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Documentary Film and Ethical Foodscapes: Three Takes on Caribbean Sugar¹

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how certain stories, voices and values around agro-food networks can be made powerful by documentary film. Our central argument is that documentaries mobilize ethics by presenting a partial and affective account of their subject matter, which makes their audience feel differently about the social relations that underpin the production of food and acts as a focal point for media scrutiny and political interventions. We focus attention on three documentaries about Caribbean sugar to explore multiple and disparate ethical claims made about the farmers, workers and communities that embody Caribbean sugar industries. Through a comparison of the three documentaries, we chart how the production and distribution of these films have entailed quite different ethical narratives, encounters and interventions. A key finding is that the context in which films are received is just as important as the content they deliver. The paper concludes with a guarded endorsement for using documentary film to transform the unequal life conditions experienced in the global food system, stressing the need for empirically-grounded critique of the context of documentaries and suggesting the important role that geographers might play as interlocutors in their reception.

Introduction

Ethical supply chains have become a key focus of the last decade's agro-food research, tracking the growing retail trend for fair-trade, organic and sustainably-sourced products. One consistent finding has been the centrality of 'stories' to the consumption of these products, narrating how certain people and places will benefit from their purchase.² Yet perceptions of provenance have also been associated with farming crises, through 'food scares' that have implicated British beef and German cucumbers among others.³ With this in mind, an imperative has been established for agro-food scholars to explore 'how different kinds of stories have been made and made powerful'.⁴ As set out by Goodman *et al.* in their paper on ethical foodscapes:

What is of interest, then, are those questions about what we should and should not eat, what becomes regarded as 'good' and 'bad' food and how these constructions are intimately situated and contextualised, what sets of criteria define the 'good' and 'bad' meanings embedded in particular foods, who decides on how these criteria are defined and how food production-consumption networks are (or are not) regulated.⁵

We focus here on stories surrounding sugar. This is a fascinating commodity through which to chart the evolution and contestation of agro-food ethics. For years linked in the popular imagination with protectionism at home, poverty abroad and poor diets among all, many sugar companies now brand their product as environmentally sustainable and an 'all-natural' alternative to artificial sweeteners.⁶ Moreover, the shift toward economic liberalisation has opened up many markets to exports of sugarcane from developing countries, suggesting to some that the poor could now trade their way out of poverty through this foodstuff.⁷ Indeed, keen to amplify this developmental claim, in 2008 the sugar refiner Tate & Lyle agreed to sell all its retail sugar under the Fairtrade label; the biggest Fairtrade switch by any UK-based company to date.⁸

In choosing to look at this commodity we follow Jackson and Ward's study on the moral geographies of sugar.⁹ However, we depart from their particular analysis in two crucial respects. First, we locate our enquiry within the Caribbean rather than the UK, exploring the ethical claims made about the farmers, workers and communities that embody the region's sugar industries. Second, rather than using life-history interviews with industry elites to survey the ethical foodscape of sugar, we use documentary films instead – defined here as the creative treatment of actuality derived through authentic footage and subject testimony.¹⁰ Our chosen films are:

- a) *The Price of Sugar* – a feature-length film made by a US production company on the plight of Haitian cane-cutters in the Dominican Republic;
- b) *Tate & Lyle Fairtrade Sugar* – a short promotional film made on behalf of the company following its decision to source certified sugar from Belize;
- c) *The Barbados Sugar Workers' Video Project* – a participatory video facilitated by one of the authors on workers' views of the industry in Barbados.

These films all look at sugar in the Caribbean from the perspective of the producers, but do so in very different ways. As viewers, we are perhaps best acquainted with the documentary as exposé of illegal and illegitimate practices, yet the latter of our two films adopt more celebratory and ambivalent positions, respectively. Through a comparison of these positions, we chart how the production and distribution of these films have entailed quite different ethical narratives, encounters and responses. Viewed together, they offer a complicated picture of what 'ethical trade' and 'good sugar' might mean in relation to the Caribbean and suggest the different ways in which particular stories are made powerful within the contemporary foodscape.

The paper begins by charting the emerging dialogue between geographers and film studies scholars engaged in agro-food ethics. Through this we suggest that documentaries are able to evoke ethics by presenting a visceral and thus *affective* account of their subject matter.¹¹ However, we highlight the *partiality* upon which this rests and the politics to which it gives rise, especially when it results in active *interventions* in the way food is publicly regulated or its production/consumption socially practiced. The paper then turns to our three films, providing a brief synopsis of each and showing how these three analytical entry points of affect, partiality and intervention functioned in each case. We note that while each reveals certain relations of production to its audiences using particular narrative and filmic techniques, they also conceal other aspects for reasons primarily linked to the purpose of their production and the manner in which they were circulated. Consequently, they each generate very different reactions, operating among diverse audiences and at varying degrees of distance from the physical site of production. The paper concludes with a guarded endorsement for using documentary film to transform the unequal life conditions experienced in the global food system. While the medium has the potential to stimulate a more reflexive and relational account of food ethics, it is also prone to be used in a manner that obfuscates certain structural barriers and systematic factors. This reinforces the need for empirically-grounded critique of the context of documentaries – i.e. not just aesthetic critiques of their form – and suggests the important role that geographers might play as interlocutors in their reception.

Evoking Ethics, Filming Food: A Dialogue on Documentaries

In thinking about agro-food ethics and the ways they (re)structure the social relations of production, we start with those approaches dubbed 'commodity studies'. These have typically been concerned with the mass-market trade in undifferentiated and industrial ingredients, and have conceptualized the connectedness of place and exertion of power through a range of conceptual devices including food regimes, *filières*, systems of provision and commodity chains. Despite their different manifestations, these approaches are all rooted in political economy and have attempted, in one way or another, to examine the 'interconnected processes of raw material production, processing/packaging, shipping, marketing, and consumption embodied in a given commodity or set of related commodities'.¹² This is deemed particularly important given the 'globalisation' of the agro-food system, which is associated with the abstraction or 'disembedding' of production from specific localities and the alienation of consumers from its origins. By exposing the causal connections that stretch relations of responsibility, it is hoped that through commodity studies people can be moved beyond the personal, near and familiar to care for distant others.¹³

A key contribution of this literature, then, has been to *reveal* the ways in which commodities get from 'there' to 'here', or 'from farm to fork' as it is often put.¹⁴ Writing in 1990, David Harvey gave the example of a bunch of grapes. These, he notes, could have come from 'happy labourers working in a cooperative in Italy, grossly exploited labourers working under Apartheid in South Africa, or wage labourers protected by adequate labour legislation and wage agreements in Sweden'.¹⁵ However, the grapes sit mute on the supermarket shelf, protected by the commodity fetish which functions to conceal exploitative social relations of production from consumers. An implicit objective of these approaches was to invoke consumer agency by unveiling the truths 'behind' fetishized commodities. Through boycotts or anti-corporate campaigns, consumers would then find an outlet for their newly awakened political consciousness and help assist producers engaged in class struggle.¹⁶

In making visible the producers of agro-food commodities and revealing their social relations to consumers, an underlying assumption of the commodity studies approach is that the information presented will prompt some kind of change in behaviour.¹⁷ Such 'revelatory' approaches are said to work off a model of moral selfhood that rests on the possession of coherent knowledge, endorsing a Kantian notion of autonomous and information-based moral reasoning.¹⁸ This presupposition is also at the heart of the idea that by providing knowledge and understanding of distant strangers, geographical scholarship will make a difference. As David Smith concludes in his seminal text, *Moral Geographies*, 'if a geographically sensitive ethics has no more than one major message, it is, again, the importance of context, or *understanding* the particular situation: how things are, here and there'.¹⁹

Within feminist and postmodern understandings of subjectivity and ethics, the idea that ethical action is a consequence of autonomous individuals making rational decisions based on objective knowledge has been forcefully rejected.²⁰ As Clive Barnett and David Land have cautioned, while revealing the exploitative conditions of production present in the life of a commodity:

Might persuade a person that their actions contribute, in small ways, to the reproduction of those harms; it is just as likely for someone to conclude that their contribution is so highly mediated that [...] they are not able to do much about it.²¹

In other words, there must be more to the enactment of ethical consumerism than simply reading a report about the plight of West African cocoa farmers and seeing a Fairtrade product label which codifies a practical response to this. Rather, scholars working in this vein have suggested that it is non-rational qualities such as attentiveness, responsiveness and emotiveness that lie at the heart of ethical relations. In 'becoming ethical', the capacity to generate emotional affects and investments in particular products or networks is just as important as other more rational ways of knowing.²²

This approach is evident in agro-food literature inspired by the cultural turn in social sciences. Represented by work on alternative food networks and the social construction of 'quality' foods, this has emphasised the importance of corporeality and modes of sense-making other than cognition.²³ The act of eating and ingesting, for instance, has been said to problematize bodily boundaries in a way that other consumer practices do not.²⁴ Especially relevant for our case, one might think of the moral imperative invoked by nineteenth-century abolitionists who suggested that in eating colonial sugar, you would also be eating the flesh of slaves: an appeal made as much to the body as to the mind.²⁵ There are clearly many parallels here with film studies and the large body of research that has explored the affective nature of video brought through embodied encounters with 'the screen' and the feelings of sympathy, empathy, shock, delight and disgust that come with this.²⁶ Part of this emotive experience comes from the sheer visuality of the performance, while another resides in the 'true life' story that resonates in the imagination in a way different to a dramatisation of those same events.

An important intermediary between these two scholarly worlds has been Ian Cook and his collaborators who have practiced 'following the thing' on film so as to provide biographies of production and distribution.²⁷ Chiming with Sarah Whatmore's call to 'supplement the familiar repertoire of humanist methods that rely on generating talk and text with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers', Cook has advocated the presentation of a more visceral account of food journeys, capturing their non-verbal and embodied relations.²⁸ This could happen in different ways: comparing the way food retailers today and colonialists in the past both use imagery of tropical fecundity to legitimate their role in plantation societies, or disrupting the separation of sites of production and consumption by counter-posing sounds and visions from a commodity's mobile life. By reworking and subverting the commodity fetish rather than disabusing people of it,

Cook suggests how we might thereby encourage consumer audiences to 'better imagine, feel, discuss, appreciate and maybe try and improve' their relationships with people living in different parts of the world.²⁹

Another topic of conversation in the dialogue between geographers and film studies scholars relates to the concept of situated knowledges. This refers to the intrinsic connection of ideas, beliefs and theories to the particular contexts in which they are produced.³⁰ As Donna Haraway has put it in relation to visual representations: 'there is no unmediated image... [only] highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds'.³¹ This is no less the case in documentary films, despite the fact that those involved in their production and distribution often trade on the notion that 'seeing is believing'. Reviews of food documentaries like *Food, Inc.* and *Super Size Me* have variously drawn attention to their lack of context, failure to interview the targets of their ire, and their 'black and white' representation of events.³² In some cases, the motivations behind the film's production have even been shown to result in a greater violence to its subjects than the conventional story it tried to disrupt. A case in point is the film about Tanzania's Nile Perch fishing industry, *Darwin's Nightmare*.³³ It was argued in one review that the film's director actively pursued a polarised and sensationalist account, falsely promoting the idea that the fish trade was linked to arms dealing and selecting for interview only those locals who seemed vulnerable, exploited or marginalised and guiding them off-camera for their subsequent 'performance'. In sum, *Darwin's Nightmare* was deemed 'an ethically dubious piece of journalism that exploits the power imbalances it claims to critique'.³⁴

To suggest that knowledges are necessarily incomplete and biased might be considered debilitating for food ethics. However, some agro-food scholars have used this epistemology to show how partiality can actually rework positions of indifference toward distant 'Others'. For example, Frank Trentmann has shown how the 'Buy Empire Goods' campaign of the early twentieth-century articulated an ethics of consumption resting on the emotional closeness of middle- and upper-class British housewives with white émigrés in the colonies.³⁵ This effectively collapsed the local/global distinction by working on an imperial scale, albeit one also reliant on class and racial hierarchies. In this sense, then, partiality and selective empathy might be considered the 'conditions for an ethical-political project that is at once both geographically expansive and geographically sensitive' – a communitarian alternative to Kantian quests for universal justice that rest on the cold, hard logic of reason.³⁶

This brings us to the final point we wish to explore: tracing the kinds of community created through this form of knowledge-production and delineating the interventions to which it gives rise. Many of the documentaries shown in the UK – such as TV the programme *Dying for a Biscuit* on palm oil or feature film *Black Gold* on coffee – have focused on the injustices of commercial agro-food practices with a clear agenda to reform certain aspects of their regulation.³⁷ Yet they sought to effect change in different ways. The former functioned as a conventional advocacy tool, relying on the leverage of the BBC (which screened the documentary to a prime time audience) to shame a single company, Unilever, into changing its buying practices, and on mass mobilization of consumers to follow suit and purchase products bearing a 'certified sustainable' label. The latter operated more as an activist film in the sense that it sought to work through existing global justice networks via screenings co-sponsored by Oxfam, but also sought to speak across political lines, hosting online forums and public debates where people could discuss their reactions to the film and where representatives of companies like Starbucks could also put their point across.³⁸ As these two examples show, documentaries can engage people in multiple ways and not simply as viewers/consumers but also as participants in the public sphere.

However, as Cook and Crang remind us, geographies of food have also been put in the service of profit, mobilized by corporations in order to capture value by imbuing their products with positive associations (the homemade cuisine; the natural ingredient) through the construction of a diverse range of commodity-signs.³⁹ Documentary films in the exposé tradition, such as the BBC's film *Mangetout*, have sought to displace such referents by revealing the reveal the social relations that constitute specific agro-food supply networks – in this case, by juxtaposing an upper-class British dinner party with farm workers in Zimbabwe and transforming the vegetable from exotic health-food to neocolonial disciplinary tool. The effect of *Mangetout* on Tesco's membership of the Ethical Trading Initiative and efforts to reform labour practices among its African suppliers demonstrates the ability of film to intervene in the foodscape, especially when leveraged against a brand name and harnessed by advocacy groups (here, Christian Aid) who can position themselves as being able to speak on

behalf of the afflicted groups.⁴⁰ It is worth noting here that the intended audience of such documentaries is not necessarily 'the consumer' of (un)ethical food, but rather a broader and polyglot figure that encompasses the retailer, the politician, the industry expert, and the shopper besides.

Taken together, this review offers three arguments that will guide our subsequent analysis. These are: (1) that the mobilisation of consumer response goes beyond revelation of information and into the realm of *affect*; (2) that these appeals are characterised by (and function on the basis of) *partial* knowledges; and (3) these can in turn evoke ethical competencies that transcend assumed boundaries of caring such as the 'local' or the 'community' and lead to *interventions* in the way social relations are organised through agro-food commodities.

Three Takes on Caribbean Sugar

Having surveyed the academic dialogue on the use of documentary film to narrate food geographies, we now turn to our analysis of three films. These were chosen not just for their diverse approaches to their subject matter, but also because of our familiarity with the places they filmed and/or the companies they referred to, allowing us to contextualise them empirically within the broader contours of the Caribbean sugar industry. A key benefit of researching the films *together* is that it lets us hone in on the different ways in which affect, partiality and intervention can function; a result that we then trace back to the documentary's particular film-making method and the interests surrounding its production and distribution. This comparative method also encourages us to aggregate their various perspectives by teasing out their common ties, making this otherwise kaleidoscopic view of the Caribbean more intelligible – a task we return to in the Conclusion.

Take 1: The Price of Sugar (Directed by Bill Haney; Uncommon Productions, 2008; 90 min)

This film centres on the efforts of a Spanish Priest, Father Christopher Hartley, who runs a parish in amongst the country's *bateyes*. These rural 'shantytowns' arose as enclaves for the Haitian migrants working as cane-cutters in the Dominican sugar industry, but have grown over time as many 'migrants' have in fact remained in the country and raised children there. Health and social problems in the *bateyes* are widely reported and from the outset the film shows us the squalid conditions, including testimonies from residents about the polluted water they have to drink and the overcrowded wooden shacks in which they live.⁴¹ We are also shown close-up images of mutilated hands, a result, one presumes, of accidents with machetes, and witness interviews with cane-cutters working barefoot in the field because, as one labourer put it, they are 'too poor to afford shoes'. This footage intends to shock viewers by revealing the structural violence and depredation of contemporary sugar production; a horror which hinges on the anachronism of seeing 'slave-like' conditions in the (supposedly) post-emancipation Caribbean.

Hartley's role as advocate-cum-agitator for the Haitian community of the *bateyes* is soberly narrated by Paul Newman and presented as a 'David versus Goliath' contest. The Goliath in question is Grupo Vicini, the company that owns the plantations in which the Father's parish is based. The film charts Hartley's efforts to organise the workers to demand basic human rights, including health care and the right to strike for better pay. Among its most serious charges is the claim that with the complicity of military and immigration authorities, destitute Haitians are picked up at the border, stripped of their identification papers and transported to the *bateyes* where they are monitored by armed guards. 'They are not allowed to leave the plantations' states the narrator at one point, as shots of people wearing military fatigues and carrying firearms silently appear on screen, hinting now at the physical violence surrounding the Haitians and potentially creating a sense of anxiety within the viewer.

When Hartley ultimately wins concessions for the workers to leave the plantation, anti-Haitian protests break out in the neighbouring town of Los Llanos – allegedly stoked up by the company – with Dominican citizens calling for the Priest's removal. The film ends with a dramatic, anarchic scene when the protesters gather outside the Hartley's church, calling for the 'immediate expulsion of all foreign subversives'. When they burst in, led by a vitriolic, nationalist TV presenter seeking to confront our protagonist, they are peacefully forced back out by the *batey* community that has gathered there to sing and worship with Hartley; an affective moment that asks the viewer, too, to share in this solidarity. This also comes as an act of redemption for the viewer, given earlier footage which has shown the happy frolicking of light-skinned American and European tourists on the beaches of Dominican Republic, oblivious to the exploitation happening only a few miles inland and arguably in

their name as sugar consumers. Nevertheless, closing subtitles remind us that Hartley and his followers remain under attack and that 'sugar exports to the United States continue unchecked'. The use of such final titling ('the story continues...') is thus deployed to bolster the narrative force, conveying carefully selected 'significant truths' to a leave lasting impression on the viewer, with the sense that their action could yet change the final outcome.

The Price of Sugar is best characterised as an exposé which uses the revelation of unseen horrors and hidden costs to evoke pathos in the viewer. The film enrolls clear affective strategies and identifies viewers primarily as consumers of sugar, but also appeals to them as more-than-consumers, as humanitarians, and seeks to create an empathy with the Haitians through the missionary work of Hartley. Like the target audience he has come from the white Anglophone West and his own personal journey which is traced in the film – from moneyed birth into the family responsible for Hartley's Jam (itself a onetime buyer of colonial sugar; an irony overlooked in the film) to his moral conversion via the priesthood in India and its apotheosis in his campaign in the Dominican Republic – suggests parallel courses of action to us. As he narrows his eyes in one interview, and says, in English, 'They know very well how determined I am to change the system', a sense of emotional identification and inspiration is conveyed to the viewer. We, too, could help change the system.

The film garnered a lot of attention in the US, although for reasons explained later, it has yet to be given general release. It was long-listed for Best Documentary by the Academy Awards and was given the Audience Award in the South by SouthWest film festival. Reviews of the film appeared in *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* among other titles, with one reviewer concluding that: 'Like most documentary polemics, it simplifies the issues it confronts and selects facts that bolster its black-and-white, heroes-and-villains view of raw economic power', although what these forgotten 'facts' might be was not mentioned.⁴² Through his participation in the Better Sugarcane Initiative,⁴³ one of this paper's authors was able to make contact with the Grupo Vicini and during a fieldwork trip to the Dominican Republic was invited on a tour around the areas in which the film was made. This provided the opportunity to open this polemic to polyvocality and explore the partiality of the film's production.

The purpose of the tour was essentially to rebut the film's credibility as a factual document rather than discuss the company's contribution to exploitation, racism and inequality in Dominican society that the film sought to raise. Two points were made in this respect. First, it was suggested that the film was inaccurate and included 'faked' footage. These errors ranged from erroneously claiming that an extravagant house belonged to the Vicini family to depicting deprived *bateyes* as Vicini property when they were actually old government ones, left to decay since the state vacated the industry following privatisation in the 1990s. Second, the guide argued that the company were working with reputable charitable organisations to make significant steps in providing better accommodation, social services and working practices for their workers; a point which had been overlooked in the film. One major project included the relocation and centralisation of *batey* residents into a purpose-built housing estate complete with school and medical centre. This development in fact featured prominently in the subsequent advertising campaign run by the company in *The Economist* magazine, targeting precisely those investors and tourists who might come to associate the specific sugar-sector allegations with the wider Vicini/Dominican Republic 'brand'.⁴⁴

A more engaging point, which acknowledged a 'grey area' in the film as opposed to a simple falsehood or exclusion, surrounded the framings of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. The film's narrator states that 'as many as a million Haitians live in the Dominican Republic; no-one knows for certain how many live in the *bateyes*'. Research puts that figure at around 200,000, although, as noted above, most of the *bateyes* are in fact attached to old government-owned plantations and their residents now more likely to find work in the informal sectors of nearby cities and other agricultural industries.⁴⁵ Vicini themselves only employ 1,500 field workers – even including family members, this would only total around 1% of the total of Haitians in the country. In fact, what the company would prefer to do is extend harvest mechanisation since this is considered both more efficient and less exploitative, but would of course remove almost all the unskilled jobs available, and, for that reason, is opposed by the cane-cutters.⁴⁶ In addition, our guide also suggested that the living conditions for Haitians should not be compared with those in developed countries (and which generates our shock in the film at seeing the small and dirty wooden shacks in the *bateyes*) but with those pertaining in the slums of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. It is this complexity that helps account for the film's

narrative choice of a heroic figure struggling against a monolithic organisation; a common technique for dramatizing systemic tensions within society that are unattributable to a single agent.⁴⁷

How did the film's affect and partiality, drawn from its heroic narrative and alleged inaccuracy, inform its eventual impact? Most notably, after first trying to suppress release of the film, the owners of Grupo Vicini filed a defamation suit against Uncommon Productions and producer Bill Haney, alleging 53 factual inaccuracies.⁴⁸ As a result of the case, Haney was forced to spend \$50,000 defending himself in court.⁴⁹ This also meant that many public screenings of the film were subject to legal contestation. In one case, the film was due to be shown at Texas' first-ever Fair Trade Film Festival but was pulled when the organisers received a letter from the Vicini's lawyers. The letter implied that if Haney lost the lawsuit, then any group that had chosen to show the film would potentially face legal action. This threat left one audience member enraged: 'That money and power can bully those trying to bring justice into this world into silence infuriates me'.⁵⁰ Reports of this in the media would thus reinforce the monolith form of Vicini that the film itself depicted. Emotions were also heightened at another screening, this time reaching the upper echelons of government. Shown alongside *Sugar Babies* – a film which looks at the fate of the children of Haitian immigrants – *The Price of Sugar* was dubbed part of a 'campaign of hate' against the sugar industry by the Dominican Foreign Minister, again echoing the attention paid to state capture in the film and the political influence wielded by the Vicini family.⁵¹

The company and its supporters have taken such a tough line because of the explicit threat the film poses to its commercial interests. The US government operates a sugar trade policy whereby imports from the Dominican Republic are paid above world market prices. The film frequently mentions the subsidy given to the Dominican sugar industry by US consumers, visualised through the pouring of sugar down the screen. Indeed, visitors to the film's website are encouraged to write to their congressman to demand that 'full civil and labor [sic] rights of cane workers are respected and guaranteed in exchange for the Dominican Republic's opportunity to export its sugar to the US market at preferential prices'.⁵² Haney himself has attempted to use this leverage, meeting with the bipartisan Congressional Human Rights Caucus to screen the film and raise the mistreatment of Haitians as a foreign policy issue. Following Haney's lead, Father Hartley has also engaged in a kind of entrepreneurial activism. After the EU's decision to open its sugar market to imports of sugar from a wider group of developing countries, including the Dominican Republic, Hartley wrote to the European Commission and executives of European sugar refiners – including Tate & Lyle – to urge them to apply pressure on their new suppliers.⁵³ Along with US State Department reports cited in his letters, Hartley uses the film and its associated media coverage as evidence of the need to act. That is to say, the documentary film quickly passed from being a position in the debate to a keystone of it, devoid of authorial intent. This stands in contrast to Hartley's personal involvement in the project. Although it is not mentioned in the film, it was at the request of Hartley himself following a chance meeting with Haney that the director first decided to document life in the *bateyes*.⁵⁴

Take 2: Tate & Lyle Fairtrade Sugar (Directed by Anon; Stanton Media, 2009; 3 min)

This film is set in Belize, a country on the Central American mainland, but which, due to the influence of British colonialism, shares much in common with its island neighbours. One of these shared legacies is an economy built around the export of raw sugar to European refiners, Tate & Lyle in particular. The short video tells the story of Tate & Lyle's work with the Fairtrade Foundation to help the country's sugar mill and 6,000 farmers meet the Fairtrade standard. Featuring interviews with sugarcane farmers interspersed with footage of the production process, the film begins by noting the damage caused by a recent hurricane. Talking heads tell us how the winds knocked down the cane, resulting in lower yields, as well as damaging school buildings. Slides then note how Tate & Lyle's commitment to Fairtrade 'will help ensure a livelihood for farmers' and that £2m of Fairtrade premiums have already been earmarked for this group. One of the farmers affirms that Fairtrade 'Is a good thing for us' before another exhorts Europeans to buy Belizean sugar as images of laughing schoolchildren dance across the screen, an allusion to the school reconstruction that could take place with the Fairtrade premium. A slide toward the end sums up the central message: 'Now, every time you buy a pack of Tate & Lyle Fairtrade cane sugar, sugar cane farming communities will benefit'. The film can thus be read as an effort to harness trust in a label by creating an image, literally, of *good* sugar.

With farmers shown in close-up, smiling and speaking directly to the camera with their names and job title spelled out on screen, a key documentary trope (and Fairtrade marketing strategy) is iterated in

the restoration of personhood, allowing distant consumers to empathetically connect with these now 'knowable' producers.⁵⁵ Moreover, the absence of a narrator means that the farmers themselves constitute the narrative voice, which takes place only through direct and positive subtitled statements; there are no questions asked and no equivocal answers given. There is also a notable lack of long takes where viewers would have time to watch and reflect on the material context of the farmers' experience.⁵⁶ Thus the film does not invite critical engagement or seek to trouble or disturb the viewer. Rather, through the use of short work-based shots of stoic-looking farmers and cane-cutters rapidly juxtaposed over joyful traditional Belizean music, a much more controlled emotional state is suggested. The film again appeals to viewers as more-than-consumers, but this time in a more passive sense, as charitable individuals that can effect change without having to invest in a common cause or struggle but just by switching brands at the supermarket shelf.

What kinds of partiality can be discerned within this film? First, we suggest that the film presents the sugarcane farmers as vulnerable rather than impoverished or marginalised. The developmental problem is articulated as one of physical geography: in a land prone to natural disasters and difficult environmental conditions like flooding, it is sheer bad luck that their livelihoods are precarious. In this context, purchases of Fairtrade sugar are construed more as a form of charity in response to the recent hurricane; an account supplemented by the press releases by Tate & Lyle and the Fairtrade Foundation accompanying the switch, which also emphasise this unforeseen shock as the culprit of the farmers' poverty.⁵⁷ Nothing is said in the film about the other factors that contribute to this, including the international market relations within which the Belizean sugar industry is enmeshed.

In this respect, more financially devastating to the industry than the hurricane was the reform to the EU sugar regime, which opened this market to competition but also lowered the prices paid to producers. This resulted in lost revenues for traditional suppliers like Belize, calculated at €8.3m in the first year alone.⁵⁸ To an extent, Tate & Lyle itself acquiesced in this shift. In evidence taken by the UK government, the company noted that, while they wished to see 'a remunerative price' be paid to Belize and other suppliers of raw sugar, their overriding concern was to ensure a ready supply of cane and large margins for refining.⁵⁹ In short, when push came to shove, the company prioritized its own narrow commercial interests. Allied to this is its historic association with the country. Contrary to what the film suggests, Tate & Lyle has in fact been linked to Belize (formerly British Honduras) since the 19th century, coming to act as the biggest purchaser of the industry's output and even taking direct ownership of a sugar mill there before divesting during the country's move to independence. This begs questions about the company's own role in the perpetuation of hardship over the preceding decades; a point masked over by the total absence of the company's name in the farmers' testimonies.

Another source of partiality comes from approaching the sugar industry as a collective endeavour rather than a capitalist activity marked by gendered and class hierarchies. The screen shot of the husband and wife, for example, says nothing about the share/control of income within the household, nor the difficulty that women often face in cane-growing areas in gaining title to land and ownership of the farm. Likewise, there is no distinction drawn between the various fractions of labour in the industry. For instance, cane-cutters like those shown in the video are often employed on a piece rate by farmers and receive a much smaller share of the benefits of the Fairtrade system. Moreover, the bundling of cane farmers together in a 'smallholder sector' also masks many of the political tensions that accompany co-operative organisations. This was notable given that just over a year after the Belize Sugar Cane Farmers Association was certified, it was then suspended by the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation for non-compliance with the standard. This related to mismanagement of the Fairtrade money and a lack of accountability in the governing committees. The suspension has since been lifted, though media reports suggest that subsequent audits conducted by members of Fairtrade had again found irregularities.⁶⁰

Both these omissions can be connected to the interests and intentions of the film's funders (as opposed to those of its director/protagonists as seen in *The Price of Sugar*). Clearly, a video made on behalf of Tate & Lyle is not going to criticise their practices or question the possibilities of Fairtrade to make a tangible difference to the lives of the poor. Moreover, the very nature of the film as an easily digested 'field report' inhibits the exploration of any complexity. Thus, *Tate & Lyle's Fairtrade* did not set out to generate controversy or even receive a large number of viewings. Rather, as an online resource hosted on the company's YouTube channel and embedded in related webpages, the documentary functioned as an authoritative reference underpinning the progressive values with which

the Tate & Lyle brand – not just the product bearing the Fairtrade label – would now be associated.⁶¹ As with other ‘corporate shorts’, we can speculate that it might also have had an important function *within* the company, convincing management of the ‘halo effect’ likely to be produced by this transformation in its marketing arrangements. To this effect, an additional video, also made by Stanton Media, showed how the Fairtrade launch campaign was covered in over 100 TV, radio and newspaper reports, reaching 115 million people.

This signals how consumers’ emotional investment in trusted ‘ethical’ labels is sustained and also parlayed into brand value; an exercise reiterated in the company’s UK advert in which it referenced its trade arrangements with Belize and referred to itself as ‘Tate & Smile’.⁶² However, this is highly misleading insofar as its Fairtrade commitment extends only to its retail sugar range, which is sold directly to consumers. Retail sugar accounts for around 20% of its UK business; the remainder is for industrial sugar, sold to food manufacturers for use in processed products and which is bought at lower prices from large-scale producers (i.e. through *unfair-trade*). As with supermarkets stocking organic product lines, this shows how the supposed binary of ‘conventional’ and ‘alternative’ food networks are now coalescing through powerful nodes in the supply chain, the contradictions between them smoothed over through the marketing spectacle.

Take 3: Barbados Sugar Workers’ Video Project (Facilitated by Author; 2007; 40 min; www.vimeo.com/16089820)

This film is the product of a participatory video project that was initiated and facilitated by one of the authors as part of a larger research program exploring the ethical geographies of Caribbean sugar. Participatory Video (PV) is a community development practice that has recently made its way into the social sciences as a tool for research.⁶³ Participants learn basic practical aspects of video production and then use these tools to identify, analyse and share issues through participatory learning and communication techniques. The participants then create a short film in a collaborative way. The workshop participants, who shot and directed this film, included three independent small farmers, one cane-cutter working on an estate, two sugar refinery workers and a local agricultural policy and development consultant – all working in Barbados. The intention of the facilitator was to use PV to create research material, and, in return, provide a video for participants to keep and show to their friends and families as well as an opportunity for workers to learn some new skills in video production.

The film itself conveys the importance of the sugar industry in Barbados and their belief that it should be sustained. This message was significant in the context of an industry in crisis and on the verge of a restructuring program that could see the closure of at least one factory.⁶⁴ Also important to consider is the fact that the sugar industries of other nearby islands – St. Kitts and Trinidad – had recently closed their own industries. So this video, unlike the other films discussed here, refers to an industry in visible decline. Perhaps for this reason, or perhaps due to the prevalence of elderly men in the ‘cast’, there is a sense of nostalgia for the sugar sector and bygone days.⁶⁵ This tragic emplotment is communicated not by a narrator or the film’s storyline (such as it is) but rather in a polyvocal manner by the workers themselves, who speak directly to the camera. The use of consistent eye contact serves to engage the viewer in a different, more intimate manner, as the film’s images come to assume, as David MacDougall put it, ‘a phenomenological existence as substantial as our glimpses of actual persons’.⁶⁶ The participants convey the sugar industry in a positive light, referring to its role as a source of livelihoods, foreign exchange, environmental amelioration, locally produced food and an essential partner to the tourism sector. The content/narrative of the film is therefore largely self-affirming and supportive of the industry, with the cast advocating for the protection of cane lands and the continuation of the sugar sector in the face of a foreboding economic climate.

Whilst PV is intentionally open about who is involved in the film, it is also explicit about its partiality. For example, it was expressed in the workshop that the voices of ordinary workers such as themselves were not heard in the mainstream media. The film is thus purposefully biased towards the perspective of employees/workers, as opposed to the government, industry or European perspectives, though it is important to note that direct criticism would have been potentially dangerous for the participants, most of who depended on this small and close-knit industry for their livelihood.⁶⁷ It is also open about this partiality, showing behind-the-camera footage to make explicit that the participants were, quite literally, calling the shots. What is evoked by the images and anecdotes in the video is a sense of sugar being fully integrated as a way of life for the elderly small farmers, embedded and embodied in historically significant livelihood practices. The participants shot long, 20-

minute takes of cane-cutting and insisted that the facilitator visit the factory to gather footage of different aspects of the production process. The positive appraisal of the sector, coming from the mouths of people who are typically assumed to have a hard time (and therefore should be complaining!) is perhaps surprising to non-Caribbean viewers. This can be contrasted with the indifference shown to the everyday experiences of workers during the EU reform process, and the suggestion by some that Barbados would be better off without a sugar industry.⁶⁸

Following the film-making period in the Caribbean, the facilitator/author returned to the UK to write about the PV and the broader research context.⁶⁹ The video has since been shown for discussion in an academic context in the UK, the US and in South Africa. Here the *BSWVP* was found to be an especially useful film for reflecting on the partiality of constructing a narrative. A key discovery was that while a consensus did emerge within the workshops around the narrative of the film, tensions arose between the old and the young, and also between the facilitator and participants. The perspective of the film was therefore not unbiased but decided upon by the (dominant) group members. Yet by the same token, the participatory method was also key in allowing for new and unexpected positions to emerge by explicitly disrupting the controlled perspective incumbent in most film-making processes. Had the researcher set out to independently make a conventional documentary, she certainly would not have been inclined to present the sugar industry in an uncritical light and without reference to the broader neo-liberal context. But the PV process disavowed such a film and genuinely surprised the researcher with its overwhelmingly positive appraisal of the sugar industry and the reluctance of the participants to countenance its closure.

In terms of the interventions in the ethical foodscape enabled by this documentary, we have a somewhat different starting point here in that the original intention of the facilitator was *not* to effect change beyond the workshop and research environment. However, these modest intentions were overthrown during one of the workshops when, having seen the rough edited version of the film, all participants were enthused and keen to have the film shown more widely. It was agreed that the video should be freely available for all to view on the Internet and that there should be a local screening event where industry stakeholders could watch and discuss the issues presented by the film. All participants were invited as well as about 50 key stakeholders, national press and interested persons in the sugar sector. Here, the partiality of the farmers' film chimed loudly. While some members of the audience appreciated hearing the views of 'ordinary' workers, others were frustrated by the lack of interviews with managers and policy-makers. 'What *were* the official plans for the industry?' they asked. Fortunately, there were several managerial stakeholders in the audience and the facilitator re-directed such questions. This was not appreciated by those who were called upon and when, for example, questions were raised about the prospective new factory, the Barbados Agricultural Management Company representative in charge of the restructuring programme refused to comment or impart any information to the audience. This is an example of how documentaries often take on a trajectory not anticipated by the film-makers, and also, of how the intended audience of a producer documentary does not have to be the (Western) 'consumer' by default but could also be those closer to home with multiple subjectivities, and who are able to influence agri-food livelihoods through changes in *domestic* policy/practice.

This *BSWVP* has not, in relative terms, been widely distributed; nor was it hostile to any party and so did not provoke any political backlash, as in *The Price of Sugar*. Unsurprisingly, there has been no comment on the film as a *documentary*. Rather, the political import of this film is the method of its production and the circumstances of its consumption. The national newspaper coverage of the screening event focused on the fact that the sugar workers' directed and shot the film. The collective viewing at the screening itself prompted questions to be asked by community members of people in authority including the facilitator; an important part of critical enquiry and one which was largely absent from the reception of the other two films. They also brought people into dialogue who would not usually meet outside of the hierarchical structures of work, such as the plantation owner and the small farmer. Taken together, the film momentarily reconfigured an agro-food geography pertaining to social distance; a distance we might have assumed as outsiders did not exist within this close-knit place of production.

Conclusions

In the colonial era, imagery of Caribbean sugar production was produced through pictorial studies, stretching from the idyllic paintings of sugar estates commissioned by planters (and conspicuously

devoid of labouring Africans) to the famous diagram of the Brookes slave ship crammed with bodies, used by abolitionists to express the inhumanity of the middle passage. In this paper we have made the case that with the increasing appetite for (tele)visual performances of food, the active penetration of agribusiness into film production, and the ascendance of 'DIY'-style video and its rapid dissemination through the web,⁷⁰ documentary film should be taken seriously as a key medium through which the politics of representation and constitution of the foodscape now takes place. We showed how the three films discussed here each put a spotlight on the social relations of sugar, a difficult task for a mass-market commodity usually consumed as an invisible ingredient, and in so doing evoked a consciousness of ethics and consideration of our relationship to food.

As a medium for portraying agro-food ethics, documentary film is, like any representational medium, always partial; films reveal an incomplete part of a picture and are biased towards certain motivations and mediated by certain understandings. Part of our argument has been to show how this partiality that conceals 'facts' also helps produce affect and emotive experience. Yet, contrary to our emphasis in the literature review on the affective dimension of the film *per se* to intervene in the foodscape, the other part of our argument has been to show how the (often unexpected) social encounters that took place at screenings and/or the media coverage generated by the documentaries were actually pre-eminent in influencing 'on the ground' change. While the films each interpellated, or hailed, the viewer as a particular subject (humanitarians, charity-givers and communitarians), their power to mobilise this post-affect subjectivity politically rested on their provision of controversial/novel perspectives so as to generate public interest at screenings and 'evidence' for journalistic stories to be compiled. In determining their authority, then, the context in which films are received should be considered just as important as the content they deliver.

Our discussion of the three films about Caribbean sugar has also highlighted the importance of deconstructing the truth claims of documentary. In this paper we sought not to falsify specific claims but rather to contextualise them, and, out of this, prompt overarching questions like 'What does it mean that Tate & Lyle refines cane from both Belize (ethical) and Dominican Republic (unethical)?' and 'Is cane-cutting an arduous artefact of slavery or a vital source of rural employment?' This kind of comparative discussion is also useful in making the cumulative 'kaleidoscopic' viewing experience intelligible. Someone watching these three films together might end up wondering if Caribbean sugar is irredeemably bad, imminently good, or simply culturally relative. Hopefully, we have tried to convey here that there is not a singular story of Caribbean sugar to be revealed but rather manifold narratives to be retold, relating to both the actual disparity of experience across different geographical contexts as well as to the partialities of documentary production.

A benefit of this approach in praxis is that we can better imagine how crude solutions imposed systematically might have unintended consequences. Just as Freidberg noted how the ban on child labour in UK-African supply chains that followed the *Mangetout* exposé did not actually serve the best interests of the labour force, so too, in light of our comparative viewing, might we rethink the removal of trade preferences and shift to mechanisation in the sugar industry advocated by development thinkers today.⁷¹ Debates around food films, we argue, should not be left to film studies alone – the empirical strength of geography must be harnessed to encourage wider engagement with how these representations impact on lived experience, shape both material and cultural geographies, construct new communities of concern, as well as rework and reproduce structural inequalities.

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- ⁶¹ FULL REFERENCE? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srROiDt4eD0>
- ⁶² S. Whatmore and L. Thorne, 'Nourishing networks: alternative geographies of food', in D. Goodman and M. Watts, eds, *Globalising Food: Agrarian Questions and Global Restructuring*, (London: Routledge, 1997), pp 287-304.
- ⁶³ S. Kindon, 'Participatory Video in geographic research: a feminist practice of looking?' *Area* 35 (2) (2003), pp.142-53; S. Pink, 'Participatory video: Images that transform and empower', *European Journal of Communication* 19 (3) (2004), pp. 411-412.
- ⁶⁴ Government of Barbados, *Barbados Adaptation Strategy 2006-2014*, (April 2006).
- ⁶⁵ In the space of two generations, the number of small cane farmers in Barbados has decreased exponentially, with only 300 or so remaining in 2007 (removed for review 2009). Most of these farmers are now elderly, with few new starters due to the social stigma attached to small farming and the perception that sugar is on the way out.

⁶⁶ D. MacDougall [INSERT REF] (1998), p. 48.

⁶⁷ It is also biased towards a male view: although women form a substantial minority of the workforce, all female workers declined the invitation to participate in the project due to other commitments.

⁶⁸ See A. Payne and P. Sutton, 'Repositioning the Caribbean within Globalisation', *Centre for International Governance Innovation, Caribbean Paper 1*, June 2007.

⁶⁹ Reference removed for review

⁷⁰ In a notable epilogue to our story, despite its general release still being suppressed by legal action, *The Price of Sugar* has now been uploaded to YouTube, where it can be viewed in full.

⁷¹ Freidberg, S. 'Perspective and power in the ethical foodscape', *Environment and Planning A* 42 (8), pp. 1868-1874; see D. Mitchell, 'Sugar in the Caribbean: Adjusting to Eroding Preferences', *World Bank Staff Working Paper*, WPS3802 (2005).