Change as a Process:  
A Case Study of the Pronto Market in Ontario, California
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Introduction

From Claremont, the drive felt about 15 minutes. We went through the residential streets, where I saw that all the grass was literally green, and the large skinny trees towered over and shaded the streets. And then the transition to driving on the freeway, a large, hot expanse of concrete bound by tall walls on the side and a smaller barrier in the middle. We drove for about eight minutes, and took an off-ramp which directed us to Euclid, the main street... I put down the windows to feel the breeze as the car drove down the street and inside of the car. As I looked around, I recognized that this was the city of Ontario, a place that only cooled me with relief as I whizzed through it.

After three years of living in the Inland Empire, I only now find myself comprehending the complexities of the region. It was a slow development which started with my awareness of the local social issues, then participation in the Ontario Program and finally 150 hours of fieldwork in the community. I understand the city now, more than I ever have before. It surely lives up to Ilgen’s nickname, the “tiger”\(^1\) of the Inland Empire; to get to know it requires some clawing and ripping apart pre-conceived and blindly optimistic notions of the social system to reveal harsh and almost ridiculous institutions. And yet all of this is right next door to the nuclear perfection of Pitzer College’s Claremont, California.

Alluding to my greater geographic and social understanding of the Inland Empire, this investigation also focuses on personal evolution and development of a collective group working

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on a market makeover in Ontario which seeks to increase local food access by adding fruits and vegetables to the local convenience store, Pronto Market’s inventory. By following and participating in the process of integrating fruits and vegetables into the inventory of a small convenience store, I chose to investigate how this progression affects actors involved in the project. This plan of inquiry builds upon questions raised in a previous Pitzer in Ontario student research project, which asked if it is possible to create a network of small convenience stores in order to develop a hyper-local food hub within the Inland Empire. Prior action focused on identifying convenience stores that might be interested in stocking their stores with fresh produce, this study examines how food producers, store employees, and city officials relate within a progressive framework which seeks to actively revolutionize the system they live in through increased food accessibility.

I chose to work toward this vision of long-term food sustainability and access with the Pitzer in Ontario program because I care health in both the abstract health of the society and tangible health of the self. I grew up in one of the largest agricultural hubs in the country, where fresh fruits and vegetables were easily accessible and consumed. Many of my favorite memories from childhood revolve around consuming fresh produce: blackberry and strawberry picking, tasting samples of nectarines and peaches at the farmer’s market, and sweet raw corn and green beans as a snack after swimming all day. Fresh food was simply a matter of habit, as I recall going with my mom to pick up our farm-share, wiping the dirt off of my carrots and gnawing on them while I pretended to be Bugs Bunny.

This project is based on informal and formal interviews, as well as participatory observation conducted at the Pronto Market site, Claremont Farmer’s Market, and various other locations around the city of Ontario. Although formal interviews were possible for the Ontario
city officials, informal interviews were more appropriate for employees of the Pronto Market, local farmers and others involved in the market makeover.

This essay follows a review of literature, methods and methodology, analysis of data and final conclusions about the research and research topic.

I. Review of Literature

Food Deserts: An overview

Although the idea of a food desert is extensively referenced throughout food justice literature, there exists no clear description of what exactly are its defining characteristics. Universally, it is considered a transdisciplinary issue, incorporating aspects of physical geography, social spatiality, economic purchasing power, city zoning, education, suburbanization as well as cultural perceptions of food into a concept which, throughout academic journal articles is connected by nothing more the notion of perceived inability to access food in some manner or another. This essay explores differing definitions of the food desert, highlighting competing approaches to the term as well as policy suggestions to remediate the issue. In the end, a review of alternative terminology to “food desert” is discussed and reviewed for the sake of juxtaposition.

Preface: A theoretical background for this research

The Pronto Market project is run out the Pitzer in Ontario Program, which seeks to help students learn social justice issues in the Inland Empire while expanding their understandings of community organizing, and efforts to enact change in the community.
The founding principle of community organizing is accessibility. Defined as the power to act, accessibility is a broad term which describes the ability of a community or individual to generally have a right to empowerment. More specifically, accessibility describes how groups are able to operate and function within social systems. The purpose of community organizing to rally the people around their own issues for the sake of action, and for the notion that change does not have to be a concept, but rather, a reality. The isolation of community issues is attributed to the idea known as “segmental thinking” because the denial of access to any one person or group of people is based on the idea that the issue of one type of people is an issue separate from the rest of the community. This is how some people end up with more access than others, and eventually, where the root of inequality is identified.

Definitions of the food desert

The vision of the Pronto Market is based on the notion that the residents of the city of Ontario experience issues around access to food; their abilities to buy healthy, affordable, and easily reachable food is hindered, in some way, by their power to act. They are thought to not be able to supply themselves and their families with the fresh fruits and vegetables that are necessary for them to build healthy lives.

Not surprisingly, because segmenting is considered to be counter-productive to an agenda based in theories of community organizing, specificity is an especially polemical issue within the confines of academic literature on food accessibility. The term food desert, popularly utilized to describe problems of food accessibility within urban environments, does not have a concrete

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definition from which all literature, policy and recommendations reference. This subjectivity of
definition has spurred arguments about how to characterize the idea of food deserts, which
additionally confounds policy-makers who are searching for ways to mitigate or eradicate
entirely the effects of food deserts on those people who live within their confines⁴.

Historically, because people from minorities groups have been ushered into specific areas
of urban environments due to their economic statuses and their ethnicities, food deserts appear
under the similar guise of subtle isolation⁵. It is because of this understated, yet consistently
enacted urban policy that contributes to idea of ethnic isolation from society. And although the
concept has existed for over a century, the term food desert only came into common existence in
the early 1990’s to describe economic and physical barriers to food access in Scottish low-
income and urban neighborhoods⁶. The concept is fairly new, and therefore it is reasonable that a
strict definition has not come into play, considering that discussion of it and around it has still yet
to be formed.

Most commonly, food deserts are defined as “areas with little or no provision of fresh
produce and other healthy food”⁷, where grocery stores have either never existed in the area, or
moved out of the district. There are various manners to describe the lack of produce in the area,
but one of the most commonly held attributes the creation of food deserts to suburbanization.⁸ As
white families migrated out of the city center and into the suburbs, the phenomenon, supermarket
redlining, incentivized grocery stores to move to spaces where they could spread out and make

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more profits. However, the dearth of fruits and vegetables in the city center, coupled with the advent of fast food restaurants and convenience stores which sell highly-processed food, increased consumption and availability of bad foods, therefore aided the creation of food deserts as well as fostered the habituation of unhealthy eating practices in marginalized communities.

Spatiality is considering an important factor in defining food deserts, specifically in the context of a person’s residence’s distance from the closest supermarket. Thomas’ study done in the United Kingdom which investigated the sociology of space and relationships to retailers, Geographic Information System (GIS) was used to distinguish characteristics between food secure and food insecure households. In the end, neither households that were considered food secure, nor those considered to be food insecure reported distance as an important factor in their decisions to shop at retail stores. Empirically, there were very few differences found between food secure and food insecure households with regard to distance from large food retail stores and convenience stores. However, by a small margin, the popularly held ideas about food insecure households being farther away from large produce-carrying grocery stores, was show to be true, but not by a great factor.

Conversely, Heidkamp’s study in New Haven, Connecticut focused not on the physical distance from the grocery, but rather on the sociological effect of how supermarket redlining affects the perceptions and ‘cost’ of food to urban city residents living in food deserts, found that the loss of supermarket, and the dearth of fresh fruits and vegetables does negatively affect the eating habits of those people who cannot shop at that store anymore.

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Bader’s article asserts that the structure of a neighborhood may make or break the notion of a food desert. Using data for New York City and the surrounding boroughs, the researcher modeled the affect of various neighborhood characteristics to test whether certain city zones could be classified as food desert ‘hot spots’. Within the testing results, controlling for a resident’s access to a car and the prevalence of crime in the neighborhood widened the gap of food access between neighborhoods, whereas public transportation narrowed it. In the end, the researcher suggested that the cities should encourage smaller markets which need less space, like farmer’s markets, and also encourage people to move into the city center with better public transportation so that grocery stores have more incentive to move back into the city and out of the suburbs.6

**Purpose**

The types of policies implemented to mitigate the effects of food deserts depend on the characteristics which help define the issue. Because the issue has many different, sometimes combative definitions, public policy directed at solving issues related to food systems may become easily misguided as a result of misconceptions about the term “food desert”. Often enough, food policy runs ahead of the empirical data which helps to better specify the cause of the situations, weighing the “need to act” over a more tangible, and less emotional explanation as to why the system excludes certain groups from access to healthy food.11 The utilization of the term “desert” connotes that there is a simple absence food, as opposed to describing the reality of health-diminishing fast food restaurants, gas station snacks and convenience stores spackled along streets, are more prevalent than grocery stores, but do not offer the fresh produce from

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which the community may grow up healthily. The way in which the situation is characterized prescribes how it should be solved, and if issue is not properly defined, or described in a way which may induce legislation that does not help it be solved in the long-run, perhaps the identification should be changed.

Methodological Issue

In the end, the reality of a food deserts depends on the definition of a food desert. Even the academic literature recognizes that according the utilized definitions, the absence or presence of food deserts in the same zone of the same city may be heatedly debated, such a case is true in New Orleans where “commonly-used constructs in the food desert literature result in prevalence rates…of anywhere from 17% to 87% of the city's 175 census tracts.”12 Additionally, after another study, one researcher found that after his review of food desert literature, none which he read presented decisive empirical evidence of whether food deserts are problematic in the United States13. It is an issue of variables, and the characteristic of a situation that a being critiqued with the construction and use of the term food desert.

II. Methodology

This essay focuses on the idea of process from the micro and macro perspectives. On the small-scale, it illustrates a case-study in market makeovers, by following the steps involved in trying to incorporate fresh fruits and vegetables into the inventory of the Pronto Market. Yet, in

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course of describing the seemingly minute details of the project, a larger vision of community relations is born by examining how the small developments in the project affected those people who were directly involved in the process of working toward the completion of this project. Considering that this essay focuses on the development of the project and its affect on those involved, the methodology is, in a sense, the most important section, as the manner of ‘collecting’ data even more heavily affects the analysis even more than most qualitative research projects.

What is this “process”?

It has become increasingly evident that projects involving already thus-established small businesses function differently than classic social change theory may dictate. Businesses exist in an economic system which is not as flexible to the same sort of house-meetings, “one on ones”, or leverage-based negotiation methods that are effective in other situations where social change is necessary. The main distinction between this project and others that have been investigated is that the long-run the Pitzer in Ontario program is looking to use this market makeover model across Ontario to create consumption-driven change in community health: greater access to healthy fruits and vegetables will positively affect those who live in the neighborhood surrounding the Pronto Market.

The “process” includes meetings and variety of interactions. Throughout these experience many issues we debated and discussed: ensuring that the business owner stays connected and supportive of the project, that the staff support the venture and the possible changes that may occur as a result of this project to their working environments, and that the relationships that are established between the Market and local produce distributors will actually be providing products which the community is interested in buying. Second, analyzing the working definition
of “healthy” food and produce, and additionally criticizing whether this definition fits into the lives of the Ontario community members. Third, maintaining the interest of the Pronto Market owner, employees, customers and surrounding community in the Market Makeover project as bureaucratic details with the funding provided by the HEAL zone grant are finalized.

Because I only decided to switch my focus entirely over to the Pronto Project from the Huerta del Valle community project in the beginning of October, after most Ontario students had already been at their sites for a full month, my data collection timeframe was a considerably shorter, running from mid-October to about the first week of December. My primary data retrieval tools were spending time with and getting to know the employees at Pronto Market, attending meetings with the students and faculty helping to advise the project a form a greater vision for the work at Pitzer College, discussion with southern California farmers at the Claremont farmer’s market, and formal discussions with the city planners of Ontario at City Hall.

In order to remain culturally sensitive, as well as mitigate the construction of unnecessary alienation between myself and the community, most of the data was collected by informal interviews. These interviews took place behind the counter at the Pronto Market and on the street at the farmer’s market. A formal interview, however, was appropriate and scheduled with the city planners, who felt more comfortable in a structured setting of which they understood the constraints.

In the Pronto Market project, just as in any other investigation, the researcher’s job is awareness, and the micro or macro distinction of this awareness is better defined as areas of study and pertinent communities are identified and recognized. When entering a community, the five most important things for a researcher appear speciously simple: establishing trust within the community, avoidance of any objectification of the people, care of distinct “cultural norms” or
unconventional and unfamiliar cultural dichotomies such as “Head and Hand” research, and finally recognition of the difference between diagnosis and evaluation and communication differences\textsuperscript{14}.

A great ethical challenge is the struggle of representation. Even within the most objective and basic of senses, it is difficult to know or understand whether or not it is possible to represent the experience of another culture through some sort of medium: story, written expression, play or video. It is the act of transforming what the ethnographer observes with her five senses into another manifestation that may create confusion or pain. It is a basic science, just like chemistry’s first law of thermodynamics—it is impossible to make a transfer of energy without losing some of that heat in the process. I have tried to portray the situations and people to the best of my ability with the assistance of my field notes.

**III. Data Analysis**

This investigation is about following processes—sometimes slow, erratic, or even nonsensical flows of steps that progress toward a vision of greater food security in Ontario, California. It is a case study of how to bring fresh produce to the Pronto Market by observing how the development of the project affected those students, community partners, professors and city officials involved. The initial focus looked to analyze how factors of time, bureaucracy, and indefinable, yet unreasonably strict systems, affected the people involved, emotionally and strategically. However, over the course of this semester’s research this project has become an

exercise in experimentation, to see how much a lofty vision on change can work within the rigid “neoliberal” or “business-centric” system. The project evolved, and the purpose of this research became an attempt to understand how theories of social change could be applied within the realm of small business, piloting a new model of community action that could transcend traditional realms of organizing into more structured and ordered settings.

After a semester of participatory observation, it is difficult to believe that the project that I proposed was even originally for the same site as my research. As disillusionment caught up with my initial, yet fleeting whimsy regarding how ideas of social change function within the restrictions of society, I felt defiant in asserting that the Pronto Market does not fit within the confines of the Ontario program’s drive for Inland Empire transformation; however, upon further reflection I note that my stance has changed a bit since that initial angst, I can now argue that the Pronto Market is the budding zeitgeist in a world of social movements. In the end, I have realized that this project is actually about recognizing, analyzing, and critiquing constraints. Getting involved in community action projects does require much of a background in local issues, but rather a willingness to ask questions and listen so as to stay informed and make critical contributions to the project.

This section will examine two key findings in this research:

1. Accessibility is a function of convenience as well as feasibility

2. Communication, the significance of introductions and a reflection on community integration

Part I.
Accessibility is a function of convenience as well as feasibility—it is not only the community’s ability to access to fruits and vegetables, but also their ability to access them locally and have the money to afford them.

By far, the most pertinent factor affecting accessibility to food vocalized within this investigation was the price. In a two-tiered manifestation, price exhibits power over both the perceived as well as the physical ability for residents to easily attain healthy foods.

**Psychological Barriers**

The first manifestation of a food access barrier is psychological, created by the nature of price and its power to affect the way people feel about their abilities to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. A person’s perceived inability to access healthy foods may be visible within the confines of her socio-economic status identification, or even in the perceived limitations they may face due to her geographic or spatial identification with a certain neighborhood or zone of the city. As noted by a woman I spoke with who was working at a farm stand at the Claremont Farmer’s Market, small-scale local farmers who grow fresh and healthy produce cannot often sell to grocery stores that are not willing to pay them above wholesale price because it forces them to lose profit on the product they sell. In terms of this relation to the ability of Ontario residents to access healthy food, those people who do not live a reasonable distance from a Whole Foods or Sprouts or cannot afford to pay the price of produce at those stores where these local farmers can sell their produce for a reasonable and profitable price, do not have access to the same fresh food, and must therefore settle for the global food solution, low-priced food shipped from across
the country and into their store. Through informal conversations at the Pronto Market, I better understand that the employees’ understandings of ‘price’ dictate the ways which they feel about Pronto Market changing its inventory to start selling fresh produce. I based these findings off of two primary informal interviews, first with the maintenance manager and second with the woman who runs the hot food section of the store.

The first day I came to visit the Pronto Market, I met the facilities director. He works at Pronto, the other convenience store, as well as the laundry mat next door, all owned by the same person. Considering that his job is to make sure that all of the appliances at those three businesses are functioning correctly every day, and each place he is in charge of is either completely lined with refrigerators or washing and drying machines, he is quite a busy man. But even taking this into account, he took a considerable amount of the time out to talk to me about his vision for the market. He was familiar with the plan to bring fresh fruits and vegetables into the store and pointed out that they had just started selling spices, which could be used along with a display to incentivize people to buy the produce.

I asked him what kind of things he would want to be sold at the store and he instead began to talk about his perception of the kinds of people that come to shop at Pronto. He made a special effort to emphasize that he noticed that the customers were mostly Hispanic men with what he assumed to be very little cooking experience, nor what he perceived to be much desire to spend time planning and preparing a meal. He presented his skepticism by peering around the store and gesturing at the beer, suggesting that most people came in to buy a beer to drink while they watched television after work. He distinguished himself from the customers by stressing that he, personally, loved to cook, but that he had personal knowledge that led him to conclude that people who come into Pronto to buy something they can make quickly and easily He
proceeded to list items of produce that he speculated customers might like: corn, cabbage, radishes, cilantro, lemons, tomatoes, oranges and apples. And while I was still writing down the list, he concluded that whether the customers were going to buy any of these items completely depended on the price that they would be sold at. Mentioning Cardenas and Superior’s low and affordable prices, and the reality that if the vegetables are not sold in the store that he would have to be the person to clean the fridges, throw out the fruit.

For this Pronto employee, the price of the produce not only represents the cost of making fresh produce an option to his community, but also reflects how much extra work he will have to do for no increase in pay. This is an important note which considers that when thinking about pricing schemes for the fruits and vegetables that will be offered in Pronto, that the price will not only reflect the price that the farmer sells at, but additionally, the markup price that the owner sets to make a profit, and even ideally a little bit more to account for the extra labor provided by the employees who are maintaining the fresh produce section. To the maintenance officer at the store the price reflects something that is low enough so that the produce will be bought, and he will not have to make up for the failure of the product to sell with extra labor. Additionally, because the produce will be a new, and somewhat out of place item in the Pronto Market, this issue of price is a representation of the risk the store is taking to change its business plan and expand its market base. The produce is an experiment, just as much as the price is, and that experiment is trying to allow people in the community to have easy access to fruits and vegetables.

In other conversation with the market employees, I contextualized how a small convenience store selling produce might be perceived by someone who usually shops at a much larger grocery store. About a month into my participation in the Pronto Market project, I brought
a sample of pomegranates, oranges, and avocados over to the store from John Adam’s farm in Rialto. I cut up the samples and offered them to customers as they walked into the store, as well as to the employees who I shared a space with behind the counter.

Although I offered it to everyone, the fruit was actually distributed according to who was willing to try it. I know that it was not as if nobody had ever tried a pomegranate or orange before, but rather the way I unintentionally alienated some people as I characterized the fruit as organic and local before I offered the bits of fruit to them. When I presented a bit of pomegranate to another market employee, she looked at it for a bit, and then up at me, tried a bit and told me that she thought it was sweet. She was a young Hispanic woman making and selling the food in the hot meal section of the store, surveying the coupon section of the newspaper in between customer rushes. I continued to peel the pomegranate on the little counter space next to the cash register and talk to her casually at the same time. The fruit juice was quickly getting all over my hand, purple and sticky. The woman continued to flip through the pages of coupons and every so often look up to see how I was doing. I asked her to tell me about what she was looking for, and she told me that the lowest price was what she needed; sometimes Superior had it, and other times Cardenas, but wherever it was, she would go there.

_I asked her if fruits and vegetables were offered at Pronto market, would she buy them and use them for her business. She said, sure, but they would have to be cheaper than Superior or Cardenas. She showed me a coupon for avocados that said “three for a dollar”._
Price is a measure of affordability, and she buys all of the ingredients for her food at the stores which offer the lowest price. To her, those fruits and vegetables which are marked at comparatively high prices are not accessible under the constraints of her business’s budget constraint.

In trying to understand why some many of the employees and customers politely refused a bit of fruit, there are many factors which may be accounted for, but unfamiliarity of my characterization most definitely played a role in its general and blatant rejection. From this it appears as if an increase in price is directly proportional to decrease the perceived notion of access to those food items. She stocks all the things she needs about a week in advanced in order to have enough supplies to make tamales, roasted chicken, mole and other traditional Latin American cuisine that is then served, ready to eat, at a side-counter separate from the other store transactions to those who want to come in and eat a hot meal.

For either the maintenance officer, or the woman who cooks ready-made dishes, the price of the fruits and vegetables which will be sold at Pronto Market will determine not only how accessible this healthy food is to them as employees, but to the customers as well. It is important then, to note how pricing schemes can reflect the extra labor that the employees will put in to maintain the display, in addition to recognizing that the owner of the store will need to make a profit on what is being sold in order for him to understand that the community does have a need for fresh fruits and vegetables, but sometimes can only access them if they are sold at their neighborhood convenience store, the Pronto Market.

Physical Barriers
The second manifestation of price as a barrier to food access is illustrated through the relationship between opportunity costs of purchasing healthy food and physical ability to purchase that food.

The physical ability for someone to access food may be attributed to a variety of factors including the physical ability for her to move her body, her access to public transportation or walking-friendly city infrastructure such as sidewalks, or more commonly her access to her own car or a even a family member’s. This understanding is founded on personal discussions I have had with residents around the northern Euclid area, Pronto Market employees, and my own experience as a person without a car or a license who has had to depend on the rides of others or my bicycle for the duration of my research.

Opportunity cost is an economic term which illustrates the hidden cost of pursuing one action over another; an alternative that cannot be pursued in order to engage in a different action or activity. Alternatively, it can be analyzed as the benefits you could have received by taking an alternative action. For example, a student in Ontario may be presented with two options for her after-school snack: walk over to the Pronto Market to buy a soda and some chips, or go back her house, and cut up some apples and oranges. Now, if she is particularly hungry, the cost of the chips and the soda would not really seem that much greater than the ‘cost’ of hunger should would have to endure if she were to wait to get home, maybe after track practice and studying with her friends to come home and have a snack before dinner. With this ideology in mind, an economic argument for better food accessibility asserts that from her perspective, these decisions most, likely, involve very long-term analysis of how her food consumption now may affect her health in the future, but that the opportunity cost of eating the junk food is much higher than eating the fruits. Therefore, because of the positive benefits associate with having a community
made up of healthy people, including this person, there should be easier access to healthy foods like fruit than junk food, and thus, greater fresh fruit accessibility.

Just as the student in this scenario probably does not have her own car, and might use her bicycle or walk to get around, the importance of the relationship between opportunity costs and physical ability became more to me apparent toward the middle of the semester, when I began to mentally keep note of the ways that people arrived at the Pronto Market: by car, bicycle and foot. The most common way, by far, fit with the general automobile-dependent culture of the greater Los Angeles, but a few people arrived in the atypical fashion, and that possibly, there were more people in the area who relied on similar forms of transportation. I wanted to find more ways to find out more about the way people transported themselves, considering that accessibility to transportation is integral to a person’s accessibility to healthy food. I realized that my time at the store had afforded me the opportunity to converse with a variety of people, none of who did not have some sort of connection to the Pronto Market. For a project which seeks to bring fresh fruits and vegetables to the those people in the neighborhood around them who do not have access to such food, it was odd for me to assume that talking only to those people who shop or work regularly at the store would be sufficient in understanding the neighboring community’s access to food.

Through further investigation, I found that in between the Pronto Market and the Ontario House, not all of the neighbors could all leave their houses. The opportunity through the connection of other project worked on by other Ontario students working in the community who had access to a different demographic than I did. On Election Day, I volunteered to help get out the vote in the city of Ontario with a group of local youth. I was partnered with a local high school student, given a clipboard with pages of names and addresses of identified voters who
said that they would vote yes on proposition 30, and a map of the area with small black dots that indicated where those houses were located. We started walking around the neighborhood at two in the afternoon and ended at eight in the evening, pursuing the long blocks of central Ontario using the sheer force of our legs.

As an American without a driver’s license, I have always been interested in how issues of accessibility and transportation overlap, however through this pedestrian experience, roaming about the neighborhoods around northern Euclid to find straggling voters, I began to understand that some people’s accessibility, whether referencing their abilities to find their ways to their local polling places to cast a vote against Proposition 30.

As we walked up the steps to the house, we noticing that the outside screen door was shut, but that the inner, opaque, wood-paneled door was left wide open. Unsure how to get the attention of the inhabitants inside, I quickly knocked on the doorframe and waited. The two of us stood for about 3 minutes before I knocked again. From the back of the hall, inside the house, we heard a rustling. A Hispanic woman in her late 30’s came forward and greeted us. We asked her if Maria was home, and she told us that Maria was her mother and that she was home, but that she could get out of bed to come talk to us.

Although it was an opportunity that may not have appeared to present immediate relevancy to my research at the Pronto Market, after further analysis of the situation, I noted that experience’s significance for me had very little to do with the canvassing aspect, but rather the soreness in my legs from walking around Ontario for six hours.
Within discussion of the poor public transportation infrastructure in Ontario, there must be a seriously ironic recognition that the city is a hub for many international business trades, and prides its primary economic supporter as the “logistics” industry: leveraging its access to three types of transport to make its business one that is focused on simply getting things away from the city, helping with the packaging of product that have been created in China, but then distributing it around the country for consumption. Ontario has dubbed itself the temporary destination and actual jumping-off point for the vast number of products in the United States Economy, but not necessarily the best place for those who work there to live.

Part II.
Communication, the significance of introductions, and a reflection on community integration

Communication is a manner by which thought is conceived and accessed. It functions as an auction of ideas. By facilitating the exchange of thoughts, communication shrinks the walls of those cultural barriers under which marginalization thrives.

From what I have observed, as well as experienced personally, every person involved in the process of working toward this market makeover experienced some issue with communication; the Pitzer students and faculty, the employees of the Pronto Market, or the planning officials in the city of Ontario. There was no particular party which had more miscommunication with another, but rather, throughout the entirety of the project, miscommunications occurred constantly no matter the role in the project. The primary issues of
communication were regarding the basic vision and motivation behind pursuing the Pronto Market Makeover, issues of language, as well as cultural differences in communication.

During the development of this project, it was sometimes difficult to identify what was the end goal of bringing fresh produce into the Pronto Market. From discussions about the importance of price in perceived accessibility to fresh produce, our vision in the Pitzer committee was to provide affordable, local produce to the people of Ontario. When our eyes got bigger than our heads, it was to expand the pilot project (which we have not ever really started) to other markets in Ontario, creating a type of bootstrapped food cooperative run out of convenience stores. After a few weeks tough conversations about the funding feasibility of the project, we toned down the idea to just stock the store with any produce that came from anywhere in the world; we said goodbye to the dream. And then we were revived once again, and as it stands the project is back to creating a local food hub for agriculture in Ontario. In a conversation with the city planning officials, they revealed their own idealistic dreams:

_Everybody has their own idea of what the vision is and I can tell you that through our efforts in the past that when people tell you about economic liability, sustainability of the community their eyes kind of glaze over._

Just as the planning committee for the market makeover often loses faith in itself, so do city officials. In the political sense, ‘economic liability’, and ‘sustainability’ are words that resonate, but do not, in Jerry’s opinion, transfer over to public discourse on the topic. A lack of communication between the city and the public leads to disappointment on one end or the other.

During this project, communication was integral to collaboration; important not only within the interactions between me and the Ontario Program, but also with the other community actors. Sometimes the miscommunications were basic, such not understanding the pronunciation of a name of one of the employees, or having trouble understanding the ways in which ideas
were expressed or articulate. The first time I visited the Pronto Market, I experienced this exact phenomena.

“I tried to introduce myself to Bijay and his cousin, whose name I didn’t catch. As I talk about my relation to Nora, explaining to them that I am a student and such and such, Bijay stopped me and turned to Nora to explain that he couldn’t understand my ‘white-girl English’.”

It sometimes inhibited my ability make strong connections with those people at the market that I was trying to get to know. Barriers to communication can just as easily come from the accented language of one person, or the vocabulary, cadence and rhythm of the other.

Although I spent the first five months of this year living in Ecuador and experiencing every day what it was like to not have the standard language accent, I never thought that I would feel self-conscious about the way the spoke once I returned to the United States. I knew that being an American, with an American accent, and a student at an American college, I could not be ridiculed pronouncing something incorrectly, but Bijay’s characterization of my ‘white-girl English’ as something he could not understand caught me off guard. I tried introducing myself again to him using what I thought might be less confusing language, but he laughed in a good-natured manner once again and told me that he could understand me and that he was just joking.

And even though he admitted that he had just been kidding, I dwelled on what he said for weeks on afterward, and even as I am writing this essay. Bijay is a recent immigrant from Nepal who speaks accented English. When he told me his name, I did not comment on the way he spoke, but listened intently to decipher what he was saying to me. It was a simple fact that we
communicated differently with each other and that additionally, both of our ‘accents’ created barriers. I felt embarrassed to ask his name again, whereas BJ couldn’t pronounce my name, creating further awkwardness.

Of course language interactions were not the most important of communication issues. What became more of issue during this process was the vision of the market makeover, namely exactly the project was trying to accomplish. The greatest struggle was to have the vision for this project line up with what the reality of our constraints would allow us to do. From a personal perspective, this proved to be particularly difficult partially because my own ideas of what was important and not important to the project changed over time. Halfway through my semester working on Pronto Project, which may be specifically observed in my observation notes from a conversation I had with the Market working group at Pitzer:

_I discuss the distinction between prioritizing the social justice “vision” of a market makeover and actually getting things done…I mention that I want to focus more on getting the project started and then work on our vision later, I don’t want people (the owner and staff at Pronto Market) to lose their motivation and excitement for the project._

The employees at the market just want to know when the refrigerator was going to come. To them, the fridge represented project completion and success, but the money with the city was delayed, and then it became increasingly obvious the members of the food group that even if we had a fridge, we would have no fruits or vegetables to put in it.
And in the end, the communication that led to disappointment on the part of the City, Pitzer committee of students and faculty, or the employees of Pronto could have been avoided with more communication about the wants and desires of each party involved.

**IV. Conclusion**

My introduction to this project was not smooth. It is important to note that the Pronto Market was not the first project I began to work on this semester, nor was it necessarily my first choice of what I might have chosen to work on. Because of my educational background, I saw the project as a manner by which I could apply what I learned for the past three years of college to something better, but I really had very little understanding what the project vision was until the very end of my work on it. It is because of this unclear introduction to the nuts and bolts aspect of the project that my research question was originally so misguided and eventually ended up being so completely different than the research question that emerged from months of community integration. Most importantly, I have come to appreciate meaning of clear communication within the web of community actors.

As I pause to think about what the next connecting sentence should be in this essay, I am increasingly reminded that at this stage in my life, everything is a transition. This idea, to my surprise was constantly highlighted throughout my research process and shockingly pertinent in describing my entry and participation in the setting of this research. On a more basic level, student involvement in this project has been in constant transition since the Market was first identified by a student last semester as an interested partner in local produce distribution. In the seven months that the project has been in existence, there have been three students, including myself, who have taken on the job as a type of community liaison. The point of this position is to
foster a sense of trust and empathy between the Market visionaries and the more disconnected idea of the project at Pitzer College. More specifically, the student in this position’s job is to serve as the person in charge of maintaining the bridge between students and faculty at Pitzer colleges who debate the meaning of the vision and while also holding the power over the discretionary funds to purchase a refrigerator, and the employees, by spending time at the market and keeping everyone there updated about the progress of the project while also learning more about their stories as immigrants, residents of Ontario, and potential leaders in the forum of social change in the Inland Empire.

As previously mentioned, I transitioned into full immersion in the Pronto Project about a month after other internship sites had already been working with students for a month. There had also been another student had been interested in the project and served as community liaison for about two weeks before her thesis topic changed. Since the employees who work at the cash register are Nepali, this partnership seemed idyllic, considering that this student had spent the last semester in Nepal, and fluently spoke the language as well. And then there was a transition as she came out, I came in, and trust had to be built all over again with another student who, as they told me many times in the next month and a half, would probably just leave when she got bored of hanging out in a liquor store in Ontario.

I am constantly in transition. This project is constantly in transition. And social change runs through both with flying whimsy.