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### Fresh Oranges

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FRESH ORANGES

by

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A master's essay submitted to the faculty of the  
Graduate Program in English in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

University of St. Thomas  
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## Fresh Oranges

Fremont Market is at the corner of North Fremont and 36<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Minneapolis's Near North neighborhood (North Minneapolis), or the northwestern corner of Highway 55 and Interstate 94 for those unfamiliar with the intricacies of the map. Chain-link fences surround most properties on the block and in the summer the grass is never green. Floating through the streets are four-wheelers, kids stowing away Takis and Island Punch on ill-fitting bikes, and the occasional Rottweiler. Fremont Market is a bit of a hotspot as the neighborhood corner store and, for that matter, the only store for blocks. Inside, owners Mike and Ray stand behind a long counter boasting stern faces and gentle eyes. Atop their counter in typical corner-store fashion is a smorgasbord of one-dollar neon knickknacks, a crinkled note about the \$5 card limit with their tobacco options listed below (no more menthol), and a basket of leathery oranges. Beyond, illuminated by dusty fluorescent light, is a colorful expanse of chips, candies, and remedial household goods.

Those wrinkly oranges are really what I've got my eye on, though. A few weeks ago, a co-worker forwarded me an article published in the *Star Tribune* about proposed changes to the Minneapolis Staple Foods Ordinance. In this article, Mike explains that these days he is throwing away more fruits and vegetables at the store than he sells and that if "[he] could sell the oranges and the apples like the chips, [he would] take off the chips and sell the oranges."<sup>1</sup> This hurts me a little. And not simply because the thought of more Flamin' Hot Cheetos poisoning our good streets gives me the shakes, but because the majority of my arguably most productive hours over

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<sup>1</sup> Mukhtar M. Ibrahim, "Minneapolis may change course on rules about healthy food in convenience stores," *Star Tribune*, posted November 19, 2018, accessed December 30, 2018, <http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-may-change-course-on-rules-about-healthy-food-in-convenience-stores/500783962/>.

the past three years have been spent trying to put those very oranges on Fremont Market's shelves.

I work with BrightSide Produce Distribution, a socially-motivated business in Minneapolis that “strive[s] to eliminate food deserts in urban areas by bridging communities through people and produce.”<sup>2</sup> BrightSide's operational model works to remedy the gap between people and produce by offering produce to corner stores at a low price and in any quantity to make fresh fruits and vegetables more accessible to the stores as well as their customers. Fremont Market is the first stop on BrightSide's weekly delivery route which makes it one of few stores in the neighborhood that offers a consistent supply of fruits and vegetables among its grocery items. And while in some places this fact might not be noteworthy, here the way Fremont Market's shelves are stocked is something of an anomaly because anyone standing at the intersection of 36<sup>th</sup> and Fremont will find themselves in a food-insecure neighborhood.

The more work I do in neighborhoods I had once never seen with fruits I've only recently tried, the more I learn about corner stores and food access for communities in North Minneapolis and, subsequently, what most folks really mean when they talk about North Minneapolis and its food system. The majority of the community in North Minneapolis is made of members who are black, low income, and experience the daily effects of food insecurity. In the past decade, a handful of local nonprofit organizations and government programs have taken notice of the latter point and enacted policies, businesses, and services to ameliorate food access issues. While many of these initiatives express a commitment to pursuing lasting social change rather than simply sourcing food into North Minneapolis, they also participate in a local discourse that perpetuates

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<sup>2</sup> “Our Mission,” BrightSide Produce Minneapolis (*website*),” BrightSide Produce Distribution, accessed December 30, 2018, <https://brightsidempls.org>.

misconceptions about blackness, North Minneapolis, healthy eating, and the systems that sustain them.

As an active participant in the local food justice movement, at times I wonder whether my words and actions make the impact I seek. Am I altering the uneven power structure that maintains the unfairly spatialized poverty, food insecurity, and segregation for the black community in North Minneapolis? Or am I simply committing a series of well-intentioned deeds with proximate results that leave me feeling warm and tingly about how I spend my time? For example, there are times—perhaps too many—when I catch myself using the term *food desert*, or frowning with a *y’know* type of nod when I explain food insecurity to reluctant ears because it feels safer and easier than daring to mention the realities of *racism* or the unfairness of *capitalism*. My intention in this exploration is of course not to feel bad about or invalidate my work but to stay true to myself to ensure that my actions and words dismantle rather than replicate the unjust systems that cause food insecurity.

I want to widen the scope of this inquiry and investigate the cultural and systemic effects a *not-too-uncomfortable* discourse has on social change efforts in North Minneapolis, specifically in regard to how we understand the space, people, and systems in it. I’ve chosen to examine the language and action deployed by prominent actors in the local food justice movement—the Minneapolis Health Department, BrightSide Produce, Appetite for Change, and Sisters’ Camelot—because their organizational missions claim to seek social justice and change in or around North Minneapolis. These organizations, among others, occupy a dominant and impactful space within the local food justice narrative that allows their language and actions to serve as models for genuine social change. My questions remain: is the discourse created by these food justice efforts perpetuating problematic notions of poverty, race, and space in North Minneapolis? What can *radical* change look like in North Minneapolis? Is it happening now?

I'm not sure that it is. Food movement scholars Eric Holt-Giménez and Yi Wang have described the food justice movement at large as a group of initiatives “largely divided between those who want to preserve the political economy of the existing global [or local] food system and those who seek to change it.”<sup>3</sup> I have come to notice this compulsion to preserve the existing racial, spatial, and political economies alive in food justice discourse around North Minneapolis. Consider, for example, an ordinance that mandates the presence of certain food items that the majority of community members can't eat; a new produce distribution avenue that purports to create a social bridge between neighborhoods though maintains the separation; a café that specializes in food by the community for the community—plus vegan and gluten free options; or a charitable group that makes randomized donations and reduces its recipients to casualties of bad land rather than bad systems. Populated with similar initiatives, this North Minneapolis food justice discourse successfully avoids altering the economic system and racialized social history and reinforces the notion that food insecurity can be remedied with social resources and economic ideals lent from white spaces. While most of the efforts in effect certainly make noticeable changes in the daily lives of the people they touch, they also contribute to a broader misconception that blackness, poverty, and food insecurity inherently belong to North Minneapolis.

With this in mind I want to look more closely at the language used by groups participating in food justice discourse as a window into the ideologies that construct discourse and life in North Minneapolis. I refer to this space of food justice as a discourse intentionally because a discourse, as Michel Foucault terms it, functions as ““a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez and Yi Wang, “Reform or Transformation? The Pivotal Role of Food Justice in the U.S. Food Movement,” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 2011): 83–102.

topic at a particular historical moment,” and simultaneously governs “how ideas are put into *practice*.”<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall adds that language functions as a system of codes which represent concepts and meanings we’ve all agreed to attach to the objects and ideas around us. A culture is made up of this system and network of codes which are constructed, made meaningful, shared, and communicated among a group of people. Language is an integral part of discourse as it functions as a conceptual *and* practical expression of culture. When we engage with a language, we also engage with the production of meaning and knowledge represented by that language, and ultimately the production of our culture and society through practice. This means that when we engage with a food justice *discourse* that quietly distances life in North Minneapolis from the mainstream and reduces blackness and poverty to natural features of the space, we evoke *action* that temporarily remedies symptoms of the above and reinforces the notion that North Minneapolis is destined to be plagued by blackness and poverty and perpetually in need of saving by whiteness and wealth.

To begin this work, it is fruitful to examine the rhetoric used by local food justice actors for insight into the racialized conception of food justice as it occurs in North Minneapolis.<sup>5</sup> Holt-Giménez notes that we might understand the food justice movement as a reflection of the ideologies that construct the food system itself as well as a reflection of our economic system.<sup>6</sup> As we seek radical justice, “understanding why, where, and how racism manifests itself in the food system, recognizing it within our movement and our organizations and within ourselves, is

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (The Open University, 1997): 44. Hall cites Foucault.

<sup>5</sup> Mentioned previously, the Minneapolis Health Department, BrightSide Produce, Appetite for Change, Breaking Bread, and Sister’s Camelot.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez, “Power and Privilege in the Food system: Gender, Race, and Class,” *A Foodie’s Guide to Capitalism: Understanding the Political Economy of What We Eat* (Monthly Review Press, 2017): 143–174.

not *extra* work for transforming our food system; it *is* the work.”<sup>7</sup> In the interests of taking action toward social change it is important to acknowledge that while many voices in local food justice discourse have certainly begun to address racism in language and action, most continually fail to actively and directly address its systemic origins.

Food justice discourse in North Minneapolis currently serves as an excellent representation of a culture inextricably bound to whiteness as an ideal. Claudia Rankine, in “On Whiteness and The Racial Imaginary,” suggests that our conceptualization of space, and the things and ideas in it, is distilled through a racialized lens into what she terms an *imaginary*. Rankine notes that it is a mistake to believe these imaginaries are not “created by the same web and matrix of history and culture” that creates us and the discourses we use, and it is therefore a mistake to allege that a conception of anything could ever be “free of race.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, neither the discourse used by well-meaning social justice initiatives nor people of color in North Minneapolis can escape the permeation of a social logic that favors whiteness and buries blackness.

Localizing this racialized imaginary in spatial terms, or as it occurs throughout discourse in North Minneapolis, we arrive at what George Lipsitz terms the white spatial imaginary.<sup>9</sup> Lipsitz underscores that the white spatial imaginary (WSI) is an understanding of space that “idealizes ‘pure’ and homogenous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez, “Racism and Capitalism: Dual Challenges for the Food Movement,” *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 5, no. 2 (2015): 24.

<sup>8</sup> Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda, “On Whiteness and The Racial Imaginary,” posted April 9, 2015, accessed July 5, 2019, <https://lithub.com/on-whiteness-and-the-racial-imaginary>.

<sup>9</sup>The white spatial imaginary transfers the racial lens that filters our social perceptions onto physical space. For example, blackness, poverty, criminality, and unhealthy lifestyles are attached to one’s conception of the buildings, streets, landscapes, and bodies in North Minneapolis. For more on the white spatial imaginary, see Lipsitz, George. “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape.” *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2001): 10–23.



design and behavior. It seeks to hide social problems rather than solve them. . . [and] promotes the quest for individual escape rather than encouraging democratic deliberation about the social problems and contradictory social relations that affect us all.”<sup>10</sup> Within the WSI, the material and conceptual experiences of whiteness are validated, benefitted economically, and manifest spatially while those of blackness are silenced in order to maintain the existing social structure. In essence, the WSI is an understanding of space that values whiteness and survives on the subordination of blackness. The WSI maintains and upholds racialized and capitalistic social hierarchies by impressing such values into the everyday discourse, or food justice discourse.

The stark absence of conversations about racism and capitalism is perhaps the most obvious example of the WSI’s discursive impact within food justice initiatives. Even statistical information regarding blacks in North Minneapolis rarely makes an appearance in local food justice discourse, though only occasionally and in pathological terms, and does not address the disproportionate number of blacks who have historically been forced into North Minneapolis and continue to live out cycles of poverty and food insecurity. Note that in North Minneapolis the black community makes up 57% of the population while Minnesota’s statewide black population is just 20%.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, *nearly half of households* in the area are low-income, earning less than \$35,000 each year.<sup>12</sup> These facts are often elided in official food justice discourse, signaling the erasure of lived black realities of North Minneapolis from broader ideological consideration. Not only does this erasure blur the lived effects of economic disparities from popular discourse,

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<sup>10</sup> George Lipsitz, “The White Spatial Imaginary,” *How Racism Takes Place* (Temple University Press, 2016): 28.

<sup>11</sup> “Near North Neighborhood,” Minnesota Compass, accessed December 30, 2018, <https://www.mncompass.org/profiles/neighborhoods/minneapolis/near-north>. According to 2016 population data.

<sup>12</sup> “Near North,” Minnesota Compass. Forty-eight percent of households in Near North Minneapolis earn less than \$35,000 annually; “Federal Poverty Guidelines,” Families USA, accessed January 1, 2019, <https://familiesusa.org/product/federal-poverty-guidelines>. The federal poverty line for a *six*-person household is \$33,740.

but it also renders their origins, capitalism and racism, ambiguous and untouched by conceptions of North Minneapolis. In the white spatial imaginary, North Minneapolis remains instead a neighborhood that just happens to attract blackness, poverty, and unhealthy food because of the entrepreneurial malaise of its residents.

This instance of racial segregation in Minneapolis can be attributed to a wave of real estate transactions in the early 1900s shaped by racially-biased covenants that explicitly restricted “any person or persons who are not full bloods of the so-called Caucasian or White race” from purchasing or leasing homes.<sup>13</sup> These deeds had an obviously spatialized impact, populating areas of Minneapolis with desirable landscapes—Lake Harriet or the Mississippi River—with white home and business life. In a span of just thirty years, from 1910 to 1940, the black population in North Minneapolis rose from ~1% to *over* 25%. While racial covenants were officially prohibited in 1953 and banned nationally with the 1968 coming of the Fair Housing Act, the results of decades of this form of racial segregation remain egregiously evident and relevant today.

The Minneapolis Health Department’s Staple Foods Ordinance (SFO) stands out as an example of food justice discourse that has only just begun to address the intersection of race, space, and food access in North Minneapolis with its language-to-action reform. At its creation in 2008, the ordinance was the first of its kind nationally and detailed a plan to address the “disproportionately high rates of obesity and chronic health conditions” that impact communities of color in Minneapolis.<sup>14</sup> The 2014 iteration is more concrete than its predecessor and inserts

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<sup>13</sup> “What Are Covenants?” Mapping Prejudice, accessed December 30, 2018, <https://www.mappingprejudice.org/what-are-covenants/index.html#changed>.

<sup>14</sup> “Minneapolis Healthy Corner Store Program,” hereafter cited as “MHCSPP”, a report published by the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support (February 2012): 1–44; Kristen Cadieux and Rachel Slocum, “What Does It Mean to Do Food Justice?” *Journal of Political Ecology* 22 (2015): 10–11. Cadieux and Slocum ask necessary questions of pathologizing food

economic consideration as well, mandating that licensed grocery stores or any convenience and corner stores wishing to accept payment from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) offer a minimum quantity and variety of healthy staple foods.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, the SFO makes the choice to purchase a gallon of milk or fresh vegetables more available and ameliorates access to “healthy” staple food items for folks in neighborhoods like North Minneapolis, although it doesn’t necessarily mean healthy eating is radically more accessible, especially as the people making the choices to sell and purchase healthy items are concerned.

So why aren’t fresh oranges and other healthy foods selling at Fremont Market if it’s the only place offering them in the neighborhood? Eric Fung, the owner of an Asian Foods store in North which caters toward Asian cuisine and the diet of an Asian clientele, has an idea. Fung points out that the healthy grocery products required by the ordinance are culturally limiting and force store owners “to sell a certain diet that really only pertains to certain people in Minneapolis, particularly Caucasians.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, that certain diet detailed by the ordinance may cater toward making healthier staple foods more abundant in target neighborhoods like North Minneapolis, but those foods are staple, healthy, and desirable to a white and middle-class lifestyle. Fung also refers to the SFO’s dairy requirements as evidence of cultural tone-deafness within the policy, as dairy products like cow’s milk and cheese, are simply

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insecurity: “Who benefits from the use of a term, or its hollowing out” and whether “allowing symptoms like obesity to act as surrogate descriptors for much more complex socio-ecological dynamics.”

<sup>15</sup> Federally-issued food assistance dollars; “MHCSF,” the most recent iteration of this ordinance in effect requires at least 20lbs or 50 items of fresh and/or frozen produce be available in at least 7 varieties, 5 of which must be fresh, while a single variety cannot make up more than 50% of the selection.

<sup>16</sup> Tiffany Bui, “City officials look to change grocery regulations to make staple foods ordinance more inclusive,” *Minnesota Daily*, posted July 17, 2018, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://www.mndaily.com/article/2018/07/ctstaple>.

not part of an Asian diet.<sup>17</sup> Fung, like many community members in North Minneapolis impacted by food justice initiatives, knows that such policies are crafted through the ideas of the community writing the policy, to the voices, interests, and tastes of the WSI.

Fung highlights an excellent example of language within the food justice discourse that (perhaps) unwittingly constructs a racialized and spatialized definition for *healthy* eating. Language around *healthy* diets and lifestyles in policies and initiatives like the SFO often reflect and evoke racist social relations in their apparent ambiguity, as users of the term assume that healthiness carries the same meaning in any space and culture. Consider, for example, Sisters' Camelot's mission to offer people "who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford it, the opportunity to eat *healthy, organic, whole foods*. . . [by] transforming a waste stream into a resource."<sup>18</sup> The assumption that impoverished folks in North Minneapolis need expensive, organic, and whole foods to have a healthy diet is a result of the WSI.

In this discursive space *healthy* functions with a universalized meaning that wrongly assumes a definition of healthiness as one that signifies the lifestyle and diet of a middle-class white person. When this meaning is assumed in food justice discourse, racial prejudice is reconstructed linguistically and spatialized through action to suggest that the only way to remedy food insecurity for blacks in North Minneapolis is for them to eat expensive, organic, and at times culturally inappropriate foods. As the WSI filters into idealized conceptions of what it means to be healthy in North Minneapolis, regardless of whether it is culturally or economically

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<sup>17</sup> Susan S. Lang, "Lactose intolerance seems linked to ancestral struggles with harsh climate and cattle diseases, Cornell study finds," *Cornell Chronicle*, posted June 1, 2005, accessed April 4, 2019, <http://news.cornell.edu/stories/2005/06/lactose-intolerance-linked-ancestral-struggles-climate-diseases>, cites a statistic from the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse claiming nearly 90% of Asian Americans experience lactose intolerance.

<sup>18</sup> Emphasis mine. Sisters' Camelot, <https://sisterscamelot.org>, accessed June 6, 2019.

accessible, the lived experiences of people of color are further erased from the consideration of the cultural imaginary.

I can tell you that I too have tried to push the joys of kale, a leafy green the people nearest me on Summit Avenue enjoy, to customers and neighbors of Fremont Market, though the wilted unsold piles of it and impassioned queries on collards tell me that kale sales will just *not* happen there.<sup>19</sup> Although I might be convinced this chemical-free kale from a nearby garden is what customers outside Fremont Market really need, this is further evidence of the WSI seeping into my own vision. I must consider that perhaps the people living near 36<sup>th</sup> and Fremont want collards. Residents of 36<sup>th</sup> and Fremont will buy collards because they enjoy collards. They know how to prepare collards. Their grandmothers will eat collards and their children will eat collards and kale is not something folks here want or *need* to be *healthy*. I take this as a hint to stop pushing kale at Fremont and instead offer collards.

This brings me to similar example of the discursive and economic strength of the WSI. Breaking Bread Café, a social enterprise in North Minneapolis that operates within Appetite for Change, boasts the slogan “Real Food For Real People.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, Breaking Bread is a café that specializes in serving meals inspired *by* the local black community *for* the local black community. While Breaking Bread is a fantastic example of a social enterprise that is created by the community its mission addresses, it also represents many of the insidious capitalistic and

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<sup>19</sup> The Summit Avenue area. “Macalester-Groveland Neighborhood,” Minnesota Compass, accessed July 24, 2019, <https://www.mncompass.org/profiles/neighborhoods/st-paul/macalester-groveland>. Located officially in the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood which boasts a population that is just 2% black, 87% white, and where 41% of households earn more than \$100,000 per year.

<sup>20</sup> Appetite For Change, accessed August 26, 2019. Appetite for Change’s main mission is to use “food as a tool building health, wealth, and social change in North Minneapolis.” The mission statement gets more specific, adding that by building these qualities within the community, the organization can strengthen families, create economic prosperity, and encourage healthy living. Breaking Bread Café functions as one of eight programs designed to address a facet of social change described by the mission.

spatialized values promoted within the WSI. The influence of the WSI on what a good diet or successful entrepreneurial values look like is evident the café's extended mission: "The café offers a unique style of flavorful and wholesome comfort foods, *with vegetarian, vegan, and gluten free options*. These dishes are inspired by the diverse culture of North Minneapolis, drawing input directly from the community."<sup>21</sup> I note the emphasis on vegetarian, vegan, and gluten free (VVGf) options because such an explicit qualification should not be notable in the mission statement if a VVGf diet is already expected of meals from the community the menu is inspired by. In this space, noting that the café serves VVGf options functions similarly to *healthy* in the assumption that it is not universally recognized that a menu inspired by the North Minneapolis community would include such options. By explicitly including the qualification, especially in a marketing space, the café's menu and mission cater to a clientele outside of the immediate North Minneapolis community spatially and culturally, or those white and wealthy customers who value VVGf dietary trends.

While the language used in policies like the SFO or in marketing by social enterprises like AFC's Breaking Bread symbolizes dominant ideologies within the WSI, it also serves as a representation of how we construct and represent *material* space. I want to bring into mind David Harvey's position that "we do not conceive of or reflect space in arbitrary ways, but seek some appropriate if not accurate reflection of the material realities that surround us through abstract

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<sup>21</sup> Emphasis mine; Breaking Bread Café, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://appetiteforchangemn.org/projects/breaking-bread/>. Statement describing Breaking Bread's mission: "Breaking Bread Café & Catering is a community driven eatery focused on increasing healthy food and community engagement in North Minneapolis. The café offers a unique style of flavorful and wholesome comfort foods, with vegetarian, vegan, and gluten free options. These dishes are inspired by the diverse culture of North Minneapolis, drawing input directly from the community. But this is no ordinary café, it's also used to train and employ youth from the community."

representations (words, graphs, maps, diagrams, pictures, etc.).”<sup>22</sup> The language within food justice discourse therefore functions as an abstract representation of our conception of the spatial reality it describes. A simple example of this might live in the images and ideas conjured by many upon hearing “North Minneapolis.” Terms like these might seem innocent themselves, simply describing a neighborhood, but familiarity with common use of the term will reveal that *North Minneapolis* serves as a symbol for a lifeless, dingy, and unsafe landscape—think vacant lots, chipped paint, streets littered in trash—that is physically distinct and inherently differentiated simply because it holds a different title. While the landscape of North Minneapolis does in reality differ dramatically from that of Summit Avenue, we should regard many of the representations of culture and physical space in food justice discourse as only semi-accurate reflections of reality in North Minneapolis. Conceptualized through the WSI, these discursive representations of landscape mask the fact that their physical differences were constructed through social systems and people rather than by nature.

This partial reality is particularly problematic if we consider again the relationship between language, ideas, action, and the material world. Harvey lends a productive framework for understanding space geographically and philosophically that is makes visible the ability of the WSI to permeate economic, ideological, and material spaces. As I examine the spatial tenor within North Minneapolis food justice discourse, one of Harvey’s spatial modalities in particular, the intersection of *conceptualized space* and *absolute space*, proves helpful in lending clarity to the material spatial impact a racialized food justice discourse might have on a broader conception of North Minneapolis. Harvey’s spatial modality includes the representation of material space in maps, landscape description, and spatial and positional metaphors and encompasses the

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<sup>22</sup> David Harvey, “Space as a Key Word,” *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (Verso, 2006), 31.

intersection of how we socially and culturally conceive of a space, or how space is constructed through ideology in an abstract sense, as well as the material and physical reality of a space.<sup>23</sup> I find it revealing to use this modality as a lens upon food justice discourse, particularly in reference to physical landscapes and socially constructed representations.

A closer look at food justice discourse reveals an interesting lack of reference to the *material* landscapes of North Minneapolis, which in many ways signals a disconnect between the realities of that landscape with the exception to the popular metaphor, and certainly relevant among mission statements of my selected nonprofits, the term *food desert*. *Food desert* is a common descriptor for food insecure spaces and is used by just two of the five organizations: BrightSide and Sisters' Camelot.<sup>24</sup> While the majority of the organizations seem to have purged the term from official language, it is worth examining how the term *food desert* reinforces a system dependent on racial inequality and blurry spatial boundaries.<sup>25</sup>

Since its conception, the food desert analogy has focused on food insecurity geographically, for example, the physical distance any person or household might be from a grocery store has long been the key to categorizing spaces as food deserts. Currently, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), an influential voice in food justice discourse, deems a space food insecure if residents must travel more than half a mile to access the nearest grocery

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<sup>23</sup> Harvey, "Space as a Key Word," 135. Further examples include: "cadastral and administrative maps; Euclidean geometry; landscape description; metaphors of confinement, open space, location, placement and positionality."

<sup>24</sup> "Our Mission," BrightSide Produce Minneapolis: "At BrightSide, we strive to *eliminate food deserts* in urban areas by bridging communities through people and produce;" Sisters' Camelot: "Although, we would love to give to as many people as possible, it is a limited resource, and therefore we need to move the bus around to different neighborhoods to more equally distribute the food. We have pinpointed neighborhoods that are *food deserts*, or places where there isn't access to healthy whole foods and brought the bus to these areas."

<sup>25</sup> Michael J. Widener, "Spatial Access to Food: Retiring the Food Desert Metaphor," *Physiology and Behavior*, 193 (2018): 257–60.



store.<sup>26</sup> While defining issues of food access in terms of physical space and distance is convenient, to limit determinants of food access in North Minneapolis to terms of distance evokes a false sense of physical and social separation within the food justice discourse.

Rather than instilling that residents of North Minneapolis are an integral part of local community, the sense of separation reinforced through the food desert analogy continually affirms that North Minneapolis and its residents are far away and part of a separate society, space, and landscape. Furthermore, the desert analogy simplifies living neighborhoods into distanced patches of land naturally unable to sustain grocery stores or fresh fruits and vegetables, whereas areas that are not food deserts, or spaces that aren't North Minneapolis, are graced with a bounty of resources by nature.<sup>27</sup> This hyper-localized image of desert and non-desert spaces lends to a conception of a white community that is fertile and alive while its counterpart is somehow devoid of life and resources by natural ordinance, suggesting that the spaces and ultimately the black people at the center of them are not worthy of inclusion or investment.

It is in this sense that the food desert analogy remains “lazy shorthand” and fails to acknowledge the racist systems that determine how communities are spaced and to what resources they have access, while minimizing residents of *desert* spaces to naturalized products of their environment.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the black people living in North Minneapolis just don't

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<sup>26</sup> Food Access Research Atlas, posted by the Economic Research Service sector of the United States Department of Agriculture, last updated May 18, 2017, accessed December 30, 2018, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas.aspx>. Circa 2010, the USDA had even launched digital tool designed to locate grocery stores over a map called the Food Desert Locator.

<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that there aren't noticeable physical features that differentiate these spaces from each other—beautiful patches of greenspace, shiny new pollinator gardens, smooth building façades contrasted with empty lots, dying grass, and an abundance of chipped signs—but it *is* to say that language has the ability to reduce these differences into default states and natural occurrences, rather than direct results of the social and economic systems we live out.

<sup>28</sup> Barry Yeoman, “The Hidden Resilience of ‘Food Desert’ Neighborhoods,” *SAPIENS*, posted August 30, 2018, <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/food-deserts-washington-dc/>.

want fresh fruits and vegetables and it's safe for white people outside North Minneapolis to place blame on residents who choose to live in an area with limited access to *healthy* food. This image of lifelessness reduces “a series of corporate decisions and a complex human ecosystem” into two all-too-simple words that suggest the systemic racialization of space is not worth acknowledging.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, other landscape and spatial metaphors that reflect and perpetuate the lived effects of the WSI are present throughout food justice discourse as iterations of less traditional metaphors of domestic landscapes—like kitchens and grocery stores. The mission statement language from each organization I have focused on includes mention of *kitchen* or *grocery store* in helpful ways that evoke humanizing and communal conceptions of everyday life in North Minneapolis—an effect not always common in the WSI when referring to predominantly black and impoverished spaces. However, as kitchens and grocery stores are referred to in this discourse, little detail is given on what these types of spaces *do* look like, making space for the WSI to penetrate and regenerate ideas and images of everyday life in North Minneapolis that have little grounding in material reality and much grounding in the WSI.<sup>30</sup>

The use of these terms also functions similarly to *healthy* in a universalized and whitened sense wherein the meaning of *kitchen* and *grocery store*, in its lack of definition, is already agreed upon and evokes images of a material space conceived by the WSI rather than of the material space in North Minneapolis. Kristen Cadieux and Rachel Slocum comment on the

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<sup>29</sup> Yeoman, “Hidden Resilience.”

<sup>30</sup> I would be remiss to not mention the use of *streets* and *waste* by Sisters' Camelot: “We are tapping into a waste stream and turning it into a resource for people. . . We pick up that food and give it away on the streets for free.” *Waste* evokes images of valueless, lifeless landscapes and poverty while *streets* is a term long associated with blackness and poverty. The series of material landscape images Sisters' Camelot conjures of North Minneapolis align with a classic WSI: North Minneapolis is a poor black wasteland that needs white charity not radical political change.

power of interacting with universalized definitions of *justice* within the food movement, noting that universals can be integral to enacting change but only if they are situated within a perspective that addresses uneven power relations. In North Minneapolis, this means we must situate universalized terms within a food justice discourse that actively addresses its own relationship with race and space.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, *neighborhood* functions as a pleasant universalism and a problematic and ambiguous spatial term within North Minneapolis food justice discourse. The near over-reference to neighborhoods and North Minneapolis as a *neighborhood* by BrightSide functions somewhat metaphorically as well to shed light on the racial and spatial anxieties promoted in the WSI, particularly so when North Minneapolis approaches recognition as an actual neighborhood.<sup>32</sup> *Neighborhood* is used multiple times throughout the “About Us” section of BrightSide’s website, though the “Neighborhood Pod” page is most revealing. Throughout the page, the word *neighborhood* is used a total of eight times with some grammatical fluidity, referring to the brand and product, the Neighborhood Pod Program, the space members of a summer Buyers Club occupy, and once to the North Minneapolis community, rendering a clear grammatical meaning and discursive meaning of *neighborhood* difficult to discern. From the initial cost of the program (\$150 up front) and the limited pick up locations, the page asserts that subscribers to the Neighborhood Pod Program have the economic and spatial capacity to become members and therefore live in areas that definitively qualify as neighborhoods.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For more on defining and practicing food justice, see: Kristen Valentine Cadieux and Rachel Slocum, “What Does It Mean to Do Food Justice?” *Journal of Political Ecology* 22 (2015): 12.

<sup>32</sup> *Neighborhood* is also used frequently by Sisters’ Camelot.

<sup>33</sup> “The Neighborhood Pods,” BrightSide Produce Minneapolis, accessed July 24, 2019, <https://brightsidempls.org/collections/neighborhood-pods>. Membership to the Neighborhood Pod Program costs \$15 per week for ten weeks and pick up locations are limited to mostly university spaces, a community center, and a bank—none of which includes North Minneapolis.

The meaning and implication that comes with the use of *neighborhood* in food justice discourse might lean in two directions: one where North Minneapolis is allowed to be a *neighborhood* according to the WSI and the other in which North Minneapolis is a neighborhood based on an equitable economic system and the cultural needs and histories of its residents. This former North Minneapolis is adjacent to yours and “just like” yours, but does not interact with, influence, or disrupt yours in any way. This North Minneapolis comfortably qualifies as a recognizable *neighborhood* according to the ideals of the WSI: order, social and spatial predictability, individual entrepreneurship, and whiteness. The latter North Minneapolis is perhaps the more radical and desirable conception of a neighborhood as a space and culture that fundamentally recognizes, values, and uplifts the social, economic, and lived realities of the black community.

Policies and operations like the Minneapolis Staple Foods Ordinance and BrightSide certainly address systemic facets of racialized inequity in the food system, although I continue to struggle with what these policies and operations don’t address. BrightSide’s mission and operation represent a somewhat progressive extension to the SFO’s endeavor and on paper and in action it often feels as though both initiatives creating impactful changes for people throughout the local food system. And I am positive that in many ways this is true, however, it is in the nuances of this action where I find myself examining how (and if) operational models like BrightSide achieve the social justice they strive for.

BrightSide addresses a systemic issue by ameliorating gaps in the local produce distribution network, though rather than restructuring that network, fills a hole in the existing system, allowing it to continue as is. Neither the SFO nor BrightSide addresses the root causes of the issues they work so hard to dissolve, like the stark cultural and class divisions that determine

access to quality fruits and vegetables or the lasting spatial effects of racial covenants.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the community-to-community and human-to-human connections that sustain BrightSide also quietly sustain the norms of the WSI that give life to the conditions that create food insecurity in the first place. In this partnership, the white, educated, and middle-class folks maintain financial and general resource opportunities that black communities in North Minneapolis do not have and cannot gain from such a model. At the end of BrightSide’s business week the young people from North Minneapolis return home, a little less food insecure sure, though still impoverished living with the same economic, social, and political effects of being black in America—all of that sorted neatly into the same few blocks—while the majority of university students or Buyer’s Club supporters return to Summit Avenue in their cars, no more or less food or financially secure, and continue to live with the benefits whiteness has always afforded them.<sup>35</sup>

While such initiatives certainly take into account elements of social inequities, it is evident they fail to *actively* consider the continued racial prejudice toward the black community in North Minneapolis perpetuated by the discursive and economic systems we participate in. This leads me to Holt-Giménez who, in “Reform or Transformation,” discusses this distinction between social justice initiatives that preserve the WSI in existing social economies and relations in social justice efforts, or “reformist” justice, and those that genuinely change them, or “radical”

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<sup>34</sup> See Holt-Giménez and Wang, “Reform or Transformation?” 97, for a handy outline of practices like BrightSide: “Practitioners (predominantly white) work to improve access to healthy and affordable food within underserved communities (comprised predominantly of people of color) by providing vegetables, garden space and knowledge; practitioners often express widespread mentality of ‘bringing good food to others’ in efforts to include non-whites in the alternative food movement and invoke essentialist constructions of race/ethnicity; reproduction of racial hegemony through domination of spaces by privileged whites; anti-racist/diversity training provided with some organization.”

<sup>35</sup> For further reading on the what this radical discourse might look like, see George Lipsitz’s “The Black Spatial Imaginary,” in *How Racism Takes Place*, 51–72. Temple University Press, 2011.

justice. Holt-Giménez lends a helpful understanding of the systemic roots of inequitable social and economic relations, concluding that in order to make genuine change to the food system, its structure, or capitalist and racist core, must be *fundamentally* altered.

I am particularly interested in the space between reformist and radical food justice initiatives in North Minneapolis. Holt-Giménez explains that while reformist food justice often considers socioeconomic or systemic issues within the food system by perhaps making note of racial or economic disparities, such a “perspective doesn’t attribute the problems in the food system to capitalism per se, but to badly-implemented capitalism.<sup>36</sup> Consider, for example the ways in which more reformist, or neoliberal, methods of social change like “market based strategies for farmers, restaurateurs, and incubator kitchens invite us to believe that patriarchy, racism, and class exploitation in the food system can be eliminated if we help women, people of color, and the poor become better capitalists.” Often these more reformist iterations of social justice encourage individuals from exploited groups to participate in the oppressive ideals of the WSI as their best and only alternative rather than addressing the system that breeds the exploitation.

Admittedly, the space between acting out *radical* and *reformist* methods of change is hazy and not always accessible to the folks who want and claim most to strive for *radical* justice. The ideological power of capitalism can be all-encompassing, invisible while the material power of capitalism is that and *physically* limiting, particularly when one must pay their rent and feed themselves while developing an organization or business that strives to enact even quotidian social change.

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<sup>36</sup>Eric Holt-Giménez, “Food, Capitalism Crises, and Solutions,” *A Foodie’s Guide to Capitalism: Understanding the Political Economy of What We Eat* (Monthly Review Press, 201): 175–212.

While I contend that a more radical food justice will address the insidious influence of late capitalist logic upon food insecure spaces and assert economic and political democracy for communities of color who have long remained underserved, subordinated, and exploited beneath it, I also know through my own experience with BrightSide that we can't all dismantle capitalism with a rigorous and theoretically-sound three-year-plan.<sup>37</sup> I *do* think that we can avoid being lulled into “the magical belief that somehow we can change the food system without changing the capitalist system in which it is historically embedded” by *always* doing the work and being critical of our own individual engagement with the world.<sup>38</sup> We can begin to normalize this critical engagement by addressing our voices, and the language and discourse we participate in each day. For me, this might look like *not* using *food desert* to describe food insecurity, even when the organization I work for really needs that ten-dollar donation today. This looks like considering that the people around me, potential customers, donors, and supporters of food justice missions, are capable of listening to new descriptions of space, people, and social relations.

Neither the food system in North Minneapolis nor the food justice discourse around it is isolated from other social and economic systems, just as the lived reality of any individual does not remain untouched by these systems. I hope that by deepening our understanding of food justice discourse, the rhetoric, ideology, and resulting actions, we can expose the insidious systems and ideologies that sustain the WSI, the uneven distribution of resources, and the racialized conceptions of North Minneapolis that keep food insecurity alive. Mind you, this does

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<sup>37</sup> Holt-Giménez, “Reform or Transformation,” 97. Radical racial and ethnic transformation: “Development of local non-white-owned food businesses by removing barriers of structural racism such as commercial and mortgage industry redlining and exclusion of non-whites from access to public resources; transfer of organizational leadership to members of underserved communities; strengthening of economic ties between local minority-owned businesses and minority farmers; legal protection of indigenous and peasant livelihoods in global south.”

<sup>38</sup> Holt-Giménez, “Crises,” 177.

not mean food justice actors like BrightSide or Breaking Bread aren't doing productive, important, and noteworthy work; as Holt-Giménez notes, “moderate food system reforms—such as increasing food stamps or relocating grocery stores—are certainly needed to help vulnerable communities cope with crises, because they address proximate [causes of food insecurity].”<sup>39</sup> But it does mean that we might use our language and discourse as a critical window into the root causes of food insecurity and strive to fundamentally alter the social and economic relations within the food system rather than reinforcing existing racist and exploitative power relations.

It is my hope that popular conversation and action concerning food insecurity in North Minneapolis and spaces like it will come to actively consider and challenge how race, economy, space, and discourse intersect to affect the policies and actions that influence the everyday lives of people living there, and most importantly, use the power in voice, language, and discourse to dispel popular myths blackness, poverty, and space. In reality—conceptual and material—North Minneapolis is a neighborhood filled with lives and communities living in a space long shaped by racially-biased policies and unsustainable food initiatives the folks living there did not create. It is a place where Mike and Ray work at Fremont Market, just down the street from your biology professor and maybe your favorite running trail, where folks, for reasons food justice discourse must now address, are disproportionately black, low-income, and must work harder to eat fresh fruits and vegetables because of systems we must all work to dismantle.

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<sup>39</sup> Holt-Giménez, “Reform or Transformation,” 93.



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