GENTRIFICATION AND GROCERY STORES IN BOSTON'S CHINATOWN

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A Tale of Two Supermarkets:

Gentrification and Grocery Stores in Boston's Chinatown

In many communities, food is something that brings people together. Food is also strongly associated with culture and can be a dividing factor between different ethnic, racial, and class groups. In a rapidly changing urban landscape it is important to understand the importance that food stores carry as a signifier of cultural inclusion or exclusion. When new supermarket opens up who is welcome there? Whose cultural values align with the food that the store carries? Who has the budget to shop at this store? These are the types of questions that drew me to this project.

In this project I focus on two grocery stores in Boston's South End, an Asian supermarket called C-Mart that was established in 2008 and a recently opened Whole Foods Market a block away from the C-Mart. The area in which these stores are located is home to a majority Asian, low-income population, but there has been a lot of recent development lately including the opening of the Whole Foods and the arrival of several large, luxury apartment complexes. The goal of this project is to figure out the relationship is between these two stores and the surrounding community. Although focused on a specific location, this project relates to many broader issues of urban equality—specifically gentrification, displacement, and racial-residential segregation.

These issues are of paramount importance when considering the development of urban public space. Designating space for development by particular groups or corporations has the

potential to create an exclusionary environment and contribute to the already unequal distribution of resources; therefore, it is very important that the public be aware of these issues.

Literature Review

In order to understand the context that these stores exist in, it is important to understand how Chinatowns came about and the amount that racial segregation factors into the development of U.S. cities. As early as the formation of cities in the U.S., those cities were segregated by race. *The Philadelphia Negro*, written in the late 19th century by W.E.B. DuBois was perhaps one of the first studies of this phenomenon. In this book, DuBois examines Philadelphia's 7th ward, a highly isolated black area of the city, and presents evidence that the 7th ward was created due to the deliberate actions of whites, to keep black people out of their communities, and to prevent African Americans from becoming full citizens (1899, 386-387). The actions taken to do so came in a myriad of forms ranging from subtle exclusivity to outright intimidation (DuBois, 1899, 28, 348). Similar sentiments are expressed by Min Zhou in his study of the formation of Chinatowns: "As a direct response to the structural barriers—social and labor-market discrimination and other immigrant disadvantages—Chinese laborers were forced into Chinatowns" (1993, 220). A 1960 study conducted by D. Y. Yuan also cites that high levels of segregation were are at play in the creation of Chinatowns (265).

Unfortunately, racial-residential segregation is not a phenomenon limited to U.S. History. The work of Camille Zubrinsky-Charles, Douglass Massey, and Nancy Denton demonstrates that our country is not only segregated, but in many cases hyper-segregated (2001, 18; 1993, 74-77**).** The fact that many whites prefer to to live exclusively among whites leads to a concentration of both wealth and poverty and does not allow for equal access to resources, especially in

immigrant communities and communities of color. The unequal distribution of resources is an important factor in gentrification because as wealthier residents move into gentrifying neighborhoods, those neighborhoods typically gain access to services from which they were historically excluded (Freeman, 2006, 123). For example, better schools, cleaner streets, and improved police and medical services are among benefits of gentrification cited by residents (Freeman, 2006, 98-100). However, as gentrifying neighborhoods experience demographic changes as opposed to integration, the new resources that it brings may not be accessible or helpful to long time residents.

As many of the people moving into the apartment complexes above the Whole Foods are white, and I am attempting to determine their relationship to the surrounding community, it is important to understand the racial tendencies of white people and how they view their relationships with people of color. A good source for this is the book *Racism without Racists,* in which Duke University sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains the tendencies of whites choosing to live in and promote segregation, which he deems the "white habitus" (2003, 104). Bonilla-Silva conducted numerous surveys of both college age and adult whites, and his findings demonstrate that whites not only experience high levels of social and special isolation from blacks, but they fail to see how their culture shapes that segregation and how their segregation is a racial issue (2003, 104-112).

Even without explicit physical boundaries the manipulation of space creates implicit boundaries that are exclusive to certain groups. Frequently, gentrification is also accompanied by a shift in public and business spaces, as the gentrifying population gains power and prominence. Through the manipulation of public spaces into spaces that are exclusive to white upper middle

class culture, gentrifiers transform neighborhoods and long term residents lose access to those spaces. One example of this is a dog park created in a gentrifying neighborhood in Dover. This dog run, studied by Sylvie Tissot, became a "quasi-exclusionary" space no longer accessible to long time residents (2001, 265). Even without directly transforming spaces, gentrifiers can make them exclusionary by demanding changes on regulations of such spaces. For example, in a Harlem park, a group of men who had met to play the drums in the same place for years were told by the they could no longer play there due to complaints from new residents (White, 2015, 340). These changes in the land use of public spaces show how gentrification often leads to lost spatial resources for long time community members.

In addition to changing public spaces, gentrification also leads to, or is brought about by, changes in neighborhood businesses. Affordable grocery stores and ethnic shops are swapped for luxury and gourmet stores that often cater to white upper middle class values. When affordable stores close, low income residents lose access to healthy food. This was the case in Jamaica Plain in 2011, when a Whole Foods opened, forcing the closure of the affordable grocery store (Anguelovski, 2016, 184). A recent study by Isabelle Anguelovski used this Whole Foods as evidence her theory, which she coins as "greenlining," that high-end, "health" food stores are unwanted by the local population are a means for gentrifying forces to expand their claim over claim over an area (2016, 184). This is will be highly relevant to my study as a I attempt to determine what the role of the Whole Foods is in the surrounding South End and Chinatown communities.

Another important theoretical insight about gentrification is that is often often takes place close to areas of central business or that are easily accessible by public transportation where

professionals can easily commute to work (Lees, 2003, 2496). Boston's Chinatown is very centrally located with access to several subway lines, and a close proximity to Downtown, which makes it a prime location for gentrification.

Based on this literature, I expect to find that the area surrounding the Whole Foods and C-Mart will experience even more intense development in the coming years due to their close proximity to the central business district. As the environment begins to change and show outward signs of young white professional culture, more and more young professionals will be drawn to the area, as Anguelovski's "greenlining" theory speculates. Finally, due to the tendency of whites to prefer racially segregated environments, I expect that there will be little interaction between white gentrifiers and Asian residents, either in supermarkets or in public spaces, and that the Whole Foods and Ink Block apartments will form a color line between themselves and the surrounding community.

Methods and Data

The concepts I am exploring in this study include belongingness, accessibility, preferences, and exclusivity. As such, I employ a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data in order to find the relationship between the two supermarkets and the surrounding community. I am studying all my variables at an individual level, except for income, which comes census data taken at a household level.

On the quantitative end, I use demographic census data to determine the income and racial makeup of the area I am studying. One limitation of this data is that the most recent data available comes from 2014, which was before many of the luxury condos were built, so it is hard to determine how much the composition of the area has changed in the past 2 years. Another

variable I am using the race of shoppers in the two stores, which will give me a broad idea of who is shopping where. This method has several drawbacks: 1) because I cannot be sure of someone's racial identity from looking at them and 2) because race does not tell me where people live and if they are long time residents of the area or gentrifiers. Another quantitative method is to compare the median prices of the same products in the two stores.

On the qualitative side I am using ethnographic interviews and observations to find more information about where shoppers come from, what they prefer in terms of food shopping, and what spatial or social barriers exist or are forming between the luxury apartments and the long time residents. The interviews give useful insight about people's opinions, however they have the drawback of being subjective and dependent on who I can persuade to talk to me.

Findings

In order to situate my neighborhood of study, I first investigated its demographic and geographical characteristics. Based on the data that can be found in appendix B, in 2014 the population of the area surrounding the Whole Foods and C-Mart was majority Asian—74.9%. The median family income was $21,806 per year, much lower than Suffolk County's average of $61,687 year. As shown on the map in Appendix A, the area borders Chinatown and is separated from it by the I-90 freeway. It is also notable that the section of Chinatown north of the two supermarkets has experienced extreme gentrification and redevelopment in recent years, and rising rent prices and evictions have caused the Asian population to drop 18.46 % since 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau). This information makes the area surrounding the two supermarkets prime for gentrification.

The Whole Foods and Ink Block complex are located one block to the East of the C-Mart and are bordered to their east by U.S. Highway 1 and a section of the Massachusetts Bay. There are several subway lines within walking distance from the two supermarkets and they are also in close proximity to the Financial District and Central Boston. In the surrounding blocks –see map in Appendix A—there are several new construction developments, a public park, some Asian shops, a pawn shop, and a recently closed bread factory.

Development has started with the coming of the Whole Foods in January of 2015 and new Ink Block apartments which attract mainly young white professionals. However, the area is still majority Asian American. Regardless of the fact that the majority of people living in close proximity to the Whole Foods are not white, most of the customers who shop at the Whole Foods are white. I observed customers at the Whole Foods for several time periods during the weekend and the weekday and found that during the weekend, on average, shoppers were 77% white, and during the weekday shoppers were 82% white. Asian shoppers made up only 15% of shoppers during the weekend and 5% of shoppers during the week (see Appendix C). For context, Suffolk County is only 56% white (ACS, 2014). However, interviews with store employees informed me that they were under the impression that most shoppers were local to the area.

"Most of them are from around here, especially during the week," one store manager informed me. He elaborated that by "around here" he meant the South End and the new apartments behind and on top of the supermarket, not Chinatown or the rest of the area surrounding the market even though they are also in close proximity. Therefore, if anyone who lives in the area is utilizing the Whole Foods, it is primarily white gentrifiers moving into the new apartments and not the residing Asian, low-income community. This was confirmed in an

interview with a representative from the Asian Community Development Corporation, a group that works to provide affordable housing to Asian Americans in Chinatown and the greater Boston Area: "I don't think that the Whole Foods is for them," she told me, speaking of the Asian population who lives in close proximity to it.

There are a variety of reasons why the Whole Foods might be quasi-exclusive to white shoppers. The primary reason is price. I compared the median prices of similar products for sale at the Whole Foods and the C-Mart (see Appendix D) and found that on average, Whole Foods' version of the same products are 170% more expensive than C-Mart's (Appendix D).Since the white people moving into this area are not low-income but young, professionals seeking close proximity to the city center, class exclusion is certainly at play. If the whites living here were less affluent, it would be more questionable why the Whole Foods is frequented by a majority white clientele.

This "Probiotic Raw Organic" Kombucha Bar at the Whole Foods Market is representative of gentrifiers tastes

However, there are other factors besides price that could be influencing shoppers' preferences. The Whole Foods' offerings cater to its clientele with a large variety of organic foods and foods culturally associated with upper middle class whites, such as a cold-pressed juice, frozen yogurt, and kombucha. The presence of these foods can be alienating or simply unappealing to those who are not accustomed to it.

Observations of the C-Mart yielded similarly segregated results, however the vast majority of shoppers were Asian rather than white. During the weekend, I observed 94% Asian customers and one weekday I was the only shopper in the store who was not Asian. A manager told me that during the week most of the shoppers came from Chinatown, and during the weekends more came from the suburbs of Quincy and Malden, some travelling up to an hour away to do their weekly shopping at C-Mart.

The C-Mart offers a wide variety of produce, meat, poultry, packaged, and prepared foods all at a relatively low cost (see Appendix D). Many of its goods are imported from Asia, and the manager confirmed to me that many of the customers preferred C-Mart to other supermarkets because they could get things there that they couldn't get at other supermarkets, like imported Asian goods.

Another interesting finding is the the residents' perception of space. A manager at the C-Mart told me that it is in Chinatown while a manager at Whole Foods, told me it is in the South End. However, the two stores are only a block apart and there is no noticeable border between the two. The woman I interviewed at ACDC elaborated that most of the established, Asian residents who have been in the area for a while consider it to be part of Chinatown, but new residents moving into the apartment complexes are calling it the South End.

Discussion

Based on my findings, it can be determined that the Whole Foods is not largely used by many of the long time residents of the area, but rather the gentrifiers moving into the new apartments. This goes along with Anguelovski's theory that the introduction of high end supermarkets into low-income neighborhoods creates a "locally unwanted land use" (2016, 184). The Whole Foods also fits into Sylvie Tissot's theory that areas which serve only gentrifiers' cultural interests serve as quasi exclusionary spaces to other community members (2001, 265). This is problematic as it excludes community members from access to parts of the area in which they live. And, as development and gentrification increase it is likely that new businesses will cater more to the gentrifying population and the wants of long time residents will not be met.

Asian supermarkets like C-mart are favored by long time residents for several reasons—they are more affordable and offer many products that are not available in other supermarkets. The fact that some patrons of C-mart travel for an hour or more to shop there shows that these customers either have a very strong allegiance to C-Mart or prefer Asian grocery stores because they stock the foods that they want at an affordable price.

Although low income community members are most likely barred from shopping at Whole Foods due to its hefty price tags, there is no financial reason for gentrifiers to not shop at the nearby C-Mart. In fact, if gentrifiers wanted to shop at an affordable grocery store that wasn't Asian, they would have to travel more than a mile. Therefore, the very small number of white customers in the store can only be attributed to the gentrifiers preferences for certain products and environments. Due to the culture of segregation, whites often intentionally distance

themselves from people of color even if they are in close proximity (Bonilla Silva, 2003, 109). Although it may seem negligible, the social segregation represented by the shopping preferences of white gentrifiers is highly problematic because it contributes to a culture of segregation that leads to an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities.

The C-Mart storefront at 50 Herald Street

It is also important to consider the effect that what a neighborhood is called can have on what it becomes. The fact that long time residents consider the area to be in Chinatown and gentrifiers refer to it as the South End shows not only a lack of cohesion between the two groups, but has dangerous potential to for making this part of Chinatown disappear. The name of a

neighborhood comes from what people call it, and if more and more gentrifiers are moving into this area and calling it "the South End," it will become part of the South End and will no longer be Chinatown. The fact that large businesses like Whole Foods are calling themselves "Whole Foods at the South End" contributes largely to what people will think of the area and what it will become. Calling this part of Chinatown "the South End" rather than what long time residents refer to it as is akin to an act of colonization and is a means for white gentrifying forces to take control of a community that has been historically underserved.

The racial segregation represented by these two supermarkets highlights the segregation and inequality that are prevalent in Boston. As new residents of the area are patronizing quasi-exclusionary establishments such as Whole Foods rather than supporting local businesses like C-Mart, they show their preference for segregation—which leads to unequal development and unequal access. It is likely that any benefits that come with the redevelopment of this area primarily benefit white gentrifiers and, as the area becomes more developed, rents will rise and many of the long time residents and businesses will probably be forced to leave.

Conclusion

Although it may be specific to a particular situation, this study is demonstrative of many of the key issues that urban sociologists are concerned with at a broader scale. Race and class inequality as well as spatial manipulation and segregation are all at play in these two supermarkets and the surrounding area. As a quasi-exclusionary space, the Whole Foods Market in Chinatown constructs a color line between its majority white customers and the long time Asian residents of the area. The fact that white gentrifiers do not frequently nearby Asian stores such as C-Mart serves as a further evidence of this color line.

This unequal development of space has the potential to amplify with the further development of the area. North of the Whole Foods, and to the East of Chinatown is Parcel 25, a piece of land currently under the domain of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation but which will soon be sold—probably to private investors. If sold to private interests, Parcel 25 will almost certainly be developed into exclusionary spaces like luxury apartments and businesses because investors will seek the highest capital return. This use of land is unfavored by long time residents and would likely cause their rents to rise further, displacing many low income community members.

Displacement from Chinatown is especially concerning because, although segregated and underserved, it offers a uniquely supportive community with many opportunities to new immigrants who may not speak English or have a thorough understanding of American culture and economics (Zhou, 1992, 233).

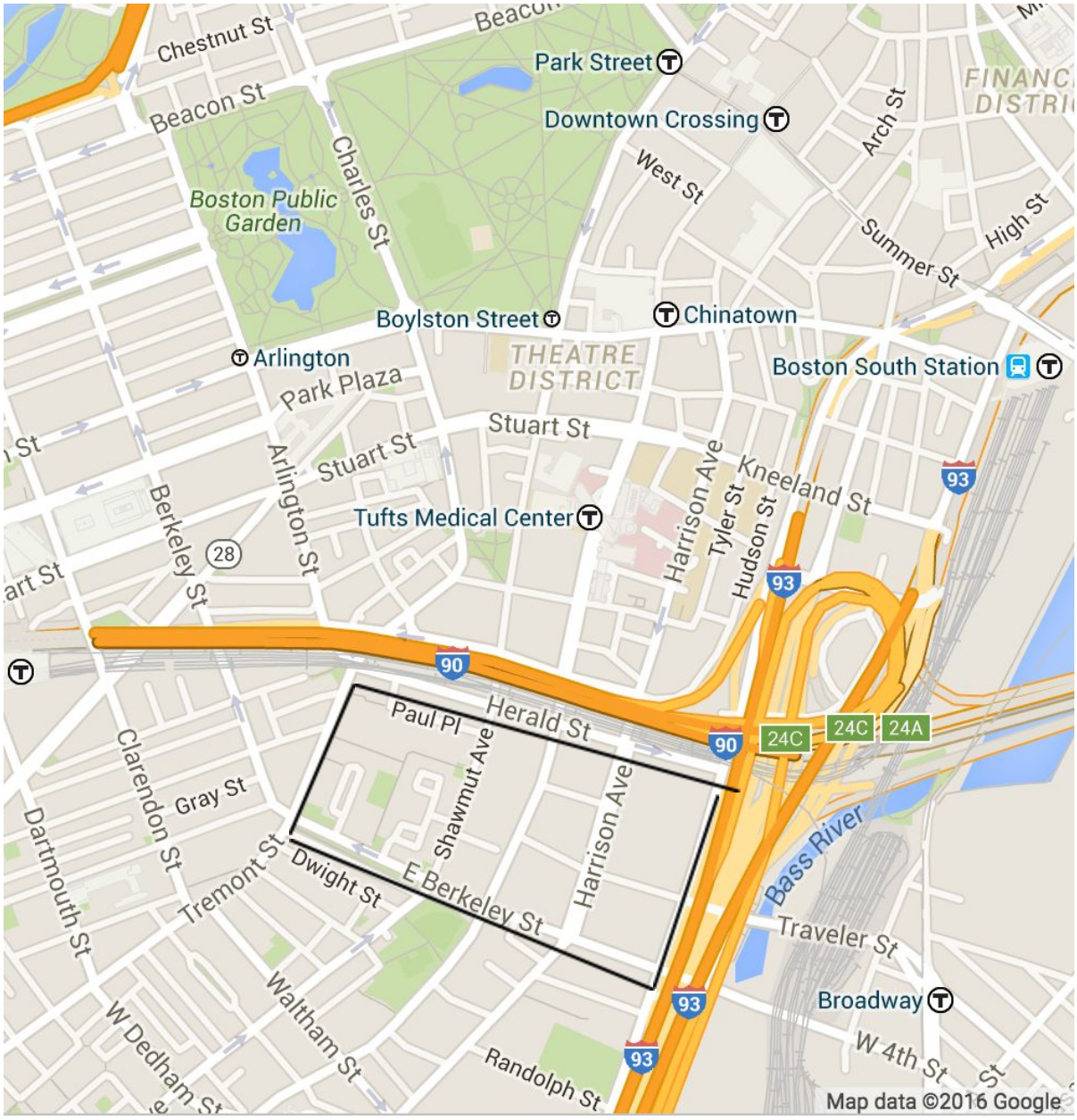
One hopeful fact about the situation is that Chinatown, unlike other low-income areas, is not a food desert. There are many affordable grocery stores and eateries, and although some have been forced to close due to rising rent prices, many of these establishments remain open despite recent development because they are frequently not in direct competition with new businesses. Such is the case with the Whole Foods and C-Mart I have researched, as I have determined that they cater to different audiences. However, despite a lack of direct competition, rising rents are still a concern for native businesses as the surrounding land becomes more developed and expensive.

In the future I would like for this project to more broadly encompass the area by getting more information from both the long time residents of the area and the gentrifiers. As an

outsider, I didn't have the opportunity to speak to many residents about their feelings towards the two grocery stores and the development of the area, which would be very useful information in this research.

From this project I learned how to see clearly something that I have been seeing my whole life but never really observed closely—gentrification and the unequal development of cities. Academically, I learned theories that can be applied to urban development and segregation, and the techniques of conducting a sociological study and doing demographic and ethnographic research. Personally, I learned much more. Doing this project has forced me to think very critically about my role urban inequality. As a middle class white person, I contribute directly to gentrification when I support certain business or if I chose to live in certain areas after I graduate. This project has taught me the importance of thinking critically about urban space and the inequality that might arise from the actions that I take part in.

Appendix A



NC = new construction = business strip

W = Whole Foods **X** = recently closed bakery

C = C-mart

Appendix B

Statistics	Census Tract 704.02, Suffolk County, Massachusetts		Suffolk County, Massachusetts	
Race				
Total Population:	1,656		747,928	
White Alone	173	10.5%	416,449	55.7%
Asian Alone	1,240	74.9%	63,043	8.4%
Median Family Income (In 2014 Inflation Adjusted Dollars)				
Median Family Income (In 2014 Inflation adjusted dollars)	$21,806		$61,687	
Poverty Status In 2014 (Asian Alone)				
Asian Alone Population for whom poverty status is determined:	1,185		57,761	
Income in 2013 below poverty level	598	50.5%	16,757	29.0%
Income in 2013 at or above poverty level	587	49.5%	41,004	71.0%

Race, Median Family Income, and Poverty Status in the Surrounding Area (Census Tract 704.02) Source: (ACS, 2014) Prepared by Social Explorer.

Appendix C

Racial Identities of Shoppers at Whole Foods and C-Mart (as perceived by the author)

	Percent White	**Percent Asian**	**Percent Black**	**Percent Other or Unknown**
Whole Foods – Weekend Average	77.06	15.59	3.67	3.67
C-Mart – Weekend Average	3.36	94.12	2.52	0.00
Whole Foods- Weekday Average	82.50	5.00	5.00	7.50
C-mart -Weekday Average	0.00	97.27	0.00	2.73

Appendix D

Median Prices at Whole Foods and C-Mart (in U.S. dollars)

	Chicken (per Pound)	**Flour** (per Pound)	**Rice** (per Pound)	**Eggs (**per dozen)	**Avocado**	**Bell Pepper (**per Pound)
Median Price at Whole Foods	4.99	1.00	3.99	4.79	1.25	4.99
Median Price at C-Mart	2.79	0.90	1.06	1.30	1.50	0.99

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