From Seed to Table:

Introducing Produce to Two Corner Stores in Ontario

Briana Perlson

Ontario Program Fall Semester 2013
Table of Contents:

I. Introduction to Ontario Goes to Market (3-5)

II. Discourse of Food Justice Literature (5-11)

III. Methodical and Reflexive Statements (11-14)

IV. Narrative and Critical Analysis of Project (14-27)
   i. HEAL Zone Kickoff (17-18)
   ii. Community Meeting (18-20)
   iii. Raja’s Introduction to the Farmers and Produce Implementation into Markets (20-22)
   iv. Community Response to Produce (23-25)
   v. Produce Tasting Event (25-27)

V. Challenges That Have Arisen (28-34)

VI. Conclusion (34-36)
I. Introduction to Ontario Goes to Market

“HEAL is Healthy Eating Active Living and it’s just our community coming together to make it better and healthier for everyone,” quoted from one of the high school volunteers at the HEAL Zone kickoff event.

Stepping onto the park grass, wet with the morning dew, and wobbling to carry a cardboard box filled with oranges from the local farm Adam’s Acres, I make my way towards the HEAL Zone kickoff. Rows of tables fill part of the park, each advertising with eye-catching banners, flyers, freebies, and healthy produce or snacks to take as one passes, to display the healthy initiative that specific group is working on in Ontario. I navigate through the maze of tables to one designated for the “Ontario Goes to Market” project, where my fellow Pitzer students and I will be passing out free samples from the farm to advertise that fresh fruits and vegetables will be coming soon to Pronto Market and Ontario Super Stop.

This past semester I have been interning in the HEAL Zone in Ontario, CA, a small community of 10,000 to 20,000 residents, sponsored by Kaiser’s one million dollar donation to help transform that area into a healthier and more active community in a three year period. I am focusing on the surrounding neighborhoods of Pronto Market and Ontario Super Stop within this HEAL zone. The main goal for the Ontario Goes to Market project is based off of a hyper local model that sources produce from the farms in the surrounding area to corner stores in Ontario. We hope to create a sustainable system that can be successful and expand to other corner markets in the future.
Ontario Goes to Market was originally named Market Makeover, however we deviated away from that name because this pilot project is not completely remodeling the liquor/corner stores. Instead it is reconfiguring how a community can access produce that is affordable, good quality, and from local farms in the area. This is done by establishing a sustainable model that brings in produce at affordable prices from local farms to corner stores, benefiting a community where walking is one of the main forms of transportation as there are not many supermarkets within walking distance. Alfonso Rosales, a store manager of Pronto Market, explained to me the transportation issues in Ontario and especially in the neighborhoods surrounding the two corner stores.

Well [the customers] would have to drive at least a couple miles to the super market, [which] are a couple miles that way and that way—north and south. But the community here, a lot of these people come walking. My customers here are on foot, so I think we are providing them with a good service as far as them coming here and buying the produce. It helps them instead of catching the bus, cause believe me it takes time catching the bus and traveling and carrying the bags around so they do appreciate that. I’m noticing they’re appreciating that we’re providing that service to them. We’re close by and they come and do their shopping here!

As Alfonso addressed, the few grocery stores that do exist such as Cardenas or Stater Bros. are not within walking distance, and when car transportation is not an option and taking the bus is not always feasible, the corner markets are the most viable option. When interviewing shoppers at Pronto I found this common theme around transportation, but also for those who do
shop at the few grocery stores in the area, many reiterated that the produce sold is oftentimes bad quality and overpriced.

Overall, this corner store conversion has been an ever changing and evolving process. It is an experiment we are implementing into Raja’s two corner stores with no guarantees that it will work or be successful. In this paper I narrate the process of bringing produce into Pronto Market and Ontario Super Stop, including the issues and situations that arose, detailing what has happened in this launching phase of the Ontario Goes to Market project. This paper is divided into 6 sections and I began by introducing the project and setting the scene of the two corner store markets that I have been working with in the HEAL Zone. I go on to orient the reader on literature surrounding food justice and alternative food systems, leading into my methodical and reflexive statements that include my positionality, ethical questions that have arisen, methods used, and theories that have helped guide and analyze my research. Next is the bulk of this paper which is a narration and critical analysis that is divided into subsections in the chronological order of events as they happened this semester. I then examine the challenges that have arisen throughout the process and conclude this paper with the final themes that have emerged. I argue through this paper that the differing discourses regarding food and health by the different groups involved in the Market Project need to be in communication and navigated in order to make this food project work.

II. Discourse of Food Justice Literature

The literature on food justice questions popular conceptions of food deserts, obesity, and differing definitions of health and advocacy. Particular among the issues is tension between food access and the alternative food movements that enhance it. In this literature review, I discuss the different classifications and controversies of food deserts (Shaw 2006), the structural inequality
including supermarket redlining that leads to differential food access (Sbicca 2012; Eisenhower 2002), the power dynamic of race and class that emerge when addressing food access on the grassroots level (Guthman 2008, 2011, Patricia Allen 2010), and the development of alternative food systems (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010, Vallianatos 2008, Jetter and Cassady 2010, B. Gail Smith 2008).

A common theme in literature regarding food justice deals with the access and availability of fresh produce in low income communities. The term food desert has been used to describe “areas of relative exclusion where people experience physical and economic barriers to accessing healthy food” with the potential causes being the interactions between “economic, geographical, psychological and sociological” factors as described in the writings Food Deserts: Towards the Development of a Classification by Hilary J. Shaw (1). Shaw goes on to address the different levels and classifications of food deserts. However, throughout food justice literature the term “food desert” is controversial in the use of classifying communities and debated in determining what aspects create a food desert. In Growing food justice by planting an anti-oppression foundation: opportunities and obstacles for a budding social movement, author Joshua Sbicca (2012) addresses the negative effects of labeling areas as food deserts. Sbicca found that the term tends to lead to charity and trying to fix the symptoms rather than analyzing and addressing the structural causes behind the food access issue. Sbicca uses the term “food apartheid” instead of food desert (461) and brings up the theme of “supermarket redlining” (459) as the reason for less grocery stores and more fast food and liquor corner stores that contain bad quality, overpriced produce prevalent in low income communities.

In the journal article In poor health: Supermarket redlining and urban nutrition, author Elizabeth Eisenhauer (2002) addresses the issues related to food justice and how those who live
in low income areas tend to not have access to markets with fresh and affordable produce.
Eisenhauer provides a history of markets in lower income urban areas, where inner city
neighborhoods have experienced a loss of supermarkets as the stores have expanded in size and
have moved to suburban areas outside of the city. This movement leaves inner city residents
without supermarket options except for traveling farther to the supermarkets outside their
community, which is not always feasible due to transportation issues. Eisenhauer found that this
process of supermarket redlining creates multiple problems for the community left behind and
this theme of supermarket redlining combined with the resulting lack of grocery stores,
negatively impacts the health of the community. The supermarket enhances “quality of life by
expanding the options available to individuals and families, while decreasing the perception
(and, often, the reality) of isolation from the city and from the larger society (129).” Eisenhauer
reported that supermarkets can help provide a sense of stability for the community and that the
loss of supermarkets in a community includes more than losing access to fresh affordable
produce. It also leaves behind unemployment, vacant buildings, and can demoralize local
residents and communities. As the previous authors reiterate, access to grocery stores and fresh
produce has an enormous impact on a community’s health as the consumption of fresh produce
increases a person’s health and leads to an increase in a community’s health.

Transforming the food system is necessary given the above arguments, but several
authors critique the power, white privilege, and economic inequalities that emerge when
privileged people actually tackle food justice problems in low income, minority communities.
The article Bringing good food to others: investigating the subjects of alternative food practice
by Julie Guthman (2008), included many overlapping themes regarding activism done by whites
in minority communities in order to “help” people. Guthman found that these efforts do not
necessarily help minority communities and most often this kind of community work reflects the desires of whites rather than the desires of the community being served. Guthman goes on to explain this as the reason for why these types of projects do not typically resonate within a minority community as the practices and discourses used tend to “enroll black people in a particular set of food practices” (3). She does this to bring attention to the “race inflicted even missionary, aspects of alternative food politics despite the pretense of colorblindness” (3).

Guthman critiques projects that bring affordable, locally grown healthy food to communities, as they may not really be helping the communities. She indicates that there has been very little research done to evaluate how effective these types of programs by non-profits really are.

Another article by Guthman (2011) titled *Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*, examines efforts to prevent obesity. Guthman continues to take the stance against alternative food systems that promote local, organic, farm fresh produce as it often reinforces class and race disparities in already impoverished communities. Arguing that even though locally grown, organic produce may have better taste quality and may be grown in more environmentally sustainable ways, overall these types of food systems tend to ignore the bigger issues, such as environmental toxins, which may be at the root of obesity problems.

Patricia Allen (2010) also critiques alternative food movements that focus on localization of the food system in her article *Realizing justice in local food systems*. Allen argues against localization projects, that although these systems do work for issues of taste and quality, they may not be as successful in working towards equity among the differences of wealth, power, and privilege in communities. Allen found that food projects including the market based initiatives may not have a positive impact because it is on the individual level to buy the produce. Also, that the way people think about food and the access lower income and minority communities have to
the fresh produce is already historically structured in such an unjust way by different societal
structures that a food project may not be able to change it.

As emphasized from the previous authors, how to combat the many injustices regarding
access to produce and healthy food options is debated. The following authors are supportive of
alternative food systems, including corner store conversions, as solutions that do have positive
results in communities. Gottlieb and Joshi (2010) found in their book *Food Justice*, that food
access issues in low income neighborhoods can be positively addressed by projects such as
community gardens and other efforts that change the current system and transform the
community’s food system from seed to table. The authors support alternative food methods and
cite other groups that have had positive results and have successfully used research and action
projects that work to transform the food system. Gottlieb and Joshi believe “food justice has the
capacity to reorient the food movement in both ways-to prioritize the need to address inequities
while seeking to change the system as a whole.” (7) The authors are supportive of these efforts
that include food activism in addressing the increasing disconnect between food and culture as a
result of a highly industrialized food system (p. 10). Also addressed in the book is the idea of the
grocery gap becoming a transportation gap, emphasizing that having cars and access to
transportation have become interconnected with going to the grocery store. As the grocery store
is expanding or the supermarket is being supersized, access to transportation may not always be
available to get to the grocery stores that are farther away. Thus Gottlieb and Joshi argue
localized alternative food projects can help address these issues in communities.

The combination of food access issues with poverty, limited park space, and inadequate
health care tends to result in higher rates of obesity and hunger, and ultimately has an enormous
impact on a community’s health. This is exemplified in research done by Mark Vallianatos
(2008) in the article *Food Justice and Food Retail in Los Angeles*, who found that there is a correlation between a community’s proximity to grocery stores and health problems such as diabetes and obesity (2). Vallianatos argues that healthy food access is central to health and that corner store conversions and pilot projects can make a positive difference in a community’s health. He cites the market projects that have been occurring throughout Los Angeles, an area where the local liquor stores and corner markets are often times the main places where residents can purchase food. Vallianatos concluded that corner store conversions are one of many ways to bring in healthier food options to places such as Los Angeles.

Authors Jetter and Cassady (2010) support projects that bring fresh fruits and vegetables to convenience stores, and conducted a study finding that consumers do purchase local produce if it is made available, as stated in their article *Increasing Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Availability in a Low-Income Neighborhood Convenience Store: A Pilot Study*. However, a challenge they found in market projects is the cost of implementing an effective produce management in corner stores. Regardless, the study found that corner market conversions that change the food environment in low income communities by bringing in fresh local produce can be an effective solution to issues of fresh produce availability and health. Whether it is done through market conversions or through other alternative management practices that take the financial and time burden off of the store owners, alternative food projects can be productive ways to promote healthier lifestyles through environmental change and an increase in consumption of local fresh produce in low income communities (702).

In *Developing Sustainable Food Supply Chains*, author B. Gail Smith (2008) found that businesses in the food sector can combine sustainable agriculture practices with business practices to successfully encourage the consumption and availability of healthier food options.
This can be done by food manufacturers, retailers, NGOs, governmental and farmers' organizations working together to address the environmental and societal factors in a community (849). Smith argues that businesses have the capabilities to invest in sustainable manufacturing and distribution systems that are based on sustainable forms of agriculture so that consumers can buy quality food from lower income food suppliers, such as convenience stores.

The literature clearly shows that there are a lot of different discourses regarding food justice and the different ways to address the issue of low income communities not having access to healthy food options. Common solutions to food justice issues include alternative food movements such as community gardens and corner store conversions. For the remainder of this paper, I will be focusing on corner store conversions which have received both positive and negative critiques. Corner store conversions include sourcing fresh and affordable produce from local farms to corner liquor stores to address issues including transportation, food access, and food justice that are relevant in many lower income and communities of color. I will be discussing more of my research done in this field specifically regarding the Ontario Goes to Market Project.

III. Methodical and Reflexive Statements

Many ethical questions arose throughout this semester and following Julie Guthman’s critiques regarding market conversion projects above, I began to question and evaluate my role in this project. There were multiple situations where I was unsure of the correct way to proceed and struggled at times in navigating what my place was within this project and community. This section investigates how my positionality led to unintentional tension in the project, explores the
ethical questions that arose in relation to my interactions with community members along with my role in the project, and describes my methods used throughout this semester.

Being a white female who is not from Ontario and with an inability to speak Spanish in a Spanish speaking community did lead to some unintentional tensions at times. There were moments when my white privilege and class privilege were accidentally exemplified. I am from Orange County, California, where within a few miles from my house there are many different grocery store options that include healthy food stores such as Trader Joes and Sprouts. Yet, in Ontario there are very limited options. I chose to do this project because it revolves around food justice, the idea that every community should have access to fresh, affordable and healthy food. I believe strongly in this goal and throughout this semester have learned how access to farm fresh, pesticide free food is more complex with many different layers and causes, rather than solely being an access issue. Throughout this project I have worried if I am replicating Julie Guthman’s critiques of white people going into low income, minority communities and creating an alternative food system based off of white cultural values. It may explain why the project may not necessarily resonate with community members as it does not have much community involvement. I will examine these challenges revolving around the project not being community driven more in depth later on in the paper.

Throughout this semester there have been multiple situations where ethical questions arose, including my constant reexamination of my role and the ethics of the project not being community driven. This was especially conflicting when the emphasis throughout the classes in the Pitzer in Ontario program is that community input and involvement is crucial to community based projects, an area the Market Project is lacking. Other ethical issues that have arisen include the labeling of produce as organic when it is not, Gabriel’s suspicions of Raja, along with my
own suspicions of Raja and his intentions, all of which I will go more in depth later on in this paper. In the Market Project I used a variety of methods: participant observation, interviews, informal conversation, meetings with youth, filmed interviews with Media Studies students, and visits to the farms and market. The interviews were filmed and incorporated into a short video done by a small group of students in a Media for Social Justice Class with Professor Gina Lamb at Pitzer to showcase the project. The bulk of this paper includes the narrative of the different groups involved in the project, what they believe healthy produce is, the conflicts that have arisen, and the successes that have been made. This way I can tell the story of those involved in this project and present their perspective, as all of us involved want the same outcome, but we each have different ideas of how to accomplish this.

Ontario Goes to Market falls underneath critical race theory because its goals are based in empowering people to go beyond the constraints of race, class, and gender boundaries to bring in fresh produce to a lower income, minority community. Even though there is not a strong community involvement, in the future we hope to have a stronger community presence, and regardless critical race theory applies as we are trying to cross race, class, and gender boundaries to increase access to better quality, local produce. Throughout countless conversations, interviews, and comments from community members, I have heard the common sentiment that families want to buy affordable, better quality, pesticide free produce. The idea is that by bringing this produce to the corner stores, access to better food can be accomplished. Whether this is a reality is to be determined, as I will continue to examine this initial phase of produce implementation in the Market Project throughout the rest of the paper. I used critical race theory to guide my research, helping me be aware of my own positionality, and the differences in race, class, and food access in Ontario as compared to more affluent and white communities.
The medicalization theory is prevalent throughout the health initiatives of the HEAL Zone projects, and specifically relates to the Ontario Goes to Market project. The theory incorporates human conditions and social problems, such as obesity and BMI that are traditionally not a medical disease or disorder, but have become a medical problem and diagnosable in society. This process has many unintentional consequences by utilizing professionals and medical diagnoses that ultimately place social controls on individuals, creating a negative self-identity for those affected by it. This is relevant among community members involved in the HEAL Zone efforts. People who are diagnosed by their doctors with the medical term obesity are misled in that they are the cause of the medical problem and are ultimately “unhealthy”. Putting a medical diagnosis on things that are not the best indicators of health, such as BMI, which is determined by calculating a person’s height and weight to determine “fatness”, often leads to the cycle of self-blame.

This medicalization of social issues puts the blame and burden of fixing oneself on to the individual, when many times the problem is beyond the individual’s control. Thus, the individual is blamed for eating too much and not exercising enough, when some of the causes behind the high rate of obesity in low income minority communities are a reflection of social structure issues rather than that individual’s weight. Many community members involved in the Huerta De Valle project reflect this discourse by saying they and their community are unhealthy and obese. These similar themes are reflected in the different alternative food movements in Ontario and specifically with the Market Project I am involved in. I will elaborate more on how the medicalization theory is intertwined with aspects of the project later on in this paper.

IV. Narrative and Critical Analysis of Project
This next section analyzes this past semester that I have spent working on the Market Project, including my interactions with community members, community events, and launching produce into the store. These subsections are in chronological order in which they happened. Throughout this past semester I have worked closely with Raja Adlakha, owner of Pronto Market and Ontario Super Stop, who was the first convenience store owner who was willing to try this corner store conversion project. Raja explained to me why he cares about his community and customers. He has consistently expressed that he does not care if he loses money because he believes this will be helpful to customers as many have asked him in the past if he sells produce. From my many interactions with Raja, I can tell that he really does want to support and help his surrounding community.

I have the check cashing business and also I have the money transfer business, so people can send money to their parents, their brother, their family, and also they usually don’t have the bank accounts so they come here and cash the checks, and spend money and you know I just help them.

As Raja implies in the above quote, these two corner markets are more than just liquor stores, they are a community. I saw this exemplified in my many visits to Pronto Market. From seeing Raja and his store workers interact with customers, I was able to see that he is a business owner who really cares about his customers. Both he, Alfonso, one of the managers, and the other store workers, know many of the customers by name and chat with them when they come to the counter for purchase.
This theme of corner stores as a community is reiterated by Susan Philips, director of Pitzer in Ontario program and Pitzer Professor who started the Market Project, as exemplified in the following quote during my interview with her.

I never really bought into the really negative discourse about liquor stores. When I heard about these market makeover projects, I thought—that’s the right thing…Part of it is about asking about what assets a community has as opposed to what the deficits are. And this project takes what is considered to be a deficit and turns it into an asset.

Because Pronto and Ontario Super Stop are community stores, with an owner and workers who care about their customers, this project has the potential to work at expanding quality food options in the area. There has been the continuous theme that Raja, Alfonso, and others involved are doing this food project to help the future generation become a healthier generation. One of the reasons Raja was willing to sell the produce is because he saw the need and want of produce by his customers. He saw this as a chance to do good, to help the community, the PIO program and his business, as he is invested in the project and Ontario community.

I have three kids of my own and they are growing kids and they also like to eat all of the junk food and stuff like that because their dad has a big stores and they want to eat candy and chips and stuff and I really want them to eat some good food and they do fortunately…I have to think of that cause all of the kids come here, they are all the same age as my kids I want them to eat well and spend
money on the right things you know—buying the fruits and stuff, instead of buying all the chips.

Raja’s investment and commitment to the produce implementation has helped make this project possible. A plus of working with Raja is that he does have the financial backing and management necessary in order to successfully implement produce.

I have enough sources to take a raise and spending time with the students to make this thing work. You know I told you guys from the beginning if you had funding problems, no problem I will do it from my own pocket...you guys come up with the things and I tried to maximize it. You know we started only with one store so I put it in my two stores on the same budget. I know I spend the money from my pocket a lot too, but it’s no problem.

As Raja indicated above, and has emphasized throughout this entire project, he is committed to making this work, even though he is losing money in this initial stage. Throughout the process of implementing the produce, different challenges have come up; revolving around the main issue of different discourses regarding what is local and healthy among each group involved in the Market Project. I will examine these different situations and the resulting challenges more in depth throughout these next sections.

**HEAL Zone Kickoff**

When I became involved in the Market Project in the beginning of the semester, the refrigerators were just purchased meaning that we could finally move forward with sourcing
produce and marketing. Thus, the next step was to advertise that produce would be coming soon to the two markets. Our opportunity arose on February 9th 2013 where we could advertise to the community during the HEAL Zone kickoff. An event put on by Kaiser and the City of Ontario that had all of the different projects as a part of the HEAL Zone grant have a booth to showcase the different projects to the community. At our Pronto Market booth, we passed out free samples of avocados and oranges from Adam’s Acres with flyers saying in both Spanish and English that farm fresh produce was coming soon to the two markets. Many community members stopped by our booth and many did not necessarily know where the markets were but were excited and receptive of the idea of fresh produce going into the two local markets. When people stopped by the booth and tried the fresh oranges, their eyes lit up because it was so good and much better tasting then the oranges at the local stores. The mothers with children tended to stay a few seconds longer when they heard the produce was pesticide free. Many of the residents who came by spoke Spanish so Marcy, a Pitzer in Ontario student working on the garden project, helped translate.

**Community Meeting**

After the HEAL Zone kickoff, there were HEAL Zone community meetings that included learning from community members how they wanted Ontario to improve. The majority of community members who attended that morning meeting were adult women with only a few males in attendance. It was mostly conducted in Spanish, but there were small translator devices for those of us who could not speak fluently that translated the presentation into English. The community members were very friendly and at one part of the meeting we were spilt up into groups to draw on a poster pictures of what we wanted Ontario to be like in three years at the conclusion of the HEAL Zone efforts. The smaller groups then presented to the entire group and
three of the groups included local markets selling fresh produce as one of the things they want to see in Ontario. It made me feel that what we are doing with the Ontario Goes to Market project is what the community wants and was a relief to know, as I try to constantly be critical of the work I am doing to make sure it truly benefits the community.

The only issue that came up was when some women in one of the groups were asking where the Pronto Market was as we were trying to spread the word that Pronto along with Ontario Super Stop are selling fresh affordable farm fresh produce. My fellow classmate, who is also white, was the student in that group and tried explaining it to the women but they had never heard of the markets and did not know where they were. She then brought me over to try to explain exactly where it was located and I made the mistake of saying it was across from the park and they said no it was not, it was also difficult to communicate because some of the women only spoke Spanish and I spoke barely any. When I left to go ask Lucy the official cross streets, one of the women said “well I guess we won’t be getting fruits and vegetables then!” I then made another mistake of starting to say that if one just types the name into a computer, but I quickly realized that they may not have access to a computer so I stopped mid sentence, however she snapped back that “not everyone has access to a computer”. It was a frustrating and embarrassing experience. But, by the end of the event, things were better once we gave them the cross streets and they then knew where it was.

Experiences like this helped me check my white privilege, but also made me question if my involvement in this project is the right thing because I am an “outsider” to this community and I am of a different race and class to the majority of residents in the area. I realized I have to constantly be aware of what I am saying and be careful not to offend anyone or make it appear that I am putting my own white cultural values onto this project and community as Julie
Guthman critiques. It is also interesting to see that the majority of community members who attended events such as the HEAL Zone kickoff and the community meetings do not know where the markets are. This makes me speculate that the demographic we are trying to appeal to with the Market Project, residents who live in the neighborhoods surrounding the store, have not become involved with the HEAL Zone efforts, just as those who are involved do not necessarily shop at the liquor stores. When I was speaking with Maria, a community leader in the Huerta Del Valle community garden project, she mentioned that both she and Lupita, another garden volunteer and community member, do not shop at the markets. They own cars and are able drive to the grocery stores, unlike the majority of local residents who shop at the corner stores. This may mean that the demographic we are trying to appeal to has less income than the majority of community members involved in the HEAL Zone efforts. As a result we need to be aware of that factor in how we advertise to the surrounding community, which I will expand on more in the following section.

**Raja’s Introduction to the Farmers and Produce Implementation into Markets**

One of the booths at the HEAL Zone kickoff was Ontario’s farmers market, that passed out organic lettuce and other freshly picked produce. I acquired the contact information of the farmer Gabriel who had supplied the delicious heads of lettuce and after the event went to visit Unity Farm. After I explained the project, Gabriel was very enthusiastic and wanted to become involved as he shares our goals and beliefs related to increasing access to good quality, local produce. As he is Hispanic, he gave me advice about integrating produce into a largely Hispanic area as he told me in his culture one does not typically eat many salads or the different vegetables that exist such as kale. Gabriel farms different varieties of kale but said he had never heard of kale until a few years ago and believes that many Hispanic families will not know how
to cook those types of produce that are popular in more affluent communities. He recommended that we educate customers on how one can cook vegetables such as kale, as he believes education is vital in low income communities. He recommended that we educate through advertisements such as recipe cards or produce tastings of different ways to cook with the vegetables. This relates to the theme earlier addressed in the previous section that the majority of residents who shop at the corner markets may not know as much about the different types of produce and how to utilize it, as compared to those involved in HEAL Zone projects like the community garden, who may be more aware as they are planting and cultivating different kinds of produce. Bringing in Gabriel expanded the project in that we now have a farmer whose farm is not only certified organic and big enough to be able to source to the two stores, but he also understands the current beliefs around certain produce and health in a largely Hispanic demographic area, such as Ontario.

Our original goals from the Pitzer in Ontario perspective were that the corner store conversion would have local farm fresh produce that cycles based off of the seasons. This way, whatever produce was grown locally would be sold in the store and it would be only local farm produce, resulting in the selection depending on the season and crop production. However, this was not a feasible model on the consumer and business economic perspective. Raja, as a business man needs to have a sustainable economic model, which is based in consistency of a product. This shift in the focus on one hundred percent local farm produce to the more realistic whole sale supplemented with local farm produce model was exemplified in the farm visit where Raja was able to meet two out of the three farmers and see the three different farms. He learned how the farms conduct pricing, ordering, and availability in regards to purchasing. He tasted different produce from the farms and said it was delicious.
After the farm visit Raja mentioned to me that the customers want consistency and to be able to purchase produce in all seasons. Selling produce based off of a seasonal model would lose customers. This was reemphasized by Pitzer Professor Emma Stephens’, whose Agricultural Economics class has been involved in the project. Her class has conducted research on the project and analyzed the best economic model for the store and other information regarding demographics and transportation. Emma attended the farm visit with us and too found that from an economic standpoint, consistency makes the most sense.

It was also because of this consistency factor that we could not work with one of the original farmers, Randy from Amy’s Farm. Randy has set pricing, which is not very affordable or flexible from a business point of view. He does not sell in bulk and does not have as much produce to sell, by not having the room in his small farm, so his produce for sale would fluctuate which is not good from the economic perspective for the stores. Whereas the other two farms, Adam’s Acres in Rialto and Unity Farm in Riverside, both only 17 miles away from Pronto, are much bigger and are able to better fit the needs of the two markets with a bigger selection and more flexible pricing. Gabriel is happy to sell the produce at reduced rates as he supports the project and wants to make it work. Whereas, John Adams has said multiple times that he does not really know pricing well and is flexible in his pricing as a result. Emma’s class also created a GIS map that showed the supermarkets in the area surrounding Pronto Market. The students found that Pronto is almost a mile away from any other supermarket in the area, meaning that Pronto could take on a role similar to that of a supermarket. In the following section I will examine community member’s response to the idea of farm fresh produce in the stores and how it could potentially work for the stores be the main sellers of quality produce for the consumers.
Community Response to Produce

My underlining assumptions in relation to the corner stores are that the majority of local residents go to Pronto for quick food that is on the go, cheap, but also unfortunately unhealthy. This was reinforced by noting that the all of the food sold at the store is unhealthy and either processed high sugar, high fat, high salt or all of them combined. There was nothing fresh, only packaged junk food and a deli to buy a hot meal, such as tamales, burritos, and tacos. Most customers come by walking, biking, some come in cars and most customers pay with cash or EBT cards. From the positive response at the HEAL Zone kickoff, my guess is that most families, especially mothers, will be the main purchasers of produce. This was confirmed by Raja and Alfonso, who found that after the produce was implemented, mostly mothers and daughters noticed and cared about it being in the store. When I conducted interviews at Pronto Market, Raja and Alfonso talked about how appreciative the customers are of the produce in the market.

We just started though and we did not advertise really well, but some girls walk in the store and ladies walk in the store, and they really like ‘oh my god I really like the stuff, I am going to buy my produce here,’ so that is true, and we are going to emphasize more on the advertising and hope it is going to be very successful.

As Raja indicated above, there has been a positive response to the produce by community members, even though sales have been slow and he is losing money on it. We are hopeful that once more people hear about the produce, it will be more successful. The demographic of local residents who tend to purchase the produce are mostly moms and their daughters. Raja indicated that they are the ones who typically do the grocery shopping for their family. I interviewed
shoppers who shop at Pronto were doing their laundry at the laundry mat next door, also owned by Raja. Both Raja, Alfonso, and the media students filming the project were there for the filmed interviews. The theme of mothers noticing the produce is exemplified in the following quote by Crystal, a shopper at Pronto, who lives in the surrounding neighborhood and has been coming to market for the past year.

Last time that I came, one of the guys told me about the organic food, that they only sell organic and I was impressed, no market does that like you guys, so far that I know of you are the only ones I like that their selling the vegetables…I love vegetables, I try to eat them all the time, get those good vitamins, I try to get my daughter to eat them but she always puts up a fit, she loves the goodies.

Crystal, along with other shoppers we interviewed, was supportive of the produce. She mentioned she normally buys her groceries at Stater Bros. or the grocery stores around. She has a car but was walking to Pronto as she no longer had access to the car because she was pulled over. She commented on the quality of the produce from the grocery stores in the following quote.

Sometimes it is overpriced, sometimes when I go get the food it a little bit over days passed, semi good, not very good, but with them (looking over at Raja and Alfonso) they’ve been having the fresh all the time, I noticed it right away at Pronto, compared to the grocery stores.

As Crystal emphasized, shoppers are supportive of the produce in the markets, especially if they find that it is pesticide free, better quality, and not overpriced, as compared to the grocery stores. The only issue at that point was the need to implement produce that was from the local farms and
to stop the misconception that the wholesale produce was organic when it really was not. I will address these ethical dilemmas later on in the paper.

Another aspect this project is missing is a community perspective, so I began forming partnerships to involve community members. I started with Ontario youth by contacting the Recreational Center at De Anza Park and began attending the TAC, Teen Action Committee, meetings so that I could connect youth with the project. The bi monthly meetings were made up of youth in their teens who volunteered regularly and were involved in Ontario. There tended to be more positive responses from the older teens while the younger teens were not as interested in a project revolving around healthy eating. I spoke with a few of the leaders of the group, asking what they thought of the produce in the markets that were down the street from the Rec Center. Jackie Garcia, a senior at Ontario High School, said "knowing that there is fresh produce where I live can benefit healthy eating choices around my neighborhood.” Responses were similar from the other teen leaders as many of them reiterated that it was good that there was produce so close by. I noticed that the older teens do care about their health and their community’s health, as exemplified by the leaders of TAC. As a result, the project’s goals in establishing this connection include creating a youth perspective and involvement whether through summer internships or volunteering over the upcoming summer. It is a hope that the Ontario youth will be good resources in community outreach on spreading the word on the project, as they are members of the community. These are future goals and if there is money for summer interns then hopefully the youth will be more interested and more invested in the project.

Produce Tasting Event
The “Ontario Goes to Market Produce Tasting” consisted of passing out free samples, coupons, and adding more signage inside the stores to market the produce to the surrounding area. I invited Gabriel, from Unity Farm, to the event because I thought if he would be able to meet Raja and see the store, then he might feel more comfortable with the project and specifically with Raja. The produce tasting event changed the relationship between Raja and Gabriel, smoothing away the suspicious Gabriel previously held regarding Raja and his intentions behind the project. It also established their partnership and mutual goal to make this project work, beginning the process of supplementing produce in the store from the not local, wholesale to the local, organic produce from Gabriel’s farm.

Previously Gabriel did not want to work with Raja because of his suspicion that Raja was only doing this project to make a profit rather than to be for the benefit of the community. In the weeks following the farm visit, Gabriel called me after speaking with Raja on the phone. He was shocked that Raja did not know that the produce he wanted to purchase for the store was not in season, leading Gabriel to worry that Raja was only trying to make money off of the produce. If that were the case, then Gabriel said he wanted no involvement in the project. He explained he only cares about helping the community and would rather go to the community and pass out free produce out of his truck then sell it to Raja to make a profit off of the people.

However, during Gabriel’s visit to the store for the produce tasting, he met Raja and all suspicions were gone by the end of the event. They continued to talk throughout the event and shook hands, with Gabriel smiling and very enthusiastic to be involved. He said he would drop off produce in the following weeks to see what sells and what does not, to indicate what the customers want. Gabriel said in addressing Raja that “he is a business man and I am a farmer and if we cannot make it work (selling the fresh produce at reasonable price) then were doing
something wrong, so we will make it work” implying that if a business man and a farmer can’t make this farm to market system sustainable and work it out to be affordable for the customers then who would? So they intend to make this work. Gabriel was able to see that Raja was not trying to make money off of this project as he had previously thought, but that in fact Raja has been losing money on the produce. By talking with Raja, Gabriel realized Raja is coming from a business owner’s perspective in trying to set up an economic model that works for the customers, who are not necessarily as in tune with the seasons as Gabriel is. Raja has often said that he believes the customers do not necessarily care about seasons, that as a society we want fruits and vegetables year round even when they are not in season. This is a model the farmers will have to adjust to and is what makes the most sense from a consistency standpoint, to have the wholesale supplemented with seasonal farm fresh produce.

During the tasting we passed out free samples and coupons to customers. Some customers did not care to try the samples, laughingly scoffed at idea of eating the free sample of fruit and veggies, but some men and women were happy to try it and even bought some of the produce outside. The guy who is a distributor for the store tried a sample and mentioned that what we were doing was really great as he delivers to many markets and has never seen anything like this. He even bought strawberries to take home to wife. While the goals for the event were focused on advertising to the community, the actual outcome that happened was not expected, but was one of the most beneficial aspects to the projects: Gabriel and Raja solidifying their relationship as a farmer and business man and realizing the need to work together and figure out how to make this project work. They were able to understand where each person was coming from which erased all suspicions Gabriel had previously held of Raja and making him excited to move forward in the project.
V. Challenges That Have Arisen

Change does not come easy, nor does it happen quickly, and working with other people on a change based project is bound to have challenges arise. Communication is one of the big challenges in this project because even though each person involved wants the same outcome of produce in the corner markets, navigating through the differing opinions of how it is to be done-including the different discourses around health and medicalization of obesity and BMI as a focus for many of those involved- have been a challenge in this project. In this section I address the different goals of each group involved and examine the challenges that have arisen due to the differing discourses involved in the Market Project.

Kaiser designated the HEAL zone section in Ontario and provided the grant money for the project, focusing on obesity, BMI, eating healthy, and staying active. The City of Ontario’s focus is on health, BMI, and consumption of fewer calories, supplemented with more fruits and vegetables. Pitzer In Ontario, specifically the students and Susan Philips, a Pitzer professor, advocate a hyper local farm to store model because of the environmentally sustainable farming practices, the locality of the produce, and the better treatment of the local farm workers. Raja, a business man and owner of the two stores, needs a system that is economically sustainable. He wants fruits and vegetables in the store, but does not necessarily care if it is from local farms or from farms across the globe. The farmers want produce in the stores too as they believe in what we are doing, however they are focused on putting in produce based off of the seasons, meaning that the same produce will not always be available. They also support using fewer pesticides and do not exploit the farm workers.
Raja’s main goal is to get fruits and vegetables in the store. As a business man, he is looking for a sustainable system that does not completely lose him money. He does not necessarily know or have a preference if the item is organic or local, he just wants produce in the store and from my interactions with him, and it appears that he believes consuming more fruits and vegetables is the main health benefit. After going on the farm visit, Raja purchased whole sale produce from Los Angeles that is not local and not organic. I found I needed to keep encouraging him to start adding seasonal, local produce from the farms to the wholesale produce and needed to contact the farmers for him as he was not doing it on his own even after the farm visits.

When I asked him about the wholesale produce, he said it was local, meaning from Los Angeles, however it is really from farms in other countries shipped to Los Angeles, so to Pitzer in Ontario, this is not local. Raja, Alfonso, and the store workers also started saying the produce was organic when it really was not. When I spoke with customers about what they thought of the produce a recurring buzz word was that it was organic. With Raja standing right there I was not sure how to handle the situation as I did not want to confront this lie of organic in front of a customer or create a bad situation. So I asked Raja about it after, mentioning that the produce was not actually organic and he responded “in the beginning we were telling people it was, but not anymore.” Ultimately, I do not believe Raja necessarily knows or believes the difference between organic and not is too important. I believe he was simply trying to get customers to buy the produce by saying it was organic through word of mouth only. Raja was misleading customers by saying that the produce is organic when it is not, but this may simply be a result of the different beliefs we each have around the idea of farm fresh, organic, and local. The hardest
part about this project is the different discourse around the idea of local produce as local clearly means different things to the different groups involved.

Medicalization of obesity and BMI is a present discourse among alternative food projects and is relevant in produce implementation into Pronto Market. It is true that eating more fruits and vegetables and exercising is important to one’s health, however, the medicalization discourse encourages the vicious cycle of self-blame and identity based off of the medical diagnosis of “obese”. This is exemplified by community members involved in the HEAL Zone projects. The City of Ontario is pushing this community health aspect and as a result, community members like Alfonso believe it, as exemplified in his following quote.

That’s the main thing that I focus on—the health issue…If you notice some of our customers here, they need the help, not to be judging them or anything. Everybody has their preference of food, but we’re trying to do something healthy for them, like I said they appreciate that…and the product is the best thing you can go. It’s all natural; it’s organic, assuming it’s all organic now, so that’s a good thing. It’s good for our health, it’s good for the community…I’m trying to convince them to buy produce that is fresh and organic for the kids and keep them healthy! They are our next future.

As Alfonso indicated, there are buzz words around health, such as organic, and the belief that organic is better, and thus one will be healthier. But, simply eating organic produce is not going to solve the bigger issues related to health. These include the stark differences between the obesity rates and health options available between more affluent white communities and low income minority communities. Medicalization leads to a communities such as the HEAL Zone in Ontario to have the self-identity that they are unhealthy because residents are told by medical
groups like Kaiser who are sponsoring the HEAL Zone that they are unhealthy and as individuals they need to change their eating and living habits.

The medicalization discourse also leaves out the justice aspects of health projects. The City of Ontario and Kaiser may be focused on reducing obesity and BMI, without particularly caring about the environmental or labor aspects that Pitzer in Ontario and the farmers care about. As exemplified through the findings of Emma Stephens’ Agriculture Economics class, during my interview with Susan Phillips, the justice aspects of the Market Project along with the Agriculture Economics class’ analysis of it are emphasized in the following quote.

Students did a cost benefit analysis of the project and their findings were that the primary benefits of this projects are environmental benefits….the decrease transportation emissions that come from sourcing the food very very locally….the city of Ontario needs to link their two discourses right now, because their notions of food and health are really about obesity and the BMI and about this discourse on food desserts and what people have access to and what they don’t….this project does not say that people do not have access to healthy food because most people do, it might be harder to get to because we do have transportation problems in Ontario, so the food is harder to get to, but it’s also conventionally grown food. For our project were looking at sourcing food that is not conventionally grown, that is local and that we would also know the conditions of labor that went into the production of that food. So when we talk about food justice it’s not just about getting people access to food they do not have access too, it’s a related set of concerns, it says justice has to do with urban sustainability
issues, it has to do with carbon footprint, and emissions, it has to do with the use of pesticides,…it also has to do with the conditions of labor in which food is grown, so that all of those things together as a totality have become part of this project.

As Susan indicated, the Market Project is about expanding fresh produce access in Ontario, but while consumption of healthier foods does lead to better health, there are issues that are more than obesity in low income communities, which is food justice. The justice aspects of the project correspond with better quality produce and ultimately do lead to a healthier life by not simply sourcing produce that is pesticide free, but by also supporting local farmers and the resulting environmental aspects of the project that lower carbon emissions which is good for air quality and breathing related issues. Local food means less carbon emissions from transportation of the produce and the local farms do not use as many, if any, pesticides as those other global farms which are better health wise. The medicalization discourse of obesity and BMI does not cover all of the other aspects related to overall health and justice that are included from the food justice standpoint. Which is why this medicalization does not take into consideration the other overall health benefits from local food projects, which is potentially the reason leading to the different disconnects in the Ontario Goes to Market project.

Throughout this semester there have been other communication issues that have come up. Included are the many times Raja is late or does not show up at all to meetings and events when he says he will be there. He is typically a few hours late to meetings and has not shown up to events, such as the HEAL Zone kick off or the corner store conversion training, that taught marketing tips and tricks that work based off of other corner store conversions done in Los
Angeles, which would have been very beneficial for him to know. He is good at telling us what Pitzer in Ontario wants to hear, however he will then go and do something different than what he tells me. I feel that I have to continually check up on him to make sure things are getting done as they were said to be. For example, after the farm visit he did not buy farm produce as he said he would, but instead bought wholesale produce. There is yet to be farm produce in the store even after he said he purchased it. There are consistently different reasons from Raja as for why different events or things have not gone according to plan, making it challenging to move forward with local farm produce in the store. It is also because of this factor that I have had ethical dilemmas in figuring out what role I could take in the project. Because I am not a community member, I struggled with if I am out of line by pushing for the local farm fresh produce, when Raja clearly purchases solely wholesale. These are all questions I have struggled with as I was unsure of the right way to go about these certain ethical issues of the project.

Other challenges in this project involve implementing produce in a liquor store as produce does not generate profits and thus, does not have much influence in regards to advertising room in the store. Raja mentioned that at one point the produce was selling more at the Ontario Super Stop than at Pronto. After going to visit Pronto, I saw the reason why sales were down; the fridge was completely blocked by stacks of beer. Bud light was promoting their product with more signs and displays that were directly in front of the fridge. A challenge of working with convenience stores is that the liquor companies do have a lot of pull in the store. Other challenges involve working with the media studies students who have been filming the project. They did not show up to some of the crucial events such as the Produce Tasting, where they came and dropped off the cameras for me to use while they went to go play a soccer game. I was trying to organize the event and capture the interactions between the representatives of the
City of Ontario, Gabriel, and Raja at the same time. Unfortunately as a result, I was not able to get usable footage because I did not really know how to work the video technology they dropped off. Part of the ethical difficulty also came in how the project was represented by the media students in the film they made. Throughout the project, we had moved away from the de-politicized idea of “food deserts” (Sbica) and toward a more justice orientation, but the students did not portray that in the film they made on the project. They also did not represent the project for what it truly is, portraying it more as a way to help the children and bring fresh food to Ontario, a “food desert”. They also included interviews from members of the Huerta Del Valle community garden project which was confusing to the audience, as it was a completely different project then our market one. There also was great footage of Raja, Alfonso, and community members throughout this project, but the group used none of those and instead included a clip of Raja saying the project is a “financial benefit” to him, which is not good to put in a film geared toward community members. The film completely misrepresented the project and as a result, we were unable to use it to promote the project to community members as we had hoped.

VI. Conclusion

These corner store conversions have been an ever changing and evolving process. In this paper I narrated the process of bringing produce into Pronto Market and Ontario Super Stop. By analyzing literature surrounding food justice and alternative food systems, I found that the critiques of market projects pose similar ethical questions relevant to the Ontario Goes to Market project. Along with analyzing my experiences from this past semester in the produce implementation phase, I included the issues that arose. I conclude this paper with the final
themes that have emerged which have also been the biggest challenges: how to navigate the differing opinions of food and health of the different groups involved in this project. Overall, there are a few different discourses surrounding food and health in Ontario, from the different perspectives of the City of Ontario, Kaiser, Pitzer in Ontario, Raja, and the farmers. We each need to become in communication with one another and begin to combine these different discourses in order to better the project. While the City and Kaiser may be focused on obesity and BMI, Pitzer and the farmers are more focused on the justice and health aspects of local food, while Raja’s main goal is to get produce regardless of where it comes from. These three different views can be interconnected and work if we all are in communication relating obesity and BMI to the bigger picture of food justice, in that local produce, along with the lessened environmental impact it causes, is better than the conventional produce for a community’s overall health.

Different theories are interlaced throughout the paper with the critical race theory guiding my research and helping me navigate my place in the project as it applies to crossing race, class, and gender boundaries to increase access to better quality local produce in Ontario. The medicalization theory is prevalent throughout the health initiatives of the HEAL Zone projects and pertained to my analysis and research. This theory was exemplified through the focus on obesity and BMI to determine how “healthy” a person is, which I found causes community members to internalize their “unhealthiness” causing them to blame themselves and their individual choices. When really there are social structures that are at fault that cause lower income communities to have higher rates of obesity, while at the same time having less access to good quality, local food options.

The Ontario Goes to Market project involves reconfiguring how a community can access local produce that is affordable, good quality, and from local farms. This was done by
establishing a sustainable model that brings in fresh produce from local farms at affordable prices to local corner stores. The Market Project is also working towards environmental sustainability by lessening the environmental impact through the farm to fork model, thereby not only creating social justice but also a more environmentally just system. The project lowers carbon emissions by sourcing produce from local farms in the area rather than from farms across the globe. Another positive is that the farm workers are working under fair working and wage conditions and are not being exploited. This corner store conversion is one of the solutions as a part of the HEAL Zone in Ontario to create a healthier community by increasing access to local, affordable, farm fresh produce.

In relation to community involvement in the Market Project, I began forming partnerships with Ontario youth through TAC, Teen Action Committee; however the project has yet to become community driven. I do not know if it is possible to make it entirely community based, but I do believe that community involvement can be increased, especially if in the future the stores source from the Huerta Del Valle community garden. Because this project just began, it is too soon to know if it is successful and I am unsure how to define what success would be for it. However, an important question to be answered is if these types of local alternative food systems actually benefit surrounding communities and if it is a positive step in navigating food justice. Hopefully with future interns and throughout the longevity of the project, that answer will become clearer.
List of References:

Adlakha, Raja. Personal Interview. Fall 2013.


Crystal. Personal Interview. Fall 2013.


Maria. Personal Interview. Fall 2013.


Sbicca, J. (2012). *Growing food justice by planting an anti-oppression foundation: opportunities and obstacles for a budding social movement*. Published online: Springer Science+Business Media B.V.

