

When Local Comes to Town: Governing Local Agriculture in the South Carolina Lowcountry

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Abstract

The South Carolina Lowcountry—the coastal region centered on Charleston—has developed a vibrant local food system over the past several decades. This article examines the role of governance institutions in cultivating local-market farmers and the broader agricultural landscape. It argues that the region’s institutions of agricultural governance produce a farmer characterized by “entrepreneurial nostalgia”—put simply, the articulation of entrepreneurial and nostalgic subjects. This farmer subjectivity in many ways fits within what is generally deemed a neoliberal mode of being, yet this article also emphasizes, contrary to much of the work on neoliberalism, the racial politics of such a subject position. Entrepreneurial nostalgia not only emphasizes individualism and the marketing of the self but it does so in a way that aligns with both colorblind and liberal-multicultural forms of racism. The article closes by reflecting on potential openings for reworking this farmer subjectivity.

Introduction

Between stops on a day-long farm tour, a Charleston County, South Carolina farmers market administrator boasted to those within earshot that she was going to “make Johns Island tomatoes famous again.” She went on to explain that—due to a unique combination of climate and soils—Johns Island produced some of the best tomatoes in the world, and that in some unspecified past they had dominated the island landscape and the early-season US fresh tomato market. Through her position as market administrator she planned to draw on this historical narrative to brand the region’s local food system. This broad understanding of the tomato’s regional importance is a common one in the area surrounding the port city of Charleston, commonly referred to as the Lowcountry. It is a myth, however, one that selects particular historical realities and crafts from them a partial narrative. While not a reliable account of the Johns Island tomato, this instance of local agriculture boosterism does reveal several important things about the spread of local food systems.

First, this mythology is representative of the extent to which the cultivation of local food systems in the US depends on the branding—indeed, the commodification—of people and places. The packaging of any historical geography is necessarily partial and ultimately has the effect of homogenizing a complex reality. While soils and climate clearly affected the production of Lowcountry tomatoes, there are similar environments all along the Eastern Seaboard. The 20th-

century growth of the tomato agribusiness industry in coastal South Carolina was perhaps more influenced by the regional presence of flexible agricultural labor, ready venture capital and large-scale land holdings than by “nature” itself. Furthermore, this branding of place is no neutral affair, for, as in the above anecdote, it can easily link the past and present in a romantic and depoliticized manner. Thus, this episode represents the tight articulation of entrepreneurialism and nostalgia—what might be thought of, in brief, as *entrepreneurial nostalgia*. I argue that entrepreneurial nostalgia is central to the cultivation of Lowcountry local food systems (and likely many others too); and that this entrepreneurial nostalgia, whether intentionally or not, often celebrates and reproduces regional forms of whiteness.

This article focuses on the institutions of Lowcountry agricultural governance and their role in cultivating the region’s local food systems. While the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) remains important to agricultural governance, regional NGOs have taken a leading role in the promotion of local food systems, in the Lowcountry and beyond. Many local food NGOs see themselves as rooted in the interests of the community (without consistently problematizing the representational glossing that term implies) while the USDA is largely beholden to the concerns of agribusiness. Yet these same NGOs also rely on USDA grants for a significant portion of their operating expenses. To the extent that their work must align with the goals and practices supported by the USDA, local agriculture NGOs have a contradictory and ambiguous relationship to the US agricultural state. The resulting form of governance, common in neoliberal restructuring, is often characterized as a shifting hybrid of state and civil society.¹ In this way local agriculture represents not resistance to neoliberal globalization but actually an extension of common patterns. The shift from bureaucratic and industrial forms of production to entrepreneurial and flexible ones, for instance, is often understood as one of the defining processes of neoliberalism (Tickell and Peck 1992). But in their efforts to cultivate local food systems, the institutions of agricultural governance not only promote zoning regulations and administer farmers markets, they also work to cultivate specific kinds of farmers. This article examines the ways that aspiring local farmers are steered towards an entrepreneurial and nostalgic subjectivity—one that resonates with liberal forms of whiteness.² In this sense, neoliberalism is not only a political-economic project but also a racial one.

While this article focuses on the South Carolina Lowcountry, the white-washed nostalgia and entrepreneurialism that it analyzes are common to (and arguably constitutive of) the broader US local foods movement. That these trends so easily reproduce a commonsense and normative form of whiteness suggests that they must be challenged in order to create a socially just food system.

¹ Much of the relevant literature highlights the ways that this form of neoliberal governance shapes, and ultimately limits, both individual and institutional agendas—and thus political possibilities. See, for example, Bakker 2010, Gareau 2012, and Goldman 2005.

² Liberal whiteness in the Lowcountry is manifest in both colorblind and multicultural forms, and both are relevant to this analysis. While they differ in obvious ways, the essential similarity between these two dominant forms is that they both normalize whiteness (see McWhorter 2009).

Regional histories of whiteness give rise to particular forms of neoliberalism: in this case, to one where institutions of governance help farmers brand themselves and the Lowcountry in a way that reproduces an exclusive sense of agrarian nostalgia and regional belonging.

More broadly, this analysis joins the work of others (Woods 2007; Goldberg 2009) to argue that racial politics are fundamental to neoliberalism, in the US and beyond. While there is a budding interest in this question (Roberts and Mahtani 2010; Hohle 2012; Inwood 2014), there also remains a tendency for scholars to understand neoliberalism as somehow divorced from racialization. This article suggests that, to the extent that the racial politics of neoliberalism are under-examined, critical scholarship not only inadequately conceptualizes its object of analysis but also runs the risk of reproducing colorblind positions that fundamentally shape current trends in economic restructuring. Most of the existing scholarship on racial neoliberalism understandably focuses on these colorblind ideologies—claims to race neutrality that actually reproduce racial inequality (Roediger 2008, Omi and Winant 2014). Yet this paper shows that liberal multiculturalism—often an explicit celebration of racial difference that denies and perhaps unwittingly reproduces structural inequality—is also a central part of many neoliberal racial formations (see also Derrickson 2014). Thus, the paper argues that attention to the articulated racial politics of economic subjectivities can build a more thorough analysis of neoliberalism. Economic subjects, we should remember, are also subject to racial projects.

The next section reviews literature relevant to US whiteness and entrepreneurialism, closing with a discussion of the research methods employed here. The remainder of the paper discusses the Lowcountry case.

Whiteness and Agriculture in the US

Whiteness is almost infinitely malleable and therefore notoriously difficult to pin down. Like other manifestations of racial politics, this amoebic character is part of what makes it such a lasting phenomenon (Stoler 1995). Yet the dynamics of whiteness, its continual reproduction, must be explained if it is to be challenged. Here, I refer to whiteness as a racialized form of subjectivity that is often understood as invisible. This invisibility is the product of whiteness being the taken-for-granted measuring stick against which others are compared. Thus whiteness is not analogous to light skin color, though it is often related to it in practice; it is a set of ideologies, practices and forms of knowledge that are used to define race and normality (McWhorter 2009). This emphasis on subjectivity, ideology and knowledge should not obscure the material dimensions and implications of whiteness. As a normative frame for understanding and acting in the world, whiteness promises privileges to those who can claim it and suffering to those who are excluded from its hearth (Lipsitz 2006).

Scholarship on local and alternative food systems has drawn effectively on the concept of whiteness to show how farmer's markets (Alkon 2008; Alkon and McCullen 2010) and other alternative food projects (Guthman 2008a, 2008b) draw on and reproduce notions of racial difference. Much of this work analyzes the geography of whiteness, showing how certain spaces are coded as white and therefore present subtle and invisible barriers to others while simultaneously creating places for white people to perform their whiteness (Slocum 2007, 2010). This work highlights the fact that local food systems are frequently dominated by white people, yet refuses the facile explanation that this is due to a lack of education or cultural appreciation among people of color. Instead, this line of inquiry suggests that there is something exclusive about whiteness which creates unequal and segregated food systems. In her study of food justice programs that target low-income people of color, for instance, Julie Guthman (2008a) demonstrates the tendency of white advocates to focus on specific practices of food consumption, rather than structural equality, as the end goal. Instead of questioning the relations of power which create uneven landscapes and livelihoods, white activists tend to ask why it is that the subjects of their reform often refuse to embrace it. This desire to change what people of color eat and the linked failure to address systemic inequality suggests that activists are animated by “whitened cultural histories” (2008a, 433)—privileged histories that allow activists to see themselves and their desired behaviors as the norm.

Alkon and McCullen (2010) draw on Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1977), which they define as a “patterned set of thoughts, behaviors, and tastes,” to examine “white cultural dominance” at California farmers markets (2010, 939). They point out, for instance, that the farmers market habitus requires comfort with expensive (often European) gourmet cuisine, and that this familiarity works as a sign of privileged social position to others. Similarly, this article outlines the habitus of Lowcountry local food production—one constructed from a nostalgic orientation towards the region's agricultural past and an entrepreneurial subjectivity—and argues that this style reserves the cultural and material benefits of local agriculture for whites. These critiques of whiteness offer compelling insights into the racial politics of food systems, but they have yet to fully account for the ways that governance institutions cultivate whitened farmer subjectivities. Given the extent to which agriculture informs ideas of belonging and authenticity in the US and beyond, food production is clearly a potent site for the cultivation of whiteness.³ By focusing on the role of governance institutions in the simultaneous production of food and racial hierarchy, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the project of whiteness and particularly its role in local food systems with the aim of cultivating a more just future of food.

Notions of “improvement” have long tied together the management of both agricultural production and racial hierarchy, thus providing an important point of analysis for my purposes here. European conquest of the Americas, for instance, was justified by the self-serving claim that

³ Anthropologists have studied the role of authenticity in alterative agriculture. See, for example, Grasseni 2010.

agriculture as practiced by whites would improve both the productivity of the land and Native American people (Knobloch 1996). Similarly, slavery in the Americas was often justified by the argument that white slaveholders improved the character of enslaved Africans by exposing them to agricultural progress (Roediger and Esch 2014). Notions of improvement are unavoidably normative to the extent that they identify a deficient subject (non-whites, in these cases) and a desired outcome (agricultural practices identified with whiteness and “progress”). Thus, as these brief examples illustrate, US agricultural development has long been shaped by European norms of who is considered a legitimate farmer and what a modern farm looks like.

In the neoliberal context which shapes US local food systems, the projects of improvement launched by governance institutions often aim to cultivate entrepreneurial farmers. As Harvey (2005, 2) notes, neoliberalism is “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual *entrepreneurial* freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” More recent treatments, however, highlight the fact that neoliberalism is never solely a formal political economic policy favoring business interests, but is also a project of the self—of cultivating individuals (in this case farmers) who see themselves and their broader social affiliations in particular ways. Much of this scholarship highlights the ways that neoliberalism posits the pre-existence of “autonomous, individualized, self-directing, decision-making” subjects (Bondi 2005, 499), while actually working to *produce* that reality.

Dardot and Laval (2014) suggest that the cultivation of entrepreneurial subjectivities is the defining feature of the neoliberal project. Entrepreneurialism articulates neoliberalism and local food production in at least three ways. First, it places primacy on market exchange and financial accounting it contributes to the further economization of everything. Second, it necessitates the construction of a marketable image of the self. Finally, as a project of self-making, it deepens the valorization of individual responsibility and obscures relations of power. The discussion section of this article will explore this dynamic in-depth through analysis of the Lowcountry case, but it is important to recognize this as a trend that extends far beyond coastal South Carolina (Allen 1999; Guthman 2008b).

Along with entrepreneurialism, nostalgia is a defining feature of many local food systems (Autio et al. 2013) and agrarianism in general (Naples 1994). Svetlana Boym (2001) defines nostalgia broadly as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed... a sentiment of loss and displacement” (xiii). As such, it depends on memory and specific imaginings of time and place. According to Stewart (1988), nostalgia, “in positing a ‘once was’ in relation to a ‘now,’ creates a frame for meaning, a means of dramatizing” (227). As a way of drawing on notions of the past to create meaning in the present and orient towards a desired future, nostalgia is inherently political. It proves reactionary for many reasons, several of which are captured by Boym’s (2001) argument that nostalgia often results in “an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an

ethical and aesthetic failure” (XIV); in this way, “unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters” (XVI). In the context of post-Civil Rights US, Geoff Mann (2008) argues that nostalgia is central to the “pose of innocence” that characterizes dominant forms of whiteness. And, as Kathleen Stewart (1996) convincingly argues, since the history of the rural US South is dominated by violent forms of white supremacy, it is not surprising that nostalgia for a rural past is largely “a white idiom, not a black one” (106).

Whiteness is a historical phenomenon that must be continually reproduced, and nostalgic understandings of agriculture have long played a key role in that unfolding (Knobloch 1994; Foley 1997; Roediger and Esch 2014). Thus, this article questions the extent to which local food production is enrolled in the reproduction of whiteness, the ways this process unfolds, and the particular forms of whiteness produced. As this brief review suggests, entrepreneurialism reinforces notions of individual action, obscures relations of power and requires a branding of the self. For many Lowcountry local-market farmers this branding of the self draws heavily on nostalgic notions of a traditional agricultural past which, intentionally or not, reproduces the pose of innocence at the heart of US whiteness—a presumed abdication from ongoing histories of racial inequality.

These claims emerge from research carried out in the Lowcountry from 2013 to 2016. During this time I conducted more than thirty interviews as well as extensive participant observation with local market farmers, farmworkers, and staff at institutions of local agriculture governance, including USDA extension employees and two regional non-profits, Lowcountry Local First (LLF) and Coastal Conservation League (CCL) which is the umbrella organization for a local food hub, GrowFood Carolina. Thirty-minute to one-hour interviews were transcribed and analyzed together with field notes through an iterative combination of grounded theory and narrative analysis. Interviews and participant observation drew out the commonsense understandings of governance officials and the extent to which a particular habitus is internalized by farmers. Due to the overwhelming whiteness of local-market agriculture in the region, all of the staff interviewed were socially-identified as white (the majority of them young, highly-educated women). The vast majority of the farmers and farmworkers were white, and most of them were also young and highly-educated. Participant-observation was conducted at three area farmers markets, on six Lowcountry farms, at monthly NGO meetings and events, and as an apprentice in the LLF “Growing New Farmers” summer training program. I also draw on published print and digital promotional materials to outline the explicit goals of governance, the implicit assumptions made by officials and broader representations of the region. These methods illuminate the racial and economic ideologies of research participants, highlight the prescriptive dimensions of agricultural governance and outline the attendant processes of subject formation.

Articulating Entrepreneurial Nostalgia

As a crucial element in neoliberal hegemony, entrepreneurialism is rarely questioned in US public discourse and is generally understood as a “win-win” scenario for both individuals and society. A Lowcountry NGO director, for example, positioned entrepreneurialism as both regional common ground and a force for economic equality, noting that “one thing everybody gets excited about is the idea of entrepreneurship... entrepreneurship can certainly help spur economic growth in underserved communities.” Many interviewees assumed that entrepreneurialism was an innate human quality and appreciated local agriculture for the potential freedom that it provided to express that characteristic. Entrepreneurialism was commonly understood as the inherently risky process of starting a small-scale and “creative” business venture from scratch. Entrepreneurs, then, were celebrated as innovative individuals especially endowed with a “spirit” that allowed them to manage high levels of risk and stress. For some farmers, this individualism manifests as masculine bravado: one male local-market farmer, for example, explained that some skilled and hard-working farm laborers simply “don’t have the nuts” to run a farm business. Through entrepreneurial commonsense, then, competitive commercial markets are naturalized as the ideal mode of personal action and social interaction and, when combined with the valorization of individual choice and effort, this results in an acceptance of the idea that farmers alone are responsible for their own success or failure.

Both the USDA and regional NGOs play a significant role in cultivating Lowcountry farmer-entrepreneurs. At the most obvious level, most grants to producers require that they prove their past economic success and future business plans. They also often include a component that requires producers to contribute to broader entrepreneurial efforts within the community, for instance by providing apprenticeship opportunities to train workers so that they can later start their own business. As one Lowcountry urban farmer explained, all of the grants for which she was eligible required that she include entrepreneurial training in her program.

Regional NGOs that support local agriculture do so under the logic that it will support economic growth and business creation. The Lowcountry local food hub, for instance, states that its objective is “to tap into the existing *assets* of small-scale agriculture to help create a stronger rural *economy*, spurring *job creation*, and building capacity in rural communities by connecting *farm businesses* to the thriving local food movement,” and closes with the assertion that, “*increased agricultural production leads to increased economic activity*.”⁴ Many programs explicitly tailored to technical farm production skills also place business training as equally, if not more, important. The LLF Growing New Farmers Program, for instance, provides training in “farm production and business planning,” while the GOODFarming workshops offer “sustainable business and production topics.”⁵ The new

⁴ <http://coastalconservationleague.org/projects/growfood/>. Accessed 1/5/16.

⁵ <http://lowcountrylocalfirst.org/gnf-apprentice-program/>. Accessed 1/6/16.

farmer training program emphasizes rigorous record-keeping and business plans so that apprentices can better qualify for future private loans to start their farm enterprise.

Marketing is the element of local food entrepreneurialism emphasized most by governance institutions. The USDA, for instance, has two main programs that focus explicitly on strengthening local food systems—the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food (KYF2) program and the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP)—both of which focus almost exclusively on market development. The LFPP offers grant funds “to support the development and expansion of local and regional *food business enterprises*...and to develop *new market opportunities*...”⁶ The ubiquitous KYF2 program is also a marketing initiative; its mission is “to support the critical connection between farmers and consumers.”⁷ GrowFood Carolina, the Lowcountry local food hub, is essentially a market-building institution working as a wholesaler to connect local food producers with regional retailers and restaurants. Marketing is also a key component of the LLF Growing New Farmers program. Workshops and training focus, among other things, on developing unique packaging and cultivating relationships with chefs and other potential buyers.

While this emphasis on marketing may seem an obvious one with fairly straightforward implications, this commonsense understanding is precisely what needs to be interrogated. For one, challenging it shows that entrepreneurialism is not about individuals boldly facing risk but much more fundamentally about institutions of governance cultivating markets and marketable subjects. For, as I previously suggested, local food marketing is not merely the creation of abstract exchanges between producers and consumers but also a process of self-formation and place-making. Governance institutions play a central role in these processes. LLF, for instance, often refers to farmers as “food entrepreneurs” and “farm business owners”—labels which local food growers often internalize. In fact, farmers are often thought of as synonymous with their farm business. One LLF employee indicated this tendency when she argued that entrepreneurs must “evolve their business model...you have to be willing to redesign and redevelop *yourself*.” “Savvy business skills,” she argued, are now more important than ever due to the high level of competition in Lowcountry local food production: “So who are you as a farmer,” she continued, “A big part of that is the marketing aspect—how are you able to *market yourself*? And I think that is where the entrepreneurial spirit [is important], because entrepreneurs are always trying to *reinvent themselves* and put themselves out there—put their business out there. They take risks” (emphasis added). Again, many farm apprentices internalize this understanding. When asked about his interests, one LLF trainee introduced himself as “an aspiring entrepreneur.” Another commented that the most important lessons were about “the marketing experience: what services are we providing?” The LLF

⁶ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/lfpp>. Accessed 1/8/16. Emphasis added.

⁷ <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/knownyourfarmer?navid=KNOWYOURFARMER>. Accessed 1/7/16.

apprenticeship training helped to “differentiate ourselves,” he continued, “to create other things within our market, so that we can look a different way.”

Along with this emphasis on branding, Lowcountry local food governance institutions also teach the “the language of business.” As one NGO employee argued, local-market growers “can talk about harvesting, planting, fertilizers and irrigation all day long but when it comes to ‘profit-and-loss,’ cash flow and lending rates, they *shut down*...so it’s like having a conversation with a business owner who can’t talk business.” The implications of this kind of training are many. Most broadly, training farmers in “the language of business” also has the effect of training growers to see themselves and the world in a particular way. The emphasis on differentiation among “farm business owners,” for instance, both valorizes the image of farmer-as-individual and normalizes a highly-competitive market. Training in record-keeping, with profit and loss statements as the final product, also works to cultivate the ideal capitalist economic subject: the rational profit-maximizer. The prescriptive dimensions of entrepreneurial training were expressed clearly by one NGO staffer: “we’re trying to make it a habit and a culture in [local-market] farming.”

This culture of entrepreneurialism is articulated through long-standing forms of regional mythology, where food and agriculture continue to perform heavy ideological labor (Van Sant 2015). The booming tourist industry that is constructed around the region’s plantation past is perhaps the most obvious example of this. Boone Hall Plantation, for instance, claims that its stately entranceway paralleled by evenly spaced rows of live oak trees embodies “southern heritage,” and that the plantation as a whole represents “Southern romance and spirit.”⁸ Interestingly, Boone Hall has recently turned to local food production; they operate a CSA, a farmstand, u-pick sales and two agri-tourism festivals annually. They aggressively promote their local-market agricultural endeavors as a part of the “proud heritage” of “over three centuries of farming” at Boone Hall (Adams 2008). This explicit branding of present-day local food production through appeals to an agricultural “heritage” sanitized of racial violence and general exploitation is a particularly dramatic example of entrepreneurial nostalgia, one that reproduces the pose of innocence at the heart of post-Civil Rights US whiteness.

Boone Hall’s entrepreneurial nostalgia is the same as that which is present in the opening anecdote of this article—the plan to restore the mythical tomato past. The will to restore defines the problematic nature of this idiom. In her nuanced treatment of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym (2001) develops a typology that distinguishes between restorative and reflective forms of the sentiment. “Restorative nostalgia,” she argues, “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home, while reflective nostalgia delays the homecoming... *Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition*” (XVIII, emphasis added). Much of the Lowcountry nostalgia for an

⁸ <http://www.boonehallplantation.com/>. Accessed 1/3/16.

imagined agricultural past is clearly of the restorative variety—posing as truth and “proud heritage”—and it is this pose that facilitates “an abdication of personal responsibility” (XIV).

Clemson University cooperative extension, for instance, has partnered with the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation (CGRF) and the Agricultural Society of South Carolina (ASSC) to promote Lowcountry heritage crop production—particularly rice but also heritage varieties of cotton, indigo, corn and others. This governance network is, as one white male who participates in these organizations commented, “a little bit incestuous.” For, as the former director of the regional experiment station, he also has board positions on the CGRF and the ASSC. His role in the ASSC, for the past twenty-five years, has been “to keep them updated on what is going on at the experiment station.” Perhaps surprisingly, the ASSC is not a group of active growers but instead consists of, according to the same interviewee, “Charleston blue-bloods” whose main mission is “to make sure that we preserve the history of agriculture in the Lowcountry.” As the self-appointed trustee of this regional history, he encouraged me to “be as factual as you can” in telling the “true story of rice.” Referring explicitly to scholarship that highlights the role of African slaves in American rice cultivation (Carney 2001), he lamented that some academics “put their own spin on things; they never let the facts stand in the way of a good story.” Giving voice to the myths of white agricultural supremacy that often inform the promotion of Lowcountry heritage crops, he insisted that slaves did not bring rice to the Americas, “they didn’t have anything but the clothes on their back.”

Many proponents of heritage agriculture link it to the restoration of an “authentic cuisine” (Bilger 2011), and do so with an eye towards fortifying Charleston’s reputation as a culinary destination (Van Sant 2015). Leading proponents of Lowcountry heritage crop cultivation tend to celebrate the nineteenth century as the highpoint of regional agriculture and cuisine, and some of the most evangelical and lyrical among them suggest that heritage agriculture can turn back the clock to a better time. “And with those crops and the careful tending they require,” one proponent waxes, “a little of the nineteenth century landscape will return as well” (Shields 2015, 53). Proponents of heritage agriculture offer various reasons for the downfall of an idealized Lowcountry agriculture, but many cite the Civil War as the beginning of the end (Bilger 2011, 44). Heritage agriculture enthusiast and chairman of the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation, David Shields (2015), suggests looking to the plantation management of “the most expert planters” because they produced “comprehensive and self-sustaining agricultural enterprises worthy of emulation” (348-349). Similarly, award-winning Charleston chef Sean Brock argues that “the rice era—from 1680 to 1930—was when food was most delicious” (Bilger 2011, 52). As he understands it, “those crops just disappeared between 1930 and 1980—that fifty year period when, I don’t know... shit went south” (2011, 42). Celebrating 19th-century plantation management while positioning the Civil War as the downfall of some sort of idealized past clearly risks aligning with a reactionary racial politics. Similarly, understanding 1930 to 1980 as that period when “shit went south” also indicates an

unreflective whiteness, in the sense that this was precisely the era of successful Civil Rights challenges to *de jure* white supremacy. While proponents of Lowcountry heritage crops are not claiming to offer rigorous regional histories, they nevertheless propagate a restorative nostalgia that yields a guilt-free return to the plantation.

Not all of Lowcountry local agriculture is geared towards the production of heritage crops, of course, and many local-market producers are not as explicit about how their reading of the region's agricultural past informs their current efforts. Yet even those local-market growers who don't currently produce heritage crops are supportive of the effort. In fact, heritage production was understood by all interviewed as an unquestioned good, as commonsense. When asked why one would cultivate heritage crops, a young local-market grower who planted a small patch of rice seed donated by Clemson extension service simply asserted that "we definitely have to keep growing it." While heritage crop production is perhaps the most explicit and dramatic example of restorative nostalgia in Lowcountry local agriculture, it is only part of a broader habitus—a set of attitudes and practices—that voices the desire for an imagined past. Farmers who do not plant heritage crops also expressed a similar nostalgia for times past. One such grower argued that local agriculture was popular because "there is an awakening in a lot of people... or a realization that they are not always going to see this anymore, it is about to disappear, and it is..." (Moore 2010, 31). Another echoed the common complaint that "we've lost a way of life, we've lost culture, an identity..." (Moore 2010, 31). Farmers also sense that repairing this feeling of loss is one of the main selling points for local food systems. "We are just holding onto all these old traditions that are going to the wayside," one Lowcountry farmer proclaimed, "a lot of people, I think, like to buy from us just because they want to be connected to the land, they want to feel connected to their food..." (41)—thus the incentive for local-market growers to brand themselves and their work through nostalgic idioms.

The appeal to authenticity that characterizes many US local food systems is also central to the nostalgia that shapes Lowcountry local food systems. And marketing this authenticity is central to local grower efforts to brand themselves and their products. Boone Hall Plantation is not the only legacy of Charleston's aristocratic past that has latched onto Lowcountry local agriculture. In fact, the growth of local food systems has provided plantation owners with several paths to viability in an era of declining agricultural profits. For instance, many large-scale white landowners simply lease parcels of their property to aspiring local-market growers who are often young, white, and educated but without the capital to purchase expensive coastal land. This arrangement allows the plantation owner to generate profits and maintain agricultural tax exemptions while avoiding the significant risks, costs and labor associated with running an agricultural endeavor. Others simply profit from the added benefit of marketing their authenticity through claims of long-standing agricultural heritage. Similarly, agri-tourism draws on ideas of authenticity, supports the reproduction of Lowcountry plantations, and is often run in conjunction with local-market production. Legare Farms, for example, was founded outside of Charleston in 1725 by Soloman Legare, one of

Charleston's earliest settlers. According to the current owners—direct descendants of Soloman—the plantation is “legendary as one of the oldest working farms in the nation.”⁹ The Legares hire a farmer to supply a CSA, market “homestyle” jams and jellies, operate several agri-tourism events, and host military re-enactments. The cultural capital secured by its claim to a “rich tradition and history” is central to the success of the Legare Farms brand in local agriculture. Lowcountry plantation owners have successfully promoted their image as the bedrock of the region for centuries (Yuhl 2005; Edelson 2006). Today the growth of local food systems provides them with a vibrant market through which to capitalize on claims to authenticity.

While nostalgia is less explicitly promoted by Lowcountry NGOs and the USDA than is entrepreneurialism, it remains an implicit part of the governance landscape. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the mural that dominates the street frontage of the local food hub office and distribution center in a post-industrial and gentrifying Charleston neighborhood (Figure 1). The sweeping Lowcountry landscape with a solitary stately live oak in the foreground and a mid-century farm truck pattering down the single-track dirt lane evokes a quieter and simpler time. On closer examination, this nostalgic vision is buttressed by the authenticity of rural blackness and celebrated as multicultural: the truck is driven by an older black man and the cartoonish produce is nestled inside a sweetgrass basket—a handmade basket that was once common among rural Lowcountry black residents but has since become a popular tourist souvenir and is perhaps the most iconic symbol of regional authenticity (Rosengarten 2008). The mural suggests, then, that local food systems can help restore the serenity of the authentic Lowcountry farm life, one vaguely located in the past. But images of rural African American labor have long worked to calm white anxiety surrounding urbanization, industrialization, Civil Rights and



Figure 1. (Above) The sweeping mural on the Lowcountry local food hub office and warehouse in Charleston, completed in 2011. *Credit:* www.coastalconservationleague.org/projects/growfood/. Image used under fair use. (Below) Detail of the truck that serves as the focal point of the mural. *Credit:* www.tylerasmith.com/designsmyth/2011/11/12/boatwrights-growfood-carolina-mural-complete. Image used under fair use.

⁹ <http://legarefarms.com/pages/history-of-legare-farms>. Accessed 12/5/15.

integration, suggesting a time when the region's racial hierarchy was more stable. Thus the serenity imagined in this mural is not only an effect of the simple life, as presumed, but also of white supremacy. As the street front of the local food hub—perhaps the most visible institution of Lowcountry local agriculture—the mural also indicates the extent to which nostalgia informs regional governance of local food initiatives.

“The Land We Have”: Entrepreneurialism, Nostalgia, and Colorblind Governance

In addition to the liberal celebrations of multiculturalism embodied by the mural above, colorblind forms of whiteness are central to regional governance. As articulated in Lowcountry local food systems, entrepreneurialism and nostalgia produce not only an individualistic and market-oriented form of agriculture but also a (neo)liberal whiteness. The competitive, self-branding mode of entrepreneurialism encouraged by governance institutions and the nostalgic desire for the restoration of a sanitized agricultural past combine in such a way that, intentionally or not, renders local agriculture as a site for the reproduction of liberal forms of whiteness. While the valorization of entrepreneurialism naturalizes competition and obscures the existence of racial and other structural barriers, restorative nostalgia for an imagined past—one that is in reality fundamentally marked by white supremacy and racial violence—creates an environment innocent or empowering to white subjects and at least off-putting if not threatening to many people of color. An African-American community organizer, one of the few to attend Lowcountry local agriculture events, commented tellingly that there is a “weird mentality” around community-supported agriculture—one that denies the long history of black farm cooperatives and instead brands alternative agriculture as a white success story. Referencing the dramatic dispossession of Lowcountry black farmland over the course of the 20th century, he explicitly characterized the recent re-invigoration of white farm livelihoods *via* local food systems as a return of “the frontier spirit.”

Is it possible that local agriculture, in the Lowcountry and perhaps even beyond, is the new frontier of the 21st century, an act of settler colonialism, as this organizer suggested? While there are clearly significant differences between historical eras and geographical processes, this is a question worth taking seriously. If local agriculture is a space not only for rejuvenating agricultural livelihoods but also for reproducing whiteness, then the project clearly promotes the racial stratification of its own social and ecological benefits. While entrepreneurialism and nostalgia are complex tendencies, they are also easily articulated to colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Goldberg 2009). In this racial formation, whiteness is taken as the unquestioned norm yet other forms of racial identification and group rights are dismissed as violating the principle of “race neutrality” (Omi and Winant 1994; Roediger 2010). Entrepreneurial ideologies of self-making that obscure structural barriers are hitched to restorative nostalgia in a way that obscures Lowcountry local agriculture's relationship to

ongoing histories of racial inequality. Thus the pose of innocence at the heart of modern US whiteness is rearticulated through regional agricultural change.

As the dominant habitus of Lowcountry local agriculture entrepreneurial nostalgia also sets strict limits on the political imagination. This is particularly clear in the realm of governance. Despite normative commitments to preserving small-scale agriculture and promoting racial equality, key figures in both regional USDA offices and NGOs envision only colorblind and market-oriented paths towards these goals. A Clemson economic development agent, for instance, insisted that he would only support a voluntary (as opposed to state-implemented) initiative for an agriculture-only zone surrounding Charleston. Even though he acknowledged that this would never happen because “market forces are going to be against you,” he remained steadfast in his opposition to increased state regulation of property use, instead placing his faith in entrepreneurial innovation. While he argued that markets were not the most efficient or just way to organize a society, he insisted (perhaps contradictorily) that, “based on markets and demand, people with good judgment can usually serve the needs of society through their own creative decisions.” Thus, this agent of the state based his argument against state regulation of land use, not in a valorization of markets *per se*, but in his belief that rational, creative capitalists can create the best society *in spite of* market limitations. This celebration of individual innovation reproduces colorblind governance in the sense that it proposes the existence of a race-neutral entrepreneurial subject and body politic—thus the legacies of historical and racial inequalities are invisible.

The contradictions and limitations of colorblind and market-driven agendas become clearer when racial politics are addressed explicitly. When asked about the lack of racial diversity in Lowcountry local agriculture, for instance, one white NGO leader succinctly voiced the colorblind creed: “I’m not the kind of person that notices it [race], so I don’t really think about it.” This style positions itself as race-neutral and thus racially progressive, while in effect dismissing the lived realities of racial inequality—both non-white discrimination and white privilege. Addressing the role that slavery and share-cropping play in the Lowcountry agricultural present, another NGO leader grasped for words: “In a way you’re fighting 200 years of history, but you also have this history of agricultural success. Now, *some of the history...is...is...not the best...we don’t want to talk about it, right...?*” (emphasis added). The discomfort this highly educated white woman felt discussing racial oppression, despite a deeply felt commitment to racial equality, is symptomatic of the liberal habitus of whiteness that dominates Lowcountry local food systems. She attempted to steer the conversation back to calmer seas *via* regional boosterism: “But the part we should talk about is that knowledge base and *the land we have*” (emphasis added). Yet “we” do not have “the land”; individuals have private property rights. And over the course of the 20th century Lowcountry African Americans have been dramatically and disproportionately dispossessed of their land—a reality that is obscured and reproduced through liberal commitments to racial equality. This imagined land-holding

community (the “we”) is an abstraction that functions, regardless of intent, to obscure the lasting legacies of racial dispossession.

Queen Quet, chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee nation (Lowcountry African-Americans who identify as descendants of Lowcountry slaves), challenged this geographic imaginary at the 25th anniversary celebration of CCL, a traditional land conservation NGO. Presentations by national conservation luminaries such as Gus Speth and Wes Jackson, as well as regional leaders, covered standard topics: development pressures, sustainable agriculture, and economic localization. After the talks Queen Quet stood in the large hotel ballroom, surrounded by a sea of white faces, and asked simply: “What about not the back-to-the-land movement [alienated urban whites] but the remain-on-the-land movement [rural African Americans]?” It is a question that governance institutions have either avoided through colorblind framings or attempted to address through liberal multiculturalism.

The contradictions and limitations of this liberal approach to racial equality are buttressed by the belief in market solutions. The figure of the successful African American farmer plays an important symbolic role in this logic. When asked about the possibility that many African Americans avoid local agriculture because of the historical association of agriculture and racist oppression, one NGO leader suggested that we should talk less about the past: “The more we can focus on models of [African American] success, then it’s not talking about the past but the future.” The telling assumption here is that African Americans might avoid local agriculture because of *their own* discomfort discussing historical oppression rather than the possibility that they avoid local agriculture because of white unwillingness to broach the subject. Celebration of economic success of an individual black farmer is commonly offered as the palliative for a crucial misdiagnosis: “Here’s someone who’s using this as an opportunity as a business owner, *regardless of his color*, this is a successful farmer” (emphasis added). Thus, the solutions that flow from this framing of the problem are limited to a common form of liberal multiculturalism. “I don’t think we have the capacity to overcome major cultural perspectives,” one NGO leader argued, “but we can take an active role in *extending an invitation* to people. Saying we want to be *an ally and a partner*, we want to work with you so *we can show people [economic] success* and balance each other’s strengths” (emphasis added). Yet this belief that capitalist inclusion will achieve racial equality ultimately fails because histories of material *inequality* and disadvantage are reproduced through an inherently competitive and individualistic economic system. Forces that have no explicit anti-racist agenda (such as capitalism) are incapable of ending racial oppression (Roediger 2008), thus it will clearly take a more creative political imagination to seriously challenge the legacies of racism in US agriculture.

Conclusion

While the growing importance of liberal NGOs in regional agricultural governance might portend a trend towards racial equality, or at least racial diversity, the case of Lowcountry local agriculture

suggests otherwise. There are several reasons for this. For one, the USDA remains an important governance institution, especially in terms of funding regional NGOs. Thus, NGOs must steer their mission and practices in a direction that is palatable to the institution that many black farmers across the nation refer to as “the last plantation.” Yet even when the agricultural state and regional NGOs aim to cultivate a more even agricultural landscape, their efforts are limited by an emphasis on market-oriented solutions. Entrepreneurialism and nostalgia, at least as practiced in the Lowcountry, prove to be particularly problematic styles that reproduce whiteness through agriculture. Thus the cultural and material capital accumulated through local agriculture is generally reserved for Lowcountry whites.

This suggests several important things for scholars of local food systems more broadly. First, it is important to recognize the extent to which NGO governance, ideologies of consumer choice, and the cultivation of entrepreneurial subjects are easily articulated with liberal forms of whiteness (whether colorblind or multicultural). Similarly, nostalgic orientations towards agriculture are common well beyond the Lowcountry and this analysis suggests that they reinforce white-washed understandings of the past.

Svetlana Boym’s work indicates one potential way to challenge the restorative nostalgia so deeply-ingrained in the American agricultural imagination, however. She argues that nostalgia can also be “reflective.” If the restorative nostalgia that informs Lowcountry local agriculture attempts to reconstruct an imagined past and protects it as “absolute truth,” a reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalence of human belonging, delays the homecoming, and calls truth into question (xviii). This study focused on the restorative type because it dominates the region, and the local agriculture habitus exhibits little awareness of its own contradictions. Yet potential remains for scholars to conceptualize and to continue to search for moments of *reflective* agricultural nostalgia—ways of relating to the past that embrace the uncomfortable reality of ambivalence and that call commonsense into question. Doing so would provide a more supple foundation for efforts to redirect agriculture today.

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