



Making and unmaking co-operative subjects in the Oklahoma Food Cooperative

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This paper sketches the history of a food co-operative to understand the challenges of cultivating co-operative sensibilities, viewpoints, and practices in geographical locations dominated by largely capitalist economies. The founders of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative (OFC) placed inordinate emphasis on mobilising social and political differences to change their own perspectives on food systems and social justice, environmental stewardship, and economic sustainability — the co-operative's stated core values. To make sense of how this approach played out over time, I orient my analysis around critical conceptions of subjectivity, exploring via qualitative fieldwork and analysis how OFC members sought to transform their own subjective experience of food systems, economy, community, and other figures via sustained encounters with difference. This case illustrates the importance for co-operatives of attending to subject formation via practices that cultivate non-capitalist subjectivities while grappling with forces that undermine such efforts, some of which may seem unrelated to the market in which a given co-operative operates. For the OFC, these forces included not only food system dynamics but also urban redevelopment, catching members in a double bind of capitalist subjectivity that I argue contributed to the co-operative's closure after 15 years.

Introduction

In 2003, a small group of food producers and consumers in Oklahoma, United States, joined together as co-owners of a co-operative. Founders were cautioned that this experiment was doomed to fail, as producers and consumers are typically thought to have opposing interests. The group rejected this advice, positing that such thinking obscured the shared interests of producers and consumers in building food systems that maintain healthy ecosystems and vibrant communities. Founders insisted on three core values: social justice, economic sustainability, and environmental stewardship. Democratic self-governance through direct participation was understood as necessary to balancing these values; each member-owner, whether a producer or a consumer, held equal voting power in decision-making in the business. This was linked in turn to the idea that re-localising food systems (namely, food products produced or prepared within the state's borders) is essential to enabling direct participatory governance. Rather than operating a bricks-and-mortar storefront, the Oklahoma Food Cooperative (OFC) developed a then-innovative model based on a website, a central distribution centre, and a series of ephemeral pick-up sites around the state. The approach

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was initially successful: the co-operative grew steadily in its early years, boasting some 4,500 members by 2011 and handling roughly three-quarters of a million USD in annual sales (Sarmiento, 2020).

In 2018, however, the OFC ceased operations. Internal conflicts troubled the firm, while an expanded market for speciality foods brought increased competition and corporate actors sought to co-opt the local food movement. I have detailed the OFC's history elsewhere (see Sarmiento 2017, 2020), but in this article, I focus on an element of the group's trajectory that is common to co-operative enterprises and to efforts to expand just and sustainable socio-economies more broadly: cultivating sensibilities that depart from dominant economic norms and resisting recapture by dominant, structuring forces. In short, the OFC offers a case study in the art of crafting post-capitalist subjectivities, namely, the challenge of becoming — and remaining — co-operative.

The OFC's early years were characterised by a commitment to individual and collective growth through sustained encounters with forms of social and political difference, achieved through participation in the co-operative. As members interacted across producer/consumer differences during the early years of operation, the founders' interest in overcoming that divide gradually expanded to include a wider range of socio-political differences, including religious affiliation, sexuality, and lifestyles. Members frequently noted that rural producers, many of whom held conservative political views, were drawn together through the OFC with consumers mostly living in urban areas, who generally leaned towards liberal political positions. Members of both groups were transformed along the way. As one founding member light-heartedly told me, "the conservative fundamentalist Baptist would actually be willing to shake hands with the lesbian Wiccan, as long as it was over a bag of locally grown carrots." By the time the OFC ceased operations, however, this optimistic emphasis on learning through difference had largely fallen by the wayside, alongside faith in co-operativism as a viable socio-economic approach.

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Oklahoma during a ten-month period in 2011-2012, with numerous shorter visits before and since. I used ethnographic methods, including focus groups and over 60 semi-structured interviews with members of the OFC and other proponents of local food, public officials and state agency personnel, and urban developers. Alongside immersion in daily life, I have been a participant observer at dozens of events and sites ranging from board and management meetings of the OFC to public festivals, food policy council meetings, and farm-to-fork restaurants. Finally, I examined textual materials such as city planning documents and local and national press coverage of the city's revitalisation efforts, as well as archival materials related to the historical development of agriculture and urban development in the state. In addition to these research methods, my understanding of the state and its culture is based on a dozen years of living in Oklahoma at various times between 1992 and 2012.

Below, I sketch the history of the enterprise with a focus on how the OFC sought to produce and maintain co-operative subjectivities among members. In the following section, I briefly describe liberal understandings of subjectivity and critiques thereof. I then explore techniques of subject formation employed by the OFC, focusing on their idea that sustained encounters with difference via the co-operative provoked individual and collective evolution. This requires us to consider the OFC's efforts to overcome pre-existing subjectivities related to economy, race, and justice, while also contending with co-optation by conventional food system actors. While these challenges were substantial in their own right, I argue that to fully understand the demise of the OFC, we must also consider the influence of a socio-political process that at first blush may seem to have little to do with food systems: urban redevelopment in Oklahoma City. I explain how speciality foods played a key role in rebranding the city, and the allure of catering to the growing creative class contributed not only to the OFC's business strategy, but also undermined their early emphasis on cultivating co-operative subjectivities. While the OFC helped create a market for local and other speciality foods in Oklahoma, tempting some to see the firm as a success despite their eventual demise, the co-operative's closure marks a transition for food activists and entrepreneurs from a vision of transforming food systems writ large to carving out

tenuous niche markets catering almost exclusively to privileged consumers. The abandonment of a politics of subjectivity was a key feature of this transformation.

Subjectivity Beyond Liberalism

Dominant understandings of subjectivity and human agency are rooted in liberal political and social philosophy. Broadly, this tradition approaches the subject in the grammatical sense, as the active agent that makes things happen in the world, the “I” in the formulation “I join a food co-operative.” In such approaches, rational deliberation and conscious thought are cast as the basis of relatively autonomous decision-making and action. Ontologically discrete, individual people are viewed as the locus of agency, and subjectivity and agency are understood as the sole province of human beings. Moreover, subjectivity is seen to be innate, personal, and relatively coherent if not unitary.

Critiques of liberal notions of subjectivity are well established across the social sciences and humanities, drawing on postcolonial, feminist, Marxian, and other perspectives (Häkli & Kallio, 2014; Holloway et al., 2018; Popke, 2003). From these perspectives, individuated subjects must contend with structural forces that constrain agency and shape decision-making. In other words, to the agential “I” critical scholars add a second notion of the individual as subject *to* power relations. For example, the way that a feudal peasant is a subject of a noble family and citizens of modern societies are subject to the laws of that society. This second register of subjectivity draws attention to the ways in which subject formation is entangled with power relations — how power operates through the internalisation of dominant norms and power structures, which can come to seem “natural” or self-evident. For critical scholars of subjectivity, the interplay of these two notions of the subject — both as agent and as subject to power relations — is understood as a key element of political struggle, because it is in and through subjectivities that any given state of affairs can be accepted, normalised, and continually reproduced, or conversely can be questioned and eventually overturned. As Isabelle Stengers (2008) puts it, the cultivation of subjectivity is a political event “par excellence, producing ... both new political struggle and new important knowledge” (p. 39).

A tension exists in critical subjectivity studies. On one side is a tradition that tends to cast the subject as the effect of social relations and structures, reducing — if not entirely evacuating — agency from the individual subject. On the other side are approaches that see in the subject at least the possibility of rejecting dominant modes of subjection, and perhaps the capacity to craft new subjectivities alongside novel social, economic, or political formations. This tension is evident in research on economic subjectivities, particularly in studies of post- or anti-capitalist economic initiatives (see Gibson-Graham, 2006). Critical research on alternative food networks (AFNs) exemplifies this tension. Researchers highlight how discourses of alterity in food systems emphasise individual choice and reduce political action to market participation, thus reinforcing neoliberal capitalist ideology and reproducing hegemonic political subjectivities. Allen and Guthman (2006), for example, in their analysis of Farm-to-School programmes in California, demonstrate that these programmes reproduce neoliberal governance through their reliance on contingent labour and private funding sources and their devolution of control to the local level, simultaneously reinforcing neoliberal emphasis on “personal responsibility and individual success, consumerism, and choice” (p. 401).

Other scholars have questioned whether such analyses might underestimate the capacity of AFNs to effect political and social change, while potentially overstating the power and reach of hegemonic political, economic, and social structures. Harris (2009) summarises this view and raises concerns that analyses overly focused on neoliberal subjectivities can inadvertently contribute to the hegemony of the discourse they critique by representing neoliberalism “not only as self-reproducing, but also as able to colonise all alternatives even as they emerge” (p. 60). To avoid this potential pitfall, Harris follows post-structural feminist geographers Gibson-Graham in advocating approaches that do not know *a priori* that alternatives to capitalism are inevitably doomed to be co-opted or annihilated by structural forces and powerful actors. Following queer

theorist Eve Sedgwick, Gibson-Graham called this stance “reading for difference rather than dominance” (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. xxxi; for an example, see Cornwell, 2012). Sympathetic scholars have raised concerns, however, that while invaluable as a technique for making visible already existing other economic worlds, this approach is (intentionally) partial; it actively turns away from analysing relations of dominance and oppression. Thus, if deployed exclusively, the approach arguably carries the risk of obscuring such relations and downplaying power struggles (Alhojärvi, 2020; Miller, 2015; Sarmiento & Gabriel, 2020).

In the analysis that follows, I seek to balance reading for difference with a commitment to examining the forces that actively constrain and thwart efforts to produce co-operative subjectivities (Sarmiento, 2017). Following Gibson-Graham (2006), such an analysis is crucial because:

In the absence of a collective presence that recognizes the potential future for [community economies] enterprises ... and that continues to renarrativize the past and present, it is very hard to foster new becomings. Our projects have demonstrated that it is possible to cultivate subjects for a community economy, but that disclosing and sustaining new worlds requires nourishment over more than a few years. (p. 162)

Cultivating Co-operative Food Subjects in the OFC

Reading the history of the OFC with an emphasis on subjectivity, we can see several stages of development that entail opportunities and challenges for forming novel food subjects: an initial phase in which the co-operative’s emergence was provoked by problems with conventional food systems in Oklahoma, which produced ruptures in dominant subjectivities; a phase of experimentation, in which the logistical and functional characteristics of the OFC transformed and stabilised dissident subjectivities among members; and a phase of tension and rupture, in which members’ dissident subjectivities were destabilised and recaptured by the logics and pressures exerted by conventional food systems working in tandem with redevelopment in Oklahoma City.

Leakages from conventional food systems and the appearance of the OFC

Over the twentieth century, Oklahoma’s agricultural systems became more consolidated, capital-intensive, and oriented towards commodity crop production. Poverty rates indicate that the current structure of agriculture is not a viable basis for rural economies: in 2023, while the state’s average poverty rate was 17%, rates were higher in rural areas, exceeding 20% in 17 rural counties (Rural Health Information Hub, n.d.). This is a top-heavy agricultural economy: while sales in 2012 for the state’s largest 3,500 farms — about 4.4% of the total number of Oklahoma farms — averaged over \$800,000, roughly 46,000 farms, or about 57%, generated less than \$10,000 in sales that year (National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2014). Ninety-seven farms generated \$5 million or more, together representing 66% of agricultural sales in 2012. Additionally, this system generates ecological impacts ranging from waste disposal and water contamination issues to groundwater depletion and loss of crop diversity (see Malewitz, 2013; McDermott, 2006). The state’s health department links this food provisioning structure to public health concerns, particularly with respect to obesity and diabetes, the rates for both of which doubled in the 1990s in Oklahoma (McDermott, 2006).

We might view the problems generated by conventional food systems as factors that destabilise dominant food system subjectivities. Virtually all the OFC members whom I interviewed mentioned these issues when I asked them what drove them to join the co-operative. One founder consumer-member described the group who created the OFC as “people who are sort of activists, people that are trying to do something that will, you know, really help people, help small farmers.” Health issues were commonly cited as motivating factors, and a number of members were moved to join by personal experiences with cancer, food allergies, diabetes, high blood pressure, and other chronic illnesses. As a typical example, one OFC producer said:

With me, you know, I had a major life change. I was ... supposed to be dead. I tried to go back to my normal life surviving in the fashion industry, and I realised that I had a purpose, and I needed to figure out what that purpose was, and that led me down this path.

Many members also found their way to the co-operative while pursuing more sustainable foods.

Thus, personal health struggles and concern for rural economies and farmer livelihoods merged with environmental goals in motivating founders and opening them to new ways of thinking about and relating to food and food systems. The challenge facing founders was to direct these destabilising vectors into a form that enabled new subjectivities and relationships with food. This challenge had many elements — logistical, financial, legal, and cultural. But it also went beyond foodways and into questions of subjectivity vis-à-vis economy, justice, sustainability, environments, locality, and more.

Consolidating the territory of the OFC, stabilising co-operative subjectivities

During its early years, the OFC was often able to stoke new subject positions among members. Members emphasised that during this phase, the group embraced an ethos of experimentation and a do-it-yourself attitude. This was necessary; a scarcity of pre-existing models to follow was commonly mentioned in my interviews as a challenge and ultimately an asset, freeing the co-operative to be creative and experiment with new forms. While retail and producer co-operatives are abundant, multi-stakeholder or hybrid food co-operatives are not (see Bilewicz, 2018 as an example). OFC was owned and directly governed by both consumers and producers, and each member had equal voting power in the firm. This is a stark difference from community-supported agriculture models, for instance, in which consumers buy shares but typically have no say in how the producers operate their businesses. In a hybrid model like the OFC, the interests of and challenges facing producers and consumers must be actively negotiated through direct governance.

Faced with organising a statewide distribution system, the OFC developed practical avenues that worked to draw together and resignify destabilising vectors emerging from conventional food systems. The co-operative did not operate a retail storefront. Instead, customer-members placed orders on a website where producer-members posted offerings. On a given day each month, producers transported their items from across Oklahoma to an operations centre in Oklahoma City. Products were then sorted and transported to pick-up sites around the state, where customers retrieved orders. These sites, which by 2011 numbered around 50, were ephemeral, popping up on delivery days. This allowed the OFC to avoid the costs of a bricks-and-mortar storefront, greatly expand its reach, and ensure flexibility. It also brought members into direct contact. The operations centre and pick-up sites were staffed by members compensated in work credits that could be used to purchase food through the co-operative. As producers arrived at the operations centre, they interacted with these workers and other producers, unloading and checking in products together, sharing a communal lunch, and hanging out. The same occurred at pick-up sites, where customers hunted for their purchases across the site, chatting with each other and the workers and producers as they moved about. These spatial configurations and the interactions they required and enabled were important to the sociality of the co-operative, making food distribution and retailing a more interactive experience.

The OFC's website included pages where producers described their practices and shared personal stories and images of their farms or commercial kitchens. Lively email groups for each member-owner group as well as the board of directors and management provided additional outlets for discussing issues and disseminating information, punctuated by monthly "Producers' Notes" features. Annual membership meetings were dinner banquets catered by producer-members, with live music and dancing interspersed with elections for board members and officer positions and discussions about the future of the enterprise. Finally, new members were required to undergo training in co-operative principles and the group's core values, structure, and operational model. Producer-members also had to undergo site evaluations to verify production practices and ensure they met food safety requirements and ethics standards.

These are examples of how the co-operative's operational model served to attach itself to and draw connections between the various subjective currents that animated members to explore different ways of producing, procuring, and consuming food. These mechanisms were woven into the structure and functionality of the enterprise, mandating a certain degree of exposure to the material-semiotic processes through which the OFC expanded around a vision of socially just and sustainable local food. Of course, members did not automatically become subjects of such a vision upon joining, nor was subject transformation guaranteed or stable over time. But the subject-forming technologies built into the enterprise at least made such transformations possible.

However, there were challenges. First, problems with conventional food systems are varied, affecting different groups disparately (Mount, 2012), thus summoning different political subjects with issues and aims that may not be congruous. The OFC's response to this challenge is insightful. As already noted, the OFC came to embrace the idea that social difference within the co-operative was a necessary asset for individual and collective transformation. This was "the interesting thing about the coop," in the first president's words, and "the most innovative thing" about it in the eyes of another longtime member and general manager. Members offered examples of this innovation. They pointed out that women occupied key roles among producers and in the OFC's leadership and business functions, where they frequently outnumbered men. They often mentioned the prevalence of openly gay, lesbian, and queer members among producers and leadership, as well as the general membership. They cited a range of political positions and religious beliefs, alongside phenomena typically framed in terms of lifestyles, including dietary choices, dress, hairstyle, tattoos, piercings, and so on.

Members often described how being drawn into regular contact with a diverse range of others tended to have transformative effects on them. One longtime producer-member, for example, described how her practices changed "pretty radically" as a result of being involved in the OFC, noting that her family bought 50% of their food and other products through the co-operative, and attempted to supplement that as much as possible with food from farmers' markets or locally owned businesses. She also observed changes in:

... simple things, like I won't buy anything from [fast food restaurant] anymore, because I took the time to do some research and find out how the chickens are raised ... I'm not going to support that in any way, shape, or form. So it's made us much more conscious of what we're buying and who we're buying it from. And that's directly related to the co-op.

I also heard numerous stories of mutual aid between producers. When a mushroom grower fell sick, for instance, other producers harvested their crop in time for delivery day, and producers often exchanged knowledge about production practices, navigating state regulations, and so on. One member told me he was inspired to join the OFC by a documentary about the problems associated with conventional food systems, about which he previously knew very little. He went on to become central to the co-operative's leadership and an activist for food system reform, drawing on the knowledge base he developed working for the OFC for nearly a decade.

These and other examples from members resonate with their claims that producers and customers alike might have embraced a variety of social positions when they joined the OFC, but could be seen to undergo a process of "evolution" as they practiced membership, often moving increasingly towards an understanding of economy and ecology that more explicitly brought ethics into play. In the eyes of many OFC members, the ethos of difference as a resource in transformation was a key driver of the group's growth and ability to influence food culture in Oklahoma.

Tension and rupture 1: Becoming-businesslike

While the OFC's approach to change through encounters with difference was initially effective, other challenges proved more difficult to overcome. OFC members rarely discussed economic positionality and class differences, but this was often a realm of struggle. While producers and consumers co-owned the OFC, producer-members separately maintained ownership of

their production operations. Some producers consistently sought to minimise costs in their arrangements with the OFC and maximise value appropriated from the co-operative. There were producers who resisted the creation of a paid management team and attempted to rely on volunteer labour as much as possible. A paid management team was eventually established, and when management pushed to increase food credits for volunteers, some producers argued against this. Management salaries were low, and some producers fought against increases. Finally, in 2012, the president and several other members led an initiative to create a new member-owner class for worker-members, which would have included management as well as other workers, thus giving the co-operative a triple-hybrid structure, allowing workers more of a voice and mandating their representation on the board. Here again, several influential producers campaigned against the measure, which ultimately failed. While internal debates surrounding each of these issues were complex and nuanced, taken together they suggest a pattern reflecting the desire of some producers to minimise costs by exploiting labour value at the lowest rates of compensation and disempowering workers. These struggles were often framed by producers via an insistence that the OFC must become more “businesslike,” as opposed to the “DIY” ethos of the early years. While no one disputed that the enterprise’s growth required more organisation and planning, subtle conflicts arose around issues such as keeping track of how workers were spending their time, auditing managerial staff’s activities, and other forms of maximising value extraction from under-compensated workers.

Struggles over what it meant to become businesslike in the OFC reflected underlying issues with how the core value of social justice was understood. The co-operative generally embraced a producer-centred notion of social justice, foregrounding farmers’ livelihoods and critiquing the ways that the political economy of food favours conventional producers. However, justice issues surrounding farm labourers and food consumers were more difficult to reach agreement about, and the refrain of becoming businesslike was often used to obscure such questions. This was most evident in producers’ arguments against spending time to figure out how the OFC might accept food stamps. Due to the co-operative’s unique structure, becoming certified to accept public assistance food vouchers was difficult, and producers were among the most vocal opponents of spending labour and funds on this. In most instances, opposition was framed as simply a matter of the “realities” of running a business, which producers insisted meant prioritising the bottom line to stay afloat. But when debates intensified, it became clear that some of the more conservative members were generally opposed to public assistance measures, which they saw as “handouts” for people who had made poor personal choices, while more progressive members tended to view economic hardship as the result of systemic factors. This divide tended to correspond to the rural/urban divide and the producer/consumer divide, and proved to be more recalcitrant than some of the other differences — e.g., sexuality, religion, lifestyles — that members preferred to invoke in more optimistic registers.

These tensions should not be reduced to the producer/consumer divide per se, however, as member debates sometimes revealed divergent understandings of economy more broadly. Virtually all research participants accepted elements of neoclassical economy theory, particularly notions of markets as expressions of supply and demand dynamics. There was some cognitive dissonance here: many members acknowledged the ways that the political economy of food systems favoured agribusiness and corporate retail, but members rarely extended such insights to the consumer side of food systems. Some members expressed the belief that as demand for local food increased, supply would naturally follow, and as the market grew, prices would fall alongside production costs thanks to economies of scale. Finally, while more progressive members tended to understand poverty and food access as shaped by structural or systemic forces, discussions of class difference per se were almost entirely absent from the OFC’s deliberations or framings of difference as an evolutionary resource. These observations speak to the ways in which dominant notions of economy continued to shape efforts to produce co-operative food subjectivities in the OFC.

Racial and ethnic differences were another major lacuna in members’ framings of difference. The OFC did not collect demographic information from its members, but my anecdotal

observations suggested that while there were people of colour and Indigenous people among the member-owners, their numbers did not reflect the state's demographics. This topic was not brought up in the numerous meetings I attended and was rarely volunteered by interviewees. When I pressed this point, nearly all conceded that it was problematic, particularly in light of the core value of social justice; some also suggested that this was a matter of cultural differences rather than classed racial or ethnic exclusion.

Tension and rupture 2: Co-optation and catering to the creative class in redeveloping Oklahoma City

The OFC's efforts to cultivate novel food subjects were also complicated by increased competition and co-optation by corporate businesses. Several high-end supermarket chains moved into the state in 2010-2011, marketing themselves as purveyors of green and local foods. Sunflower Farmers Market, for example, irked OFC members, as the name of the regional chain store was seen to falsely imply being a place for direct sales by farmers. Whole Foods Market, despite selling only a marginal percentage of locally produced goods, publicised their opening in Oklahoma City with a massive corn maze that read "Know your farmer, know your food." Even the fast-food giant McDonald's attempted to cast its food as local with the marketing tagline "Oklahoma bred, Oklahoma fed," referring to sausage biscuits manufactured in the state and distributed across the southeastern United States.

In response, OFC leaders chose to focus on the localness of their products, adopting the slogan "Real food, real local." This was meant to express a series of qualities leaders assumed to be inherent to local production. The health benefits and better taste of freshly harvested, proximately produced fruits and vegetables and animal products had always been a selling point for the OFC, alongside reduced food miles. But these values came to eclipse the emphasis on rural economies and producer livelihoods that had initially informed the core values of social justice and economic sustainability. Thus, "Real food, real local" reflected a major shift in the meaning of local food for the OFC and others in the local food movement. While many of the businesses that followed in the OFC's wake invoked ideals such as community and helping small farmers, they operated on capitalist principles of private ownership of firms staffed by waged employees. This point is significant; while the OFC did not heavily use the concept of community, their initial approach to self-governance and their core values emphasised negotiation of difference, implying an understanding of community perhaps akin to Gibson-Graham's (2006) anti-essentialist view of communities as the emergent and contested result of the working out of being-in-common. A more romanticised notion of community began to be evoked more explicitly later, especially among the small capitalist firms that spun off from the OFC.

Meanwhile, in the OFC, there was a gradual shift away from both social justice and co-operative participatory governance. This was partly a matter of size, as it was easier to include members in governance when the co-operative was small. But by 2013, the OFC shelved debates about public assistance vouchers; training materials for new members emphasised the logistics of the OFC's distribution system rather than the meaning and practice of the co-operative's core values or co-operative principles; and the notion of difference as a transformative resource was rarely discussed (Sarmiento, 2020). In a 2016 email to the board of directors, one board member bemoaned the loss of the OFC's social justice perspective, noting "I don't think we [even] mention [that] anymore."

Ultimately, it was through co-opting local food that high-end retailers moved into the market in Oklahoma, reclaiming on behalf of conventional food systems the territory carved out by the OFC and other small firms. Thus, economic forces squeezed the OFC and its producer-members, which sometimes latched onto and fused with pre-existing subjectivities vis-a-vis justice and economy.

There was, however, another set of forces that helped to recapture the dissident forces that animated the early OFC — redevelopment in Oklahoma City. By the late 2000s, when the local

food movement was at its peak, Oklahoma City was experiencing a dramatic redevelopment process. In a remarkable period of capital reinvestment, much of the central city was transformed: buildings were renovated, long-neglected infrastructure was upgraded, and a flurry of new construction brought high-end developments and sports and entertainment venues, a downtown canal, a new city park, and a trolley system. This was in many respects a typical entrepreneurial development strategy (Harvey, 1989) focused on maximising urban property values and refashioning parts of the city to attract and retain the so-called creative class (Peck, 2005). The local food movement played a role in this process. Journalists and corporate boosters invoked local food in narratives of a food renaissance in the city, and the OFC was often mentioned as a prime example of the state's forward-looking food culture (Sarmiento, 2020). Local food enterprises were instrumental in the city's makeover, anchoring high-end developments, re-signifying long-neglected urban spaces, and priming them for reinvestment and gentrification. One small local food retailer, for example, was enticed by a developer to relocate into a high-end new urbanist development in the Deep Deuce neighbourhood, once the heart of Oklahoma City's Black community and now predominantly white (Payne & Greiner, 2019; Sarmiento, 2020).

The OFC was drawn into redevelopment for several reasons. Most of the growth in membership occurred in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, lending weight to arguments made by members who wanted to focus increasingly on urban customers. The growth of the creative class presented an opportunity for the co-operative to capture premium prices for their products. Some OFC leaders, wary of growing competition and corporate co-optation, argued that the co-operative should instead focus on expanding their presence in smaller cities where high-end supermarkets would not venture. Some of these members were also concerned about the social justice implications of catering to the creative class, as it seemed to imply an abandonment of issues of access, affordability, and inclusivity. Shifting focus to rural areas, where poverty rates and food insecurity is high, the liberals argued, would be more aligned with social justice goals. But these debates were ultimately won by those who argued in favour of focusing on well-heeled urban consumers. As one of the more progressive OFC leaders wearily put it at the close of a lengthy email discussion about food stamps, "I think we should concentrate on the 'educated, high discretionary income, environmentally aware' market segment." Even for this leader, a champion of social justice and primary visionary of the OFC's emphasis on difference as a transformative resource, a focus on high-paying customers came to be seen as a regrettable but necessary strategy to preserve the co-operative and its long-term goals (Sarmiento, 2020).

The dramatic changes in Oklahoma City and its foodscape and the expansion of its relatively affluent population provided discursive support to the narrowly economic notions of becoming businesslike in the OFC, feeding directly into the refrains of increasing efficiency, cutting costs by doing more with less, and capturing premium prices. This outcome was not simply a discursive or ideological effect, however. The entwined systems of conventional food systems and neoliberal urban redevelopment exerted economic pressure on the co-operative and presented alluring opportunities to increase revenues. This dynamic of pressure and opportunity helped more conservative members justify their positions vis-à-vis justice and questions of food access in the name of seemingly disinterested business sense, which fed back into the producer-centred framing of food justice that dominated the co-operative from the start. A broader acceptance of neoclassical understandings of economy among members also compromised the ability of progressive members to effectively push back when the ideals of co-operativism and a more expansive notion of social justice were threatened.

Ultimately, the strategy of catering to the creative class failed. New memberships tapered off and sales declined alongside member involvement. By 2018, the OFC received fewer than 300 orders per month from its more than 5,000 members. Paid employee positions were reduced to a single general manager and pick-up sites were cut to a minimum. Salvage efforts included a fundraising campaign and proposals to terminate all compensation for labour performed in the OFC. These initiatives were unsuccessful. In October, the general manager resigned;

the co-operative held a liquidation sale in November. Once again, the OFC was a bellwether of the local food movement. New businesses specialising in local foods appeared less often, and even the most successful of those that had followed in the OFC's wake struggled to stay afloat as others ceased operations. At the time of writing, the market for locally produced foods in Oklahoma has settled into a relatively stable but small niche primarily serving relatively privileged consumers.

Conclusion: Co-operatives, Community, and Justice

Internal tensions, corporate co-optation, and the decision to cater to the creative class all contributed to the OFC's declining sales. Members also cited more prosaic factors, including the difficulty of procuring food from the co-operative amidst a culture of convenience, declining interest in local food, and the challenges of growing premium crops in Oklahoma's climate. A focus on subjectivity allows us to recognise that the OFC's decline also entailed a dramatic shift in how members thought about food and individual and collective transformation. Initially, local food appeared as a vehicle for transforming food systems by convening differently positioned actors in the food system and facilitating their evolution through shared governance and operation of a co-operatively owned enterprise. Some fifteen years later, local food had largely become a speciality item for well-heeled consumers and characterised by freshness, health benefits, and romanticised notions of small farmers and community. As this transformation of 'local food' occurred, the subjects who promoted, laboured over, and produced this evolving object were similarly changed (Sarmiento, 2020). Lost along the way was a subjectivity that explicitly recognised and valued the imperative of subjective transformation itself.

The abandonment of subjectivity as a terrain of struggle and subject transformation as a goal was arguably a major factor in the demise of the OFC and in circumscribing the potential of the local food movement. This transition made local food more vulnerable to co-optation, as the fetishised, feel good object that targeted the creative class, largely stripped of the OFC's early (if still far from perfect) engagements with justice, rural economic development, and ecological concerns, was not perhaps easily distinguishable from the speciality foods offered by high-end grocers and gourmet restaurants. But more fundamentally, the early OFC recognised that new food subjectivities were required to cultivate novel publics that wanted different things from food and food systems. As flawed as the co-operative may have been, we can glean in its story faint traces of such publics emerging, beginning to take an almost-coherent form. OFC members seemed to grow cognisant of their position in a liminal terrain where lines of flight from conventional food systems grasped for leverage and points of connection with other dissident vectors. The decision to consciously embrace this liminal space and attempt to harness it as a transformative resource was indeed perhaps "the most interesting thing" about the co-operative, as members observed. The eventual abandonment of this terrain seemed to leach much of the energy and power from the OFC, at precisely the moment when the enterprise was also threatened by co-optation and internal struggles.

There were missed opportunities to pursue alternate paths. I have discussed the co-operative's efforts to be certified to accept public assistance vouchers and to create a worker-member class, and the idea of focusing on rural areas; these initiatives may have made a significant difference to the trajectory of the enterprise. But there were other lines of flight as well, including discussions with tribal governments and the state's largest food banks to source food from the OFC. Such high-volume contracts might have provided important opportunities to shift away from the premium product business model. A number of producers and consumers in the OFC were tribal members, creating opportunities for linkages with tribal food sovereignty movements in the state. And just as urban redevelopment created transversal connections with the OFC, recapturing it on behalf of hegemonic systems, the OFC might have sought to connect with some of the problems associated with redevelopment. Non-profits such as Oklahoma City's Women in Agriculture were addressing systemic inequities in the food system and community development in the gentrifying city through food initiatives, creating a parallel local food

movement. The OFC might have forged alliances with such urban initiatives, perhaps through a proposed local food hub that has been discussed in Oklahoma City since 2013.

Each of these inflection points offered opportunities to connect dissident vectors overflowing from hegemonic systems and consolidate the territory of the OFC and other novel publics, to increase the capacity of these publics as social machines that can harness the power of difference to transform subjects. The injustice, economic unevenness, and negative environmental impacts of conventional food systems persist, as do the inequities and overflows of dominant modes of urban development.

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