CODING OF PLACE, RACIALIZATION, AND SOCIAL BARRIERS IN SMALL-SCALE NEIGHBORHOOD GROCERIES: A CASE STUDY IN ATHENS, GEORGIA

by

GLORIA HOWERTON

(Under the Direction of Amy Trauger)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the limitations of the current food desert literature by seeking to determine what factors aside from Euclidean distance between place of residence and nearest large-scale grocery store impacts food access and food purchasing decisions. I determine that neighborhood grocery stores are under-recognized in the study of food landscapes. Via interview and participant observation data collected at two neighborhood grocery stores in Athens, Georgia, I found that the following affected people’s shopping decisions to a greater degree than distance alone: 1) transportation and landscape navigation issues; 2) knowledge of the stores; 3) the cultural appropriateness of the products; 4) the “ethics” of the stores and how they are run; 5) prices. The data also reveals that the way the grocery stores are coded, particularly in regards to race, can create a strong deterrent for shoppers who feel “out of place” in these spaces.

INDEX WORDS: Neighborhood groceries; place, racialization; food desert; grocery store; food landscape; urban food access
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the members of Writing Group. Working with all of you kept me on track and made the task of writing a thesis seem much less daunting and the two years we worked together infinitely more entertaining.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I had run out of food. I had run out of food, and I had no car. I had run out of food, I had no car, and it was a Sunday, which meant that the city buses weren’t running. Even if they were, going to the local Kroger could easily require hours of my time as well as some planning, due to the fact that the bus would only stop there once an hour and was notoriously not on time. To make matters worse, I’d only be able to buy as much as I could carry. And then I’d have to consider the potentiality of waiting an extra hour in the hot Georgia sun with perishable products should I happen to narrowly miss the bus. Should I even bother with milk? No, and anyway, milk was a multi-pound luxury reserved for those with cars or more upper-body strength than I possessed.

But again, it was Sunday. So what was I going to do? Why couldn’t there be a closer grocery store? I could ride my bike to Kroger along what I consider to be a fairly dangerous road. And then I could only bring back what I could carry in my backpack. Would it even be worth it? There was a gas station about a block from me. Maybe I could go there and get some ramen or over-priced milk and cereal to tide me over. I could ask a friend for a ride, but I hated to once again be that friend who was forever begging for a lift. My pride and my fear of making a burden of myself would once again come between me and the healthful produce that I simply wouldn’t be able to find at the convenience store. I found myself grateful that I didn’t have an additional person to feed. Food had seemed so simple when I lived with my parents in their lazy, full-refrigerator-and-cupboard utopia. Now, without a car and straddling the poverty line (but
unable to acquire food stamps), I discovered that obtaining food could be a tremendous ordeal, even in a country that constantly found itself being reprimanded for its apparent gluttony.

And suddenly it hit me. I did have an option. Nearly as close as the convenience store was Los Compadres, a small grocery store located right outside of my neighborhood. It specialized in Mexican food, but it carried produce and “general” grocery staples. And frankly, while it didn’t have everything I wanted, it had everything I needed. It was certainly a better option than the convenience store that I had begun to resign myself to shopping at. Especially because it was not only cheaper than notoriously over-priced convenience stores, but the products that you could buy there were, on average, less expensive when compared with the same types of products at a supermarket.

Los Compadres was the obvious answer to my dilemma. I didn’t have to choose between hunger, take-out that I couldn’t afford, and convenience store offerings. So why hadn’t it occurred to me sooner? And why did I still hesitate to go there? The reason seemed absurd: I felt uncomfortable in the store. Nobody was going to do anything to me in that space, but I felt as if people wondered why I was there during my past visits. At the counter, there was always an awkward exchange that shifted back and forth between Spanish and English. It seemed assumed that I, and almost everyone else in the store, spoke Spanish, which led to some fairly awkward exchanges at the register. Ultimately, I felt like an intruder in that space. And even though, thinking rationally about it, nobody probably cared very much that I was there, the feeling of not belonging was enough to almost completely remove the store from my mental map of my own neighborhood.
This research was born in part out of frustration with rhetoric around food in the United States, especially amongst well-meaning food advocates who quite literally buy into capitalist notions of voting with your dollar, the choice to eat well (while hopefully supporting local farmers, local businesses, and the environment along the way) being as simple as choosing one easily accessible food over another. However, for the many individuals who live in food deserts and do not have access to a private vehicle, or have pressing monetary concerns, it is not nearly as simple. Convenience stores, for example, generally charge more than a grocery store for the same product (Broda et. al 2009) and tend to lack healthful food options (Zenk et. al 2006). However, they may be the only physically proximate food source available, particularly for impoverished or minority individuals (Baker et. al 2006).

As I will demonstrate later, food desert research has thus far gone a long way toward identifying the fact that food access is a problem for many even in wealthy nations such as the United States. Yet, as I will also explain in greater detail throughout the thesis, I find that many important food access issues are understudied in the current food desert literature. This thesis is concerned with reviewing the current state of food desert research and pointing to issues that are largely absent in food access considerations. Food deserts are difficult to define, and indeed the term is defined differently by varying organizations, scholars, and governments. While the USDA describes food deserts as areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food (USDA ERS 2009), UK policy considers food deserts to be spaces that compound lack of physical access with deprivation and social exclusion (Wrigley et. al 2002b). I think it is important to incorporate the additions from the UK definition when considering food deserts in the United States. Therefore, I give particular consideration to the social dimensions of food
access and inquire into the potential role of neighborhood grocery stores in meeting nutritional needs. I define neighborhood grocery stores as stores focusing on the sale of groceries roughly on the scale of convenience stores, which can be unobtrusively inserted into areas that are predominantly residential. I focus here on neighborhood grocery stores because small-scale grocery stores are understudied in the food desert literature despite being an important component of the food landscape (Rose et. al 2009). Additionally, neighborhood grocery stores can provide much-needed food access to those without private vehicles as they more readily fit into areas proximate to residential spaces. However, I also ask where there may be potential shortcomings in terms of accessibility that could be addressed by planners. I problematize idealized concepts of “community” and “local” which are espoused by many alternative food advocates who may agree with a renewed emphasis on scaled-down, neighborhood-proximate groceries. I suggest that, in creating “place” social boundaries are drawn that work to both include (such as in the case of the emphasis on “community” cohesion being fostered within certain spaces, such as “local” groceries) as well as to exclude those who are not coded as being “in place” (Cresswell 1996).

To this end, I specifically seek answers to the following research questions:

1. What other reasons do people have for choosing food sources aside from mere distance from their place of residence?

2. What role does the construction and coding of place play in the decision to purchase food from one location over another? How is knowledge about these spaces constructed, and for whom is it constructed?
As I discuss in greater detail later, I answer these questions via a combination of interviews with people who both do and do not shop at two different small-scale groceries located proximately to neighborhoods, and participant observation performed at both of these grocery stores.

*How did we get here?: a brief history of grocery stores in the US*

In much of the United States outside of densely built-up urban centers, the food landscape is dominated by large chain grocery stores and supermarkets. Due in large part to the sheer amount of space required to build “big box” grocery stores and their accompanying parking lots, it is usually not feasible to locate these stores in or near residential areas. The distant megastore and its accompanying stretches of pavement are a staple of the built environment in the United States, suited to a pervasive car culture.

Yet, according to Tracey Deutsch (2010), the food landscape in the United States has not always been this way. Until the 1910’s, food was purchased from small-scale enterprises such as small grocery stores, public markets, and food carts, all of which were situated within or proximate to residential areas. Women in particular were tasked with navigating and negotiating these spaces, which served a second purpose of providing a site for neighborhood politics. While this provided a location that encouraged community cohesion on some levels, they were also sites where personal feelings could come into play in a negative way. African Americans and first or second-generation European immigrants, for example, were frequently discriminated against in this more “personal” consumer environment where the feelings of individual shop owners were more likely to come into play. Additionally, there was a lack of the product standardization that we are accustomed to today. Preferred items might be reserved for customers
of certain social standings or who had especially good relationships with the store owners, while others would be given less palatable produce.

Deutsch (2010) goes on to explain that purchasing food was generally recognized to be both a burdensome and time-consuming negotiation for everyone, but the highly-standardized chain grocery stores still met with some resistance as they emerged in the 1910’s and 20’s. They invaded the territory of other types of stores, such as candy, cigar, and variety shops. There was also concern that women would demand more personal attention and chances for negotiation than chain stores typically allowed for. However, the interwar years saw a demand for more equitable distribution of goods and, due in part to increasing government regulations, chain grocery stores came to be seen as clean spaces with a variety of safe, standardized products that required far less time and effort. By the late 1930’s, modern centrally-managed supermarkets began to emerge. Supermarkets are distinct from chain grocery stores due to their emphasis on mass retailing and increasing the physical space of the store, frequently making use of abandoned warehouses or factories for their retail space.

Mayo (1993) continues this history by describing how the movement to the suburbs after World War II provided the ideal conditions for supermarkets as they supported the car culture that allowed the further separation of retail from residence, and allowed for the allotment of huge plots of land to build large-scale stores and accompanying parking lots. However, by the 1960s the trend had begun to move away from unlimited supermarket expansion into suburban areas, instead replaced by a move toward larger but fewer supermarkets in the 1980s. Mayo demonstrates this evolution:
“In 1978, the average size of a new supermarket was 32,500 square feet, whereas the average size for closed stores was 12,800 square feet. The trend continued into the 1980s with new supermarkets averaging 40,000 square feet and some stores being built with over 70,000 square feet” (Mayo 1993, 217)

The 1980s also ushered in “hypermarkets” or, more colloquially, “big box” stores, with Wal-Mart as a prime example. They are based on principles of discount-pricing, a variety of products that allow for one-stop shopping, and a tremendous amount of parking. The hypermarket consolidated three retail functions into one space: 1) the shopping mall, 2) the discount store, and 3) the supermarket. By 1989, this model had captured 20 percent of total retail trade.

The current food landscape is still dominated by chain supermarkets and hypermarkets. Yet, as the food desert literature demonstrates, this move away from neighborhood groceries and toward massive suburban chain supermarkets has left many without easy access to food, especially reasonably-priced, healthful food. Additionally, in the face of a globalizing and standardizing world, there is an alienation felt by many about what they see as a growing lack of local community and culture (Murdoch et. al 2000). It is clear that neither a pure reliance on chain supermarkets nor an uncritical return to pre-1910’s style grocery buying will meet every concern.

*Mapping out the Thesis*

Chapter two is concerned with reviewing food desert and food access literature as well as introducing the theoretical frameworks used in the analysis. I begin the chapter with an introduction to the theoretical frameworks which I use to structure my understanding of the data collected for this project. In particular draw upon theories of race, Timothy Cresswell’s (1996) theory of “place,” Butler’s (1993) concept of “performativity.” I follow the theoretical
framework with a review of relevant empirical research. This literature reveals that the economic status of a neighborhood is a likely indicator of its physical proximity to adequate healthful food. While economically well-off neighborhoods tend to have greater access to nutritious food, poorer neighborhoods have less access while also generally having higher numbers of convenience stores and fast food restaurants. However, it is not a matter of simple economic status; the urban food landscape tends to directly reflect and promote racial disparities within society, with predominantly black neighborhoods faring the worst. Additionally, despite some efforts to address the unwieldy use of “as the crow flies” measurements of distances to food sources that consider neither transportation networks nor neighborhood geography, this is still the most prevalent type of measurement that has been used by scholars studying food deserts. Furthermore, measurements of physical proximity have proven challenging as mapping of food landscapes frequently encounter Modifiable Aerial Unit Problems (MAUPs). Yet the literature also reveals that, even when there are points of food access located within “walking distance” of racialized minorities, they may be places that are coded as white.

Chapter three reviews the methods and methodology used in this research. My methods include qualitative data collection from intercept surveys and in-depth interviews at the stores and at physically proximate bus stops as well as participant observation. Additional data was collected via online reviews of the two stores. All data was iteratively hand-coded prior to performing qualitative analysis. In this section, I also describe my study sites, explore how my own positionality may have affected the responses I received, and discuss the strengths and limitations of my chosen methods.

Chapters four and five analyze the data that was collected during my research. Chapter four critiques the current state of food desert literature and considers the other barriers to food
access which are largely lacking in the current distance-from-residence model. My data revealed five major themes: 1) transportation and landscape navigation issues; 2) knowledge of the stores; 3) the cultural appropriateness of the products; 4) the “ethics” of the stores and how they are run; 5) prices. Other concerns came up, albeit less frequently, and they are discussed at the end of the chapter. Chapter five continues to question the current food desert literature’s understanding of what impacts food access in the United States. It focuses on concepts of place, community, race, and the local, and is particularly concerned with perceived social barriers that are built around identification of “the other”. I end with a summary of my findings and suggest areas for further research in chapter 6.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the central themes of this project is the creation and coding of place, particularly as it works in an exclusionary capacity. As the collected data reveals, race is tightly woven into understandings of place and its boundaries. I begin this chapter with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that I use to structure my understanding of the data, starting with theories of race and place. I then move on to the concept of performativity, which is integral to the creation of the “text” of a space, allowing for interpretation of what a place represents, who it is for, and who and what is considered out of place. I follow the theoretical framework section with a review of the empirical scholarship focusing on food deserts and urban food landscapes. This chapter contextualizes my research and arguments within the broader scholarship and provides a background to the understanding of how race, place, and performativity come together to create exclusionary spaces that limit food access on a level not covered by mere physical proximity.

Theories of Race

Sociologists Omi and Winant (1994) explore the history of race in the United States, particularly from the civil rights movements of the 1960s and onward. Their contributions have greatly influenced geographers who seek to study race in American society. They choose not to embed race within other theories to explain its evolution, but instead elect to study it as a central
issue independent of class, ethnicity, or nation. They suggest that, while the accepted meaning of race is constantly being contested, it is also something real in that it shapes not only individual lived experiences, but also the operation of entire systems. Omi and Winant begin by introducing three perspectives on race that they believe “neglect the specificity of race as an autonomous field of social conflict, political organization, and cultural/ideological meaning.” (Omi and Winant 1994, 48) These perspectives include ethnic group, class, and nation-based theories of race, all of which ignore the true centrality of race in favor of weaving it in as a mere thread in a larger system, suggesting that racial inequality is a symptom rather than the disease itself. As an alternative to these three paradigms, Omi and Winant present the racial formation perspective. They define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed.” (Omi and Winant 1994, 55) Here, race is defined as a means of human representation and categorization based upon the body as well as a signifier of social interests and conflicts. The racial formation perspective seeks to understand historically situated racial projects, which organize and redistribute resources along racial lines.

Omi and Winant point out that all elements of society are in some way racially coded. As they go through the history of racial relations and the continual racial conflict-resolution progression, they demonstrate the ways in which racial meaning and how it is addressed have changed. In the wake of the minority movement upsurges of the 1950s and 1960s that managed to create a sustained paradigm shift in terms of the social meaning of race, it became no longer politically viable to promote outright racism. They demonstrate how the political right worked around this via coded language to promote policies that would be beneficial to the racial majority over the minority. For example, “anti-busing” became “pro-family” and phrases such as “reverse discrimination” became prominent calls to arms, especially for working class whites.
Integral to critical race theory, which I shall discuss later, is the idea that explicitly racist language has been displaced “onto categories seemingly unrelated to race (Nelson 2008, 42)” which implicitly mark the cultural norm as ‘white’. As Derrick Bell sums it up, “The code words differ. The message is the same.” (Bell 1993, 9)

While there is a noted lack of truly race-centered theory in geography, there has also been a call for a greater focus on and understanding of race within the discipline (Delaney 2002; Pulido 2002; McKittrick 2006). Geographers concerned with race have chiefly worked toward an understanding of the co-production of racialized identities and place (Peake and Schein 2000). Law professor Ian Haney Lopez points to an aspect of racialization that should be of particular interest to geographers, namely the reification of race through affiliation with different types of places (Haney Lopez 1997). Even as race is studied in geography, there is a problematic tendency for nonwhites to be mere objects of study within an assumed white landscape, rather than geographic subjects (McKittrick 2006). This is particularly problematic when we acknowledge that objects of study are considered facts that are fundamentally stable (Said 1994).

Delaney (2002) advocates for a geographical approach to race theory because he sees in the discipline a methodological and theoretical pluralism that puts it in the position to allow for a variety of voices that reach a variety of audiences. He goes on to say that race is spatial because race-centered ideologies mix with other ideological elements (such as citizenship), as well as other types of power to produce the landscapes of every-day life.

A study of race in spaces of the every-day is vital because, as Rachel Slocum (2008) points out in her discussion of the whiteness of famers’ markets,
“(observed) bodies are one part in a series of intersections. These bodily differences are noticed (in particular ways in this racist society) and they enable what occurs at the Market, in ways that limit and open avenues, […] activating prejudice or reinforcing inequality.” (Slocum 2008, 855)

Which bodies are expected in certain socially constructed places is tied up in “common sense” narratives, and thus the presence of various bodies reify spatial binaries, giving credence to ideas of which bodies belong and which are out of place. The prevailing spatial organization not only creates social barriers, but also gives legibility to uneven geographies that are suited to the agendas of dominant groups (McKittrick 2006).

Given that geography still lacks a solid theory of race despite increasing engagement with the subject, I will pull from critical legal studies and engage with critical race theory (CRT). CRT emphasizes the racialized aspects of advantage which are often upheld by the law, and suggests that white privilege is the basis for the foundational hierarchy of society in the United States (Price 2010). Critical race theorists have put forward the argument that the idea of race as a biological category by which to separate and evaluate “types” of people is a problematic and impractical avenue of inquiry (Peake and Schein 2000). Price (2010) points out three intersections between CRT and critical geography that geographers ought to more deeply explore. The first is the everyday nature of racism. She contends that we should not look only to extreme events such as genocide, as doing so will obscure the day-to-day lived experiences in a highly racialized world. According to Sibley (1995), everyday exclusionary practices are less noticed by the general public and so the ways that control is exercised in society and the ways in which hierarchies are maintained remain relatively concealed. Haney Lopez (1997) points to legal legitimation and racial reification as twin forces which constrains the imagination and leads individuals to embrace the world as it exists as the natural order of things. He suggests that the seemingly progressive idea of race or color blindness “ironically targets not the harmful effects
of racism, but the efforts to ameliorate such harms.” (Haney Lopez 1998, 178) It is this backdrop of legally and socially legitimized color-blindness that makes the study of the every-day experiences of racialized individuals so important.

The second commonality Price (2010) notes is the issue of the black/white binary. According to Price, there is a tendency by some critical race theorists to play into this dichotomy which either ignores non-black minorities in its study of race or groups together all non-white people as “people of color,” thereby tending to oversimplify a wide diversity of experience. Such discussions also have an unfortunate tendency to reify “unmarked” whiteness as the norm around which other races are constructed (Haney Lopez 1997). Finally, Price addresses the idea of “narrative” as a strategy for negotiating spatial processes, and how creating cultural tales serves as a powerful mechanism to shape the world and how it is experienced.

Using racial formation to understand uneven urban food access, the food justice movement links food access to broader themes of power and political efficacy by contextualizing the struggle for food security within institutional racism and racialized geographies (Alkon and Norgaard 2009). Racialized landscapes are racial projects. These cultural landscapes act as discourse materialized, and these discourses (both historical and contemporary) may be read in part through urban morphology (Schein 2012). In this case, racialized communities being underserved by food retailers constitutes a racial project made legible in the urban landscape. The construction of social space works to stabilize race’s inherent instability of race (Delaney 1998). More nefariously, this construction works to marginalize groups and deny them belonging, which entails a social justice issue (Schein 2009). It is because of this that an understanding of how place and its inherent boundaries are constructed and interpreted becomes important to studying the urban food landscape and working toward equitable food access for all.
Theory of “place”

I draw upon Tim Cresswell’s theory of “place” as a primary theoretical framework. In his book *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (1996), Cresswell explores the idea of “place” as something more than merely space. Cresswell builds upon Antonio Gramsci’s idea of ideological power. Gramsci tells us that historically necessary ideologies “have a validity which is ‘psychological’; they ‘organize’ human masses, they form the terrain on which men [sic] move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.” (Gramsci 1988, 199) Cresswell brings geography more explicitly into the discussion of the impact of ideology and suggests that place is used to structure a normative landscape, and that expectations about behavior in different places are critical to constructing ideological values. In his estimation, space and place are not merely formed by societies; “space and place” and society co-produce one another.

If we agree that we live in a world of meaning rather than one of mere spatial abstraction, we must also agree that we are constantly engaged in acts of interpretation as we navigate the spatial environment. Navigating and interacting with the geographical environment forces people to turn beliefs and ideologies into actions. The normative meanings embedded within places are constructed through these actions, which in turn impact the way that people behave in these places. As Foucault states, “A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. So it is not necessary to use force to constrain the convict to good behavior, the madman to calm, the worker to work.” (Foucault 1977, 202) While some are able to adjust their behavior to normative expectations in order to feel included within a space, there is little one can do to become included when one of the normative expectations embedded in a place is racially-based.
Of particular interest to my research is the idea that unexamined or unstated classifications of place are especially powerful because they impact day-to-day experiences. The hegemonic meanings associated with places are primarily made explicit when an act of transgression threatens to change the meaning of a place, particularly when there is perceived danger of a shift from “our” place to “their” place. As Sibley (1995) suggests, boundaries provide security and comfort to some while simultaneously working to exclude and alienate others. For those who find separation of groups desirable, liminal zones that are not distinctly the territory of one group or another tend to create significant anxiety, which is often expressed through the use of stereotypes. The perceived danger of transgressing boundaries can be thrilling to some while being dangerous to others (Sibley 1995).

Alkon and Traugot (2008) highlight two particular processes of place construction: place comparison “in which actors negatively characterize nearby places to advocate for strategies intended to maintain differences between them” and 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.” (Alkon and Traugot 2008, 98) Trudeau (2006) adds to this by considering how landscape, when considered a contrived scene, can bound place and enforce particular ideas about belonging to a group and the spaces that group inhabits. Those members of the dominant group have the power to (re)create landscapes in such a way that they work towards fortifying their specific ideal of community and belonging. Spatiality draws boundaries in the landscape such as fences, walls, or even store counters, forming explicit boundaries between groups. This works to create local “place” which may be used defensively as a way to hold onto meaning and relationships as movements toward ‘the global’ arguably disrupts local culture and relationships. However, this protection of local place creates restrictions that may
even effectively bar even the geographically proximate (Massey 2005). The definition of landscapes is therefore seen as a powerful method of exclusion, especially when ideas of belonging and not belonging in place are given a technological legitimacy via legal prescriptions for acceptable behavior and activities in various spaces. Trudeau further argues that “landscapes represent socio-spatial practices aimed at fixing boundaries, imposing cultural coherence and stabilizing meaning as a response to the ‘inherent unboundedness’ and instability of the social world.” (Trudeau 2006, 437)

Performativity

The boundaries inherent in place construction require interpretation to exist at all (Delaney 1998). This research pulls from the work of feminist theorist Judith Butler to engage with her concept of performativity, which can be tied to ideas of interpreting and constructing racialized place. The term “performativity” as used by Butler describes discourse’s reiterative power to actually produce the phenomena which it works to regulate. It is this reiteration that is particularly important. Constraint in action and discourse is integral to the idea of performativity. It requires a regular, even ritualized, repetition of norms. Acting outside of these norms may carry consequences such as punishment or social ostracism, but it is not merely the fear of punishment that maintains the rituals; it is largely the habitual repetition itself which essentially naturalizes the action (Butler 1993). Lloyd seeks to clarify Butler by reiterating that her larger point is not that identity can be easily meddled with and changed via performance as a free expression of choice, and that opportunities for resignification are contingent upon the social and political context under which they are attempted (Lloyd 1999).
Thomas (2005) utilizes Butler’s theory, bringing it to the geographical study of race. She argues that racialization endures through these repetitions of socialized racial norms that have yet to be shaken off in our “color blind” society. Thomas importantly suggests that spatial practices, i.e., how individuals navigate and make use of space, are examples of performativity which are imbued with racial meaning. Furthermore, this racial performativity is prompted by the force of powerful social normativity. Depending upon the context, race may be interpreted in myriad ways with a variety of social outcomes based on those differing interpretations.

Food deserts and the urban food landscape

In recent years, scholars have made strides toward making sense of inner-city retail gaps (Bellinger and Wang 2011) and food deserts (Shaw 2006; Gordon et al. 2011; Thomas 2010; Walker et al. 2010; Walker, Keane and Burke 2010). There is some inconsistency between the food desert definitions used by different scholars and organizations. Food deserts are described variously 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 2002b). However, in the attempt to describe and explain food environments, food sources that do not fit within the dichotomy of chain grocery stores versus fast food outlets and convenience stores have largely been ignored. I argue that independent and small-scale food sources such as bodegas, food co-ops, and ethnic groceries must be better integrated into the analysis of urban food environments and discussions of food deserts in particular. Not only do these “alternatives” provide a significant source of food
for many individuals, but it should not be a foregone conclusion that large chain groceries are the best fit for every neighborhood.

Raja, Ma, and Yadav (2008), for example, recommend that planners hoping to combat urban food deserts should not immediately jump to courting supermarkets, but should instead first consider the potential for small-scale neighborhood groceries to meet food needs. According to Helling and Sawicki, “larger stores do not guarantee better selection, lower prices, or time savings. Under some circumstances, smaller stores may deliver on these goals nearly as well, while also providing greater accessibility.” (Helling and Sawicki 2004, 394) They suggest that low prices at larger stores might not be realized if competition is limited, and that customers lacking transportation choices and customers who highly value their time and are relatively insensitive to high prices are potential captured markets for smaller stores. Those individuals residing in low income neighborhoods who are sensitive to high prices were also shown to benefit from small, full-service markets, given that the foods are sold at relatively low prices. They may also be attractive due to the difficulties of bringing in large supermarkets to food insecure, low-income areas, such as negative perceptions of these areas by retailers as well as issues surrounding zoning (Short et al. 2007). A study of British cities in the 80s and early 90s also found that the introduction of “superstores” at the edge of cities benefited more affluent and mobile residents while hurting disadvantaged customers, particularly those with mobility issues (Wrigley et. al 2002a). Another British study found that affluent individuals may live in food-deprived areas of a city, but tend not to have much difficulty because of their ability to drive to distant food sources. However, poor areas where fewer people possessed personal vehicles faced not only poor diets but social exclusion as well (Guy et. al 2004).
Food accessibility in the United States is not only predicted by income, but is also in large part mediated by racial biases in geographic location. White, higher-income neighborhoods are more likely to have immediate access to fresh fruits and vegetables than white or mixed-race low-income neighborhoods, or predominantly African American neighborhoods regardless of income level (Baker, et al. 2006). In addition, not only were African American neighborhoods in Leon County, Florida shown to have no supermarkets, but they also did not contain any SNAP-accepting stores (Rigby et al. 2012). African American neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Harlem also have the fewest bodegas with healthy food as well as the fewest supermarkets when compared with predominately white or Latino neighborhoods (Gordon et al. 2011). Another study in Brooklyn found that at least one supermarket was located in roughly one in every three census tracts in “white” areas, one in every fourth in mixed race areas, while none existed in mostly black census tracts. Additionally, organic produce was only available in predominantly white tracts (Morland and Filomena 2007). While Raja et al. (2008) found no major food deserts in their area of study, Erie County, New York, they saw in their data an absence of supermarkets in neighborhoods made up primarily of people of color when compared with predominantly white neighborhoods. On the other hand, Block et al. (2004) found a positive link between fast food restaurant density and predominantly black and low-income neighborhoods in New Orleans, Louisiana. A study of census tracts in Atlanta, Georgia that had a majority affluent black residents found that these tracts have lower access to grocery stores of all types and restaurants other than fast food than their white economic counterparts. However, like Block et al, they found there to be higher access to fast food and drug stores than in tracts dominated by their white economic counterparts. The study determines that race has an effect separate from income, and the authors go on to suggest potential explanations for the retail gap, including
inaccurate or stereotyped marketing profiles for black neighborhoods or racial bias in business
decision making (Hellig and Sawicki 2003). These findings are particularly interesting because
they indicate a bias against African Americans of all classes reflected in the geographic
environment in terms of access to healthy food, at least within the areas of study. A wider survey
of the retail environment in 39 US cities reported similar findings, and found that neighborhoods
with high percentages of African Americans were systematically underserved by retail, 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).

Although the process of eradicating food deserts requires changing the food landscape
such that food is more immediately physically accessible, close physical proximity to food
sources to a residential area does not necessarily mean that the resident population will perceive
themselves as being near useful grocery stores. “There may be one large section of the
population towards whom most of the retailing is oriented, leaving other sections with different
tastes relatively unserved.” (Shaw 2006, 238) Shaw suggests that there are three barriers to
access: financial barriers, physical barriers, and knowledge/mental attitude barriers. She
recommends classifying food deserts based on these different potential causes rather than
grouping them together. As Shaw points out, not doing so could unduly cause some to write off
their existence when there is no immediately obvious physical barrier. In another study
comparing perceptions of local food environments in New York, Maryland, and North Carolina a
far stronger relationship between the perceived availability of healthy food and actual
supermarket density was found in North Carolina than in New York or Maryland. They also
found that lower income respondents and those who identified as neither white nor Asian
generally perceived themselves as having lower access to healthy foods than whites and higher
income respondents, although they did not explain whether the perceptions were accurate or not (Moore, Roux, and Brines 2008). However, Freedman and Bell (2009) found that perceptions of the food environment reported by people living in low-income, urban, minority, and food insecure communities largely mirror reality.

A study done in Australia found that most food items were equally available across all neighborhoods regardless of socioeconomic status. They pointed out that their results were at odds with findings from the United States, “suggesting that these may reflect actual geographical differences in neighborhood variations in food environments.” (Ball, Timperio, and Crawford 2009, 583) However, scholars who analyzed existing food desert literature through an economic lens have suggested that most food desert analysis misses important sources of food (Bitler and Haider 2011). They suggest that missing these food sources may have made food desert analysts overestimate the scope and severity of food deserts. Broda et al. (2009) determined that the poor actually pay less for food as a result of a tendency to shop at stores with lower prices and purchasing products that are on sale. While Wiig and Smith (2008) also noted a tendency to shop by price and select in-store sales and specials, they also interviewed many low-income women who felt that they did not have access to their ideal diet, and who listed “store accessibility, food prices and food stamp policies” (Wiig and Smith 2008, 1731) as the major factors affecting where they purchased food.

The negative effects of living in a food desert are most likely to affect those who do not possess personal vehicles or who do not have access to reliable transportation. Because of this, food desert literature regularly addresses “walkable” distances. However, even this concept may be problematic. Scholars from various disciplines have made use of spatial analysis techniques such as GIS mapping to describe the physical food environment and thereby explain the
prevalence of issues such as hunger and obesity (Samina, Ma and Yadav 2008; Moore, Roux and Brines 2008; Walker, Keane and Burke 2010; Shannon 2013; Eckert and Shetty 2011). However, the use of GIS has potential pitfalls that may mask actual ground-level issues. “As the crow flies” distances from a central point located in a neighborhood may not accurately reflect transportation networks, although some work is being done to incorporate more realistic network distances (Rose, et al. 2009). Additionally, distances used in food desert research often appear to be somewhat random and, for some groups, almost a completely useless designation. These distances are often based on radii ranging from 0.25 miles to 1 mile (Walker et al. 2010; Freedman and Bell 2009; Gordon et al. 2011; Thomas 2010; Jiao et al. 2012) rather than on the actual distance one would have to travel if they were to take designated paths such as sidewalks. It is therefore instructive to consider food deserts not from merely a proximity standpoint, but rather on one that also emphasizes practice. Shoppers may rely on convoluted bus routes, or may typically do their shopping after work, making the work space the more useful starting point (Shannon 2013, personal communication). Rose, et al. (2009) make a point of analyzing transportation networks rather than merely using a radius to look at distances in order to address this issue. Additionally, disabled and elderly individuals may not be able to travel these distances with groceries, and travel time for low-income residents is often a more pressing issue because they cannot “buy” time by paying other people to perform tasks for them (Thomas, 2010). Therefore, the concept of “walkability” must be better defined: for whom is this distance walkable, and is the “as the crow flies” measurement that is so frequently employed actually feasible in the particular built environment?

Aside from research focusing primarily on physical distance between neighborhoods and grocery stores, there appears to be fairly little analytical work being conducted within the
discipline of geography on factors affecting food access and purchasing patterns. In order to better understand food environments, scholars must recognize the role of food sources aside from large-scale chain grocery stores. Yet including alternative food sources in the study of accessibility and the food environment cannot simply sweep away all accessibility issues, even if these spaces may provide more physical proximity to healthful food. Julie Guthman (2008a), for example, discusses the limitations of the alternative food movement and its tendency to reproduce whiteness in largely counterproductive ways. She documents the disappointment of her predominantly white students after working with African American groups and finding that they were not as responsive to being instructed on the topic of alternative and organic food as the students had expected. Alkon and McCullen (2010) write about the “community imaginary” that is often held by shoppers at farmers’ markets, which 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.” They also suggest that high costs at farmers’ markets reinforce the market’s whiteness, and renders invisible the experiences of those who make food purchasing decisions based primarily on need. Additionally, Cathryn Bailey confronts the implications of whiteness as it pertains to “ethnic-food cruising.” She sees the rise of multicultural food palates among a certain category of whites as a mark of “special whiteness,” the ideal of being separate from the “reviled suburban whiteness.” (Bailey 2007, 48)

Rachel Slocum (2006) rejects critiques of whiteness that label it as only a destructive process, stating that such an attitude “shuts off possibilities of an anti-racist, non-essentialist future.” (Slocum 2006, 522) She also suggests that there are progressive possibilities in alternative food practices despite the whiteness of the spaces associated with it. However, Slocum is careful to remind us that “it is an exclusion that cannot be overcome by inclusion on
the terms of a white dominant society.” (Slocum 2006, 524) Donald and Blay-Palmer (2006) add to the defense of the alternative food movement, suggesting that social inclusion can and should be viewed as a goal and a process within the movement and that it is “premature to conclude that […] the alternative food system has become solely the new diet of the privileged class.” (Donald and Blay-Palmer 2006, 1903)

**Conclusion**

Although there is certainly a troubling tendency for the economic status of a neighborhood to predict physical proximity to adequate food, there also seems little doubt that the urban food landscape tends to directly reflect and promote racial disparities within society. Additionally, using measurements of physical proximity as the primary means of understanding food access has been shown to be problematic. Although there have been efforts to address the use of insufficient “as the crow flies” measurements of distance that do not take into account transportation networks or neighborhood geography, this is still the most prevalent type of measurement in the literature. Furthermore, even when there are spaces of food access located within “walking distance” of racial minorities, they may be places that are coded as white. The psychological effects of belonging are very strong, and therefore the study of how and for whom belonging in place is constructed is necessary for a complete understanding of the urban food environment and how it is navigated. In the next chapter I discuss the methods which I will use to answer questions about food access issues that fall outside of the scope of straight-line distances.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Access to healthy food is limited for many living in urban spaces. Barriers to access may be physical, financial and social (Shaw 2006). As previously outlined, while significant work has been done on the physical distance aspect of food deserts, as well as on economic issues, social barriers remain poorly understood. In order to make the case for the importance of smaller-scale food spaces that are easily accessible to residential populations, I submit that it is important to understand these spaces and how they are perceived by the populations who have physical access to them. It is useless to push the development of spaces that do not meet the needs and desires of local residents if the goal is to better understand and remedy food deserts. In order to better address these issues, this thesis answers the following research questions:

1. What other reasons do people have for choosing food sources aside from mere distance from their place of residence?

2. What role does the construction and coding of place play in the decision to purchase food from one location over another? How is knowledge about these spaces constructed, and for whom is it constructed?

Both questions offer the chance for a critique of the current state of food desert literature. The first opens up the possibility to discuss other factors that may impact where and how people shop and eat aside from a straight line distance from home to grocery store. The second more pointedly asks about social concerns that may constrain people from shopping at points of food access that they are physically able to reach. It pays particular attention to the way places are
socially coded to be inclusive or exclusive to certain individuals, as well as how knowledge of these spaces comes to be constructed and disseminated. By asking these questions, I seek a more nuanced and complete understanding of urban food landscapes and barriers to food access.

The goal of this chapter is to detail how I have gone about this research and to explain the advantages and disadvantages of the choices made. The chapter begins with a description of the project’s study sites. This is followed by a discussion of methods and methodology. Next, I reflect critically on my own positionality and consider the possible limitations of my study, followed by the conclusion.

Study sites

My sites of study are situated within Athens-Clarke County, Georgia, which is of interest due to its high levels of poverty existing in proximity to the University of Georgia. According to the USDA’s Economic Research Service, the 2010 poverty rate in Clarke County was measured at 33.3%, giving it one of the highest overall poverty rates in Georgia and the United States as a whole for a town of its size. I concentrate only on residents of the interior of the “Loop” (the Georgia State Route 10 Loop, which is a ring road circling most of the city), in which all of the study sites are located. Within the Loop there are pockets of poverty interspersed in more solidly middle class areas, as well as the coding of certain low-income housing as areas for students of the University versus long-term low-income residents. The diverse makeup of the Athens-Clarke County area provides a rich backdrop to examine coding of place and issues of “belonging” in different spaces, and how these coded spaces are accessed by different groups living within close proximity of one another.
My two sites of study are Taj Mahal Groceries and Daily Co-Op Groceries. They were chosen because they are both proximate to residential areas and are neighborhood-scale. As I will detail later, the stores cater to very different clientele and both offer products that would be difficult to find in a typical chain grocery store. Because of their similarities in terms of scale, local ownership, and neighborhood proximity, they serve as effective counterpoints to chain supermarkets such as Kroger or “big boxes” like Wal-Mart. Because of the differences in what they specialize in and how they present and code themselves, as well as the neighborhoods they are located near, they show how important place-based coding can be in terms of consumer behavior. In response to the popular perception of food co-ops as spaces that are only accessible to those securely falling within middle and upper-class income brackets, and in order to speak to access issues other than actual financial barriers, both of my chosen study sites accept EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) cards. Of course, allowances for those receiving food stamp benefits does not in and of itself negate the idea that food from these sources may be prohibitively expensive. However it somewhat conflicts with the idea of businesses as being completely unconcerned with allowing for the participation of those with less disposable income to put toward ideology-laden food choices. Because these stores are both within close physical proximity to residential areas and are in some way attempting to cater to those who qualify for government food assistance, they are useful sites to study the third barrier to access: social boundaries.
Daily Groceries Co-Op

Daily Groceries Co-Op (henceforth referred to as Daily) is a neighborhood grocery cooperative located on a major road close to the downtown area. Residential housing is located behind and to one side of the store and, at the time of this study, a hair salon and bookstore to the other side. Daily itself is run from the bottom floor of a two-story building that is only slightly larger than the surrounding houses. Across the street there are more residential buildings, an Episcopal church, and two thrift stores. There are also two bus stops located roughly 600 feet away from Daily on either side of the street, at both of which I conducted non-shopper interviews. The area is served by three city buses as well as one University of Georgia bus line.

According to the vision statement published on Daily’s website, the goals of the cooperative are “to operate through practices that are ethically responsive to both the social and environmental conditions of production and the needs of our community.” They intend to accomplish this by “investing in local and cooperative communities to offer fairly priced local, nutritious, organic, and fair trade foods, and by adhering to the cooperative principles”. These cooperative principles include the use of “working members,” or volunteers who perform tasks such as cashiering, stocking shelves, and closing the store in return for an invitation to board meetings where voting concerning how Daily is run takes place, as well as a discount on purchases made there.

As previously described, Daily offers a number of local, organic, and fair trade foods. Much of the fresh produce is produced locally (although some may come from other countries and the percentages will vary depending on the season and what is available), as are other products such as pickles, bread, and knit accessories, among others. There is also a “Daily Deli”
with a workspace located in the back of the store where salads, sandwiches, and hummus are made by Daily working members and employees. Much of the produce is also labeled organic, as are many of the canned and packaged goods. There also many shelves full of teas (both loose-leaf and bagged) and coffees which bear organic and fair trade labels. Next to these are a variety of health and beauty supplies, with many herbal supplements and “natural” remedies. Products such as rice and lentils can be purchased in bulk, and are shelved toward the back.

**Taj Mahal Grocery Store**

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 the Rocksprings neighborhood which is largely comprised of public housing units. The shopping complex also includes an art supply store, a dry cleaning service, and a tattoo parlor. Additionally, Taj Mahal is within less than a block of two bus stops, and is serviced by two city buses, each of which passes through the area hourly.

Taj Mahal is a, private, family-run grocery store that is slightly larger than a typical convenience store. While it specializes in South Asian foods and could be considered a specialty store, Taj Mahal also offers many American staples foods as well as basic convenience store type items, such as light bulbs and batteries. The storefront displays a prominent sign reading “Pakistani – Indian – Arabic – American Grocery Store.” Inside, the store is divided in half with all of the South Asian items held on one side of the store, while the typical “American” grocery and convenience store items are located on the other side. Around the counter, which is located
on the American side, there are display cabinets full of costume jewelry in both South Asian and American styles. The counter also has lottery tickets and cigarettes for purchase, as is typical of a convenience store. The dividing line between the two sections consists of racks of novelty bumper stickers, signs, and t-shirts that bear humorous English-language slogans. According to Rani, the store’s owner, roughly ninety percent of the clients are made up of predominantly African-American residents of the Rocksprings neighborhood, and as such, they attempt to suit the products on the American side of the store to what Rani deems “typical African-American tastes,” with products such as do-rags and hair care products specifically designed for African hair prominently on display. While the American side has many canned and boxed groceries, it has very little in the way of fresh produce. At a given moment, produce may be limited to a single basket of potatoes and onions. The South Asian side, on the other hand, has refrigerators and freezers full of in-store cooked meals, vegetables, and cuts of meat in addition to shelves well-stocked with foods such as lentils and rice. The South Asian side is also differentiated in terms of beauty products; the hair care products are designed especially for Indian hair, in contrast to the Afro-centric beauty products on the “American” side of the grocery.

Methods

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach. Within the qualitative tradition, I have selected to perform case studies of two distinct neighborhood grocery stores in Athens, Georgia. Case studies explore an event, an activity, or individuals within a bounded time and place (Cresswell 1998). I gathered the information about each of these sites via intercept surveys and in-depth interviews, accessing online reviews of the stores, and participant
observation. The qualitative data was hand-coded and analyzed. Because this work involves the study of human subjects, I sought UGA Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for my project prior to beginning. I was required to submit my interview protocols as well as my recruitment and consent script. These remained unchanged after initial IRB approval, and can be found in the appendix. It was determined that my project posed no risk to subjects outside of what they would experience in daily life, and the research was approved and given the number “2013-10085-0.”

Qualitative data collection

A. Surveys

A minimum of 5 shoppers and 5 non-shoppers were intercepted at both of the stores and nearby bus stops to complete a survey, although, as the situation permitted, more interviews were conducted. In the end, I performed ten bus stop interviews (five per store) and five interviews at Taj Mahal. I interviewed thirteen people at Daily, in part because I sought to perfect my interviewing techniques and protocols there before moving on. The purpose of these interactions was to produce data that reveal the dominant narratives about the two stores. The project aims to understand why some choose to shop in these stores, and why others, who may be physically able to access them, do not. To that end, I chose participants in two types of locations. Shoppers were intercepted in each of the grocery stores. Non-shoppers were intercepted primarily at nearby bus stops, thereby demonstrating that they are able to physically access the grocery stores. All participants chosen were 18 or older and were as demographically varied as possible. For shoppers, each participant was asked if they would be willing to participate in a longer, more
in-depth interview. Of all participants, only one declined to participate in the second interview. The total time of interviews ranged from four to 30 minutes. Participants were tape-recorded to ensure data accuracy. However, participants were informed that if they did not wish to be recorded, there was also the option of filling out a paper-based survey. The responses were completely anonymous and numbers were assigned to the participants rather than names. However, managers at both locations agreed to non-anonymity in the interviews.

Survey and subsequent interview questions have been designed to learn: a) what the respondents know about these places and what ideas and associations come to mind when people think about these places; b) what shoppers believe to be the “atmosphere” of the store; c) how they came to know about these places, and how they came to know about other places to buy food; d) questions about accessibility and the constraints that affect choices of where people choose to shop; e) what percentage of their food comes from the store in question; f) what products are important to them and whether their grocery needs can be/are met at the stores; g) what changes in the store would cause them to no longer shop there if they are current shoppers and what changes in the store would cause them to consider shopping there if they are not current shoppers; h) demographic information. A question dealing with spatial perceptions was also included to gain an understanding of how respondents perceived the food landscape. This question asked them to describe the route that they take to get to the area most frequently, and the things they notice along the way. All surveys and interviews are included in the appendices.

I was particularly careful about demographic information, and asked respondents to describe themselves rather than asking them to select answers from a pre-determined list. This way I hoped to be able to analyze the ways in which perception of self affects the perception of the way places are coded. A pilot survey at Daily Groceries revealed that simply asking people
in these spaces open-ended questions about why they choose to shop where they do prompted responses that begin to get at construction of place and ideological commitments (i.e., “good” people, friendly atmosphere, a space for engagement with the community, commitment to boosting the “local” economy, fears of the industrial food system, etc.).

B. Interviews

As previously stated, individuals who completed the initial intercept survey were asked if they would be willing to participate in a longer, more in-depth interview. I recruited at least five per group (Daily shoppers, Daily non-shoppers, Taj Mahal shoppers, Taj Mahal non-shoppers), with the possibility of more. Interviewees were given the choice of being interviewed immediately on site or at a time of the participant’s choosing by phone or in person. However, all but two chose to be interviewed on site. These interviews were semi-structured, and frequently deviated from the list of prepared questions. I typically allowed participants to follow their own lines of thought even as they strayed from the topic at hand with the idea that the more comfortable they felt speaking to me personally, the more revealing their commentary may become.

After conducting roughly half of the interviews, I began to realize that many of the non-shopper respondents had no knowledge of either of the two grocery stores. I edited my interview questioning for the remainder to include a question in which I presented the respondent with pictures of the store fronts of Taj Mahal, Daily Groceries, and Los Compadres, another small-scale grocery store served by the same the same buses that serve both Daily and Taj Mahal, which specializes in Mexican groceries. They were asked to rank which of the stores they would be most likely to shop at and then to explain the rationale behind the order that they chose. This
provided insight into what might attract or repel a potential customer before they even entered the store. The photos used for this question are included in the appendices.

Additionally, in order to answer the questions of how knowledge of these non-chain food sources is being created, to whom it is disseminated, and who target audiences for this knowledge actually are, I interviewed organizers and managers at my research sites about their advertising practices as well as the history and mission of the stores. By following this rubric I was able to better understand the choices made by people who have easy physical access to these food sources but choose not to use them for other reasons, as well as their general perceptions of how these spaces are coded.

C. Participant Observation

As discussed elsewhere, at the time of the study I was an established working member at the Daily Groceries Co-op. I had also been making use of the various buses and bus stops that I chose to do my non-shopper interviews at for nearly a year prior to beginning my research. Additionally, I shopped at both Daily Groceries and Taj Mahal prior to beginning my interview process, potentially generating trust among the people who I would later interview. I was able to observe people and their behaviors while going about my routine in these spaces, and talk to them in a way that was completely removed from my research but still often revealed pertinent information. When a conversation or an observed action seemed to be relevant to my research project, I would take note of what I had observed in a field notebook after the incident. These observations could at times serve to be far more revealing as to people’s feelings and understandings of place than formal interviews, where they were aware of being analyzed.
D. Online Reviews

As a further means of establishing how people interpreted place without the social pressures that result in self-censorship, I analyzed online reviews of each of the stores. I used multiple review sites, including Yelp.com, Citysearch.com, and yellowpages.com. Daily had a much greater web presence, and I was able to use eleven of the reviews I found (reviews such as “ice cream!!!!!!” that did not reveal anything substantial were filtered out), while I only found two for Taj Mahal. Online reviews have the double advantage of representing the opinions of people who feel strongly enough about an experience to make the effort to share it with others, while also allowing the reviewers the relative anonymity of internet handles or even choosing to remain completely anonymous in their reviews. Perhaps unsurprisingly, online reviewers tended toward more name-calling when they were unsatisfied with their experience than individuals who were speaking face-to-face with an interviewer. A major disadvantage of analyzing online reviews is that there is no chance to ask reviewers follow-up questions or to ask for clarification on statements they may make.

Methodology

Qualitative analysis

According to Cresswell (1998), qualitative research is research which explores human and social problems in a natural setting, wherein the researcher strives to create a holistic picture. He goes on to describe qualitative research as being distinct from quantitative in that it works with fewer cases and delves more deeply into each. This allows the researcher to move beyond simple categorization of subjects and to see the story behind the data. However, Rose (2001), through her reading of Foucault, concludes that pre-existing categories should not simply be
thrown out without any analysis, but that instead claims to “truth” should be scrutinized and shown to be results of constructions. This incorporates a social constructionist approach to research, which holds that research ought to raise skepticism on any positive claims made to an understanding of objective truth (Cruickshank 2012). Tuan (1991) discusses a socio-linguistic approach to understanding landscape which treats the landscape as a text with subtexts that may be understood through language employed in and about these spaces. Qualitative analysis will inform my interpretation of the qualitative data in order to better understand the implications of the coding of place in terms of inclusion and exclusion, particularly as it pertains to how spaces are racialized.

**Participant Observation**

What people profess to believe or how people say that they act is often contradicted by how they actually believe and behave. Participant observation as a style of qualitative research is useful in that it functions as a check against a research subject’s personal and subjective reports of their own actions and behaviors (Mack et. al 2005). Broadly understood, participant observation involves the researcher themself playing a role in the studied arena (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). The explicit and tacit information collected by the researcher in the processes of acting as both a participant and an observer is recorded and used as data for analysis (Dewalt and Dewalt 2011). An important function of the participant observation method is that it allows the researcher close, first-hand knowledge of the space and subjects of study. In this way it is distinct from approaches that stress distance from the research subjects as a means of emphasizing researcher objectivity (Clifford et. al 2010).
Coding and Analysis

The interviews, field notes, and online reviews used in this research represent raw, primary data that have had no prior scholarly interpretations applied to them. In order to interpret and analyze this data, I began by transcribing and coding it. Coding is the process of identifying and highlighting themes and categories within the data (Clifford et. al 2010). I iteratively hand-coded my data based around five themes: 1) ideas about who shops in the studied store; 2) ideas about the store; 3) how knowledge about the store is constructed and disseminated; 4) ideas about other spaces the subject is willing or unwilling to enter; 5) personal reasons for either shopping or not shopping at the store. I constructed my interview questions in such a way as to answer my research questions. Prior to coding my data, I created a list of themes that I imagined would emerge that were pertinent to my research questions. I began the coding by first reading the interviews, field notes, and online reviews and considering to what extent my previously crafted themes were actually reflected in the collected data. Based on my reading, I adjusted the categories, taking out those which were not represented in the data and adding new categories which both reflected the data and spoke to my research questions, resulting in the five aforementioned themes. I created a sixth category called “other” to accommodate any information that I considered noteworthy that did not fall into any of the five main themes. The qualitative data was then analyzed based on these themes with an eye to the structuring theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review. Certain data was not included within any of the six categories and so were not included in the final analysis.
Critical Reflections

Positionality

Feminist methods call attention to the “positionality” of the researcher. Understanding positionality requires the acknowledgement that markers of identity such as race, class, and gender indicate relational positions instead of essential personal qualities. Identities are defined contextually, and so it is important to determine your position and how it affects your interactions in a given context (Maher and Tetrault 1993). This is especially vital to understand in situations in which the researcher is actively interacting with study subjects and engaging with the study site to uncover knowledge. The very identity of “researcher” is a positional relation that skews power dynamics and is likely to influence responses from research subjects, and thus calls for reflexivity in research endeavors (Sultana 2007). Understanding my own positionality has helped frame the research and revealed potential biases that may impact the study. As Edward Said wrote, “No one has ever devised a method of detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life.” (Said 1994, 9) Although it is likely that I am overlooking other things that may affect my interactions with those I am conducting interviews with, in this section I will discuss those which I have succeeded in identifying.

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the things that I believe has proven most useful to my research is the fact that I have no private vehicle. For the past year I have regularly taken the buses that service the areas in which both Daily Groceries and Taj Mahal are located on my way to and from the University of Georgia campus. This provides me two basic advantages. The first is that, because I frequently make use of these bus routes, I was likely to be a fairly familiar presence to many of the individuals who I intercepted for interviews at bus stops. I found it to be
significantly less challenging to obtain interviews with people who were used to seeing me in the locations in which I spoke with them. The second advantage of being without a car is that I have a greater understanding of the difficulty of obtaining groceries without one. Living in a food desert will undoubtedly impact those without a personal vehicle far more greatly than vehicle owners. There are many things to consider when grocery shopping without a personal vehicle, such as how much you will be able to carry, how much time you should leave for checking out and walking to the bus stop so as not to miss the bus, or how various products might fair while waiting in different types of weather. In fact, a large portion of one's day must be scheduled around a trip to the grocery store if he or she relies on public transportation. I often find myself walking to the corner store and purchasing food that I know to be unhealthy and overpriced due to the frustrations of dealing with grocery shopping without a personal vehicle.

Additionally, I am very familiar with (and am a familiar face to many at) Daily Groceries. I have been a working member at Daily Groceries since September, 2011, and as such am an active participant in the coding and place-making of this site. As a working member, I volunteer as a cashier once a week for three hours and 15 minutes in return for a 20% discount on all of my purchases for the week, voting privileges for annual board of director elections, the ability to attend all board and member meetings and events, voting privileges in any co-op referendum, the opportunity to run for the co-op board of directors, and the ability to request to see the co-op’s financial statements. Because I have been an established presence at Daily Groceries for nearly a year prior to beginning my research there, I was unlikely to be brushed off or regarded suspiciously by potential interviewees. Yet, although there are many benefits to being familiar with this community, this closeness will almost certainly call into question my objectivity as a researcher when discussing Daily and its customers and working members.
Although I recognize that it is nearly impossible to remove all biases, I do my best in this research to allow the interviewees to speak for themselves.

My racial ambiguity is something I also found to be beneficial to my research. My experience has shown me that I am in a fairly unique position to be able to put people of most every racial background in the United States at ease. The ambiguous nature of my racial background also seems to prompt people to reflect on race and share lived experiences of different racial and cultural categorization. For example, prior to beginning research at Taj Mahal, I had a conversation in the store with a woman of South Asian descent which began in a friendly enough manner, but without any true feeling of camaraderie. However, once she discovered that my mother is Indian, she immediately opened up. While I am unsure what impacts my racial background may have or have had on my interactions at Daily (though it should be mentioned that, being half white, I am largely immune from the dangers of making white people uneasy), I expect it made a considerable difference to my interviews at Taj Mahal. Rather than appearing as a white outsider with a clipboard interrupting people who were of either African American or South Asian backgrounds while they were shopping, I think I appeared to be at least marginally more of an insider in the environment.

Finally, my style of dress and the way I present myself had a very noticeable impact on how accepted I felt in both places, but in particular at Daily. I did notice that I felt less inclined to dress in my usual style when going to Taj Mahal for interviews as I was afraid of possibly distancing myself from potential interviewees, and instead tended to dress in plainer clothes than I may have otherwise. However, my thick-rimmed glasses and nose ring marked me as the “type” of person who would be involved with Daily. While multiple respondents who chose not to shop at Daily remarked upon the exclusionary “hipster” vibe of many of the shoppers, my
personal style made me feel as if nobody questioned my presence there. In fact, I noticed no negative reactions to my personal style among shoppers at Daily.

Limitations and Strengths

When considering the conclusions of this research, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that there are myriad means of answering the same questions which may give slightly different answers. Perhaps the most obvious limitation to the way that I chose to conduct this study is the fact that it includes only two study sites. Because of this, it will be difficult to draw larger generalizations from the interviews, particularly as both sites are located in the same college town in Georgia. This is a very specific location and many social dynamics observed here cannot necessarily be more widely extrapolated to explain social dynamics in other areas. At the same time, this narrow focus can also be considered a strength, as it has allowed me to personally spend time in and observe the study sites. This allows a greater understanding of the dynamics that are actually at play in these sites. Collecting impersonal data from a large number of sources and collecting a great deal of personal data from smaller numbers of sources will each create inherently different information with which a researcher can work, and will also impact the types of analysis that can be done and the stories that can be told.

In terms of the interviews, it may be difficult to obtain a true cross-section of shoppers. For a variety of reasons, some individuals who I had hoped to speak with were unable or unwilling to participate in the interview. Reasons given typically included time constraints, particularly if they expected a bus or a ride to be arriving soon. Even those who did consent to be interviewed would sometimes have their interviews cut short because their bus would arrive or a
friend or family member would show up to give them a ride home. The longer follow-up interviews likely limited the type of person who agreed to participate even further. Those who agreed to longer interviews may have been those with more spare time than the average shopper, or who are unusually garrulous. This is particularly unfortunate due to the fact that the points of view of shoppers who must budget their time would prove to be especially useful and illuminating.

Additionally, the very concept of the interview is highly limiting. Respondents in face-to-face interviews who were asked questions about race had a tendency to use semantic moves to make racist statements without appearing to be racist themselves (Myers and Williamson 2001, Bonilla-Silva 2010). The tendency to censor and police actual opinions when speaking in a public context is something that must be considered when analyzing public discourse. It was because of this tendency toward self-censorship that I chose to also make use of anonymous online reviews, as well as participant observation. Participant observation allowed me to talk to the same people in many instances in both a structured interview setting and in a general, more relaxed atmosphere without a tape recorder. Because of this, I saw the self-censorship that can occur during structured, recorded interviews first hand. The online reviews, while not necessarily giving me greater insight into what the individuals I spoke to actually thought, showed opinions that were not constrained by a fear of public shaming if they appeared to be socially unacceptable.
Conclusion

This thesis critiques the current state of food desert research and pays particular attention to the social dimensions of food access. I study neighborhood grocery stores because I see a lack of consideration of smaller, non-chain food vendors in food desert and urban food access analyses. In these less anonymous counterparts to the large-scale chain grocery, it becomes even more important to study the construction and coding of place. These smaller stores can be idealized via notions of “community” and “local,” which must also be problematized as these ideas can have very powerful exclusionary effects. In order to add to our understanding of the urban food landscape, this thesis addresses the following questions: What other reasons do people have for choosing food sources aside from mere distance from their place of residence? What role does the construction and coding of place play in the decision to purchase food from one location over another? How is knowledge about these spaces constructed, and for whom is it constructed? In order to effectively answer these questions, I collect qualitative data from intercept surveys and in-depth interviews at the stores and at physically proximate bus stops. I also engage in participant observation and analyze online reviews of the two stores as a means of counter-acting the self-censoring tendency of interview respondents. Data was coded by hand analyzed based on recurring themes in the interviews, in my observations, and in the online reviews. In the following two chapters, I analyze the data collected using the methods described here.
CHAPTER 4

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY MAY NOT COME: LOOKING PAST PROXIMITY

Question: So it’s important that it be close by?

Answer: No, the most important thing is that there’s food in my refrigerator, I’m settled in my stomach, and I have money to buy it.

Researchers studying food deserts and food access in the United States have dedicated a considerable number of pages to the issue of physical proximity to food sources, focusing primarily on distances from residential areas to grocery stores. This is very important work, but it leaves out other significant elements that must be considered if we wish to understand how people shop and eat and how best to alleviate food access issues. I suggest that simply inserting a physically proximate grocery store will not be enough to make people begin shopping at it. If you build it, they may not come. Ultimately, a one-size-fits-all approach cannot work: place and the desires of local populations must be taken into account.

In this chapter I will answer the following research question: What other reasons do people have for choosing food sources aside from mere distance from their place of residence? Based on my interview data, I uncovered five major themes: 1) transportation and landscape navigation issues; 2) knowledge of the stores; 3) the cultural appropriateness of the products; 4) the “ethics” of the stores and how they are run; 5) prices. I also discuss other food procurement concerns that people brought up in interviews that did not fit into any one of the five aforementioned themes.
Transportation and landscape

The food desert literature illustrates a preoccupation with “as the crow flies” radius measurements from neighborhoods to grocery stores. This approach fails to take into account the many different ways people actually navigate their landscapes. For some, groceries are frequently purchased after work, making distance from home to grocery store less important than the distance between their place of employment and the grocery store for those individuals. Additionally, sidewalks and streets are unlikely to take a straight line from point A to point B, and the extra distance could make all the difference to somebody who is on foot or cycling with groceries. Furthermore, topography and climate become important when access to a vehicle is taken out of the equation. As one man who typically took the bus to get his groceries said, “I know the distance to the grocery store isn’t too far, but when I have to walk up that big hill and it’s the middle of summer? I’m just not going to do it.” This sentiment was echoed by many who took the bus to the grocery store, despite living in a range that many food desert researchers would consider being within “walking distance.” Moreover, complaints about how little could be carried per trip on bike or on foot were frequent, even among those whose primary mode of transportation to the grocery store was either walking or cycling. Among those respondents, none had dependents for whom they needed to purchase food. However, parents with children to take care of who lacked access to a private vehicle either relied heavily on friends or family members to take them grocery shopping, or depended upon the city bus.

Buses provided respondents with a number of issues as well. One woman who preferred to ask friends to drive her to the grocery store stated:
“Well, for anything aside from grocery shopping, I hit the buses. I mean, I do public transportation. If it were just shopping for myself, I probably wouldn’t have that problem necessarily and could take the bus. But three kids! You have to buy one hundred fifty, two hundred bucks at a pop.”

Large quantities of groceries can quickly become unwieldy when using public transportation. If a bus is crowded, there may not be extra seats to set groceries down on. And even so, shoppers can only purchase as much as they can carry at once by hand, considering that they will have to carry those groceries to the bus stop from the grocery store, and then home from the bus stop. Scheduling also becomes very important as each bus will only come to a stop once per hour, and will stop running before 9PM. If a shopper times everything else perfectly, but doesn’t account for long lines at the checkout, they may miss the bus by a matter of minutes and then be left waiting with groceries for another hour. Also, they must plan their purchasing around not having bus access on Sundays or holidays.

The bus system may also be complicated or confusing for those who are unfamiliar with it. As one man said:

“Normally I have a car, but I catch the city bus now because I ain’t got my vehicle right now. I mean, once you get the time down to what bus is going where, it’s alright. But now, you know, I ain’t rode the bus in a couple months. I’m probably gonna sit out here for thirty minutes before the next bus comes.”

He was fairly accurate as he waited another twenty minutes with me before the bus finally arrived, which turned out to be nearly fifteen minutes behind schedule. The same afternoon that I spoke with that man, I witnessed two different men being turned away from buses, one because he could not find his bus vouchers, and the other because he didn’t have enough change for bus fare. Although he had ten dollars, bus drivers cannot make change, and he would have effectively lost almost nine dollars.
Not only are the city buses difficult to carry groceries on, frequently late, and complicated for new users, but it is not unusual for their routes to miss closer, but smaller groceries in favor of large supercenters. This makes sense from a planning perspective but also demonstrates how, for those without a private vehicle, it may actually be more difficult to access closer stores based on transportation networks than larger competitors. Additionally, it is important to note that multiple people who I interviewed would pass other grocery stores to shop at either Daily or Taj Mahal, despite the fact that they are small-scale groceries. This fact was revealed through a spatial perception exercise in which respondents described the route they most frequently travelled to arrive at the store. One student shopper who biked across town to get to Daily explained her behavior by saying, “I feel like [Daily] fosters more of a sense of community than those other places.” Clearly there is more at play than physical proximity for some shoppers.

Knowledge of the stores

Knowledge about smaller, non-chain stores appears to be largely constructed via relationship-based networks. Nobody I spoke to claimed to have learned anything about either Daily or Taj Mahal from advertisements, even people who said that they regularly read newspapers to find out about sales before going grocery shopping. Advertising therefore tended to have a greater impact when the store was already well-known. Shoppers at both Taj Mahal and Daily all discovered these stores in one of three ways: 1) they worked or lived close to the store and passed it regularly; 2) they were interested in finding a specialty store or co-op and so asked around or searched the internet to find such stores in the area; or 3) because somebody they know shops or works there and recommended the store to them. The first was most common
among people shopping on the “American” side at Taj Mahal, while the third was the most frequently cited of the three for Daily shoppers and shoppers at Taj Mahal who made use of the “Asian” side of the store. As a manager at Daily acknowledged:

“I think our best advertising is word-of-mouth. Because that really conveys the most useful information about Daily. The people who are already here know about it and tell their friends about it. Maybe the working members tell their friends to volunteer here because it’s really fun. That’s our best advertisement.”

Although employees at both Taj Mahal and Daily consider word-of-mouth to be what brings in the majority of their customers, they still attempt to bring in new customers through non-word-of-mouth advertising strategies. Both had advertised in Flagpole, the local news and culture newspaper that focuses heavily on local arts and politics. Taj Mahal is also advertised in the UGA student newspaper, Penny Saver, coupon books, and Food and Culture, a monthly Athens magazine. Rani, one of the owners of Taj Mahal, claims that Food and Culture has brought in a significant amount of business, particularly from UGA students. The managers at Daily did not say that they advertised in print anywhere aside from a monthly ad in Flagpole, citing the fact that their advertising budget is smaller than they would like, although it was something they were hoping would change in the future. They did say that they try to be present at “community events” such as Taste of Athens, which highlights the many restaurants in town. They also sought to promote the Daily brand by donating to events and local charities, which they considered to be a marketing strategy.

The spatial perception exercise at the end of the interview revealed that many of the respondents who chose not to shop at either Taj Mahal or Daily Groceries seemed to have a hole where these stores would be in reality. For instance, one woman said, “The Co-op is within walking distance of my house; unfortunately, I often forget it's there!” A man who I interviewed
at a bus stop that was in plain view of the co-op had no idea what Daily was. When I pointed out
the store and explained to him that it was a small grocery, 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. Others who I
interviewed at that same bus stop were either unaware that it sold food or said they had simply
never thought about it before. 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. One 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. Similarly,
people who did not shop at Taj Mahal (and were aware that it was there) seemed to be confused
as to what it sold. Despite the sign on the front of the shop clearly stating what sorts of groceries
were sold (not to mention the store’s very name), one man explained his disinterest in shopping
there by saying, “Well, I’m not real interested in Mexican food. And I think that this is Mexican,
right?” Strangely enough, he was not the only person to have the idea that Taj Mahal specialized
in Mexican food. Another man told me, “I heard of it, but I never been in there. Isn’t Taj Mahal
is like half Mexican or whatever?” Still others assumed it was merely a convenience store along
the lines of a 7/11. “I’ve always wanted to go in there ‘cause it looks pretty interesting. It’s just
sometimes I felt like it looked more like kind of a convenience store. You know, sometimes
specialty grocery stores look different. So I’m always hesitant to go in.”
Cultural appropriateness

A main theme of food security is the idea of “cultural appropriateness.” (FAO 1996) Simply building a small-scale, neighborhood grocery in an area without considering the desires of the neighborhood residents can prove to be highly ineffectual and may result in the grocery quickly going out of business. Catering to the preferences of those who are physically proximate may seem like an obvious business strategy, but sometimes appears to be overlooked based on the personal visions of business owners.

Respondents who identified as African American who shopped at Taj Mahal largely expressed satisfaction with the number of products on the “American” side of the grocery store that seemed to cater to African Americans in particular, but seemed less interested in the “Asian” half of the grocery, which may have ultimately been a business concern as the store’s owner estimated that roughly ninety percent of her clients were from Rock Springs, the predominantly African American housing project across the street from her establishment. One woman from Rock Springs who I interviewed chose to bypass Taj Mahal for all but the most basic of her grocery needs in favor of taking the bus to Kroger. She summed up her reasoning by saying, “They definitely have things that people of color can use. But, I guess because of their heritage or whatever, they have more variety for their heritage.”

There were multiple examples of individuals who would bypass not only smaller grocery stores, but also larger chain supermarkets in order to access a space that sold “culturally appropriate” items. For example, one woman who had relocated to Athens from India said that she regularly drove across town to shop at Taj Mahal due to their selection of products that she was more accustomed to cooking with. Another man who had immigrated to the United States from Mexico said he had just one day a week off from work at a Chinese food restaurant, making
it the one day he had to both relax and run errands. He chose to take the bus twenty minutes each way to get to a Mexican grocery where he could find foods that reminded him of home and which he was more familiar with preparing. In addition, although his English seemed to be nearly fluent, at least within the context of our interview, he said he chose to go out of his way to shop there because he liked having the option to speak Spanish while he was in the store and has the chance to interact and make friends with other Spanish-speakers.

“Ethics” of the store

“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 the product line. Like having products that are “alternative to mainstream products. I think a big thing is the ethical standpoint. I think they think it’s a more ethical place to shop. Maybe greener, more sustainable. Socially conscious.”

The majority of Daily’s clientele associated their morality and (left-leaning) politics with their consumer choices, opting to act upon their ethical stances by “voting with their dollars.” As one woman put it when asked to describe herself, “I’m liberal. Very much liberal. A total food advocate.” 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. Perhaps because, at the time of these interviews, local debates were occurring over whether or not to allow a new Wal-Mart to move into the downtown Athens area, 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.”
Not everyone viewed things in such black-and-white terms, however. Many Daily shoppers responded that they regularly shop at stores such as Kroger, Earth Fare, or Trader Joe’s because they found it difficult to purchase everything that they wanted at the co-op. Daily shoppers frequently noted a tension between their ideals regarding what they saw as “ethical” or “healthful” eating habits and concerns over prices, although the general consensus was that health and ethics would be put before costs whenever possible. One example came from a man who stated, “I don’t usually look at prices, just because I’m looking for specific organic food. And, you know, vegan. And you just don’t get that very many places. So I’ll pay a little more for quality.” Multiple shoppers claimed that they would continue to shop there if the prices increased in order to support the ethics of the store, even though they acknowledged that they would have to cut back.

Many loyal Daily shoppers also admitted that they simply couldn’t find everything they wanted at Daily. When explaining why she only did around forty percent of her grocery shopping at Daily, one shopper stated, “I would try and shop at the local versus big box as much as possible. But I mean, there are just some things you aren’t gonna get at the smaller stores.” Buying as much as possible at the co-op and only turning to larger chain stores for things that absolutely couldn’t be found at Daily was a common strategy, although there was often an disclaimer explaining that even when shopping at chain groceries they would be selective and as ethical as possible in their choices. For instance, 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. Although most people did not initially define what they meant by “local,” when pressed they usually explained it in one of two ways. The first had to do with local production of the food and a commitment to shortening the “farm to fork” distance. Although the produce selection regularly includes things from across the country or Central America, there also tends to be offerings from many of the same farms that regularly graced the local farmers’ market, in addition to local bread, pickles, hand-knit items, and a small box of CDs which features only musicians from Athens. The reactions to this local selection ranges. Some individuals felt that the co-op didn’t offer enough local produce, especially considering the success of the Athens Farmers Market. One self-proclaimed co-op connoisseur called their local selection “limited” compared to co-ops in other cities he had lived in. On the other hand, most respondents who were interested in local produce seemed largely satisfied with Daily’s selection, and typically held a laudatory attitude toward it. One shopper who regularly came to Athens from Atlanta in order to visit her daughter said, “I love this place! I love how much local stuff they have. And I can’t find local produce in Atlanta. You just can’t find it.” Another woman said, “I really look for local a lot, particularly local produce. But local, fresh. That’s why I come here.”

There was considerable concern for being “green” or environmentally conscious among Daily shoppers. Many respondents echoed the idea that locally-grown foods would inherently be “fresher” or of higher quality, and equally if not more importantly, would be better for the environment. A perhaps unfounded connection between being “local” and lacking in pesticide usage came up more than once. One shopper was particularly taken with the fact that Daily not only sells bulk food, but also bulk soaps, detergents, and shampoos. She claimed to have shampoo and conditioner bottles as well as a laundry detergent box that she had been reusing for
years since Daily allows you to refill your own containers. This allows for less packaging, something that more than one person mentioned that they saw as an environmental benefit of shopping at Daily. Sustainability came up frequently in interviews with Daily shoppers. Two respondents also explained that their personal love of nature made them Daily shoppers. “I enjoy the environment and being outside, and I think that relates to some of the reasons I shop at Daily,” one stated when asked to describe himself. A certain level of environmental-mindedness was assumed to be present among most people who regularly visited the co-op. As one online reviewer said, “Daily Co-Op stands next to a few other places that makes the City of Athens magical for me. This is the most charming grocery store in the world. I appreciate the people, who are all committed to sustainable lifestyles.”

The aforementioned review leads to the second meaning of “local,” which has to do with fostering a sense of community in Athens and helping to create and maintain a uniquely Athens culture. I will return to this concept in the next chapter to discuss who is actually a part of this “unique Athens community.” For now, I will merely describe the ways in which the idea of local community impacted the shopping habits of respondents. In explaining why he thought that Daily was having such success in the Athens area, one store manager said, “Right now our focus is really people who are interested in supporting community-owned businesses. There is a great interest in supporting completely local, non-chain. We make all the decisions here.” Locally-owned business was tied up in many shoppers’ idea of embracing a local Athens community. Not only were local business owners considered community members who needed the support of the rest of the community, but there was also an emphasis on keeping money within the local economy. One person suggested that buying from a local farm meant that that farmer might come buy something from a local bookstore, or have coffee at a local coffee shop, or perhaps
purchase art from a local artist. It is interesting to consider the fact that, although Taj Mahal is also a locally-owned and non-chain business, no discussion of it being “ethical” or “local” ever came up in any of the interviews.

Although personal ethics regularly came up in interviews with Daily shoppers, they were frequently vague. One young woman stated that she liked shopping at Daily because they carried “items that are, in some regard or another, a little bit more ethical in their production.” When describing the type of shopper that would be attracted to Daily, ideas such as “a conscious shopper,” or “someone who is more eco-conscious,” or “people who are food-conscious” regularly came up. Perhaps the boldest claim was that Daily shoppers are “ethically committed people who want to be part of something bigger than grocery shopping.” This contrasted with ideas from people who did not shop at Daily about Daily shoppers, which ranged from “trendy hipsters” or “crunchy granola hippies” to “vegetarians” or “people who take a lot of supplements.”

Price

“It all has to do with prices, you know what I mean?”

Unsurprisingly, price was a factor in almost everyone’s shopping decisions, no matter where they chose to shop. Sales were important to almost everyone, save for people who shopped at Daily. Lower prices were worth spending extra time organizing a day around bus rides even for people who had very little free time. For example, a man who felt that he was overworked and had very little time to spend with his daughter went out of his way to go to Bell’s, a low-cost grocery store with four local locations. Bell’s is an interesting case in and of
itself. It bills itself as “Your locally owned and operated food store” in its advertisements, but aside from this one individual, nobody I spoke to mentioned shopping there. This is particularly strange as the site he was referring to is on the same bus line as both Daily Groceries and Taj Mahal. This could be a function of the bus stops that I chose to interview at, however. A more extreme example of how important a factor price was in shopping choices was a woman who preferred to go all the way to Atlanta to shop at the Dekalb Farmers’ Market where she could purchase Indian cooking supplies at what she considered to be a much more reasonable rate than at Taj Mahal. She said she would shop at Taj Mahal for the occasional emergency when she ran out of spices, but added, “Price-wise, you know, I can’t speak for them. I mean, I’m a businesswoman. They buy, and they sell. And because I know how much I can get it for… But for the Americans, you know, it may be affordable.” Interestingly, interviews showed that she was correct in her estimation of Americans’ perception of price. Some expressed considerable excitement over how cheap the food and spices were. However, one American who had been to the Dekalb Farmers’ Market agreed with her. “You know, I used to think the stuff at Taj Mahal was a really good deal. Then I went to Dekalb and realized [Taj Mahal’s owner] has to really be jacking up the price on the Indian stuff.” Other Taj Mahal shoppers felt that the “Asian” side of the store had reasonable prices, but that they were able to sell those products cheaply because they raised the prices unfairly on the “American” side of the store. One woman who lived across the street but rarely shopped at Taj Mahal suspected that “[t]hey buy their stuff in bulk and break it down to make their own prices. Which they have the right to do, but I think their prices on that side are a little too steep. ‘Cause five dollars for a gallon of milk is just… That’s just too high.”

Perceptions of cost at Daily were also contradictory. Many people who chose not to shop there assumed that the prices would be incredibly high and kept them from entering the store at
all. One man who did not even consider Daily when thinking of places he might buy groceries said, “I mean, the ones I shop at, they have a coupon or sales in the newspaper. I ain’t ever seen one for them in the newspaper. The other ones have a little bit in the newspaper.” A friend of mine who admitted only to coming into Daily mostly to see me while I was working said:

“I feel like it’s overpriced, but in a different way. I feel like I’m paying to buy at this trendy, hipster, organic place. I feel like it’s just kind of pretentious. And a lot of what they sell you can get other places. I haven’t done a price comparison, but they have certain things I like, and maybe I’d pick something up, but for the most part it’s not really where I’d choose to shop.”

Although the general consensus among people did shop at Daily was that items that could be purchased in bulk were reasonably priced or even cheap, they found the prices on many other items to be prohibitive. One man who had previously worked at Daily and received a twenty percent discount said that he had almost completely stopped shopping there after he had to quit in order to dedicate more of his time to school.

“My inner, like, super-cheap person is very strong. Controls my whole life. That’s why I don’t go to Daily so much anymore. I get coffee sometimes in the morning because that’s actually really cheap. A lot of produce I’ll buy at Kroger though, ‘cause it’s cheaper. And yeah, like, pretty much any grocery item I’ll get at Kroger.”

A working member who still had access to the discount said that, although he tried to buy as much as he could there to support the co-op, “Unfortunately, I can’t afford the natural, quote unquote, natural products like organic litter, organic cat food, etcetera. I’ll go get the cheap stuff elsewhere.” Another working member who knew she would have to stop cashiering there soon admitted that she would probably stop shopping there as well as, to her, the discount made all of the difference in terms of affordability. However, one of the co-op employees was very enthusiastic about the idea that the prices were actually very competitive at Daily. He explained it by telling the story of how he started shopping there in the first place:
“Well, like everyone I think about costs. It’s kind of a funny story. I originally decided to start shopping at the Daily Groceries because I came with a spreadsheet that had my staple items on it, the things I always buy when I go to the grocery store. And I went to five different grocery stores and added in the prices. And I created a little bit of an equation where I’d evaluate price but also like, where it came from and how I felt about that, and also the atmosphere of the store. And with the 20% working member discount, and also knowing that everything was either local or organic, Daily is just above and beyond the best grocery store for me.”

Despite that, managers at Daily were cognizant of the fact that many people were put off by perceived high prices.

“We’ve been trying to reach out more to people who are more, like, walking distance from here. You see a lot of Dr. Oz signs around, and we find a lot of the lower-income people who we haven’t seen in the store before come in here looking for things they’ve seen on Dr. Oz. For a long time, the natural and organic foods market has been, you know, for people who have money. You know, the Whole Foods thing. We’re definitely trying to reach out a little bit more to people who don’t, and show people how they can do more with what they get here, even if it costs a little more.”

Other non-proximity factors

There were a number of other factors that went into people’s decisions about where to shop, but which were not discussed as frequently by respondents. Therefore, I did not think that they each warranted their own sections. However, they lend credence to the idea that there are a significant number of factors going into food purchasing decisions aside from physical proximity to the home and so I include them here. They include food safety and cleanliness, the needs of children, healthiness of the food, selection and variety, and atmosphere.

Food safety and store cleanliness were common concerns, but only among people who were not Daily shoppers. The fact that it was never brought up by Daily shoppers is interesting, considering many were bothered by pesticide usage in agriculture, which was linked to
environmental issues rather than food safety. Concerns with cleanliness began even before entering the store for some. As one man said, “I look at the way the store is built and the way it looks before I ever go in. That it looks clean, that’s a big thing.” Some respondents told me that they worried about cleanliness with non-chain stores because of the lack of standardization. Small groceries could be owned by anybody, and the food could potentially come from anywhere and be handled in any manner. This reflects some of the anxiety felt by shoppers which was alleviated with the rise of chain supermarkets as described in the introduction. When explaining why he would be hesitant to enter a small grocery that he was unfamiliar with, one man said, “You know, some of those stores look kind of nasty like maybe they got bugs in them, and ain’t healthy. You know, it’s supposed to be out on display for the public.” He went on to say that, “As long as it’s clean. You know, mopping the floor, keeping it clean. As long as it’s clean and it looks presentable, yeah. If I can tell they really work to make it clean in there, then I might [go in].” For some shoppers, cleanliness in the store translated directly into food safety. There was some worry that food might be contaminated in smaller shops, or come from disreputable sources. Shoppers who voiced these concerns also tended to be more aware of “food scares” and food recalls. As one man explained:

“Well, like safety is important. ‘Cause I hear a lot of things on the news where they have defective meat. I’m not really looking for any type of place, but I’m just saying if I had to go shopping somewhere nearby maybe I’d go [to a small-scale store], but I don’t know if they’re safe in all their products or if they’re, you know, if they’re really that clean.”

This food safety anxiety was particularly prevalent among parents who were shopping for younger children. In general, parents had a different view on grocery shopping and saw themselves as subject to different constraints than those who were not shopping for children. Some parents expressed an interest in shopping at a place such as Taj Mahal, but worried that the
food there might be too “exotic” or unfamiliar for their children to eat. The health and tastes of children seemed to be the main concern of parents, a few of whom bemoaned their children’s simple tastes and lack of curiosity about more “interesting” foods as preventing them from expanding their grocery shopping repertoire. Some considered shopping at places where they were not positive that they could find the types of food their children were accustomed to eating to be a waste of money or time. One mother clarified why she chose Kroger over other smaller stores by saying, “Maybe if it were just me. Yeah, if it were just me, I think I’d like to go to one of the interesting little places and see what they have. But with the kids, who knows if they’ll eat it?”

Perceived selection at stores was important to shoppers in other capacities aside from suiting the needs of children. Some people were satisfied with a store just carrying a wide array of products. For example, one man put selection on par with prices in terms of importance by saying, “Well, I would like it to be not too expensive, like, unreasonably expensive. But also that they have a lot of stuff. You know, from produce to everyday use. Whatever you call those things. And then, yeah, just, they have to have a lot of things.” Others agreed with that sentiment, clarifying that it is not the size of the store or its status as a name-brand chain that is attractive, but rather the variety of products available. One woman explained that she would actually prefer to support small businesses, but usually finds herself going to supermarkets. She went on to say, “It really depends if the small grocery store has what I need. You know, if it has everything I need, then I’d probably go to the smaller one. Size, being big like Kroger, doesn’t really matter. It’s what they have. Unfortunately, bigger usually wins on that one.” However, the focus on available selection often favors smaller groceries with a specialized assortment of products. Multiple people chose to shop at Daily, for instance, because they felt that it provided more
healthy choices and less processed food, the absence of which they saw as a bonus. One UGA student said she liked to shop there because “they have so much healthy food that’s really good, and I’m not distracted by any Pop-Tarts or Oreos or anything. Shopping there helps me stay healthier.” Likewise, people who shopped in the Asian side of Taj Mahal frequently pointed out that they had a selection of foods and products that simply could not be found any closer than Atlanta.

Atmosphere and “comfort” were also huge draws for many people. While some people did not like the “anonymous” feeling associated with larger grocery stores, others preferred it and claimed to feel uncomfortable when given special attention by employees. Some were put off by the “crunchy granola hipster” vibe at the co-op, while others railed against the “greedy corporate” or “individualistic” atmosphere in chain stores. Feelings of community and expectations of stopping to chat with cashiers or workers were incredibly important to many, yet others were made uncomfortable because they felt that they were left out of the “club” and one woman even felt like she was an intruder or a nuisance when she entered those seemingly friendly spaces. Big chain grocery stores, on the other hand, were considered “overwhelming” or too “intense” by some who preferred smaller groceries. Finding a place where they felt at ease was an incredibly important to many people, and was key to store loyalty. As one woman said when asked to talk about herself, “I am a person who likes convenience. And don’t mind paying for it. But I’m also a creature of habit. I find certain places or people that I like and I kind of stick to them.” Interestingly, some people who brought up comfort seemed to feel as if placing importance on being comfortable in a space was silly or unique to them. However, it was a very common concern, and will be the primary focus of the next chapter.
Conclusion

For many shoppers, smaller, more intimate stores are preferred to large chain stores. They cite reasons for this preference that range from enjoying the personal attention and the perceived helpfulness of the employees in a smaller space to simply having an easier time finding everything. One woman said of Daily, “I like that it’s kind of smaller, so you don’t have to like, search for stuff. I think that’s one reason why I really like it.” However, when advocating for a move toward more small-scale neighborhood grocery stores and fewer residentially removed chain supermarkets, it is also important to consider the fact that many people actually prefer the larger grocery stores for a variety reasons. In fact, some of the things that some like about small stores are what drive others away from them.

It is important to remember, for example, that not everyone is treated the same way in a community. For many, the anonymity expected in a large chain grocery store may actually be a relief. One woman explained that she preferred not to be approached or “watched” by staff because it made her feel uncomfortable, as if they were judging her or waiting for her to do the wrong thing. When a space has a very particular community attachment to it, there are many accompanying codes and expected behavior that may be difficult to anticipate for those who are not a part of that community. A man had a similar sentiment about too much staff attention:

“I don’t really like it when it is… unsolicited. I think the unsolicited enthusiasm, and friendliness, and conversation from the staff in some places is unwarranted and makes my shopping experience less than delightful. I just want to get my food and get out.”

Others were just bothered by the “squished” feeling that came from being in such small spaces with other people in such close proximity. While explaining why he chose to shop at “big box” stores, one man stated, “I don’t like these small places. I think maybe being comfortable is more
important to me than most people. Everything’s too close in a little place like that. Everybody’s squished in together.” Another woman agreed with that idea, saying:

“I just don’t like really small, enclosed space. Like, every time the door opens, I’m sort of looking to see who’s coming in. Somehow it always does make me feel like I’m in a hurry. Like I gotta grab what I need and go.”

Small sizes also limit variety, which is unacceptable to many shoppers. One man explained that he would choose Kroger or a store like it over either Daily or Taj Mahal because big stores have more variety, and that was his main concern when going grocery shopping. He did not want to go to a grocery store with a shopping list or recipes only to find that half of the things that he wanted were not available. One woman felt considerable conflict because she would have preferred to support small, local business, “but there are just some things you aren’t gonna get at one of the smaller stores…” Three different individuals who shopped regularly at Daily, when asked what they would change about the store, pointed to size first. All three believed that Daily would be a better store if it were larger and could offer more products.

These examples demonstrate that it is impossible to please everyone. Consumer behavior is based on myriad beliefs, tastes, and circumstances that are particular to the individual. While physical proximity to place of residence did come up in a number of interviews as a major factor in choosing where to shop, it was rare that it was listed as the factor that took the greatest priority. This, perhaps surprisingly, was true even for those without a personal vehicle. As the this chapter and the next show, it is incredibly important to understand the desires of the community when seeking to eradicate food deserts by introducing neighborhood groceries. If the store does not fit the needs and preferences of the neighborhood at large, it may end up doing very little at all.
CHAPTER 5

“OH HONEY, DON’T YOU KNOW?”: INCLUSION, EXCLUSION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PLACE

So, the “friendliness” of a place you’re shopping [in] is important to you, then?

Yeah, I would say so. ‘Cause it’s nice to feel comfortable in such a small space with someone else right there.

In this chapter I explore meanings of place, the local, and community, and how these concepts work to not just include individuals and create social cohesion, but also to exclude. I draw heavily from Cresswell’s (1996) understanding of place to inform my analysis. He suggests that place is much more than merely a stand-in for the term “space.” Instead, there is an implication of what is proper in certain spaces: what and who does or does not belong in that space, what behavior is or is not acceptable in that space. More succinctly put, place is the marriage of the spatial and the social. I argue that, even when social boundaries are not explicitly drawn atop spatial borders, their implicit presence still acts as a powerful spatial organizer of people.

This chapter starts with a discussion of the rhetoric around the terms “local” and “community.” I will show that these concepts are involved in powerful place-based narratives at Daily Groceries that are used to explain who makes use of the space and how they use it. At the same time, ideals such as supporting local business and having staff that give more personalized treatment than a typical chain grocery store that are so strongly attached to the meaning ascribed to Daily are also present at Taj Mahal, despite not being part of that store’s narrative. I will then
describe how the act of creating meaning in place tends to simultaneously create boundaries that work to exclude those who do not see themselves reflected in a given place. These ideas will lead up to a discussion of racialized landscapes, and how the racial coding at work in grocery stores works to limit food access in an already barren food landscape.

*Inclusion and exclusion in concepts of “community” and the “local”*

Starr and Adams (2003) suggest that, among movements favoring local production in the face of increasing economic globalization, the creation and defense of local food systems is the most significant. Among other things, local food advocates hope to bolster local economies, support environmental sustainability, preserve local culture, and tighten community bonds. These themes were brought up frequently by shoppers at Daily, many of whom saw locally-owned and operated grocery stores as being an integral part of the local food system. Emphasis was especially placed on Daily’s perceived ability to help preserve and create “the uniquely Athens community.” This rhetoric was largely missing from data collected from non-Daily shoppers and shoppers at Taj Mahal, which is also a locally-owned grocery. Following Cresswell’s (1996) definition of *place*, I describe how appeals to the “local” and “community-building” are integral to conscious place construction which not only work to include, but actively exclude even those who are physically proximate. The coding of defined space (grocery stores in this case) creates boundaries that are more permeable to some than to others. I argue that feelings of being “out of place” that are reinforced by such coding are so strong that they affect individuals’ spatial perception of urban landscapes and ultimately work to limit food access for portions of a population who are not being targeted by the term “community.”
At the time of this study, I had been a working member at Daily for over a year. While Daily has since switched to a patronage model and has eliminated working member positions, at the time of interviewing, nearly everyone working at Daily was a working member rather than an employee. While there were a select few paid employees, most of the cashiers, openers, closers, and stockers were “working members” who received a 20 percent discount and, according to Section 2.2 of Article 2 of the co-op's bylaws, were “entitled to participate in the governance of the Co-op” in return for roughly four hours (though hours may vary based on the tasks being performed) of service every week rather than payment. In most cases people would probably be reluctant to give up their spare time to ring up other people's groceries or make sandwiches that they would never get to eat. It seems unlikely that the response would be the same if a chain supermarket offered discounts rather than paychecks in return for work. What is it about this space, and this idea of the “cooperative” that is so attractive to certain people? And for whom does it hold such a tremendous draw? How much of it is really about the food?

“I lived in Athens for many years. I lived here since 1983. And I wanted to be part of a co-op. I was part of a food buying club for a long time, where we’d just order stuff together just to get bulk prices. So we would order things together, but that disbanded and I was looking around for something else, and a co-op was starting. And by the time I heard about it, all the working positions were filled. And this was when it was just beginning. And it kind of put me off, because there weren’t any spots open… It was like, ‘Oh, they have it all taken care of’ by the time I heard of it. I would shop there, but it wasn’t like when I became a working member. I just felt like it was where I wanted to be. I was in a transition in my life, and I wanted to be in a place where I met more like-minded people while I figured out what I wanted to do.”

The above quote was given by Maria, a woman in her sixties who no longer lives in Athens, having moved to Atlanta to find work. She regularly visits her granddaughter in Athens, but claimed that stopping in at Daily is the second most important task on her agenda when coming to town. Maria’s feelings about Daily as a place run deeper than merely a positive
assessment of its ideological leanings such as its commitment to organic products. It is a place in which she feels comfortable and at home. It is a social space where people she feels are similar to her congregate, rather than a place where disconnected people come to anonymously purchase food. For her and many like her, Daily is more than a grocery store; it is a location imbued with meaning. At Daily, many pieces come together to create a very specific coding of who belongs within its walls. For Maria and many other Athenians, that coding creates a welcoming atmosphere that suggests that they are in place, while also signifying that others are not.

To understand the role the store’s coding and narratives play in the creation of “place,” it is useful to begin by asking what Daily offer that non-cooperative grocery stores do not. The space is small and cramped with fairly little in the way of “choice.” I often received the impression while working at Daily and chatting with customers that many were savvy enough to be suspicious of the many “choices” presented at a conventional grocery store. Some individuals seemed to have a perception of Daily as removing many of the “unimportant frills” found in a chain grocery. In this way it offers the removal of the temptation for an “unhealthy” lifestyle for its shoppers. Yet a quick glance at Daily’s website shows how questionable the assertion that “frills” have been removed at Daily. The website provides a list of “popular items” that can be purchased there, including things such as coconut water, Kombucha tea, black bean chips, local and organic produce, loose-leaf teas, and “Annie’s and other Organic packaged foods.” That Kombucha tea (a drink that costs roughly $4.00 a bottle) is highlighted before cheaper and more widely-used bulk foods speaks to the way that the co-op is representing what it is and who it is for.

But the working members that I spoke with at Daily Groceries tended to largely downplay the expensive specialty items when explaining their personal attraction to the store.
One of the major recurring themes that appeared in discussions that took place between myself (in the role of cashier) and customers was the idea of Daily as a communal place. Like many spaces in Athens, one of its main functions seems to be to serve as a location for like-minded people to come together and interact with one another, regardless of what the space itself is attempting to provide. This ideal of “local community” is deeply embedded in the fabric of Daily Groceries: in the store you can always find fliers, stickers and pins insisting that we support local business and farmers, that we protect downtown Athens, that we stop Wal-Mart from moving in and destroying what “we” love about “our” town. An eye-level sticker on the door proudly proclaims that Daily is “local,” although it does not elaborate on what that means. However, the concept of “communal loyalty” acted out via supporting grocers from one’s own community (and especially one’s own racial or ethnic group) has a history of devolving into rhetoric that focuses on negative portrayals of other groups (Deutsch 2010, 39). As DuPuis and Goodman ask, “Who gets to define ‘the local’? Who do you care for and how?” (Dupuis and Goodman 2005, 361)

While the concept of the “local” is partially predicated on exclusion, those that I interviewed in an unstructured pilot interview only spoke about inclusionary aspects. In the pilot interviews, I only asked for respondents to give their impressions of Daily and never specifically asked about community or interactions with other people within Daily Groceries, yet all five of the people interviewed told me that they enjoyed the friendly, communal atmosphere, and all but one volunteered the information that they had made friends with other workers and customers. One woman described the shoppers and workers as “good people” who are “conscientious about how they treat others” and claimed to only have ever had positive interactions with people at the co-op. A man that I interviewed actually asked me to underline the words “friends” and
“community” in his response in order to emphasize the importance of those two concepts.

Another man simply began listing individual people he liked when asked why he volunteered his time every week.

Of course, the deeper question is how far and to whom that friendliness extends. I suspect that there are plenty of “friendly” people who do not feel the same friendship and community that regular shoppers and working members at Daily often described as being part of the store’s charm. The interaction of the social and the spatial in forming place does more than create spaces of belonging; it also works to create barriers to social interaction, including economic interactions. Although social barriers are permeable no matter how thoroughly and violently they are enforced (consider, for example, territory as a social construct whose physical boundaries – be they national borders or gang territory – are regularly transgressed), Foucault’s (1977) idea of the disciplinary power of fictitious relations is particularly potent in explaining the tendency of the majority to adhere to these barriers. While the use of physical force may at times be necessary to maintain the social order desired by dominant groups, that is the exception. Policing of the behavior of groups and individuals via the normative meanings embedded within place is generally enough to maintain various levels and varieties of order, including which type of marked bodies are typically found in a place.

In the celebration of the local community, it is important not to forget that the constructed idea of the “local” clearly does not reflect the preferences and cultures of many individuals who are geographically proximate. The following anecdote is particularly telling: An older man came into Daily Groceries while I was working. He had walked down the street with another man, and his companion lingered outside. He came in and purchased a cup of coffee with an EBT card and left without a word. His silence and unhappy demeanor were strange enough in
that space to comment upon. Another worker said that he had seen the men before, and that they had come from Sparrow's Nest Mission Church, an organization just down the street from Daily that works with people in need. My co-worker said that they sometimes come in for a cup of coffee since it is one of the least expensive coffee options in town. I expressed surprise that more people didn't come here from Sparrow's Nest for inexpensive coffee, and my co-worker shrugged and said, “I think they're scared of coming in here because it's a co-op.”

As Cresswell (1996) suggests, unstated place-based characterizations prove to be especially influential upon people’s unexamined understandings of place, and likewise their understanding of behavior in place. People who are marked as being out of place are met with intense social pressure to avoid said spaces, even if the pressure does not include members of the dominant group drawing overt territorial lines. I cannot say for certain that my co-worker was correct in his estimation that people walking past Daily after coming from Sparrow’s Nest are “scared” of co-ops, but it is true that they are unlikely to be treated immediately as part of the in-group. This may matter less in a place such as a chain supermarket where everyone is fairly anonymous, but being an outsider in a place that is structured around a notion of community and neighborliness can quickly add an extra layer of discomfort.

Behavior within space is a socially interpretive act (Cresswell 1996), and I argue that those who recognize themselves as having “outsider” status may choose to deal with this status in a number of ways. Returning to the spatial perception example from earlier, if a place is coded in a way that makes it seem as if it is not “for” a particular person, that person may not even notice it. People who fit the “mold” of a typical Daily or Taj Mahal shopper who regularly passed the stores tended to be attracted to them and curious enough to go inside, while people who did not fit the mold often did not even notice them, even if they frequently walked past
them. As one man said when looking directly at Daily from across the street, “I pass here all the time. I didn’t even think about that that place has food before. I always just go to the corner store down there when I want something!” Others noticed, but purposefully avoided the stores if they felt uncomfortable or were unsure what to make of them. Interestingly, one African American man spoke to me outside of Taj Mahal and told me that he frequented places downtown (although he did not visit Daily) even though he knew his presence made white people uncomfortable and he felt that they did not want him there. He did so because he felt that he had “just as much a right to be there as anyone else” and wanted to publicly demonstrate that. Others may have a difficult time interpreting which behaviors are acceptable in a space, such as one woman who felt like she was not supposed to open the refrigerators lining the walls at Taj Mahal the first time she went in, or another person who was unsure as to whether it was appropriate to interrupt the manager at Taj Mahal to ask a question when she was chatting with another customer. Being unsure as to how to behave in a space can create anxiety about being revealed as an outsider, and can be a deterrent to potential shoppers.

There is far more to the social coding of Daily Groceries than the types of food that are sold there. The music that is played in the store, the liberal political leanings of the fliers and stickers, the penchant for the cute, “earthy” and quirky: all of these things and more code the space with a very particular type of youthful liberal whiteness. Concerning the music, which is typically selected from workers’ personal mp3 players, one Daily shopper said:

“I was a little taken aback when I first came in, because of the music. There was usually, especially in the evening shifts, really loud, esoteric music. I like that kind of music, but there’s a time and a place. You know, experimental jazz does distract one from grocery shopping, so I understand the plight of people not wanting to come in here to shop.”
This falls in line with Trudeau’s (2006) idea of landscape as a contrived scene which enforces particular ideas about group belonging to a spatial component. Members of the dominant group(s) (in this case typically white, liberal, self-consciously “creative” or “artistic” and generally young) have the power to (re)create landscapes that fortify their particular model of community and belonging. Imbuing place with meaning can be a defensive strategy that seeks to maintain cultural meaning and relationships in the face of movements toward the global. Yet, as Massey (2005) points out, this protection of local place creates restrictions that may affect even geographically proximate persons.

The hegemonic meaning of place is often made explicit when an act of transgression threatens a shift from “our place” to “their place.” (Cresswell 1996) While the perceived lack of racial heterogeneity may be acknowledged at Daily, I never overheard anyone say that they prefer it or would take any action to keep it that way. However, other groups, particularly fraternity brothers, were spoken of in a derogatory way from time to time. Some spoke with what seemed to be pride about the fact that fraternity brothers would not like the atmosphere of Daily due to its overt liberal leaning, its “natural” aesthetic, and the music being played there. Those that I spoke to at Daily never seemed to make a connection between coding the space in such a way as to put off fraternity brothers and making it unpalatable to other groups who did not fit into the narrowly catered-to majority at Daily.

It is important to look at the implications of these feelings of inclusion and to consider who is being left out. One person who did not like to shop at Daily felt that the volunteers he had encountered made going into the store an uncomfortable experience. He said:

“The staff is mostly clueless hipsters who just want to stand around talking to their friends, so I don’t really like going in unless I really need something that they don’t have at Kroger or something. But even then, I can probably get it at Earth Fare.”
He, like other people who chose not to shop at either Daily or Taj Mahal, did not feel like part of the store’s community and therefore felt unwelcome. Another man said of the workers and clientele, “There’s lots of weird people there. I don’t have anything against them, they’re just peculiar. I guess they have peculiar ideas.” If one of the major goals of promoting small-scale, neighborhood groceries like Daily is to provide food that is “healthy,” “local,” “fresh,” or “organic” then we must consider the fact that people who are not comfortable with the way the space is coded, who do not see themselves reflected in the store's personality, may end up limiting their own access to these products due to the power of being “out of place.” (Cresswell 1996)

Much of the rhetoric from shoppers at Daily falls into almost rehearsed-sounding talking points about supporting “local” business and food systems and creating local community. Frequently, these talking points fall into Alkon and Traugot’s (2008) idea of place comparison and place meta-narrative as ways of understanding the social meaning of a particular place. Daily shoppers often negatively characterize physically proximate groceries as being too corporate or too disinterested in community. They also use meta-narratives to locate Daily in the larger green and local movements. Sometimes people were so keen to make Daily fit into the larger movements that they ultimately constructed falsehoods about Daily, such as the idea that all of the produce is local even though it frequently comes from other countries. These same talking points were not present in discussions with shoppers at Taj Mahal, nor were they used by any Daily shoppers to describe Taj Mahal or other small, “ethnic” grocery stores like it. However, speaking to the concern over “local,” Taj Mahal is most certainly a locally-owned business. If the point of calling a store local is to put an emphasis on local products, then Taj Mahal does not count as local. Yet the majority of the products sold at Daily are not produced locally either. If
the point is that the owners live in an area geographically proximate to their business, then the following quote from a Taj Mahal shopper would certainly make them seem local:

“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.”

As for fostering local community and a friendly, neighborly atmosphere, those things were certainly present at Taj Mahal based on my observations there. The things that made Daily so “unique,” such as the “random conversations” and “chances to meet other people in the community,” were also present at Taj Mahal. There were only ever three cashiers that I saw when coming into Taj Mahal, and the majority of the time it was either the owner, Rani, or one employee who lived across the street, Ray. As such, they had more direct interaction with more of the clientele than did Daily volunteers who would cashier for only four hours once a week. Because of this, it seemed as if almost every person who came into the store was greeted like a personal friend. Ray was especially gregarious and talkative, and if he saw me wandering around the store, would strike up a conversation about nearly anything. He was that way with the majority of customers, and it seemed that most people couldn’t help but smile when talking with him. More than that, he pulled multiple people into conversations with him at a time, thus frequently creating little groups of shoppers who would chat at the register together. He was so charismatic that I once saw him pull a person into a nearly fifteen-minute discussion of chicken salad, which they seemed happy to participate in. This was particularly interesting to me, as there were customers who I perceived as being very guarded and difficult to start a conversation with, but Ray would always seem to put them at ease. Rani also chatted with most of the customers. She knew a great deal about many of them, and I frequently overheard her asking about shoppers’ families and work. This type of interaction was different than what I observed at Daily.
Although Daily cashiers and customers frequently discussed topics such as recipes, gardening, music, or bikes, there was no discussion of personal things such as jobs or families unless the shopper was a personal friend of the cashier’s. There was a much more intimate employee-customer interaction at Taj Mahal. Rani frequently called her customers “neighbors,” even when she was describing them to me. And this interaction was not one-sided; customers were not harangued by Ray and Rani while they were trying to go about their business. Customers would frequently come up to them to chat or joke around, or ask them about their families. All of the shoppers from the Rock Springs housing project that I spoke to mentioned that people there 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.”

Daily is also not alone in attracting volunteers; one man I interviewed 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.” Even people from Rock Springs who chose not to shop regularly at Taj Mahal due to things like perceived high prices or lack of selection were quick to say that they found it to be a very friendly and welcoming place.

However, like “outsiders” at Daily, many shoppers at Taj Mahal who were not from the Rock Springs neighborhood did not find the atmosphere as welcoming. “Every time the door opens, I’m sort of looking around to see who’s coming in. Over time I’ve gotten more comfortable being there, but I still always do feel like I gotta grab what I need and get out,” said one self-identified white woman who claimed to shop at Taj Mahal because she liked being as authentic as possible when cooking Indian dishes. Multiple people who shopped exclusively on the Asian side of the grocery, or who refused to shop at Taj Mahal at all, said that the presence of the housing project across the street made them uncomfortable. One woman even felt sorry for
Rani, saying it was a pity that she had to sell to everyone. Rani did not seem to feel that way, as she explained that she deliberately chose to establish the business in that location, which, she said had “built-in neighbors and customers.” However, Rani drew the line at what she called “crazy people,” which she explained as people she thought might be on drugs:

“Honestly, I don’t mind whoever. But I don’t want crazy customers over here. Whenever crazy customers come here, I say, ‘I don’t need your money. Just leave.’ Trust me, because sometimes they come and say, ‘I have money that I’m going to spend!’ And I say, ‘You know what? You need to leave.’ Because we’re not that kind of people.”

Yet, while Rani drew the line around out of place behavior rather than people, some respondents associated the behavior with the “type” of people who live at Rock Springs: poor, and typically black. For example, an Indian woman who drove from across town to shop at Taj Mahal felt uncomfortable in the space “because [Rock Springs] is very drug-related. The people there, I think most of them are on bad drugs.” Some people who shopped on the Asian side felt that Taj Mahal was itself out of place in that part of town, or seemed to feel some confusion as to whether they were themselves in place or out of place when they were in the store. Two people mentioned that being in the parking lot outside of the store made them feel uncomfortable. One woman said she felt very comfortable on the Asian side of the store, but felt strange entering the “American” side of the grocery store because she got the feeling she wasn’t supposed to be there and that it was “specifically catering to people across the street.”

The meanings assigned to places are created through practices in those spaces. Actors read spatial “texts” and then act based on their interpretations of the space, thus simultaneously reacting to and producing the meaning of a place (Cresswell 1996). As I suggested before, group or community-oriented spaces can cause some dissonance and discomfort for people who do not see themselves as insiders. This, I would argue, is largely due to the confusion associated with
deciphering a place’s “text.” While you may be allowed in a space, are you wanted there? Are you correctly interpreting the social cues and reacting appropriately? Here it is interesting to consider Butler’s (1993) concept of performativity. What is appropriate and “in place” in a particular community is based on a habitual reiteration, or performance, of the community’s norms. These actions, based on spatial interpretations, become naturalized in that space. Yet, for an outsider, it may be jarring to be in a new space where they find themselves unable to understand and participate in what is “natural” there. Therefore, performativity draws socio-spatial barriers as can be seen in the following response a Daily shopper gave when asked to clarify why he described Daily as “welcoming”:

“Well, I do think it’s very welcoming. But I can see from, like, an outside perspective, I mean. It’s hard for me to judge, because I’ve been involved with co-ops for a lot of years so I sort of know what to expect. So it kind of is easier for me to blend in with it. But I do see how some people could feel uncomfortable, because from just like an insider’s standpoint it’s just, like, a little different from your typical grocery. And it’s not as easy to acclimate to at first, maybe. Maybe they don’t know what to do.”

Understanding the text of a place helps to create in-groups and out-groups. In the case of the “neighborhood” grocery stores, the associated anxiety may manifest itself in self-censorship or a reluctance to ask questions or interact for fear of saying or doing something that is socially inappropriate, or of revealing one’s self as being an outsider or unknowledgeable. One man, who eventually became a Daily shopper, spoke to me about his first time going into the store:

“I don’t like places that feel too, uh, exclusive. I like inclusivity, so it kind of weirded me out. It seemed kinda weird. Like, not very welcoming to normal people. I didn’t know what to say or do. I felt like a fraud going in there ‘cause I didn’t have, like, a band or a cool haircut, or you know, a ‘vegans rock’ shirt on.”

Another woman who chose not to shop there similarly joked about how she didn’t feel she fit in with the community there, claiming she wasn’t “cool” enough to shop at Daily, and that she was afraid that the cashiers would laugh at her for being a “square.”
Every place has a constructed identity which works to include some while excluding others. Even places that celebrate “local community” tend to codify community membership as something more than merely living within close physical proximity. There is also an element of performativity (Butler 1993), of being able to recreate the norms and ideals associated with a community through behavior and appearance. In interviews, people tended to laugh about their insecurities over feeling unwelcome or being unsure as to how to behave in a place as if they were illogical or even silly personal quirks. Whether it is logical or not, it appeared frequently as a barrier strong enough to affect both people’s spatial perceptions and shopping habits, and therefore must be taken seriously when considering methods of alleviating food deserts. I will discuss more thoroughly in the next section the role of race in place construction and how it affects food access.

Race and the construction of place

Although there are many elements that go into the coding of place, race is arguably the most intractable and certainly one of the most difficult to adequately address. In terms of food access, a lack of existing grocery stores is a political economic one. Racialized landscapes serve to exacerbate the problem by adding potent social boundaries, further limiting options. Yet, while race serves to shape both landscapes and how people navigate them, creating a useful dialogue about the impacts of race in a society that largely adheres to colorblind ideology is no simple task. Here I discuss how people largely sought to avoid directly speaking about race, instead making “semantic moves” (Myers and Williamson 2001) to talk about it indirectly, particularly during structured interviews. This “indirect” discussion of race still powerfully revealed people’s
perceptions of how Daily and Taj Mahal are racially coded, and how those perceptions worked to create social boundaries that affect food access.

It is instructive to begin with two anecdotes from Daily, both of which serve as a clear example of the ingrained nature of race in place construction and coding, even in a grocery store that, as previously discussed, prides itself on “community.” Sitting behind the counter at Daily, I overheard a discussion about another volunteer. I asked for the name of the person being referred to, and when that failed to ring any bells for me, I asked for a physical description. “Well, they're white,” someone said. Everyone laughed. “It's funny because everyone here is white,” someone else explained. Another conversation revealed similar cognizance of the racial makeup of Daily: When asking if the “black gentleman from earlier” had left behind one of the items that he had purchased, another employee asked for further clarification. They received the response, “There’s, like, one black person that shops here.” The second person replied, “Actually, there are probably two or three that I see come in pretty regularly.” If we take as a given the “transparency phenomenon,” which marks the tendency among whites to not notice whiteness (Haney Lopez 1997), and seems to be an important underpinning of color-blind ideology, then these instances of race cognizance appear to indicate the extent to which those making use of the space are racially homogenous. As noted in the last section, simply feeling as if one’s personal fashion choices were not considered the norm in a space was enough to make individuals feel uncomfortable shopping there. Being “out of place” in terms of race understandably tends to have a tremendous impact on feelings of exclusion.

The cognizance of racialized space present in the previous anecdotes was also noticeable in interview settings, although people who had actively acknowledged race in private discourse (some even joking with me about my mixed-race identity) worked to talk around race when they
were confronted with a confidentiality agreement and a tape recorder. Considering the differences in the discourse that I noticed when I compared what I overheard while engaging in participant observation with what was said to me when I was perceived as a researcher, or a “public” figure, I would certainly agree with Myers and Williamson (2001) that people censor their racial perceptions in public discourse. One particularly telling example came when I interviewed a white woman who spent a considerable portion of the interview describing why she felt uncomfortable at Taj Mahal without ever explicitly mentioning race. As soon as I turned off the recorder, she leaned in and asked, “I didn’t sound, like, racist, did I?” Even something as seemingly benign as noticing that most of the bodies in a space tend to be coded “white” could not be openly admitted by white respondents in an interview setting. In fact, only one Daily shopper overtly mentioned race (albeit in a fairly limited way) by describing Daily as “a nice place. Pretty white.” However, the respondent was a friend and therefore may have been able to mentally place the interview in a realm between public and private discourse.

In my reading of the narratives provided in interviews and via participant observation, I follow Omi and Winant’s (1994) argument that, while it is no longer politically viable to promote outright racism, this is worked around via the utilization of coded language. Myers and Williamson (2001) refer to this as making “semantic moves” to promote objectives benefitting the racial majority, while Bonilla-Silva (2010) describes this type of occurrence as “race talk.” This occurs, once again, in the respondent’s attempt to indicate cognizance of the space’s racial homogeneity. For example, when asked to describe typical shoppers at Daily, one white, male respondent stammered out the following:

“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 it may be a leap to connect “missing demographics” to “lack of racialized minorities,” I would suggest that this is not so, as in private discourse during my participant observation, the same individual openly told me that he noticed the lack of non-whites and wasn’t really sure how one might go about changing the overt whiteness of the space. This example also illustrates what Bonilla-Silva (2010) calls “rhetorical incoherence.” This idea suggests that mistakes in speech such as long pauses, repetition, or grammatical mistakes noticeably increase when whites who adhere to a colorblind ideology are made uncomfortable by discussions of race. This frequently occurred in my interviews when white respondents sought to talk about (or around) race without mentioning it explicitly.

Building off of Butler’s (1993) discussion of performativity, Thomas (2005) argues that spatial practices are examples of performativity which are imbued with racial meaning. The acknowledgement of the “American” side and the “Asian” side of Taj Mahal is a testament to far more than the types of food sold on each side of the store. Basic familiarity with products on one side of the store versus the other may be enough to explain away some of the de facto segregation that occurs in Taj Mahal, but based on my interviews and observations, I argue that there is a very self-aware element to many customers’ spatial navigation that is made particularly obvious and explicit in such a small space. Would the mixing of customers occur more readily if the Asian groceries were mixed among the American groceries? In designing the layout, the ability to not interact with different types of customers seems to have been built in. One customer responded, “I would change the layout because it feels so divisive” when asked about what would make Taj Mahal feel more inviting. However, I again suggest that a mere layout change would not be enough to erase feelings of discomfort in the store. As 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. But 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. When asked who the store seemed to be trying to attract, people frequently had difficulty stating their answers, often falling into the previously mentioned trap of rhetorical incoherence. The “Asian” or “Indian” community was typically supplied as an answer without any great unease, but the remainder of the clientele was harder for people to give name to. This is particularly interesting as people were much more likely to discuss nationalized race, but tried very hard to revert to “socially appropriate” color-blind discourse when discussing people who are 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 Rock Springs 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.” While never described explicitly in any of the interviews aside from a couple of nods to the residents of Rock Springs, or as one customer interestingly called them, “the locals,” the answer to the question of who the “American” side of the store targeted came out more readily in unstructured conversations. They are poor and they are black. Multiple people pointed to the types of groceries and products sold on the American side of the store to back that idea up. One man told me that it was obvious from the hair products
with African Americans on the box. This is particularly interesting in terms of invisible or “unmarked” whiteness, because nobody ever associated the excess of white models on hair products in other grocery stores as a sign of those spaces being for white people. Whiteness is the default, with the representation of other racialized peoples as purposeful deviations. When asked if she felt she was part of Taj Mahal’s target demographic, one (white) shopper laughed as if the question were ridiculous before answering in the negative. If there are more black faces represented on products, a space becomes coded as for people who are marked as black in particular, and is to be largely avoided by other racial demographics. Interestingly, when one woman (she chose to refer to herself as a “person of color”) who shopped at Taj Mahal was asked about who the owners were attempting to target, she responded: “All kinds of people. White, black, Asian, different. Different people. Everybody. It’s got everything you need.”

However, the discomfort that white shoppers at Taj Mahal felt did not extend to sharing space with non-black racialized minorities that frequented the Asian side of the grocery. The concept of “model minorities” as described by Pulido (2006) is apt here. Racialized groups are frequently subject to inclusion within a hierarchy that tends to put whites at the top and blacks at the bottom, with other racialized minorities falling in-between and frequently struggling amongst one another for a higher position. 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, lower-class Asians were not considered a threat. Instead, their perceived culture was met with curiosity and interest rather than fear and disgust. They were the vessel for frequent exoticization including but not limited to foods with which they were associated. During my observations, I found that first-time white shoppers at Taj Mahal seemed to be delighted by products such as henna, bindis, and bangle bracelets while objects associated with African-
American culture such as “doo-rags” and white tank tops were pointed out as items that made the other side of the store intolerable. One online review of the store read: “I just like wandering around the aisles. You can find so many little charmers like brightly-colored saris for sale behind barred windows, and hindi pop music videos on the t.v. above the register.” In addition, shoppers were impressed by foods that were either unknown to them or that they had experienced only rarely. Bailey’s (2007) discussion of “ethnic-food cruising” is especially pertinent here. The multicultural palate of the “daring” eater is a marker of “special whiteness” which separates those who possess it from “reviled suburban whiteness” (Bailey 2007, 48). Shoppers could read the spatial text on the Asian side of the store as providing an opportunity for an exotic, but safe, adventure. As Sibley (1995) explains, transgressing boundaries is not dangerous or threatening all the time to everyone; it can also be an exciting practice. Customers ruminated upon their love for “authentic” ethnic foods, expounding upon the lengths they were willing to go to recreate cultural dishes as accurately as possible. The words “exotic” and “ethnic” were frequently employed to describe the merchandise. This is particularly interesting as it seemed to imply the (always white) speaker’s own lack of ethnicity.

Critical race theory is in large part concerned with the everyday nature of racism. I argue here that a major aspect of this everyday racism is the way in which varied racial stereotypes and hierarchies are taken for granted and used to understand and (re)create place. Most striking to me in my interviews and observations was the fact that certain things that were present in both Taj Mahal and Daily were not perceived in the same way, to the point that sometimes existing phenomena were not observed at all in one place, while they were tied up in the rhetoric of the other. As I have previously discussed, ideas of the “local” and “community” were routinely mentioned and celebrated at Daily while neither term came up even once when discussing Taj
Mahal. Perhaps even more worrying was the fact that “negative” attributes that were associated with the customers who made use of the American side of the grocery store that were not similarly attributed to Daily shoppers or the shoppers on the Asian side of Taj Mahal. Most striking was the association between food stamp usage and the Rock Springs contingent. Again, many people attempted to present a color-blind representation of themselves in the structured interviews, but it is very telling that color-blind rhetoric only appeared in connection with discomfort around the Rock Springs residents. While multiple people brought up food stamps in my interviews when discussing the atmosphere or demographics of Taj Mahal, one woman espoused a particularly bleak view of food stamp users from across the street:

“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.”

Again, these negative associations between food stamp usage and the people requiring food stamps (in the case of Taj Mahal, almost exclusively African-American shoppers) did not come up at Daily. However, as a cashier there, I was privy to people’s payment choices, and I found that a considerable number of the store’s regular customers paid with EBT cards. In fact, I was initially surprised by the frequency with which people made EBT purchases, revealing my own assumptions about the people for whom food stamps are intended. The majority of people at Daily who I encountered using food stamps were young and white, and while not appearing to be especially affluent, did not have any obvious markings of poverty, especially in a town in which thrift shop clothing is fashionable (depending on who is wearing it). However, nobody in any of my interviews or even during participant observation brought up food stamps in reference to
Daily or its customers. It is not, then, the food stamp usage that creates a dangerous other to be avoided when navigating the landscape, although that is selected as a proxy to explain discomfort. I argue that it is instead used to describe the racialized black customers at Taj Mahal because food stamps are stereotyped as being for poor black people in particular. Whites who are eligible for food stamps are not assumed to be users, unless they are so impoverished and poorly educated as to become a caricature.

Food stamp usage was not the only proxy by which people chose to explain away their avoidance of the customers marked as poor and black. 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 have 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 this case, again, the people who live in the neighborhood are both poor and black. In miring the point in the coded language of place instead of people, individuals are still able to espouse racist views without being labeled racist themselves. One young 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 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 shopper, who restricted her self to the 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.”

These case studies revealed that the intersectionality between “blackness” and poverty
caused whites and Asians alike tremendous unease and gave them negative impressions of a
place and caused them to avoid places they perceived as being coded for impoverished blacks.
On the other hand, Asians were exoticized by non-Asians and spaces coded as being “for”
Asians were not seen by non-Asians as being barred to them. This demonstrates that varying
racial stereotypes and racial hierarchies greatly impact understandings of place and ultimately
affect people’s shopping habits. At the same time, feelings of being unwanted in “white” spaces
were described by one black respondent who chose to regularly transgress such socio-spatial
boundaries to make a point. It did not escape people’s notice that spaces, even sections within the
same store in the case of Taj Mahal, were imbued with racial meaning that created varying levels
of barriers. Considering its powerful influence on the ways in which people navigate space, the
racialized landscape must be acknowledged as impacting food access.
Conclusion

As shown in the previous chapter, many people who regularly passed both Taj Mahal and Daily did not even place them in their mental maps of the area. In this chapter, I showed that feelings of being “out of place” (Cresswell 1996) can create barriers to entry strong enough that they can alter perceptions of the food landscape to the point where stores specializing in groceries are not even recognized as being points of food access. These feelings can go so far as to make people apprehensive of crossing an invisible line in a store, such as with the case of Taj Mahal. Shoppers frequently have a difficult time explaining these negative feelings, yet easily rely on ideas of the “local” or “community” and place-based narratives to explain instances when they feel welcome. On the other hand, negative feelings associated with place were frequently due to dissonance created by racially-driven discomfort while also living in a society that preaches the virtues of color-blindness. Unfortunately, as Bonilla-Silva (2010) points out, simply pretending not to see race does not make the effects of racism go away and, in fact, makes it harder to break through racialized boundaries. These difficult to confront and grapple with social barriers must be incorporated into our understanding of food deserts if our ultimate goal is to actually impact people’s ability to access food.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This thesis exists as a tool for better understanding urban food access in the United States. I contend that the current food desert literature tends to reflect an overly-simplistic understanding of the built environment. In particular, the focus on “as the crow flies” distance does not accurately represent how people navigate urban spaces. I also suggest that the literature does not consider seriously enough neighborhood-scale alternatives to large-scale chain supermarkets in its attempt to map the urban food landscape. I focus on neighborhood grocery stores in part due to a personal belief that an emphasis on increasing their presence would be an excellent step toward combating the ill effects of food deserts, especially for the many individuals without access to private vehicles. However, I found that physical distance was not the number one factor impacting food purchasing decisions for almost any of my respondents. While providing more physically accessible food options for under-served communities is necessary to combat food deserts, these case studies have demonstrated that the way the grocery stores are coded, particularly in regards to race, can create a strong deterrent for shoppers who feel “out of place” in these spaces. Alleviating food access issues in a way that makes a real difference requires a consideration of intersectional social forces such as race and class that work to create powerful social barriers to entrance into spaces which are coded as for or not for particular groups. Because of this, any plans to combat food deserts via the introduction of new consumer spaces must heavily incorporate people in the targeted neighborhoods in the decision-making process.
I studied two neighborhood grocery stores in Athens-Clarke County, Georgia where high levels of poverty exist in proximity to the University of Georgia. My sites of study were Taj Mahal Groceries and Daily Co-Op Groceries. Because of their similarities in terms of scale, local ownership, and neighborhood proximity, they both serve as useful contrasts to chain supermarkets and “big boxes.” Because of the differences in how they are coded, they show how important the construction of place can be to people’s understanding of the built environment. In order to understand what other reasons people had for making their food purchasing decisions aside from mere distance from residence, I analyzed the dominant narratives espoused in intercept surveys and in-depth interviews with shoppers and non-shoppers at both sites, as well as those witnessed in online reviews and via participant observation.

Limitations

The conclusions reached in this study must be understood in their proper context. In choosing to perform case studies on two grocery stores in Athens, Georgia, I greatly limited my ability to draw larger generalizations. Many of the dynamics observed in Athens cannot necessarily be more widely extrapolated to explain social dynamics in other areas. As a southern town with a prominent research university it cannot, for example, be directly compared to a northeastern inner-city area. Nor can the behaviors observed in the two stores be assumed to be replicated in all similar stores in the town.

Similarly, the number of interviews performed at each of the study sites was relatively low. Although having fewer interviews allowed for them to be more in-depth and less structured, there were many voices and opinions that were not represented in the study. Additionally, it is
unlikely that I obtained a true cross-section of shoppers. Not being in either store or at any of the bus stops 24/7, I likely missed seeing and interacting with a tremendous number of potential research participants. Among those I did interact with, some chose not to be interviewed. Even among those that I did interview, some had to leave before every question had been asked, frequently due to a ride’s arrival. Although I believe that much useful information can be gleaned from the interview data, the small number of sources and the allowance for a certain level of self-selection among the participants should be taken into account as it is being reviewed.

**Major Findings**

Shopper behavior was based on far more than simple physical proximity to place of residence, even for those without access to a personal vehicle. It was influenced by a wide variety of beliefs, tastes, and circumstances that are particular to the individual. For example, one man who identified himself as Mexican chose to ride the bus twenty minutes each way on the one day he had off a week in order to buy his groceries at a place where they spoke Spanish and sold foods he had grown up with. This was not out of necessity; he spoke and understood English perfectly well, and had the option of shopping at closer grocery stores. This anecdote reflects a major theme from the data: physical proximity is often not the most important factor in food purchasing decisions. In fact, there were five major recurring considerations: 1) transportation and landscape navigation issues; 2) knowledge of the stores; 3) the cultural appropriateness of the products; 4) the “ethics” of the stores and how they are run; 5) prices.

I also determined that feelings of being “out of place” (Cresswell 1996) can create social barriers strong enough that they can alter perceptions of the built environment to the point
that stores specializing in groceries are not even perceived as being such. These feelings can render entire stores invisible, but they can also make people apprehensive of transgressing social boundaries where they read them in the landscape. This is especially true of perceived racial coding. Negative reactions to and avoidance of spaces frequently appeared to be due to racially-driven discomfort. This was particularly true of whites and Asians who found themselves confronted with spaces they perceived as being coded black, although not exclusively. For black respondents, it was more frequently the case that they claimed “white” spaces simply did not appear on their mental maps, and only one spoke of his unease in white spaces. While people frequently fell to talking around race to explain their discomfort, people tended to rely upon ideas of “community” and place-based narratives to explain instances when they felt welcome. These “local” and “community”-oriented narratives were especially prominent in Daily, a store coded with a particular brand of liberal whiteness that pervades much of the alternative food movement.

I suggest that, while an emphasis on local community can be a very positive thing, it must also be self-consciously detached as much as possible from its exclusionary tendencies when it is built into one of very few points of access for something as necessary as food. Social barriers are inherent to the construction of place and community. Even when efforts are made to reduce barriers to entry for those who are physically proximate and therefore would gain much from access, it is nearly impossible to attain complete inclusivity. Exclusionary social coding is difficult to uproot, and race and reactions to it are especially hard to grapple with. However, it is still possible to disrupt racialized landscapes to such a degree that greater and more equitable access to food and other necessities can be obtained.
While there is no silver bullet to creating a perfectly equitable food landscape, there are a variety of options that can work toward making adequate nutritious food available to all. Introducing more neighborhood grocery stores that can be accessed without a personal vehicle is a good first step. Yet, as these case studies have shown, small grocery stores frequently do not even register as points of food access for many who are physically proximate to them. For example, Daily’s storefront has a sign that says it is a grocery store, yet more than one respondent who was looking directly at the store admitted they had never thought of it as a grocery store before. Additionally, more than one person who knew about Taj Mahal thought it was a Mexican grocery store, despite the large sign above the front door stating otherwise. Stores themselves can do things such as placing food outside their front doors to visually indicate to passersby that they sell groceries. Advertisements can also be run in a wider variety of media sources. For example, although Daily managers spoke about wanting to broaden their customer base, they admitted to only advertising in the Flagpole, a left-leaning newspaper that tends to focus on covering the downtown Athens arts and music scene. None of the non-white respondents claimed to read Flagpole, instead typically choosing to read the Athens Banner-Herald. This sort of advertising strategy seems designed to maintain the particular young, white liberal contingent while not reaching out to other citizens of Athens. Counteracting that could be as simple as placing advertisements in newspapers read by other demographics. Another strategy that stores could implement to bolster their image as a grocery store is the rearranging of the product layout. As previously mentioned, more expensive specialty items such as kombucha, herbal remedies, and loose-leaf teas are among the first things people see when entering Daily, while more cost-effective bulk foods are kept towards the back. One respondent claimed that he had believed Daily primarily sold alternative medicines from the one and only time he had
decided to look inside the store. Considering that Daily’s mission as described by employees was to create a space close to downtown and residential areas where people could buy groceries and fresh produce, it could benefit them to rearrange the store to put less expensive food products at the front of the store alongside the fresh produce. Finally, a grocery store run with the main purpose of reaching as many of the residents of an area as possible would be wise not to create an atmosphere of exclusivity. The more grocery choices are available in an area, the less concerning targeting certain demographics via selection and atmosphere becomes. However, in a place with no or extremely limited physically proximate food options, exclusivity in points of food access can create an extremely inequitable food landscape.

Government can also impact food access on a larger scale. For instance, more money could be allotted to programs such as SNAP and the requirements for qualification could be made less restrictive. Assistance could also be provided to new neighborhood groceries being developed in underserved areas premised on an agreement to conduct a community needs assessment. The assessment is important because, if a store moves into a neighborhood without a clear understanding of the needs and desires of its customer base and subsequently fails, a disincentive is created for future groceries considering opening in communities with little access to adequate nutritious food. Additionally, zoning could be reconsidered so as to allow more small-scale retail within or near predominantly residential areas. While a combination of store adjustments and government assistance in creating more opportunities for neighborhood groceries will not solve all food access issues, if handled properly they could represent tremendous steps forward in the eradication of food deserts.
Areas for future research

A. Placemaking

Although one of the main points discussed in this thesis has been that the concept of “place” in many ways works to create exclusionary boundaries, careful and reflexive placemaking policies in urban design could work toward making points of food access more inclusive to those who are physically proximate. Placemaking emerged from the new urbanist approach to urban design and development. It emphasizes not simply efficiently putting up functional buildings, but using urban design to create places that reflect the culture and desires of those use of public spaces in such a way as to promote health and happiness (Shibley 1998).

According to the Project for Public Spaces’ website, the first of the eleven principles of placemaking is that the community is the expert. Despite place’s exclusionary power, there could be the potential for a more equitable reimagining of urban spaces via placemaking that not only seeks to incorporate local knowledge and desires, but also searches out the widest range of voices as possible rather than defaulting to the interests and visions of the most powerful and privileged in a community. Done carefully, placemaking has the potential to create places that are inclusionary and help to create a sense of belonging rather than mere anonymity among those making use of a space. I suggest that there is room for study into both the positive and negative influences that placemaking can have for food accessibility for all residents of a geographic area.

B. Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty is one of the fundamental concerns of food access. Yet, while there has been a considerable amount of writing done on the topic of food sovereignty, the subject remains largely untheorized (Trauger 2012). Food sovereignty, while often used in conjunction with the
term “food security” is a different concept. While food security is primarily concerned with the production of adequate amounts of food to conceivably feed an intended group, food sovereignty deals with control and autonomy of food supplies (Patel 2009). If we refer to the previously discussed ideas of construction of place and experiences of belonging and exclusion, it would appear that food access is at least partially wrapped up in the social construction of food spaces.

When discussing the power of the sovereign, Foucault (1978) suggests that “the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death.” He goes on to explain that power is now associated with mastery of living beings and their bodies, with the promise of the sovereign administering life to good subjects. If power and control of the subject’s body for the purposes of the sovereign exists now in the assurance of the maintenance of life, it seems a logical conclusion that the sovereign would exert control via the promise of rights to food. Foucault’s writings on power offer an interesting point of discussion for the food sovereignty movement: What would food sovereignty look like here and elsewhere? At what scale must food sovereignty be achieved, and to what level can subjects be expected to achieve it in a hierarchical society? If social barriers to entrance in spaces of food access are truly hindering an individual’s ability to obtain adequate nutritious food, then whose responsibility is it to work around or remove those barriers in a society dedicated to food sovereignty? Should it be left to the sovereign power to determine issues of life and health of the body? If a government were to cede greater control of the food system and “local” food environments to subjects, what would the implications be for local failures in food access?
Post-script

After the research and much of the writing was completed for this thesis, some major changes occurred at both Taj Mahal and Daily Groceries which are worth mentioning, although they could not be addressed in the main text of the thesis. Taj Mahal abruptly closed, with rumors that they will be moving to a different location on West Broad Street. This is particularly interesting considering that interviews and discussions with Rani revealed that she was very happy in the location adjacent to Rock Springs and had no plans to move. Having no personal contact information for Rani, I will only report conjecture from others as to why the store may have closed in that location. The major theory has been that the construction of two Family Dollars in the area, one on each side of Rock Springs, may have cut into Taj Mahal’s profits too much for them to stay afloat. Family Dollar provides cheaper groceries, and does not reserve half of its space for specialty items. While I suggested that community and personal interaction were important at Taj Mahal, variety of product and prices are particularly vital to low-income individuals.

Daily Groceries underwent a very different type of change. They chose to do away with working members, claiming that the discounts working members received ate into the profits too much and made it difficult to succeed to the point that hiring paid employees was more cost-effective. They also moved away from the buy-in model in which various discounts were purchased for a certain amount of money per year. Instead, they are now courting investor members, who pay in at the beginning of the year and receive money back if the co-op does well. It is still too early to tell how well this new model is doing or how it is affecting who shops there and how much. I have spoken with former working members who continue to regularly shop
there and maintain a desire to support Daily. On the other hand, I have also followed up with previous working members who express disappointment with the change, suggesting that it has become too expensive for many who used to receive the discount. Some have also said that they feel the community aspect is damaged by this change. The management at Daily maintains that it is still a community-owned and supported enterprise, and that the changes will eventually allow them to bring the prices down for everyone, as well as potentially allow for expansion in terms of both size and variety of product.
ENDNOTES

1. SNAP offers nutrition assistance to low income individuals. “SNAP is the largest program in the domestic hunger safety net. The Food and Nutrition Service works with State agencies, nutrition educators, and neighborhood and faith-based organizations to ensure that those eligible for nutrition assistance can make informed decisions about applying for the program and can access benefits. FNS also works with State partners and the retail community to improve program administration and ensure program the integrity.” (USDA Food and Nutrition Service website a)

2. “EBT: Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) is an electronic system that allows a recipient to authorize transfer of their government benefits from a Federal account to a retailer account to pay for products received. EBT is used in all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Guam.” (USDA Food and Nutrition Service website b)
REFERENCES


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A. VERBAL RECRUITMENT AND CONSENT SCRIPT FOR OWNERS

Hello. I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Amy Trauger in the Department of Geography at The University of Georgia. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study entitled Social barriers and the coding of place in small-scale neighborhood groceries: A case study in Athens, Georgia. The purpose of this study is to examine issues of comfort and belonging and how they affect shopping decisions.

To participate in this research you must be 18 years or older.

Your participation will involve answering a series of open-ended questions, and should only take between 5 and 20 minutes.

Would you like to participate?

*If yes, continue with the remaining elements of informed consent:*

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will not be
identified by name in the research. Direct quotes will be attributed to a pseudonym. Your identity will not be associated with your responses in any published format.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. Likewise, there are no personal benefits associated with this research.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact me or my faculty advisor. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board. Contact information is provided in the letter.

By proceeding with the interview, you are agreeing to participate in the research project.

**After the survey is completed, ask the following:**

I would also like to request permission to interview customers in your store about their shopping habits. If you agree, I will consult with you as to how and where I may solicit interviews. By agreeing and signing the provided consent form.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and Dr. Amy Trauger can be reached by telephone at: 706-542-2330 and by email at atrauger@uga.edu, while Gloria Howerton may be reached by email at: gjhowert@uga.edu.
B. VERBAL RECRUITMENT AND CONSENT SCRIPT FOR NON-OWNERS

Hello. I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Amy Trauger in the Department of Geography at The University of Georgia. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study entitled Social barriers and the coding of place in small-scale neighborhood groceries: A case study in Athens, Georgia. The purpose of this study is to examine issues of comfort and belonging and how they affect shopping decisions.

To participate in this research you must be 18 years or older.

Your participation will involve answering a series of open-ended questions, and should only take between 5 and 20 minutes, depending upon whether you would like to participate in both parts of the interview.

Would you like to participate?

If yes, continue with the remaining elements of informed consent:

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will not be identified by name in the research. Direct quotes will be attributed to a pseudonym. Your identity will not be associated with your responses in any published format.
There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. Likewise, there are no personal benefits associated with this research.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact me or my faculty advisor. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board. Contact information is provided in the letter.

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C. INTERVIEW AND SURVEY PROTOCOLS

A1. Survey for Shoppers at Study Sites

Participant # A1_________

1. Why do you shop at [site]?

2. What are the top five things you typically buy at [site]?

3. What percentage of your grocery shopping do you do at [site]?

4. If you do get all of your food at [site], where else do you get food (other grocery stores, gardening, etc.)? What do you get elsewhere that you do not get at [site]?

5. How did you find out about [site]?

6. What is your main mode of transportation to [site]?

7. What neighborhood or part of town do you live in? How long does it take you to get to [site]?

8. How would you describe yourself? [race, age, sex, occupation, etc.]

9. How would you describe [site]?

10. Do you or would you shop at [other site]?
11. Would you be willing to do a longer [20-30 minute] follow-up interview now or at a later date? If at a later date, please provide contact information [phone number and/or e-mail address] on a separate sheet of paper.
1. Where do you usually buy groceries?

2. [Show pictures] Please rank which of these grocery stores you’d be most likely to shop at and explain why.

3. Why do you choose not to shop at [site]?

4. What changes would [site] have to make for you to consider shopping there, if any?

5. How did you find out about the stores you shop at? Why do you choose to shop at them?

6. What types of food do you purchase most often? [fresh fruits, canned vegetables, frozen foods, prepared meals, etc.]

7. What is your main mode of transportation?

8. What neighborhood or part of town do you live in? How long would it take you to get to [site]?

9. How would you describe yourself? [race, age, sex, occupation, etc.]

10. How would you describe [site]?

11. Would you be willing to do a longer [20-30 minute] follow-up interview now or at a later date? If at a later date, please provide contact information [phone number and/or e-mail address] on a separate sheet of paper.
1. What do you look for in a grocery store? [Atmosphere, products, prices, etc.]

2. How would you describe the atmosphere at [site]? (Welcoming, clean, etc.)

3. Would you change anything about [site]? If so, what?

4. How do you interact with other customers or employees at [site]? Is interaction with customers and employees important to you?

5. What would cause you to no longer shop at [site]?

6. Describe the type of shopper you think [site] is trying to attract.

7. Please rank the following stores based on how likely you would be to shop there based on their store fronts. (Pictures shown in Appendix D)

8. Please describe your route to [place they were first interviewed], including any notable landmarks (stores, neighborhoods, buildings, etc.)
B2. Interview Protocol for Non-Shoppers at Study Sites

Participant # B2

1. What do you look for in a grocery store? (Atmosphere, products, prices, etc.)

2. How would you describe the atmosphere at [site]? (How welcoming, clean, etc.)

3. What products do you think [site] offers?

4. What products do you purchase that you do not think they offer?

5. Describe the type of shopper you think [site] is trying to attract.

6. How would you feel about shopping at [site]? Would you feel comfortable shopping there? Why or why not?

7. Please rank the following stores based on how likely you would be to shop there based on their store fronts. (Pictures shown in Appendix D)

8. Please describe your route to [place I first interviewed them], including any notable landmarks [stores, neighborhoods, buildings, etc.]
1. What is the story behind the store? How was it started? How was the location chosen?
   Has it always been here?

2. Who does the store try to target and attract?

3. Can you describe your shoppers? What do you think attracts them to your store?

4. How does [site] advertise? If it does not advertise, why not? How do you think patrons usually find out about [site]?

5. Are there plans to change anything about the store [site, size, products]? If so, why?
D. STOREFRONT PHOTOGRAPHS USED DURING INTERVIEWS

1.
3.