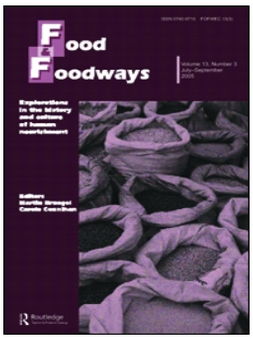

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Critical inquiry into Detroit's "food desert" metaphor

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, the "food desert" metaphor has emerged, evolved, and expanded. The media use it as a negative metaphorical label applied to the city of Detroit, but those living in the city and working on food advocacy disregard it. The juxtaposition of the media's narrow narrative of a barren Detroit clashes with the sustained efforts of local food advocates and activists who continue to address the inequitable access to food experienced by a large segment of people in Detroit. The persistence of the "food desert" term reveals the unequal power relations between local food advocates and the dominant media and political institutions. This project presents a critical inquiry into the media discourses and ethnographic perspectives of local food advocates addressing food access issues in the purported "food desert" of Detroit.

KEYWORDS

Detroit; discourse analysis; food access; food desert; metaphor

Introduction

Detroit's assumed "food desert" has been called the "*worst and most severe*" among U.S. cities (Weatherspoon et al.). The "food desert" metaphor has emerged, evolved, and expanded over the last decade and is regularly applied as a negative label to Detroit. Local and national media take a narrow view of a barren Detroit that presents a stark divergence from the efforts of local food advocates. They reject the "food desert" label but accept that the "food access" problems associated with "food deserts" exist. Food advocates continue to address the inequitable access to food experienced by many people in Detroit. Usage of the "food desert" term reveals the unequal power relations between local food advocates and more dominant regional and national groups.

Food access and grocery stores have been entangled in Detroit's history of deindustrialization, segregation, and inequality (Darden; Sugrue; Fine). Detroit's decline began in the 1950s, when corporations began to move facilities and opportunities out of the city and beyond the state of Michigan. Even during Detroit's jobs boom of the 1940s and 1950s, often referenced as key to building the black middle

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class, blacks were systematically discriminated against at work (Boggs; Surkin and Georgakas). For example, the promotion of three black workers at the Packard Plant on the City's Eastside caused a three-day walkout by nearly 25,000 white workers (Barnard). The exodus of jobs and people placed growing pressure on a city that had already been a place of regular racial tension, with at least nine race-based civil disturbances recorded in over a century from 1863 to 1975 (Farley, Danzinger, and Holzer). Blacks were systematically overlooked for jobs, restricted from housing, and brutalized by police (Sugrue).

The first building looted in the summer of 1967 rebellion was a white-owned grocery store—a symbol of the inequity of Detroit's social and economic struggles (Field Notes III). Out of the 2,509 structures burned and looted, the largest number (611) were grocery stores (Fine). During the 1960s and 1970s, food access and hunger were commonly documented issues among Detroit's black population as poverty and unemployment soared (Kass and Kolasa). The continued loss of jobs, the fear of having black neighbors, racism, and the unease with continued integration drove "white flight" to Detroit's nearby suburban municipalities (Thomas; Sugrue). This process accelerated Detroit's deindustrialization while neoliberal policy spurred rapid suburban sprawl that brought on consolidation of food retail brands and locations (Alkon and Agyeman1).

In the early 1940s, the majority of Detroit residents purchased their food throughout the week at small, neighborhood grocery stores (Detroit News 1941). However, blacks in the city were still racially restricted in where they could live, and so they opened stores in their own neighborhoods (Thomas). Berry Gordy Sr., father of Motown Records founder Berry Gordy Jr., opened one of the first black-owned grocery stores in the early 1920s (Gordy). By the 1970s, grocers in Detroit had consolidated under a handful of supermarket brands to eventually reach a period of competition among six primary supermarket chains in the city. The late 1980s saw the beginning of "grocery desertification," as food revenues fell and supermarket chains began closing, reflecting the ongoing market forces driving deindustrialization of the city (Alkon and Agyeman; Donohue). The early 2000s marked the closing of Detroit's last national chain grocery stores (Farmer Jack) and an increase in media coverage of the hardships associated with finding and purchasing food in the city (Alejandro 2007; Grossman 2009; Harrison 2009; Trop 2009).

The history of job loss, population loss, and retail loss has informed the current media depiction of a vacant, barren, and empty Detroit. The fact that the city became majority black has made the shortcomings of the media's coverage of Detroit that much worse. The purported emptiness of Detroit perpetuated the myth that black residents were unable to manage or maintain their own spaces and neighborhoods. The use of "food desert" to describe Detroit has made the history of decline and lack of access to food synonymous, even while food is readily available across the city. The metaphorical concept of a desert is an important marker for understanding how both outsiders and residents perceive and act upon Detroit's food landscape.

This project first seeks to understand the "food desert" terminology in Detroit and nationally as it has changed and adapted. Then the project examines dominant media narratives around Detroit's "food desert" through critical discourse analysis. The theories of Patricia Hill Collins and Katherine McKittrick ground the project in concepts of metaphor, controlling image, and "black geographies." Ethnographic research with community leaders provides a counter to the media narratives and demonstrates the rejection of the "food desert" label. Finally, ongoing barriers identified by community leaders are discussed as the city seeks to find new ways forward to improve food access.

For the purposes of this article, the following definitions will be utilized:

- **Food desert** is an area with little or no food retailers and where people face physical and economic barriers to accessing healthy foods.
- **Food access** is best understood as the ability to obtain food
- **Food justice** and **food sovereignty** are the ability of communities and individuals to exercise their right to grow, sell, and eat nutritious and culturally appropriate food.
- **Food advocates** are individuals working for activist groups, nonprofits, churches, foundations, and universities promoting food access and food justice.

Methods

Through a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992) of both written text and ethnographic interviews, this project identified common themes, metaphorical uses, and debates about the "food desert" term in and about Detroit. Texts were selected through Google Search, Google Scholar, and Google Books for their inclusion of both the terms "food desert" and "Detroit." Searches were conducted while logged out of a Google account and while using Internet browsers without existing search history in order to keep searches as unbiased as possible. In all, 134 texts were identified and used in this analysis (92 news articles, 21 academic research articles, and 19 books), 22 texts were rejected due to lack of substance or geographic focus on Detroit. The project goal of understanding the meaning and usage of the "food desert" term meant that texts that simply mentioned "food desert" but didn't provide substantive discussion were rejected. An analysis of "food desert" texts revealed the degree to which the metaphor is used, while it also examined how authors draw on existing discourse and dominant narratives. Google Trends and Google Ngram Viewer were utilized as a starting points to understand the year-to-year trends in mentions of "food desert." Google Trends searches for terminology usage within news article headlines and Google Ngram Viewer looks at terminology used in books published since the year 1800 (see next section for discussion).

In our everyday physical and social experiences, metaphorical concepts are utilized to help structure complex ideas when we think, speak, and act. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson ("The Metaphorical Structure") argue that the concepts within metaphors can only be understood on an experiential basis. In order to

truly examine the impact of the "food desert" metaphor, ethnographic interviews ($n = 32$) with food advocacy leaders across Detroit were conducted. Individuals came from community organizations, small and large nonprofits, churches, urban farms, and universities. All of the individuals interviewed were selected for their focused work with food in Detroit and on-going engagements with the author. Individuals worked in emergency food assistance, summer meal programs, and urban farming and gardening, as well as local health programs.

The project relied on Katherine McKittrick's work on the production of black geographies, or examinations at the intersection of politics, place, and blackness. The power dynamics related to who is creating and publishing the "food desert" narrative in media and policy is drastically different than the narrative accepted and used "on-the-ground." This project included a specific focus on conducting interviews with black community leaders (69% of all interviews) in order to examine the social implications of the "food desert" label. Food advocates may reject the "food desert" term, but the term has become a "controlling image," or enduring negative stereotype of oppressed groups (Collins), for the media, funders, and residents of Detroit who aren't directly engaged in food advocacy work.

The emergence of food deserts

Desert: Historical and metaphorical

A *desert* is a climatological and geographic category that from its Latin root means "an abandoned place." School children often first learn about deserts as "arid land with meager rainfall that supports only sparse vegetation and a limited population of people and animals" (USGS). Academically, *desert* is primarily a geographic landscape that exists in a remote, mostly unpopulated area of the world.

Historic usage of *desert* in the United States often implied lack of population, unfarmable land, or uninhabitable places. At the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Thomas Jefferson wrote that the region was "immense and trackless deserts" (Greely and Ames). Jefferson's comments were followed by the expedition of Zebulon Pike, who wrote in 1806 that "these plains of the western hemisphere, may become in time equally celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa" (Meinig 76). Major Stephen Long, responsible for leading the expedition to explore the West, labeled the region the "Great Desert" on a map of the United States published in 1823 due to the land being called "unfit for cultivation and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture" noted geographer Edwin James (Wheat).

However, by the end of the 19th century, the "Great Desert" region became the breadbasket of the United States as a result of its high crop yields of grains and produce. "Desert" continues to be a term of confusion, but now holds common definition of desolation and emptiness. "Desert" was first used to describe an urban environment by John Baines (Baines; MacDonald) in reference to suburban neighborhoods in the U.K. that typically lacked retail stores.

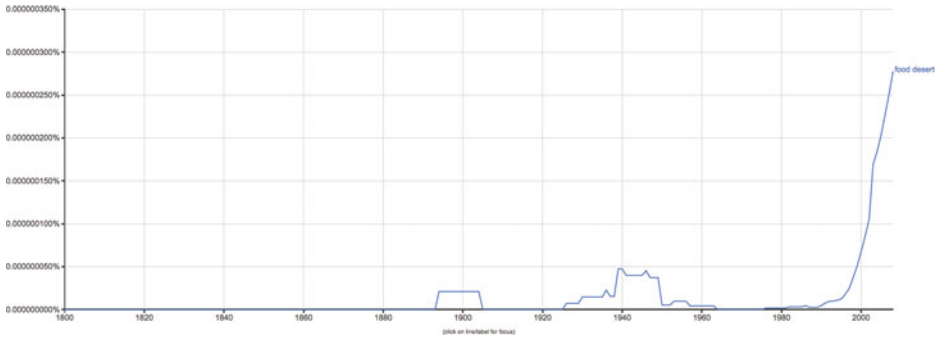

Figure 1. Graph of use of the term "food desert" in books from 1800 to 2014.

History of terminology

The use of the term "food desert" skyrocketed from the mid-1990s into the early 2000s (Google Ngram Viewer).[1] The "food desert" term is said to have been coined by a resident of public housing in West Scotland in the 1990s (Cummins and MacIntyre, "Food Deserts"). In 1995, the Nutrition Task Force Low Income Project Team of the Department of Health, United Kingdowm first published the term. Food desert meant: "[…] populated areas with little or no food retail provision where people face physical and economic barriers to accessing healthy foods." (Cummins and MacIntyre, "The Location of Food Stores"; Reising and Hobbiss).

In the United States, "food desert" was initially applied to rural areas where lower population density and fewer grocery stores made it difficult to purchase food (Bitto et al.; Cummins and MacIntyre, "Food Deserts"; Morton and Blanchard). In the 1995 report, *Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health*, the "food desert" term was used to refer to inner city areas where nutritious food was unobtainable at low prices and where residents relied on public transportation and were unable to reach supermarkets outside the city (Acheson).

Around 2005, the "food desert" term began to be applied broadly to urban areas in the United States that were more populated but access to food, specifically food deemed healthy, had many barriers (Gallagher; Larsen and Gilliland; Zenk et al., "Neighborhood Racial Composition:). In the urban context, the term was still being used loosely to describe varying definitions of environments with limited food access (Raja et al.) without consensus across sectors of government, nonprofit, and academia.

Formalizing a definition

Although the term had been used in academic literature previously, "food desert" made its national debut in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, more popularly known as the "Farm Bill." In the Act "food deserts" were defined as: "[…]

[1] In Figure 1 there appeared to be a number of early uses of the term "food desert" due to a handful of search returns that read "food. Desert" which includes the beginning and end of two different sentences. The search did not account for punctuation within the "food desert" bigram, nevertheless the trend represented an interesting phenomenon and further analysis showed that it matched with the growing "food desert" discourse around the turn of the new millennia.

an area in the United States with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower-income neighborhoods and communities" (Title VI, Sec. 7527 as cited in Ver Ploeg 2009).

The term "food desert" has had a regularly evolving definition that has rarely been agreed upon, however organizations with influence such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) took the first steps to formalize the definition by publishing exploratory reports and literature reviews (Ver Ploeg 2009; Beaulac et al. 2009). In 2009, the USDA presented a report to Congress, *Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences*, which was a direct result of the 2008 Farm Bill. The report took a comprehensive look at "food deserts" across the country and highlighted the health implications of "food deserts."

Spurred by First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign (2010), the USDA developed an interactive "food desert" mapping tool (Food Desert Locator) and published a specific definition for "food deserts" as part of the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), defined as: "[…] a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store" (USDA, "Food Desert Locator").

The USDA report ("Food Desert Locator") further explained that "low-income" meant at least 20 percent of a census tract population lived below the poverty line and "low-access" was defined as at least 500 people or 33 percent of a census tract population who lived more than one mile away from a supermarket or grocery store in an urban area.

In 2013, the USDA updated their definition of "food desert" to include shorter distance measures (0.5 mile radius) as well as vehicle availability. Along with the updated measures to define a "food desert," the USDA changed the name of the "Food Desert Locator" to the "Food Access Research Atlas." The justification for these changes was based on the many ways to measure access to food for individuals and communities. They were a powerful demonstration that the term was not concrete and that the USDA recognized pushback against use of the term. Yet, the USDA definition continued to be simplified. By the time of their 2013 report: "[…] low access to healthy food is defined as being far from a supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store […] ("Food Access Research Atlas").

Debate & discord

The Google Trends chart (Figure 2) demonstrated that use of the "food desert" term steadily increased in news headlines. The notable spikes represented key national moments for the "food desert" debate. The adoption of the "food desert" term by the 2010 Let's Move campaign arguably gave the term its peak significance on the national stage. What followed in the national news debate only a year later in 2011 reflected the growing pushback against the term as a catch-all for poor, black, and unhealthy communities. Likewise, it reflected the growth of the more nuanced discussion about how to label and describe food access issues in the U.S. cities.

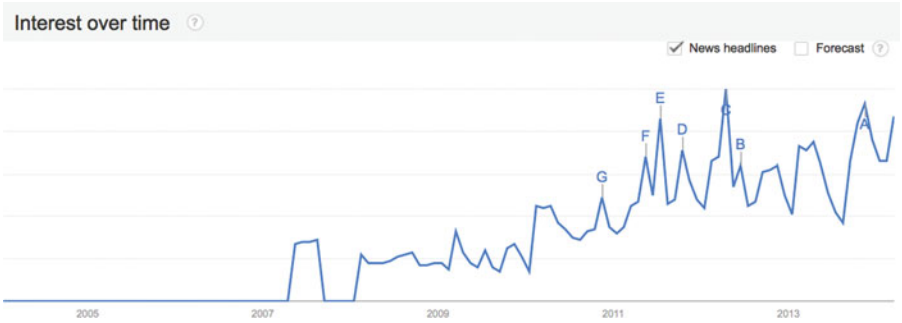

Figure 2. Graph of news headlines that include "food desert" from 2004–2014.

In an opinion piece, John Bare, leader of a large non-profit foundation, presented yet another marker of discord among powerful decision makers. Bare advocated a reverse campaign for a "Food Oasis Movement." The government (Let's Move), policy influencers (Mari Gallagher), and foundations (John Bare) can change and flip the "food desert" term in their lexicon year in and year out, yet the majority black communities most affected by use of the term are often unable to engage in the local or national debates with dominant media and foundations.

Many scholars and writers have used metaphors opposite of "food desert" to describe food as plentiful as opposed to empty or absent, such as: *food swamp, food grasslands, food oasis, food hinterlands* (Breyer and Voss-Andreae; Leete et al.; Devries & Linn, Short et al.). These opposing metaphors attempt to convey either the missing attributes of "food deserts" or to propose solutions. Others have argued for a term besides "food desert" that more accurately describes the problem, such as simply "food access" or "food mirages" (Breyer and Voss-Andreae; McEntee).

While there is no consensus on the final definition of the term, "food deserts" do present a few defining characteristics across all usages: "Food deserts" are geographic landscapes and residents within them face social, economic, or spatial barriers in reaching retail food locations with affordable, healthy, and appropriate foods. Sparks et al. (2009) found that across the many different studies examining "food deserts," all used different measures to create a definition, but ultimately all of the differing metrics came to the same spatial or geographic conclusions about "food deserts."

Levels of spatial access to food are largely agreed upon, however there are still a number of critical qualitative factors that are missing. Each person experiences his or her own environment or landscape differently. Likewise, each individual has different opportunities and barriers to access food in their environment. Some scholars have argued that the "food desert" metaphor isn't adequate to describe and address the food environment experienced by communities of color (Raja et al.). McEntee proposed that "food access" is a more accurate and less misleading concept when it comes to describing and examining food inadequacies. McEntee provided a sensitive discussion of food access to counter the presumed one-way relationship that individuals have with their environments. Individuals don't simply consume their available food landscapes, they also creatively manage and create new spaces as was seen with Detroit's first black grocer in the 1920s.

Detroit is a desert

Detroit historical food context

The "food desert" term builds on the drawn out media narrative that "Detroit is a blank slate" (Gregory). News media and organizations both inside and outside the city report on Detroit's dramatic loss of population, vacant buildings, empty land that is becoming "urban prairie" (Dixon) and the city's absence of public services.

Detroit has an 83 percent majority black population ("Quick Facts" 2014) and longtime racial tension has been important to the history of food access and the "food desert" in Detroit. In discussing the 1967 rebellion, Sugrue wrote, "[…] inner-city grocery stores were among the most prominent targets of young looters. White-owned and -operated stores were the most prominent businesses in Detroit's African American neighborhoods and the most convenient symbol of the systematic exclusion of blacks from whole sectors of the city's economy" (p. 114).

In the aftermath of the civil disturbance, one local nonprofit director noticed the continued inequity of food access:

> Food supplies poured into the city from surrounding suburbs. […] Some grocers fortunate enough to survive the torch exploited the situation by doubling prices on milk and bread. A black militant organization, the Crisis Council, moved truckloads of food in front of such stores and gave it to the "brothers" and "sisters" along with fliers reading, "Tell that grocer to go to Hell!" (Report by Rene Freeman Eye-Witness Account of Origin of Riot—Detroit, July, 1967, Reuther Library Archives)

Again, the rebellion demonstrated the long history associated with race and food access in Detroit and a potential contributor to the current food access issues experienced across the city.

Today, there are no black-owned grocery stores in Detroit as a result of financial strain and proximity to new national chain supermarkets, like Meijer. As noted, Berry Gordy Sr. opened one of the first black-owned grocery stores to serve Detroit's growing and geographically restricted black population. Gordy Sr.'s store no longer stands as a result of government prioritizing highway construction over historically black neighborhoods during the urban renewal era (Thomas). The last black-owned grocery store, Metro Foodland, sold to a new white owner in late 2014. Another well-known black-owned food retailer in the rapidly gentrifying Midtown/Cass Corridor area announced it would be closing during the summer of 2016. A food cooperative formerly operated for nearly 20 years in the 1980s and '90s out of Detroit's Cass Corridor with a diverse and majority black membership base (Author Interview with Community Leader, April 2014). However, financial struggles and a location change closed the store in 2002. In response to changes in the food retail landscape, the Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength (MOSES) coalition of congregations attempted but failed to launch a grocery store in 2009, the United Commercial and Food Workers 876 (UCFW) collaborated to reopen a closed independent grocery store in 2014, and the Detroit Black Community Food Security

Network (DBCFSN) has been working on plans to open a new food cooperative once a property has been secured.

In 1972, Detroit had six major grocery chains, but these began to disappear in the 1980s. The chain grocer, A&P, was able to buy 79 Farmer Jack stores in the metro Detroit region by 1994 as a result of striking workers and falling revenues. However, the merger was not enough to keep the retailer in business, and the last Farmer Jack chain grocery store closed in Detroit in 2007, leaving a void that has caused many to characterize much of the city as a "food desert" (Ackerman-Leist).

In the same year, Mari Gallagher released her infamous and widely cited report titled, *Examining the Impact of Food Deserts on Public Health in Detroit*. The report became the bellwether for Detroit's extended place at the top of the "food desert" list. By attempting to measure "food imbalance" in various neighborhoods, Gallagher's research relied on limited data collection and national retail databases that don't adequately capture Detroit small businesses in order to generate "food imbalance" scores. The report was and continues to be widely cited by those doing work in Detroit on food issues.

The confluence of race and food in Detroit has been a long running issue where grocery stores, independent and chain, have dominated neighborhood food access. Following Detroit's most notable racial civil disturbance, access to food became strongly tied to grocery store proximity. The focus on nearby grocery stores allowed the "food desert" label to be easily applied in 2007 with both the closing of Detroit's last national chain grocery store and Gallagher's widely cited report.

Mixing metaphor and losing meaning

Media narratives about Detroit and its food issues quickly lost meaning as metaphors won out over nuanced explorations of the drivers of food inequity in the city. Through the examination of common metaphorical uses, the "food desert" term can be matched with similar narratives about the city. In a collostructural analysis (collexeme), or the examination between the interactions of words, of a number of differing terms, Martin Hilpert found that the cognitive linguistic terms associated with "desert" as a noun were "dunes, sand, destruction, abstraction, despair, resentment." These terms match well with the idea of a geographic landscape but then begin to deviate to terms often associated with urban decay. Hilpert found that "desert" as an adjective revealed different collexeme results: "remote, cultural, barren, arid, hot, dry, inhospitable."

These terms map on to the typical imagery of a desert as well as the common imagined narrative of Detroit. Examining metaphors specific to Detroit's "renewal" process, Siobhan Gregory found that the city was most often referenced as: "a blank slate, a vast, enormous canvas, a frontier, and a land of opportunity." Not only do these conceptions generate inaccurate imaginaries, but they also bring racial undertones that blackness must be invisible. The assumption that Detroit is empty cannot exist without also assuming that black people don't matter (Stovall and Hill). McKittrick's mapping of the systemic disinvestment in black spaces across

the country provides a useful lens in understanding how Detroit came to be seen as empty. Detroit's decline was accompanied by a long trajectory of disinvestment in specifically black neighborhoods and schools, eventually encompassing the entire majority black city (Thomas).

Gregory also identified terms associated with Detroit that are synonymous with Hilpert's findings: "abandoned, decay, vacant." These terms and their uses have all advanced the metaphor that "Detroit is a desert" or that "Detroit is empty." The addition of the "food desert" label only further mired Detroit in metaphors of emptiness. The following media accounts demonstrate the relationship between the imagined narrative of Detroit's overall emptiness with the sensationalization of the lack of food access.

> […] Detroit's inner city is home to one of the *worst* "**food deserts"** in the country. And that means that there is no large chain grocery store operating within that city. (Martin).

> […] a symptom of civic *catastrophe*, a *desperate* last measure for people *trapped* in *destitute* neighborhoods that have become **food deserts**—places without decent grocery stores, with no local food available except for chips and soda at a convenience shop on the corner. (Longworth)

> Detroit, Michigan is one of the *most severe* **food deserts** in the United States in terms of size and duration. Some areas of Detroit have had limited access to nutritious foods since the 1969 [1967] riots and certainly for most of the city, since the closing of the last supermarket in 2007—Farmer Jack. (Weatherspoon et al., p. 46)

The use of phrases such as "*worst and most severe*" make the issue of "food deserts" specific to understanding Detroit. Although Gallagher first released a report on "food deserts" in Chicago (2006), the term applied to the Detroit narrative came to define the city's problems and failures. Due to Detroit's substantial population loss and vacant land, the "food desert" label added weight to media narratives of decline.

While "*catastrophe," "desperate," "trapped," and "destitute*" emphasize the DETROIT IS EMPTY metaphor, these terms do little to create a better understanding of food access issues in Detroit. These terms also reflect the controlling images of blackness in U.S. inner cities where black people are firstly viewed as poor and inept (Collins).

Definitions and discursive practice in Detroit

Across all of the media surveyed, the report *Examining the Impact of Food Deserts on Public Health in Detroit* (Gallagher) is the single most widely mentioned and referenced ($n = 27$) in Detroit's "food desert" narrative. Gallagher defined "food deserts" as: "[…] areas with ***no*** or distant grocery stores and limited access to nutritious food options" (Gallagher, p. 2).

With nearly one fifth of all media mentions relying on Gallagher's report, I argue that the narrative and controlling image of "food desert" specific to Detroit began with Gallagher's report. Her report along with previous research conducted about Detroit's loss of grocery retail (Pothukuchi 2004) and its apparent lack of

chain supermarkets (Zenk et al., "Neighborhood Racial Composition") all fueled the media onslaught about Detroit's mythical "food desert."

The vast majority of news articles fail to give as comprehensive a definition of "food desert" as the USDA (*Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food, USDA*, "Food Access Research Atlas."). The common definition used for Detroit's "food desert" is simply the lack of grocery stores, mirroring Gallagher's published definition, The stripped down definition presented an easy controlling image with which to frame Detroit and it generated a number of responses:

> While a reality for some Detroiters, all this pervasive talk about the "**food desert"** is *insulting* to the large swath of the population that does have transportation and does make an effort to forgo fast food and cook with those healthier options that may be a few steps or blocks further down the road, but are nonetheless there. (Griffioen, "Yes There Are Grocery Stores in Detroit")

> […] national media publications likely will *continue* to call Detroit a "**food desert**," at least until that long-discussed Meijer actually gets built. (Oosting)

> Clearly, Detroit is not a **food desert**, although some areas do face serious food accessibility difficulties and these areas are home to tens of thousands of residents. That said, calling Detroit a food desert because it lacks major large-scale grocery stores is *ironic*. (Linn)

In response to the media frenzy over Gallagher's (2007) report, a Detroit resident's blog (Griffioen, "Honey Bee Market"), which was republished twice ("Yes There Are Grocery Stores in Detroit" and "Detroit Resident Calls Bullshit on 'Food Desert' Propaganda"), along with the geographic mapping of local grocery stores by Data Driven Detroit (Devries and Linn) presented an opposing narrative. These personal and local pieces offered a rebuttal to the "food desert" narrative in Detroit and were often referenced locally ($n = 16$) but never gained national coverage like Gallagher's 2007 report. The year 2012 brought another series of local news articles writing to debunk the "food desert" myth in Detroit ("Detroit Grocery Stores"; Walljasper, "Detroit as Food Desert," "Detroit as a Food Desert," "It's a Myth," "Grassroots Movement Shatters Myth"). These articles continued to highlight the existence of local grocery stores, however at the same time, they recognized confounding factors for food access in Detroit.

Due to the misalignment between local food advocates and local media pushback against the term and the national media's continued embrace of the false food desert narrative, the "food desert" term was accepted until roughly 2010 without significant disagreement. While there was considerable local pushback against the "food desert" term in relation to the absence of grocery stores in 2011–2012, the national media followed the same trajectory that relied on metaphor over meaning. The peak of use of the "food desert" metaphor in the news media, both accepting and rejecting the term, arrived with the 2013 grand opening of a Whole Foods store in Detroit.

Whole Foods is an oasis

For just over six years, no national chain grocery stores existed in Detroit. June 2013 brought the opening of two national grocery chains: first Meijer and then Whole

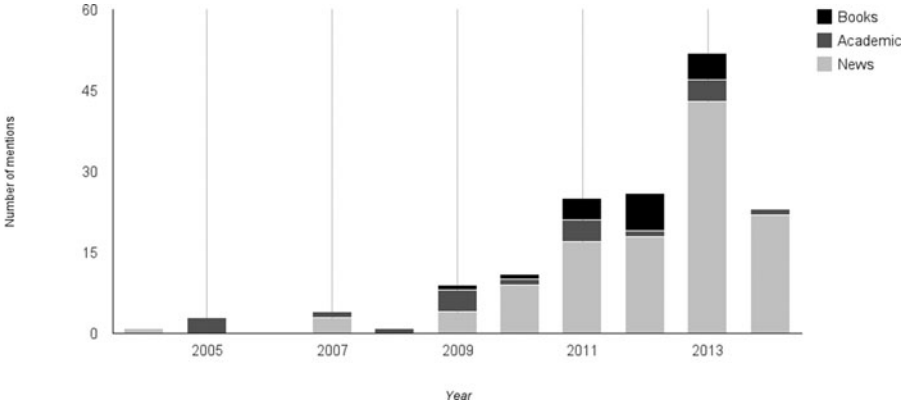

Figure 3. Chart of Detroit-specific literature mentions of "food desert" from 2004–2014.

Foods. While the Meijer store at the northern edge of the city limits presented the greatest benefit for food access with a larger store, more affordable prices, and proximity to more of Detroit's population, the Whole Foods grand opening garnered overwhelming media attention. Among the 54 mentions of "food desert" and "Detroit" in 2013 (Figure 3), nearly half of these were in reference to the opening of Whole Foods. The new store also represented a spike in coverage from national media outlets since the Assignment Detroit writing spree of 2009–2010. One local headline read "Food Desert, What? Look Who Opened Their Doors Today in Detroit!" (Rose), while the *Wall Street Journal* read: "Detroit May Be Bankrupt, But at Least It Has Whole Foods" (Gasparro), and *The Atlantic* asked: "Can Whole Foods Remake Itself in the Middle of a Food Desert" (Badger).

These headlines implied that the opening of Whole Foods negated the "food desert" metaphor entirely. Further the media coverage failed to recognize how Whole Foods was positioning itself in Midtown, the rapidly expanding and predominantly "White" area of the city.

> Parts of Detroit have been described as "**food deserts**," where access to healthy food can be a major problem. Whole Foods hopes to fill that *void* in Midtown. (Brush)

> The opening of a Whole Foods Market store in the retailing *black hole* of Detroit is a welcome development for a *downtrodden* city where "fresh-produce **deserts"** and "food insecurity" are daily realities. (Buss)

> The June opening was promoted as the unveiling of an *oasis* for young urban foodies and traditional city dwellers living and toiling in Midtown Detroit's **food desert**. (Beach)

The opening of Whole Foods presented an opportunity for the "food desert" metaphor to continue to be used unopposed in the national media narrative of an empty Detroit. The national media published stories focusing on Whole Foods filling a "*void*," improving the "*downtrodden*" city, and becoming an "*oasis*" for the city without any grocery stores. Whole Foods CEO, Walter Robb is even quoted as saying that the "food desert" term is an "insulting term for that community," but that it is a reality (Woods).

The opening of Whole Foods demonstrated the power of a metaphor defining a black city over the nuanced understandings, definitions, and local experiences. Here, McKittrick's discussions on black geographies being erased by dominant narratives is most relevant as the media rarely engage residents. Previous years' (2007–2010) news coverage at least took more text space to discuss intersecting issues such as unemployment and transportation, but Whole Foods' coverage caused the news media to use the term as nothing more than a metaphorical label for the city.

> […] *unshakeable* **Food Desert** label" (Beshouri).

> "Detroit isn't just America's fastest shrinking city, home to urban farmers, **food deserts**, and low rents, […]. (Beaudoin)

> Detroit's local food pioneers are transforming the *fallow landscape* and bringing nutritious cuisine to eager restaurants and families all across this *notorious* **food desert**. (Hunter)

"Food desert" became a quick and dirty label to slap into a headline or as an intro to writing about Detroit, but there were also a few individuals who realized the metaphorical contradiction after spending more time in Detroit:

> I think one of the *major assumptions* we had coming in is that Detroit is **food desert**. We *overestimated* the extent of the food desert in Detroit. There are really close to 100 grocery stores in the city, and while they are not all high-quality a lot of them carry fresh produce. So the issue wasn't necessarily access to healthy foods but maybe convenient access to quality foods. – Noam Kimelman (Wey)

The associated terms of "*unshakeable*," "*fallow*," "*notorious*," "*assumptions*," "*overestimated*" show how the "food desert" metaphor had already been emblazoned into the national and regional mentality about Detroit.

The social impacts of rejecting labels

Creative opposition and resistance to the "food desert" term and associated emptiness narratives can be seen among the food advocacy community in Detroit. Food advocates work daily to improve food access among neighborhoods. They reject and contest the term in the hopes of shedding light on confounding factors related to the "food desert," such as unemployment, lack of opportunity, transportation, health impacts, and race. Moreover, the majority of the local food advocates interviewed said that they had seen no changes in the community with the introduction of the "food desert" term. The media narrative of Detroit and, specifically, the "food desert" narrative rarely includes the responses and words of individuals living in the so-called "food desert." This quote specifically matches with McKittrick's call to ground research in discussions with actual people. "[…] one must speak with actual **food desert** residents. And when you do, you hear a lot of things that run counter to everyday mythology about the habits and behaviors of poor people" (Pringle). One individual who had been working on food access issues since 2010 noted that the "food desert" term just wasn't a term that residents use. She said that it was largely a term used by the media.

> It's a label that has been more of a marketing brand statement than what is actually happening in the city. – Female, 26, Local Advocate

Another individual who has been doing food access work since 2009 noted that "food desert" has just become another negative term to apply to Detroit. She said that when she hears someone use the term it puts her on alert.

> I'm starting to hate the term. – Female, 33, Local Nonprofit

> The term has to be invoked carefully. – Male, 45, Local University

A number of individuals interviewed said that the term has been helpful for those outside of Detroit to understand the issue but then the term also backfires with the idea that it means there is "no good food" in the city.

> "This is a food desert and we can't get good food"—that attitude gets into people's heads. – Female, 33, Local Nonprofit

> Most neighborhoods have a grocery store and people have found ways to adapt to what they have. It's not good, just, or fair, but they piece together family food needs in many ways. Some people see the term as a personal affront. – Female, 51, Local Nonprofit

Many recognized that the term had a role to play in getting the USDA to take action with the 2008 Farm Bill and to mobilize influential resources, such as the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation's (DEGC) incentives for local grocery stores.

> We were instrumental in getting the USDA to use the term in the 2008 Farm Bill and we did that in order to get them moving. If we hadn't then nothing would have gotten done. – Male, 63, Regional Nonprofit

One individual even commented about how the construction of Whole Foods was a result of the "food desert" term being applied to Detroit for the Federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), which offered tax incentives for food retailers in "food desert" areas. Some food advocates mentioned the unequal investment in chain grocery stores rather than community food efforts. Others had also heard that some local, independent grocery store owners were unhappy that they couldn't access similar financial incentives for their existing neighborhood grocery stores.

Many food advocates commented on how their organizations used the term often in their early work on food access issues, but now the term has become less used and presents a barrier.

> At the beginning it had its role, but now it's being abused, not abused, but used against Detroit. It's been blown out of proportion. – Female, 33, Local Nonprofit

> I used the term a lot early when we started working. I find I don't use the term as much anymore. We've shifted to focusing on helping our community of vulnerable people in food access. We are now more focused on the bigger picture, which includes economic resources. – Female, 65, Local Nonprofit

While all of those interviewed had a strong dislike of the term or outright rejection of it, most individuals were influenced by the Gallagher report, which

dominated the local and national media discourse. All individuals who were interviewed agreed that there was a food access problem in Detroit as well as an unequal distribution of food but preferred to discuss the major issues that have caused a food access problem to exist in Detroit. The overall focus by those interviewed on how the "food desert" or food access issue came to exist in Detroit connects with McKittrick and Woods's (2007) call to examine how black geographies are constructed. While the media is focused on catchy and simple narratives, local food advocates are discussing "food deserts" in relation to systemic issues and institutional changes needed to improve food access. Actually intervening on food access issues requires more than penning a headline; it requires a coordinated holistic political and economic effort.

Conclusion

Systematic review of available media on a place-specific and place-based phenomenon should be a core step in assessing metaphor as a controlling practice that influences policy and program development. As this project demonstrated, "food desert" has had a changing definition locally and nationally. As a result, policy makers, journalists, and researchers oversimplified "food access" problems in Detroit by mislabeling and in doing so passed over issues of poverty, joblessness, and transportation identified by community leaders that need to be addressed. The reality of "food access" is a confluence of factors that drive perceptions, purchasing, and pathways.

Detroit, and cities in similar situations, are not served well by the "food desert" metaphor. As a cognitive concept *deserts* have taken over the psyche of the news media and residents alike. The metaphor of the "food desert" has won out as a buzzword over the complex activities behind the term. Those who have used the term while working on-the-ground have refocused their efforts on local food access issues to where "food desert" is just another cognitive hindrance in getting their work done. The local food advocates are on the narrative's frontlines to dispel the myths and push funders to reimagine Detroit as the place that it is: a place of people engaged in building food access.

"Food access" in Detroit isn't so much about survival as it is about equity. Detroit is not a *desert*, devoid of food, absent of any community assets. Detroit is a place of inequity and missing opportunity, populated by innovative and persistent residents. "Food access" is a critical need for all residents to live high-quality healthy lives, maintain well-paying jobs, and provide for their families. Food access is blocked by misleading controlling images like "food deserts."

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