Alternative Food Media as Site of Radical Praxis

Mallika Khanna, IU Bloomington Media School

Narrative and impetus

Historically, North American food media has been a markedly conservative media form, littered with exoticization, tropes of alienness and disgust, and a constant, uncritical xenophobic othering of nonwhite foods. Recent reckonings in food media around race and power have created new possibilities and avenues for different stories around race, diasporicity and food to be told.

For this project therefore, I move past critiques of conventional food media to explore the many alternatives to tired narratives that can be found in alternative food media, which I posit as an innovative space where truly radical food work can happen (and is happening).

Methods

I used Voyant for web-based text reading, analysis and visualization. I used David Mimno's jsLDA tool for topic modeling.

I used 60 articles from 5 alternative media outlets (Whetstone Magazine, Southern Foodways Alliance, Fare Magazine, Sourced Journeys and Cleaver Quarterly) as a preliminary database. My sampling was entirely subjective, based on my prior knowledge of this space.

With some preliminary results established, I am creating a digital garden through Notion where viewers can interact with my findings and with the primary data collected for the project.

Findings #1: Land and Indigeneity

One of the more exciting turns in alternative food media has been towards taking indigenous relationships to land seriously. Through topic modeling, I found that the words "indigenous," "indigeneity" and "native" appeared in multiplicitous and tentacular relationships to both each other and to other topics, particularly those oriented around land, farming and agriculture.

This relationship has important connotations. Historically food media has painted indigeneity as entirely "damage-centered," to use Eve Tuck's crucial phrasing. Stories about redeeming fry bread, about loss of native land, about past abundance giving way to reservation scarcity were the norms in the few spaces offering any representation to indigenous narratives.

Alternative food media are not interested in resisting these narratives with "better" stereotypes about indigenous foodways. Rather, they bring us a set of concerns and desires that resist the hegemonic playing field altogether.

Findings #2: Grain, Seed, Crop

The abundance of agricultural references (seeds, crops, land, grain, growing) in the corpus was striking. Through topic modeling, I noticed that agricultural references were correlated overwhelmingly to sustainability and self-reliance, which takes on particular importance for diasporic and racialized communities.

The idea of the "homeland" has a particular valence for diasporic communities- as an "out there" or inaccessible space both deeply tied to land and simultaneously intangible. Based on my findings, I contend that alternative food media are providing materialist framings for this imaginary of homeland by using food to LITERALLY link land to cultural heritage.

The words farmers, seeds, seed, agricultural, agriculture, varieties, growing, crops, grow, land in the Voyant word cloud indicate a deep investment in land as the site where food emerges. Unlike the traditional model of food media, which starts from the restaurant and ends with the restaurant critic, this alternative space offers possibilities for reconfiguring how food is understood, making the growing process a (the?) crucial node of diasporic food systems.

Findings #3: Temporality

One of conventional food media's most enduring tropes is its proliferation of nostalgia centered narratives. These are stories centered around loss, around the desire to go back to something that never was there to begin with.

Through multiple Voyant visualizations, I found that my corpus had few words referencing nostalgia, loss, homeland, missing, lack or failure. Instead, looking at the relationships between time related words, I found that they are most often used to indicate endurance, persistence and possibility. Topic modeling further indicates a relationship between temporality, community and kinship structures, indicating persistence and continuity through relational practices.