

Foodscales and the geographies of poverty: sustenance, strategy, and politics in an urban neighbourhood

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Abstract

This paper argues that food should be a more central focus of critical geographical research into urban poverty and that the concept of ‘foodscape’ can contribute to this literature. We utilize the concept in a study of the daily practices of accessing food among low-income residents of the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood of Vancouver, BC. We highlight how food access for the urban poor involves a complex and contradictory negotiation of both sites of encounter and care and also exclusion and regulation. Focusing on foodscales emphasizes the social, relational, and political construction of food and thus highlights not simply food provision but also questions of existing power structures and potentialities for future change. Therefore, we discuss efforts to question the existing food system in Vancouver, to resist the gentrification processes that threaten the Downtown Eastside’s food resources, and to build alternative strategies for urban food justice.

Introduction

The geography of food provision and consumption for very low-income and marginalized people in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood is full of contradictions and juxtapositions. In the space of a few blocks there are dozens of free and low-cost food providers, including soup kitchens, subsidized cafeterias, and drop-in centers (Li 2010).¹ On the streets, people stand in block-long line-ups for hot meals. Church groups hand out sandwiches in the parks. Social service agencies provide food to encourage participation in their programs. Corner stores advertise ice cream, soda, and 99 cent pizza while grocers in nearby Chinatown sell inexpensive produce. Food is sold or bartered on sidewalks along with used clothes, bicycle parts, and myriad other wares. Community gardens and urban farms have sprung up in previously empty lots, providing an opportunity for residents to grow their own food. Inside some of the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels where many residents live, social service organizations run community kitchens to compensate for SROs' lack of facilities and space for storing or preparing food.

Despite being a low-income neighborhood, food is everywhere on the Downtown Eastside, there are soup kitchens, community gardens, corner-stores and trendy cafes. Yet, many of its low-income residents are food insecure, meaning that they experience difficulty in accessing enough nutritious food through safe and predictable channels. Indeed, for low-income people on the Downtown Eastside, finding adequate shelter, health care, and food is often a daily struggle. The neighborhood is commonly known for homelessness, marginal housing, addiction, and mental and physical health challenges, including HIV/AIDS. Yet, as Masuda and Crabtree (2010:661) point out, residents have "a paradoxical relationship" with the neighborhood. Despite the daily challenges of living there, it "is a place that encourages healing through acceptance, solidarity, and community" (Ibid).

Of course, food is central to survival for all low-income urban residents. Yet, the extensive literature on urban poverty, service provision, and everyday survival strategies in cities of the global North has tended to decenter food as a focus of analysis. While much of the literature acknowledges the importance of food access and provision in the lives of the urban poor, it tends to refer to food as one element within broader discussions of street-level survival (e.g., Cloke et al. 2008, Wilson and Keil 2008). On the other hand, at the present conjuncture in global North cities, food is squarely on the agenda of municipal attempts to reduce greenhouse

gas emissions by replacing imported goods with local food from urban agriculture and farmers markets while food consumption itself is a fashionable cultural marker of class distinction and the basis for a restaurant industry that has long encouraged and benefited from advancing gentrification frontiers. Therefore, this is a politically and intellectually crucial time at which to focus on questions of food and the politics of daily survival in cities. Our purpose is to address the decentering of this fundamental human need in discussions of urban survival by positioning food as a central lens and focus for analyzing the everyday experience of urban poverty and for generating critical examples, ideas, arguments, and questions about how to better organize urban food systems and empower those whose daily survival depends on them.

In the next section, we elaborate on how the use of foodscales can enhance analyses of food access in low-income communities. We go beyond a recounting of where and when food is available and begin to unpack the contradictory nature of the foodscape. We discuss the experiences of residents as they use charitable meal providers (both spaces of regulation and care), as well as locations outside of the charitable system including restaurants, corner stores and bins. We then turn our attention to the politics and possibilities that exist as part of the foodscape. Here, we explore issues of gentrification and food activism, both of which have the potential to alter not only how food is accessed but its meaning within the Downtown Eastside.

Critical geographies of foodscales and survival

Geographers have had a long, if uneven, engagement with questions of poverty. DeVerteuil's (forthcoming) review, for example, notes a surge of interest in poverty in the 1970s, followed by a nadir in the 1990s when the term was not included in the field's leading dictionary. Nonetheless, geographers have contributed grounded analyses of the conditions and experience of poverty. Work on homelessness has long been a key contribution in this regard (e.g., Dear and Wolch, 1987; Rowe and Wolch, 1990; Wolch and Dear, 1993), as has research into the practices and institutional sites of social service provision (e.g., DeVerteuil and Wilton, 2009; Lawson and Elwood, 2013), while there are ongoing debates over the concepts used to frame analyses of poverty (DeVerteuil, 2013; Lawson, 2012; Lawson and Elwood, 2013). Yet, as Milbourne (2004) and DeVerteuil (forthcoming) emphasize, there is a continued need for research into the local geographies and everyday experiences of poverty.

Recent discussions of poor people's geographies of survival – socially produced arrangements of public and private spaces and social services that define how, and even if, people can live in a particular place (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009; McLean 2012) – offer potential to deepen our analyses of the lived realities of low-income people's lives. These discussions have, as yet, tended to focus mostly on the institutional, legal, and activist practices that define modes and spaces of survival. Scope remains for elaborating both conceptually and empirically on the experiences and practices of low-income people as they seek out food every day and on the connections that exist between those daily strategies and attempts to develop a politics of food justice in cities.

If we are to position food at the centre of a critical analysis of urban poverty, it is worthwhile to utilize and further develop an established approach or concept in our analysis. One possibility is research into 'food deserts,' typically defined as a low-income area that lacks grocery stores or other retail food, often the result of income or racial inequalities (Walker et al. 2010, for examples of this approach, see Kelly et al. 2011). Largely based on quantitative techniques and GIS, this literature has developed a rigorous and detailed approach to the analysis of food in cities (McKinnon et al. 2009). Yet, its strengths in identifying neighborhoods that lack grocery stores etc. and highlighting economic and racial inequalities in food access are undermined by its tendency to produce static and fragmentary accountings of numbers of food sources without conceptualizing the ever-changing, social, relational, and political nature of landscapes of urban food consumption and provision.

For critical geographers, an alternative to this quantitative, supply-side approach is 'foodways,' "the cultural and social practices that affect food consumption, including how and what communities eat, where and how they shop and what motivates their food preferences" (Alkon et al. 2013:127, see also Cannuscio et al. 2010). The sociality of the foodways approach is paralleled by the second, complementary concept of 'foodscape,' which explicitly emphasizes the spatiality of food systems. While food deserts and foodways have become well-defined, the use of 'foodscape' has been more diffuse; referring in its different uses to food production, retailing, and consumption and to a range of scales, from global to local (Mikkelsen, 2011, Cummins and Macintyre 2002). Geographers have deployed the concept to explore "the ecological sites and social relations of food production, consumption, and distribution" in the corporate organic foodscape (Johnston et al. 2009, p. 513) and to explore foodscales within

which food has moral and ethical meaning (Goodman et al. 2010). Both of these approaches point to the political potential of foodscales in elucidating the “processes, politics, spaces, and places of the praxis ... embedded and produced in and through the provisioning of food.” (Goodman et al. 2010:1783). Despite these interventions, it can be argued that foodscape remains a “chaotic conception” (Sayer, 1992) – one that may evoke a general sense of a phenomenon but is too all-encompassing to be of great analytical value.

Nevertheless, we argue that this weakness can and should be overcome because the concept offers a language for thinking through food-place relations in terms of geographies and politics of urban poverty and survival. The concept can be sharpened by taking seriously the situated and relational connotations of Appadurai’s (1996, 33) use of ‘-scales,’ “which are not objectively given relations ... [but] deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors.” Thus, the foodscape concept both requires and rewards being *situated* in a particular place and focused on the relationships that a particular community has with food. Its conceptual value can also be enhanced by focusing on the mutually constitutive relationships among various aspects of a food system, rather than on its separate, quantifiable, or mappable attributes (e.g., existence and number of food outlets). Deploying foodscape in this situated, relational way necessitates a qualitative approach that elicits interviewees’ personal narratives to explain the complex, enacted, changing, and political food landscape of a particular urban neighbourhood and its residents. We deploy foodscape in this way to focus on the intersections of food, survival, and politics – specifically the social, material, institutional, and classed contexts in which low-income people access and interact around food in cities.

It is in this context that food can be positioned centrally in the study of geographies of poverty and survival (Mitchell and Heynen 2009; see also Heynen, 2010; McLean 2012). This is not to say that we should privilege food as the only lens through which to understand survival but to argue that, when approached in terms of social construction, relationality, and spatiality through the notion of a foodscape, the study of food elucidates the everyday agency and political potentialities of very low-income urban residents. As Mitchell and Heynen (2009: 613, emphasis added) put it,

people in poverty continue to *activate their own geographies of survival*, to construct pathways of survival through the urban landscape that link together places to sleep or rest

(ranging from relatives' couches to their own apartments to a relatively dry place under a bridge), locations to eat a meal or forage food, hidden corners of security and safety (soup kitchens, pantries, stores friendly to food stamp recipients, restaurant dumpsters), and even sometimes such relatively permanent fixtures as homeless encampments or shanty towns.

This is a very different urban foodscape than the one featured in the glossy advertising of gentrifying condo developments or in municipal sustainability discourse. In many cities, including Vancouver, urban food policies promote some forms of food production and distribution, such as community gardens, fruit tree projects and other 'green' initiatives; yet often ignore food insecurity (Mendes 2007). The power of these hegemonic discourses leads to a regard food itself as having been irreparably gentrified and subsumed under neoliberal rhetorics in contemporary global North cities. This discourse is not complete, however, and it should not dissuade us from critically analyzing the experience of poverty and survival in low-income urban foodscales and identifying the alternative politics of food being generated in places like the Downtown Eastside. After an outline of our research methods, we will discuss the contexts, strategies, and politics of food access in the changing geography of that neighbourhood.

Researching foodscales

As Alkon et al (2013, p. 128) note in their critique of supply-side food desert approaches to understanding food insecurity, in order to "understand the complicated sets of variables that go into food choice, and the varied food landscapes that low-income residents navigate, a qualitative analysis is required." Here, we draw upon a series of in-depth interviews with 47 low-income residents of the Downtown Eastside.² Interviews were focused on how, when and where residents accessed food within the neighborhood (e.g., charitable food providers, stores, restaurants), any difficulties they had with finding food and moreover, how they felt about these sites. The interviews were arranged through a low-barrier social service agency located in the neighbourhood that also helped in recruiting residents and provided a secure and confidential space for conducting the interviews. With their permission, the interviews were recorded and if permission was not granted, detailed notes were taken.

Recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically in order to draw out common (and at times divergent) experiences with the Downtown Eastside foodscape (Aronson

1994). Analysis entailed reading of all transcribed data, developing salient codes and applying these codes to sections of the interview texts. The coded data were then organized into themes, which were derived from similarly coded sections of text (Aronson 1994). These dominant themes centered on the daily strategies used by residents to obtain food, why certain places were chosen over others, and what they liked and did not like about the foodscape. Using the residents' own descriptions of their experiences and strategies, we highlight their daily experiences that they identify as most salient to their ability to eat enough nutritious food on the Downtown Eastside. The names and some of the identifying information have been changed to protect the residents' identities.

The majority of those interviewed were Caucasian (51%) and male (66%), while 34% were Aboriginal, 9% of African descent and 6% Latino. The average age of the residents at the time of the interviews was 42. The majority (98%) reported a history of drug use although not all were current drug users and several reported being in or having completed drug rehabilitation. In addition, 72% said that they had some sort of physical or mental illness or disability. The most common of these were Hepatitis C, HIV/AIDS, and mental illness. Among those residents who were interviewed, 26% were living in a private SRO, 23% were in supportive housing, 21% were in non-market housing run by a non-profit organization (often a converted SRO room) and 6% were living in a social housing apartment. Nearly all residents were receiving social assistance in the form of income assistance (\$235/month for a single adults), disability assistance (\$531/month), or support for persons with persistent multiple barriers (\$282.92/month). Individuals receiving these forms of support are also provided with \$375/month for housing. According to one survey, however, only 5% of SRO units in the Downtown Eastside rent at this rate or less (Swanson and Drury 2012) which forces residents to use money that might have otherwise gone to food for housing. Only two residents reported wage labour as their primary source of income although others engaged in informal economic work such as collecting bottle and cans, volunteering for a stipend or working odd jobs. Taken as a whole, physical and mental illness, drug use, homelessness and poor quality housing in addition to marginal incomes suggests that these residents have a number of barriers to food access yet are also those most in need of nutritious food.

The interviews have been supplemented by ongoing participant observation in the neighborhood, consisting of working closely with several non-profit organizations around food

issues, attendance at food and social service-related meetings and public forums, organizing and being involved in working and research groups, and participating in site visits and tours to Downtown Eastside social service, housing and health agencies. This observational method allows an understanding of food insecurity from multiple perspectives, including those of the food providers themselves.

The practices and politics of a low-income urban foodscape

The Downtown Eastside has long been an important social space in Vancouver. It was originally a “space of male labour,” comprised of transient or former workers in the BC resource industries (Ley and Dobson 2008: 2483). SRO hotels, providing basic housing and charitable services, emerged to care for the needs of this population (Sommers 1989; Linden et al. 2012). In the 1980s, other groups, such as low-income Aboriginal people, the deinstitutionalized mentally ill, and the homeless also began to use the neighborhood as it provided much needed resources, including food and shelter (Smith 2003). The Downtown Eastside is also a space where illegal drugs are easily accessed, which has given rise to high rates of health and social problems including Hepatitis C, HIV/AIDS, overdose, and street crime (Linden et al. 2012). Partly through these circumstances and partly by design, the Downtown Eastside has developed a significant concentration of government and non-profit social services in a relatively small area. Indeed, over 35% of social service offices in the city are located there, as well as a high percentage of social and subsidized housing (Ley and Dobson 2008; Smith 2003).

For the low-income residents interviewed, their daily paths through the streets are both enabled and constrained by the structure of that urban space and their experience of the various ways in which food is made available there. They are most commonly involved in negotiations with the charitable food sector but they often find ways to circumvent that system, with its various restrictions, regulations and stigmas, through alternative food procurement strategies. Most combine food obtained from charitable meal programs with that purchased from stores or restaurants, prepared in community kitchens, or traded with friends or family. While this experience, which we detail below, is specific to those interviewed and would likely differ somewhat for other individuals and groups, we argue that it generally resonates with the experience of the low-income community on the Downtown Eastside and with those in other urban settings who face similar social and economic conditions.

In the interviews, residents asserted that getting something to eat on the Downtown Eastside was relatively easy or, as Marina, a white woman in her 40s said, “You can’t starve here on Hastings,” the major neighbourhood street, and that, in comparison to many other places in British Columbia, there is a relative abundance of locations to eat. This suggests that the Downtown Eastside may not be a food desert, as commonly defined in much of the literature, but it nevertheless raises a question about whether residents of this low-income neighbourhood are food insecure in a place where food programs abound. Food insecurity, “the inability to obtain sufficient, nutritious, personally acceptable food through normal food channels or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Davis and Tarasuk 1994:50) is about more than about food deserts, or about hunger in any straightforward sense. Rather, it is about the experience and political economy of food insecurity, including the spatial, social, cultural, political and the emotional aspects of food. One way of understanding the complexity of food insecurity is to examine the forces that shape a foodscape, how that space is enacted by those who inhabit it as well as the contradictions that arise from a complex food landscape that is embedded within the political economy of food provision.

Since food is a daily necessity, accessing it is central to daily geographies of survival for low-income residents of the Downtown Eastside. When asked where he goes to eat, Willis used the term “Hasting Shuffle” to describe how he moves from one meal program to another through the day:

I start the morning at eight thirty at United Church. They serve you vegetables and soup. And then somehow I end up here [a drop-in centre] at ten o’clock and eat here. Then I go next door to the Look Out [drop-in centre]; then I go to the United Church or Union Gospel [Mission]. It’s the Hastings shuffle. [Aboriginal man, 40s]

As Cloke et al. (2008: 252) note in their study of homeless people in Bristol, England, soup lines and free meals, “act both as significant nodes in the daily journeys of homeless people in the city and as strong regulatory influences on such movements ...”. Thus, the “Hastings shuffle” and the Bristol “food route” are both examples of the daily rounds that the homeless and marginally housed make to access food and other services. The specific character of these rounds depends upon the economic and housing circumstances of those involved, as well as their past experiences negotiating the rules and expectations of charitable food providers, their

understanding of the opportunity structures in which they operate, their social networks, gender identities, and health status, among other factors.

In the following sections we explore three components of a foodscape that, in combination, are produced by and shape low-income people's everyday geographies of survival: food availability and food programs' regulations; residents' constrained agency and choice; and the a range of responses to the political-economic constraints and growing pressures on the existing foodscape caused by a lack of state funding and increasing gentrification.

"Beggars can't be choosers": Negotiating rules, regulations and line-ups

There is no government entitlement program specifically for food in Canada, unlike the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the US, for example. Therefore, charitable food providers are a crucial, yet *ad hoc* and largely unregulated, part of the foodscape in low-income Canadian neighbourhoods (Riches 2002, Tarasuk and Eakin 2005, Tarasuk and Dachner 2009, Dachner et al. 2009). In their critique of charitable food distribution in Canada, Wakefield et al (2013) note that the sector "can be seen as a fundamental component of the shadow state"; substituting "publicly provided services with private or non-profit initiatives as part of ongoing attempts to 'roll back' the state and retreat from the provision of social services in neoliberalism" (see also Warshawsky [2010] for similar trends in the US). As in other cities in Canada, this lack of state support leaves Vancouver's charitable programs constrained by limited funds, reliant on donations from private companies (e.g., grocery stores needing to rid themselves of expiring or overstocked goods) or time-limited contracts and grants.

Within the micro-sites of the food programs themselves, governance of the poor is enacted through rules, regulations, and line-ups. Residents told stories of being banned from certain food providers because they were using drugs or acting intoxicated and others complained about having to attend religious services in order to receive a meal. In other instances, individuals did not fit into the client categories – age, gender, disability or ethnicity – defined by the food provider, which created divisions and exclusions within the wider community. In one instance, Suzi, an Aboriginal transgender woman and sex-worker, recounted how she was unable to access food at a program for female sex workers because she did not always appear "female".

When you go [to a woman-only food program] now, you have to be dressed to the hilt. Trannies have to have high heels on and be dressed as a woman. You can't just go there like I am right now. I am transgender. I am on hormones but I can't go there just like this. I have to have boobs in, hair-up, make-up on.

Thus, while this particular program welcomes some of the most marginalized and stigmatized people on the Downtown Eastside, it also excludes others who do not appear to fit into its definitions (see also Miewald et al. 2010).

Although it is free or low-cost and relatively abundant on the neighbourhood, obtaining food takes a good deal of time, energy and knowledge. One must know where to go and when, within a complex and constantly changing landscape of providers and other resources. Programs open and close, hours change, and providers stop serving early because they run out of food. Frank described the difficulties of accessing food on a holiday when many of the food programs are closed.

Yesterday it was difficult for being a holiday long weekend. Four places that hand out food were shut down because of the holiday. It was hard to get some decent food because that means all the other food line-ups are doubled up and they run out. I was in a line-up to get something to eat and I just got up to the window and [they told me] "we're out". I wound up going to [another food provider], which I don't like. [White male, 40s]

Line-ups for food, some of which stretch for a block or more, create anxiety and sometimes conflict, situation that is highlighted in Jimmy's, description of line-ups, "You spend so much time in line, it's awful...there are fights in the line, it's horrible" [White male, mid-30s]. Those with physical limitations or addictions may not have the ability to wait and therefore are excluded from these spaces. While line-ups are used pragmatically by providers to regulate the flow of program participants through dining rooms, for some they are also the most visible and stigmatizing manifestation of the rules and regulations around charitable food.

Those who use the charitable system have little say in when, what, or with whom they eat and are expected not to complain about, or reject, the food provided (Tarsuk and Eakin 2003). While residents noted that the quality of charitable food is often limited and lacking in variety they also commented that it "fills you up" and while "not really the healthiest diet...it's better than no diet", they acknowledged that most food providers were constrained in their ability to provide healthier food. For example, Paul said that while he "could do without sandwiches for a

while” he also understood that charitable organizations are often struggling financially. He went on, “So you can’t complain. Beggars can’t be choosers.” [Aboriginal man, 40s]

“The staff has class. They don’t kick you around”: Negotiating the paradoxical spaces of charitable food

While the neighbourhood foodscape is partly the product of the funding, inventories, missions, rules, regulations, and schedules of a range of charitable food providers it is also produced by how food insecure residents negotiate it, within social and economic constraints. While in some respects, Paul’s assertion that “beggars can’t be choosers” reflects an acceptance of the regulations and limitations of the charitable system, interviews also revealed many examples of residents making decisions about where to eat based on criteria that go beyond simply accessing a free meal. Therefore, here, we focus on the strategic ways in which residents utilize neighborhood food resources. In addition, we point out that these spaces themselves can act in contradictory ways, depending on who is using them, which complicates attempts to define them, and the charitable food sector in general, as either wholly positive or wholly negative.

While the charitable food sector has been critiqued for providing inadequate nutrition and failing to address the structural causes of food insecurity (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2012), it also provides spaces of care, sustenance and survival (DeVerteuil and Wilton 2009; DeVerteuil 2012a) for low-income residents that serve as “zones of encounter” between individuals of differing class backgrounds. As such they provide opportunities for governance of the poor as well as increased understanding across class lines (Lawson and Elwood, 2013). While some programs are limited to providing meals and enforcing sobriety among participants, for example, others operate with few barriers to participation and some offer spaces where residents can access showers and phones, take yoga or art classes, cook together in community kitchens and interact with both staff and neighbors (Cloke et al. 2008, Masuda and Crabtree 2010). Where residents chose to eat was often a reflection of where they felt they received care in the form of good food and sociability, where they felt safe, and where they were treated well by staff. Perhaps most important for residents was the feeling that they were treated with respect or as Andre, an older Aboriginal man, explained when asked why he was a regular participant at one low-barrier drop-in centre, “The staff has class. They don’t kick you around. They show that they have respect for you.” One way of showing respect is by creating meal programs that do

not require line-ups, provide some measure of choice in what is served, and include healthy, high-quality food. However, this is a tall order for most charitable food providers who operate on tight budgets, rely on unpredictable flows of donations, and have little access to stable state funding.

Furthermore, the regulations that exclude some people like Suzi from certain spaces also create a sense of safety for others. Programs that only serve women, Aboriginal people, or sex-workers create safe spaces for these groups, often by excluding others who do not fit certain categories. For example, many women said that they favored women-only food programs, which they identified as safer and providing better quality food. For example, when asked why she chose to largely eat at a women-only program, Kate responded,

Well first of all it's a women's center and I don't have to worry about guys bugging me and it's a safe place to eat. They have a lot of other services there and it's just a nice place to go. [White woman, 30s]

Having a “nice place to go” instead of standing in an often-rainy sidewalk line-up provided a greater sense of safety and caring for Kate and other women. Additionally, Aboriginal agencies work to incorporate culturally appropriate components to their food provisioning, including gardening and traditional food preparation. These organizations are attempting to address the specific needs of the people they serve in an attempt to improve health and well-being. This notion of food programs as forms of caring was also expressed by some food providers who saw their role as both enhancing nutrition and creating safe spaces for their participants. In this respect, social service providers created spaces of care and sustenance (DeVerteuil and Wilton 2009) where both the material for survival are provided and acts of caring are performed that create networks and relationships between residents and staff.

Diners, dumpsters and corner stores: Strategies beyond the charitable sector

While the focus of most geographical research on urban poverty and survival has been on sites where social services are provided, an examination of the foodscape sheds light on places beyond these institutions. The inexpensive diners, pizza stands and corner stores that dot the Downtown Eastside serve as alternatives to the charitable food sector because they are less restrictive, allowing for greater control over when and what to eat (see also Gaetz et al. 2006). These places are often overlooked when it comes to understanding the social dynamics of low-

income foodscape (but see Bedore 2010, Alkon et al. 2013), or are viewed as sources of poor nutrition and therefore in need of intervention to increase the amount of healthy foods they sell (O'Malley et al. 2013). However, residents of the Downtown Eastside are able to buy ice cream, chips and candy for a few dollars at corner stores and inexpensive cafes and Chinese take-outs are known to provide large portions at cheap prices. James explained that although he had limited financial resources, he did occasionally “splurge” on a restaurant meal as a special treat.

There's Flowers [Café]...it's just one of the inexpensive restaurants. If you live down here, you don't have a whole lot of money to spend on restaurants and stuff like that so I use that one and then there's a Chinese place over in Chinatown. You get a fair amount of food there for four dollars. [Aboriginal man, 40s]

Although restaurant meals could be a financial drain on limited resources, some preferred to eat there rather than standing in line-ups that could be dangerous, stigmatizing, and time-consuming. Chuck explained that for those engaged in drug dealing or sex-work, restaurants are preferable to charitable providers as they afford some level of privacy and safety.

A lot of the working girls eat restaurant food. They get their payoffs on a daily basis and they don't have the time or the patience [to stand in line]. A lot of the working girls, they have issues with standing in line where everyone can look at them and judge them.

[White man, 30s]

Yet, while restaurants and corner stores and offer respite from charitable meals, they too can be sites of regulation. One must have the financial resources to purchase food and, increasingly, these locations are policed by private security who eject those who do not appear to be “paying customers”. Therefore, some residents relied on an underground economy to access food, often buying or trading for it on the street, thereby avoiding the regulations of both the charitable and private sectors.

For those without the economic resources to buy food, retail outlets also provide a source of discarded or ‘dumpstered’ food. Some residents said they preferred to get food from dumpsters rather than relying on soup kitchens. Dumpster diving is viewed as a way of utilizing food that would have otherwise gone to waste, rather than as an unacceptable way to access food (Eikenberry and Smith 2005). For these residents, it is at times a challenge to access the bins as increasing numbers of them are being locked or behind fences. Nonetheless, this revanchist tendency is undermined by staff of certain restaurants and grocery stores who leave food out, so

that it is available to those who want it. Nadine explained her strategy for finding otherwise-wasted food:

I've been doing dumpster diving for years. Well, [a fast food chain] throws out stuff every night and they usually put it beside the garbage too for you and they usually have it all wrapped up for you too. Mainly downtown here, and [a coffee chain] they do the same thing. Sometimes they'll wrap up stuff and put it near the bins for you.

This practice on the part of staff and, in some occasions, sanctioned by owners, indicates that a low-income urban foodscape is relationally produced between poor and marginally housed residents and a range of other inhabitants and users of the neighbourhood; not only those who work in charitable and nonprofit agencies but also the staff of some retail establishments.

In the two previous sections we have identified the ways low-income residents exert some power and agency over the regimen of the charitable food sector. Yet, they are nonetheless constrained in their ability to access food by economic circumstance and both subtle and overt exclusion from certain spaces. A foodscape approach allows for an understanding of the diversity of strategies for obtaining food and at the same time address the structural constraints that limit these efforts.

The politics of a changing foodscape: pressures and possibilities

The strategies and choices Downtown Eastside residents have in accessing food and the ability of charities to provide it are constrained by the lack of secure funding for low-income food programs at all levels of the Canadian state. The longstanding absence of the state in this aspect of the neighbourhood's foodscape is compounded by its growing presence in another: At least since 2004, when a chief city planner explicitly urged Vancouver's condo developers to turn their attention from increasingly built-out areas of the western and central downtown peninsula to the Downtown Eastside and surrounding areas, the City has encouraged and facilitated a push to gentrify the neighbourhood (Beasley, 2004). One element of this gentrification has been the promotion of a high-end 'foodie culture,' evident in the growing number of upscale cafes, bars, bistros and restaurants that have emerged in the last decade and the media-driven rebranding of the neighborhood as the next foodie destination featuring a cadre of 'top chefs' (e.g., see Scout Magazine 2013, also Burnett 2013, Aiello forthcoming).

This ‘foodie gentrification’ involves the displacement of the inexpensive diners and corner shops that once epitomized the neighborhood. During a tour of the Downtown Eastside given by one charitable organization, the resident tour-guides pointed out several new foodie locations, such as a gourmet donut shop, noting that they could never afford to shop there (field notes, 2012). Charitable organizations also feel threatened by the rapid gentrification of the neighborhood where rising rents and gentrifier NIMBYism may increasingly constrain their abilities to provide services (see also DeVerteuil 2012b). Municipal efforts to create a “social mix” in the area, the conversion of privately-owned SROs into more expensive hotels and the erasure of inexpensive stores and restaurants means fewer places for people to live and eat (Funk 2012). These, according to community activists, are only some of the many high-end developments punctuating the neighborhood with “zones of exclusion” (Marquez et al. nd) – areas and establishments that low-income residents cannot afford, are actively prevented from entering, or in which they feel uncomfortable.

These pressures have recently encouraged a politics of resistance by some neighbourhood residents and community activists. Famously, a months-long picket in 2013 targeted Pidgin, a new restaurant, with a “champion” chef that opened across a narrow street from a park where homeless people congregate. The action was sparked in part by an opening-night review by a local blogger that praised Pidgin’s large windows, looking onto the park, offering diners a “wide angle view of the oft-sordid goings on across the street ... [while] supping foie gras rice bowls and sipping Negronis in heated, cloistered comfort....” “[T]hat’s the reality of Vancouver,” he continued, “and I dig that they’re framing it instead of running from it” (Scout Magazine, 2013). Similar protests subsequently focused on a second restaurant, with pickets holding signs including one saying, “Stop Boutique Restaurants” (Lupick, 2013) (Figure 1).

Insert Fig. 1 Here: Protesters in front of Cuchillo, one of the restaurants that has been the focus on protests in the neighborhood.

Resistance to gentrification is one form of action around food in the contemporary Downtown Eastside. Others, involving a range of activists including some also involved in the resistance, seek to reimagine the neighbourhood foodscape in social, nutritional, and physical terms and to increase the range of alternatives to charitable food. Community food security

programs, including community gardens and kitchens, good food boxes and coupon programs at farmers markets, have emerged. Unlike charitable meals, community programs engage participants in activities like food production or cooking and often have some skill- or community-building aspect (Heynen et al. 2012). They attempt to both improve the quality of food and, in some instances, address wider structural issues of income inequality. For example, the Hastings Urban Farm operates as a social enterprise, providing employment and training, a horticultural therapy program, and is a source of fresh produce for meal programs (Figure 2). At the same time, these urban gardens and farms are often the result of tax incentives to developers who are encouraged to ‘land-bank’ lots that they are not ready to develop but which likely be built on in the future as part of what Quastel (2009) terms ecological gentrification. Therefore, the long-term viability of these spaces as part of the foodscape is tenuous.

Insert Fig 2: Hastings Urban Farm, run by the PHS Community Services Society

On the one hand, these initiatives represent the insecurities that emerge from reliance on the private sector to provide space for urban food production and have been critiqued for “reproducing neoliberalism in placing the economic needs of producers above food provisioning, for turning to market mechanisms to increase food access rather than demanding it of the state” (Alkon and Mares 2012: 350). Yet, they also represent the potentialities of alternative food production models since they allow residents to participate in food production that would have otherwise been impossible, given their living conditions and lack of access to land. Nonetheless, their small scale and tenuous finances mean that, unless they are scaled up to reach a larger number of food insecure people and provided with secure funding and facilities, they are unlikely to redress the inherent inequalities that structure the food system (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk 2009; Dowler and O’Conner 2012).

The Downtown Eastside Neighborhood House (DTES NH) takes the politics of food further by focusing on the “right to food”, “urban food justice” and “food sovereignty” to link food access to issues of democracy, citizenship and environmental justice (cf. Bedore 2010). The organization’s operating philosophy is directly political, identifying it as “activist, reformist and non-violent, critical of the poverty mentality and its handmaiden the charity model.” (Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House a, n.d.). According to the organization’s Food

Philosophy (Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House b, n.d.), the “right to food” is central to their efforts and it directly critiques the contemporary charity model by advocating for healthier food provided in a dignified manner. In its efforts to reshape the foodscape of the neighborhood, the DTES NH, through its Kitchen Tables Project³ (<http://dteskitchentables.org/>), not only provides a number of community kitchens and healthy smoothies at various gathering spots in the neighborhood, but also works to empower residents through the *Right to Food* zine (<http://dtesnhouse.ca/zine/>) and the Right to Food Mobile Mural Project which outlines their food philosophy, including the statement “Dignifying food = more food @ more places with no lineups.” (Figure 3).

Insert Fig 3 here. Downtown Eastside Kitchen Tables Project Mobile Mural (Detail)

This organization directly challenges the charitable food system by providing an alternative discourse to the institutionalized ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ paradigm by “[o]ffering people a choice of the foods they ingest”. Beyond provisioning, its politics challenge the “commonly held myth that those living in poverty don’t have nutritional knowledge or aspirations” by acknowledging “food to be a communicative instrument and hence [using] its offering as an instrument of community building”. In this respect, the organization is attempting to work to both improve the quality of food provided in the short-term as well as work on long-term efforts to re-envision the foodscape (cf. McEntee and Naumova 2012).

Indeed, residents in our study spoke about the wider food justice movement in the Downtown Eastside, of which the DTES NH is one part, and argued that it had made a difference in recent years. While cakes, muffins and donuts were once the primary foods provided, there is now more fresh produce served and, increasingly, organizations are moving away from lineups in favor of a more open door approach. Residents also expressed an awareness of the connection between food and dignity, and, as noted above, strived to eat at places where they were respected through the attitudes of staff, the quality of meals, and the way in which they are served. Yet, all programs remain constrained in their abilities to improve food quality without adequate funding and as long as the reliance on donations persist, these organization may be constrained in their abilities to reform an entrenched system.

Conclusion

Food is basic human need that is imbued with social meaning. It is a marker of class, signifier of health and a symbol of caring. The provision of food can result in both zones of encounter – providing the potential for alternative politics around food -- and exclusion – as in the case of gentrification. In this paper, we have used foodscape as a lens to explore the role of food in survival and to go “beyond food” to institutional structures that contribute to inequalities, including food insecurity (Passidomo 2013). In a neighbourhood that has long been defined by struggle, food is both a “contested territory” (Chambers 2011) and a fundamental focus of everyday survival. What Willis called “the Hastings shuffle” – the daily rounds in which low-income residents engage to find food and other forms of sustenance – provide little time for ordinary people to do much about the overarching political-economic structures that affect the foodscape of the Downtown Eastside. Willis is homeless, has HIV/AIDS and while no longer using “hard” drugs, occasionally drinks and uses marijuana to help his appetite. The charitable providers that are part of his daily rounds provide food and social spaces and he’s appreciative for what he receives. Yet, while his strategies, choices, and interactions, like those of the other interviewees, have some role in shaping the neighbourhood foodscape, there is much more to it than individuals can easily affect.

Without a restructuring of the economic conditions that give rise to food insecurity, particularly the absence of predictable, secure, adequate, and long-term state funding for food programs, the charitable food sector, for all the good it does, will remain the fragile front-line of nutrition for the poor. In turn, very low-income people will continue to be forced to supplement charitable offerings with practices such as dumpster diving. Thus, our purpose in this paper has been to identify not only the daily strategies of survival and the overarching conditions that shape those strategies, but also to point to examples of collective action that seek both to improve food quality and eliminate line-ups, but also to question the neoliberalization processes that makes these meal programs necessary while using food as a strategic gathering point around which to discuss and act upon wider issues of inequality.

What makes foodscape a useful concept for positioning food as the focus of geographical research on poverty and survival is that its social constructionist, relational, and processual perspective allows us to conceptualize the complex and changing interconnections that shape food access and to point to the politics of food in ways that the mapping of specific food system

attributes fails to do. Thus, through the notion of a foodscape, we can go beyond descriptions of where people can access food to narrate the experiences and strategies of finding food and unpack the political implications of its very provision. Analyses of foodscales, hunger, and food insecurity must see beyond the food itself and must continue to approach food access as defined – but not determined – by a set of surrounding institutions and wider processes, of which housing provision, urban development, and public health-care are only some of the most salient.

Yet, this is not to position the causes of, or opportunities for change in the contemporary low-income urban food system at an abstract level of seemingly abstract institutions. It is important to understand the state and the charitable system as grounded, peopled, and enacted social products in themselves and to understand them as available for engagement and change at ‘street level’ (Proudfoot and McCann, 2008). Thus, the foodscape is produced through actors from various class backgrounds. Lawson and Elwood’s (2013) discussion of poverty as a relational construction indicates how some of these sites bring poor and middle class people together in the co-production of social systems. These organizational and institutional sites lie “between the micro-level of face-to-face human interaction and the macro-level of society’s structural properties” (Philo and Parr, 2000: 517). As residents travel the Downtown Eastside for food, they are involved, along with staff and activists, in making “‘everyday rationalities’, the effects of which then travel beyond the local instants of their production to become generalised (even if only briefly) as agreed ways of getting things done for the organization as a whole” (Philo & Parr, *ibid*: 519). In this context, the possibility of agency by both those receiving and providing food within an overarching hegemony is worth recognizing and the actions or intentions of actors in these institutional sites cannot be read off from some *a priori* definition of class position or identity (Marr et al. 2009).

Food is a resource and commodity around which disputes about social justice and the right to the city emerge and through which the contemporary geography of survival can be clearly identified. It remains to be seen how gentrification will affect this geography. While government-funded social housing and well-established social services may be able to maintain their footing as the gentrification frontier advances, questions remain as to whether the often-vulnerable charitable system and low-income retail can cope with rising rents. We conclude by asking whether the changing character of food availability that accompanies gentrification will force residents to travel outside of the neighborhood to access food, thereby altering their ability

to survive in the Downtown Eastside? Furthermore, without the right to food, will residents lose their claim to a place in the city as a changing foodscape alters their connections to and sense of belonging within the neighborhood? Finally, and more starkly, can the urban future be one in which the poorest people gain or maintain a right to stay put and a right to live? These are open questions that continue to be negotiated in Vancouver and elsewhere.

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Notes

¹ There is however, no food bank depot in the neighbourhood although some programs do provide canned and packaged food to their participants. Therefore, the primary source of food is meal programs.

² We use the term resident to describe individuals who participated in an interview. In some instances, individuals actually lived outside of the neighbourhood – for example in homeless camps in nearby parks -- but made regular visits in order to access needed services.

³ The Kitchen Tables Project is jointly run by the DTES NH and the Potluck Café Society, a social enterprise that provides food skills training to residents as well as meal programs and a community kitchen.
(<http://www.potluckcatering.com/>)