

The paradoxes of purity in organic agriculture in Burkina Faso

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Abstract: For decades, critical agri-food scholarship has sought to evaluate the outcomes of alternative agri-food systems such as organic. Two key critiques have emerged: the first focuses on the limitations of certification-based systems that rely on a neoliberal model of consumer concern; the second critique highlights the Whiteness of alternative food movements and the persistence of racial exclusions. In this paper, we draw these critiques together and extend them through an ethnographic case study of organic cotton in Burkina Faso, West Africa. We explore contradictions in the win-win-win discourse of organic cotton, which promises ecological sustainability, improved livelihoods for producers, *as well as* pure products for consumers. We argue there is an implicit prioritization of consumers within several organic cotton regulatory rules that focus on ensuring final products free of contamination from pesticide residues. We contend that these rules create difficulties for producers and obstacles for the expansion of sustainable agriculture. Further, the focus on “purity for the consumer” may actually reproduce and transmit (historically fraught and colonial) racialized imaginaries of purity. Some Burkinabè producers see organic as prioritizing purity for an imagined White consumer. Organic’s call to “get back to the dirt” also clashes with a cultural context where aspiration for development is

often expressed as “getting *out* of the dirt.” This paper thus raises new questions about the implications of organic agriculture’s intense focus on purity for a) the full realization of the promise of organics and b) residual racial imaginaries embedded within the idiom of “purity” itself.

Keywords: cotton, organic certification, inverted quarantine, global race theory, Whiteness, West Africa

1. Introduction

“All social movements based on purity are intrinsically exclusionary.”

-Goodman, Goodman, and DuPuis (2013:427)

In the last few decades, agri-food movements around the world have launched major social and environmental critiques of conventional agricultural systems and global commodity chains. Alongside these critiques, a multitude of alternative production and trading systems have emerged, many based on voluntary certification and labels. Appellations such as organic and fair trade have sought to provide consumers with the guarantee of more environmentally sustainable or socially equitable production conditions or trade relations. A substantial body of scholarship has sought to evaluate the success and outcomes of these alternatives: are they achieving what they promise? (i.e. Besky 2013; Guthman 2004a; Raynolds, Murray, and Wilkinson 2007).

This paper engages with two central critiques of how these certification systems have played out. The first key critique is that certification systems are inherently consumer-focused and rooted in a neoliberal politics in which individuals are urged to make their own choices and

vote with their dollars (Guthman 2007; Guthman and Brown 2016; Johnston 2008; LeBesco 2011). These consumer-focused efforts that are often motivated as “precautionary consumption” (MacKendrick 2018) can reinforce social inequalities. Szasz (2007) has argued that the consumer strategy of “shopping our way to safety” is based on a logic of an “inverted quarantine,” wherein privileged consumers protect their own bodies while leaving the broader environment and others’ bodies contaminated (i.e. those who can’t afford these practices). The second key critique concerns the racial exclusions and racial formations that have accompanied, are embedded within, or produced through alternative agri-food systems. Critical scholars have highlighted the often invisible Whiteness of the spaces, bodies, and discourses of many alternative agri-food movements, including organic (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Guthman 2011; Slocum 2007).

This article brings together these two critiques to examine how the consumer-focused “inverted quarantine” logic of organic agriculture intersects with racialized logic of purity. We examine this through the case of organic cotton production in Burkina Faso, West Africa, a context where organic producers are mostly poor African women, the rules of certification are created in the United States and Europe, and the final products are intended for predominantly Northern consumers (Freidberg 2004; Galt 2014; Reynolds 2004). Promoters of organic agriculture claim that this arrangement can produce ecological sustainability and improved livelihoods for producers (Kaegi, Bischof, and Luethi 2017), *as well as* pure products for consumers (OCA 2018) .

This article explores contradictions in this win-win-win discourse. There is an assumption within organic that a focus on purity and “clean” products for consumers (a product uncontaminated by synthetic inputs) will be good for the consumer, the producer, and the environment. Yet there is nonetheless an implicit prioritization of the consumer, which is

particularly visible in several organic codification rules which have little to do with protecting the environment or the producer but focus instead on ensuring a *final product* free of contamination from pesticide residues. In analyzing several of these rules in this paper, we argue that contrary to the win-win-win discourse, the focus on purity for the consumer actually creates difficulties for the producer and obstacles for the expansion of sustainable agriculture.

We then examine how these certification rules and practices reproduce and transmit (historically fraught and colonial) racialized imaginaries of purity, drawing upon a growing body of global critical race scholarship (Arat-Koç 2010; Bacchetta, Maira, and Winant 2018; Christian 2019; Go 2018; Itzigsohn & Brown 2020). As Jemima Pierre has argued: “how could any postcolonial society not be structured by its legacy of race and racialization— especially when colonialism was, in the most ideological, political, and practical way, racialized rule?” (2013:xiv). We also draw on Ramamurthy (2004) and Marston’s (2011) insights that global commodity chains produce more than commodities; they also produce (and create spaces where people navigate and contest) cultural meaning and imaginaries. We explore how Burkinabè cotton producers react to organic’s strict insistence on purity for the consumer, showing how this standard reinvigorates a racial imaginary that links Whiteness with purity. Some Burkinabès are critical of a system that seems to produce clean products for Northern consumers (but not for local consumption). We also identify a cultural contradiction between Northern romanticism about “getting back to the dirt” (where purity is now defined vis-a-vis chemicals, not dirt) and Burkinabè aspirations for development that are defined locally as “getting out of the dirt.” This article thus raises questions about the potential unintended (or invisible) paradoxes of certification-based systems such as organic, particularly when these systems travel to formerly colonized nations in the Global South.

2. Critical agri-food studies and racial legacies of purity

Critical scholarship of agri-food movements has revealed the internal contradictions that arise within market-based certification systems. Because of label-based strategies, market logics, and the structural requirements of the capitalist system, these movements may fail to achieve the goals they seek and actually reproduce race, class, and gender inequalities and re-entrench market systems. Here, we contribute to this conversation by connecting U.S.-based and global commodity chain scholarship on alternative agri-food systems with critical race theory to introduce new questions about the racial logics of purity that permeate and are transported into communities through codified strategies of contamination management within organics.

Scholars identify alternative agri-food systems as potential avenues for producing just sustainability (Gottlieb 2009; Lamine, Darnhofer, and Marsden 2019) and improved social relations (Allen and Kovach 2000). Yet, scholars of the movement and its gains also highlight how, despite benevolent intentions to produce progressive change, these movements are nonetheless rife with exclusionary, inequitable, and exploitative processes (Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Allen 2010; Mares and Alkon 2011). Julie Guthman's work (2004a, 2018) has elucidated the many contradictions that emerge between the stated objectives of the organic movement and the structural imperatives of capitalist markets that constrain its transformative potential, triggering significant debate over the concept of the "conventionalization" of organic (Nikol and Jansen 2021). These various contradictions (in organic but also fair trade) can limit or undermine the achievement of various goals, such as gender equity (Lyon 2008; Terstappen et al. 2013), sustainability (Guthman 2004a; Partzsch and Kemper 2019; Szasz 2007), or the promise of "de-fetishizing" the commodity and reconnecting consumers with producers (Dolan 2010; Gunderson 2014; Marston 2013; West 2012).

Another prominent critique focuses on the emphasis on consumer choice within market-based alternatives and a neoliberal, “vote with your fork” politics that fosters exclusionary, classed boundaries (Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Goodman and Goodman 2001; Johnston 2008; Mares and Alkon 2011), and gendered responsibilities (MacKendrick 2018). Scholars of U.S. agri-food activism highlight how, through this model, organic certification schemes “foste[r] niche production for those consumers who can afford to pay premium organic prices” (Goodman and Goodman 2001:115). These consumers engage in what MacKendrick (2018) calls “precautionary consumption,” or a form of “Not-In-My-Body” (NIMB) politics (DuPuis 2000; Guthman and Brown 2016). Furthermore, Szasz’s (2007) concept of the “inverted quarantine” emphasizes how the privatization of contamination management has produced a focus on protecting particular consumers’ individual bodies as safe havens of purity and health, while the broader environment and other, often less powerful, peoples are left to absorb the externalized chemical *and* labor burdens unaccounted for by a green market system. We draw on these scholars’ insights, and the notion of the inverted quarantine, to draw attention to organic agriculture’s focus on what we call “purity for the consumer.”

Critical agri-food literature also explores how White racial logics have powerfully shaped agri-food activism spaces, discourses, and objectives in the U.S. Several scholars have highlighted the production of White spaces within the movement through the preponderance of White bodies and the perpetually unacknowledged cultural norms of Whiteness (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Anguelovski 2015; Slocum 2007; Slocum and Saldanha 2016). Colorblindness shapes agri-food activism through the unmarked universalization of White desire – a “‘politics of perfection’ which universalizes and elevates particular ways of eating as ideal,” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005: 362) and positions White desires and imaginaries as both correct and righteous

(Guthman 2008, 2011). Meanwhile, White agrarian dreams of “getting one's hands dirty” – which translate into various attempts to build alternative systems – often overlook violent, racialized histories of White settler colonialism, forced labor, and land theft in agriculture (Finney 2014; Guthman 2011).

Several critical scholars (i.e. Freidberg 2004, Galt 2014, Glin et al. 2012, Marston 2013, Ramamurthy 2004, West 2012) have sought to unpack the contradictions of ethical goods within global commodity chains, moving beyond a purely economic analysis to examine the production of both material lives as well as cultural discourses and meaning-making for both producers and consumers. Following the neoliberal deregulation of states within the Global South, global commodity chains have been increasingly governed by European and U.S.-based third-party certifications, creating export-oriented production systems based on the standards and desires of buyers in the Global North (Dolan and Humphrey 2000; Freidberg 2004; Reynolds 2004; West 2012). Organic standards in developing countries, for example, are generally harmonized with U.S. and E.U. standards, to guarantee the export and certification of organic products as “equivalent” (Sawyer, Kerr, and Hobbs 2008). Given this dynamic, some scholars have contended that these commodity chains and certification regimes represent a form of neocolonial governmentality through imposed Western standards (Galvin 2011; West 2012). Scholars like Paige West (2012) and Priti Ramamurthy (2004) have also drawn attention to the contradictions in how “ethical consumerism” is portrayed in Western countries – how advertisements often reproduce notions of “primitive” and racialized Others who are being saved by the Western ethical consumer, yet often completely obscure or mis-represent the complex experiences, lives, and aspirations of people involved in these commodity chains. In challenging the win-win-win discourse of organics, this article builds on this approach.

In terms of underlining the inequalities produced by these systems, Galt's (2014) research in Costa Rica highlights the systemic injustice of an agricultural commodity chain in which agricultural products with *less* pesticide residue get exported while more contaminated products are consumed locally; he thus demonstrates how organic certification can prioritize consumers in North America over producers in Central America, despite the win-win-win promises of ethical consumerism. Freidberg (2003) also identifies the racialized discourse of "cleaning up down South" that accompanied contamination rules on vegetables exported from Africa to Europe, a discourse that implies a "White man's burden" approach to managing contamination in global commodity chains and evokes the historically racialized view of Africans as dirty and contaminated.

Building on these insights, our analysis opens up some additional ways that organic certification standards both unwittingly produce barriers for improved producer livelihoods and ecological sustainability, and also reproduce racial imaginaries throughout the global commodity chain. We are particularly interested in organic agriculture's intense focus on purity. Given the deeply racialized history of the concepts of purity and contamination¹, we explore how certified organic agriculture – originally designed and codified in the North – plays out in a formerly colonized country. We thus analyze this assemblage of market-based change strategies and racial discourses while paying attention to the shifting sands of racial representation and meaning (Omi and Winant 2014).

¹ Notions of purity have been central to the historical development of ideas about race. Early constructions of Whiteness drew heavily on discourses of purity and cleanliness, and constituted racialized Others through notions of contamination, dirtiness, and pollution (Berthold 2010; Mills 2001; Zimring 2016). Early codification of racial difference in the U.S. shaped White identity as a "declaration of racial purity" (Gotanda 1991:26). Discourses of White purity/cleanliness and dirty/contaminated racialized Others were employed throughout Europe's colonial empire (Burke 1996; Freidberg 2003; McClintock 1995; Newell 2020).

3. Methods

Data for this paper come from eight months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first and third authors in Burkina Faso in 2016. As part of broader research on the cotton sector, which included a total of 125 interviews with cotton sector actors (including conventional farmers, conventional cotton sector employees, scientists, and NGO employees), the first author conducted interviews with organic cotton sector representatives from Helvetas, Catholic Relief Services, and three senior organic sector employees in the cotton farmers' union (UNPCB). Following these connections, the first and third authors spent two weeks in the Cascades region in the town of Tiéfora, one of the earliest sites of organic cotton production. The first author (a White American woman) speaks fluent French and Dioula (the prominent lingua franca in southwestern Burkina Faso) and conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation fieldwork without translation, but with crucial cultural and linguistic assistance from the third author (native Burkinabè). References to “we” in this section refer to the first and third author, who engaged in extended discussions of how our positionalities shaped our data collection process. Certainly, the presence of a White woman shaped peoples' reactions (particularly in raising concerns about de-certification) and also shaped our interpretations.

Somewhat surprisingly, entry into this sector was difficult. We learned that many people were suspicious of outsiders asking questions, particularly a White woman, because of 1) concerns about losing organic certification (fears that we were undercover inspectors), and 2) concerns linked to “the Victoria's Secret scandal” from 2011, when a Bloomberg reporter wrote that Burkinabè organic/fair trade cotton was grown using child labor. This report nearly crashed Burkina Faso's fledgling organic sector due to Victoria's Secret's abrupt pull-out from the market. To contend with these difficulties, we drove around on a motorcycle in surrounding

areas and stopped in peoples' fields to try to expand our interview base beyond pre-selected interviewees. (We followed IRB protocol in this process, introduced ourselves and our research, and obtained consent from these participants). This was useful in that we met many ex-organic farmers – those who had adopted but left for a range of reasons. Of the grower groups we interacted with, most of them had shrunk considerably from their original size.

We interviewed an organic extension agent and thirteen organic (8) and ex-organic (5) cotton farmers (a mix of men and women), asking about reasons for adopting organic (and for leaving organic), the advantages and difficulties with organic, broader questions about changes in farming practice and their community, and their aspirations for the future. We also spent time harvesting cotton with some of the farmers and their families, conversing as we picked cotton. Although this is a small data set, claims based on this data are primarily about the basic structure of organic codification and certification, which we feel that our data can support, and are supported by other publications on Burkinabè organic cotton (Bassett 2010; Métouolé Méda et al. 2018).

Other claims we make in this paper are exploratory, intended to raise questions about the racial imaginaries that may be evoked in this system. These latter claims are supported by additional data from another site in southwest Burkina Faso: two neighboring communities in the Tuy Province (Hauts-Bassins region), where the primary author (and at times the third author) spent five months conducting participant observation work and over 67 interviews with primarily conventional cotton farmers. Besides cotton, several farmers grew organic soybeans and sesame, and many women were part of an organic shea butter initiative. Interviews and conversations on the topic of organic production from this site thus inform our reflections on the racialized imaginaries of purity and contamination that surround organic production in Burkina Faso.

4. The promise and limits of organic cotton in Burkina Faso

Cotton has long been a pivotal cash crop in Burkina Faso, constituting the largest agricultural export crop and providing substantial revenue for the state (Gray 2008; Gray, Dowd-Uribe, and Kaminski 2018). The conventional cotton sector relies on extensive use of pesticides and fertilizers, many of which are quite toxic and pose significant health and ecological risks for farm communities (Luna 2018, 2020). This sector is organized by three vertically integrated cotton companies that operate as monopsonies in their respective regions (selling inputs to farmers on credit and then purchasing back farmers' cotton) (Dowd-Uribe 2014a). Conventional cotton production is also almost entirely controlled by male farmers (though wives provide field labor); despite women's historical role growing cotton for local textile markets in West Africa, colonial agents and extension efforts organized export-oriented cotton production around male producers (Gray and Moseley 2008).

Burkina Faso's organic/fair trade cotton program began in 2004 with help from Switzerland, particularly the Swiss NGO Helvetas. The program has been run through the conventional cotton sector's farmer union (UNPCB), which organizes farmers into Organic Cotton Producer Cooperatives (GPCBs), assisted by organic cotton extension agents. Other Swiss NGOs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Catholic Relief Services have also been involved in supporting the program. Emphasis was placed on reaching women and other groups marginal to the conventional cotton sector, not on converting conventional farmers to organic. This is an important point, in that organic cotton is often not a "replacement" for conventional cotton, but a separate activity; many organic cotton growers were new to cotton. Organic certification has been carried out by Ecocert International, and fair trade certification by FLO-Cert (Bassett 2010). Significant to our analysis in this paper, Burkina Faso's organic standards

are based on U.S. and E.U. standards to ensure that the exported products can be labeled organic in those markets (Helvetas 2008).

In 2015, there were 8300 organic/fair trade cotton farmers (roughly half women), who produced 1468 tons of seed cotton. The average farmer's field size was 0.5 hectares, and average yields were roughly 500kg per hectare. Farmers received 325 CFA (roughly 60 US cents) per kilogram, plus a 34 CFA fair trade bonus to their cooperative (Interview with Helvetas, 2016; see further statistics in Kaegi et al. 2017). For comparison (though again, many organic cotton farmers are not converts), conventional cotton farmers in 2015 grew 3-4 hectares with average yields of 900-1000 kg/h, and more than 170,000 farmers produced roughly 700,000 tons of cotton on 660,000 hectares (AICB 2015). These farmers received less money per kilogram (235 CFA per kg) and spent substantially more on fertilizers, insecticides, and herbicides. Profit margins may be similar between organic and conventional (Vognan et al. 2017), though conventional farmers can more easily scale up.² This comparison reminds us that after a dozen years, the organic/fair trade cotton sector still represented less than 1% of cotton production in Burkina Faso and should not necessarily be seen as a replacement or alternative to conventional cotton at this point.

Publications by Helvetas claim that organic/fair trade cotton in Burkina Faso has had economic, social, and environmental benefits for producers: increasing farmer profits, reducing debts, ameliorating poverty, reducing pesticide use, and improving soil fertility (Kaegi et al. 2017). In terms of pesticides, organic cotton farmers are indeed less exposed to pesticides than conventional cotton growers, who use many harmful pesticides during production, including the

² Importantly, per-hectare profits do not always correspond with total profits. As one ex-organic farmer explained: "Yes, with organic, you can make a higher profit for a small area. But you can't do more than a small area. So the overall profit isn't that high." With conventional, he farmed four hectares, obtained fertilizer for his corn, and his corn had higher yields, "so the family eats." He said, "A lot of people realized this and went back to conventional."

insecticide chlorpyrifos and herbicides atrazine, paraquat, and glyphosate (see Luna 2018, 2020). Nonetheless, organic cotton farmers are still exposed to pesticides if they or their family members also grow conventional crops or purchase conventional produce. Market vegetables are often grown with pesticides (Korbéogo 2018), including chemicals intended for conventional cotton (Yonli 2019), and some organic cotton farmers we interviewed reported using chemicals on their food crops or reported family members who grow conventional cotton; for these growers, their small field of organic cotton may be the only field that is chemical-free. Nonetheless, we did interview several people (including two widows) who, like the promotional materials put together by Helvetas, were quite positive about the economic opportunities and the lack of pesticide exposure in organic production.

At the same time, it is worth considering why organic cotton has remained very limited in scale, representing a small number of farmers with less than 1% of cropland. One central component is the vested interests and monopoly power of the conventional cotton sector, which in Burkina Faso has been dismissive of organic and failed to provide much institutional support (Bassett 2010; Coulter 2011; Métouolé Méda et al. 2018). This was particularly true when the conventional cotton sector also grew genetically modified cotton from 2008-2016 and pushed organic production into marginalized areas due to concerns about contamination (Kaegi et al. 2017). It is worth noting that although organic proponents may blame GM seeds and a “multinational company” for organic’s marginalization (Kaegi et al. 2017), we should also consider how organic’s strict criteria for purity also played a role.

Organic cotton farming requires intensive labor, resources, and knowledge. Andrew Flachs (2019) has argued that organic shares a “technical solution” approach, similar to that of GM seeds, that relies on outside expertise and markets while ignoring the complex political and

social roots of agrarian distress. In many ways, the purity of organic is achieved by replacing synthetic chemicals with labor (hand-weeding rather than herbicides; hand-made compost rather than fertilizers). As one woman described: “It’s just you and your sweat in the organic fields.” While this may be good for farmers in reducing chemical exposure, it also creates new struggles, particularly in a broader context of increasing labor shortages. Compost, for example, takes labor and resources, yet many poor farmers report not having easy access to animal manure, not having carts or equipment, and having to haul water in jugs over long distances (Dowd 2008).³ Meanwhile, Burkinabè farmers are facing extreme labor shortages (Luna 2020). As one male farmer explained:

We decided to stop growing organic. It’s because of all the difficulties, the materials. You have to go get water from the marsh (to wet the compost). I myself used to dig the pits to make compost. But we don’t have any labor. All our kids are in school, they leave to go to school when the sun is up. So you tell them to go to school, then you tell them they have to help make organic compost, you can’t. ... And we (adults) are tired. And *it’s this demand for so much work ... these are the reasons that I stopped growing organic cotton... Everything is by hand.*

These labor and resource shortages severely constrain organic production. One organic cotton sector official estimated, for example, that organic farmers used only 10-20% of the recommended amount of compost on their fields, based on a 2015 internal study. Additionally, organic requires extensive hand weeding (rather than herbicide use), and extra work to ensure compliance with standards, such as enforcing buffer zones (which we explore below).

³ Though Glin et al. (2012) note (in Benin) that this need for manure can lead to new, positive relationships with local Fulani cattle herders.

Organic cotton's labor demands may even constrain farmers' other farming activities. Given limited amounts of compost and labor time, farmers may use resources on their cash-crop cotton at the expense of their food crops (Dowd 2008). In one interview, an ex-organic male cotton farmer said:

Organic actually prevents you from being able to grow cereals, because of the time it takes to weed. By the time you finish your weeding, you turn to planting your corn and it is too late.... You are late in planting your corn. Not to mention that the weeds in your cotton field (where you started) are already coming in again and you need to go weed again. In contrast, with conventional cotton, you can get a lot of corn, because you aren't wasting so much of your time in your cotton field.

This farmer's comment raises questions about whether a production system so intensely focused on purity within a market system can really be win-win-win in the sense of producing pure products for consumers at the same time as uniformly improved livelihoods for producers.

Lastly, organic cotton is highly gendered; one of the promises of organic/fair trade is the empowerment of women, and the organic cotton sector in Burkina Faso is roughly 50% female. This has often been seen by organic promoters as a benefit, and organic production may indeed help some women obtain income and establish a viable livelihood. This is not a claim we dispute. Yet despite these potential gains, questions remain about how organic certification systems, like fair trade, may exclude some women through the "burden of complying with norms" (Lyon, Bezaury, and Mutersbaugh 2010:93), or by producing greater labor burdens for women (Terstappen et al. 2013).

In Burkina Faso, employees in the conventional cotton sector tend to dismiss organic as a "thing for women": marginal, small-scale, low-yielding, and inherently *effeminate* in contrast to

the dominant construction of modern Burkinabè masculinity, which revolves around the large-scale farmer who uses new technologies.⁴ Female organic growers are often quite poor and most often must ask their husbands or male family members for access to small plots of land (though gendered dimensions of land tenure vary; see Kevane and Gray 1999). They rarely have access to equipment (although they might ask a male family member to use his oxen or cart), so many tasks are done by hand, from composting (if they can) to planting, thinning, spraying natural insecticides, weeding, and harvesting. For example, one woman explained that given the other demands on her labor (for her husband's fields), it takes her three months to harvest her half hectare of cotton. "Some of the women are in their fields harvesting cotton all the way up until the rains come again," she said.

When men grow organic cotton, the gendered labor dynamic can be directly exploitative (rather than simply self-exploitative). An extension agent who had worked in organic for ten years said:

People like organic, but they don't like the effort needed to do organic. A lot of farmers who started out in organic in the beginning are now criticized by others. Often it is women [doing the criticizing]. You know women constitute the majority of the labor force for the population of this western region of Burkina. There are men who have up to eight wives and, well, often it's to have labor, they use that to have labor. There are men who have left [organic] because they didn't have enough labor to avoid the hassle themselves. So there are women who will say, 'it's like slavery, you put us in slavery while the other [women] are flourishing. They don't bend over for weeding, the selective

⁴ Pesticide application is also often done by men, either justified through conceptions of the gendered division of farm labor or to reduce the risk of chemical exposure for women.

herbicides do all the work, and you [the husband] still want us to keep up [organic] production, but what is our production, what is our yield?’ There are all these complaints. Here, the extension agent explains how some women working on their husbands’ organic fields may feel exploited and resentful of the additional (and low status) labor of hand weeding, which is ultimately labor imposed by their husband’s choice to grow organic. (In Section 6, we further explore this question of status). We now turn to examining how the codification of practices designed to create purity for the consumer create additional obstacles to organic production within this broader agrarian landscape.

5. Clean cotton or sustainable agriculture?

The handbook for organic cotton production in Burkina Faso claims that the goal of organic agriculture is to “better respect living things and the environment. It aims to manage production in a holistic and sustainable way, favoring the agro-ecosystem, biodiversity, the biological activity of soil, and other biological cycles” (UNPCB 2015:7). Yet, the standards themselves reflect what critics have called the “conventionalization” of organic, where – despite gestures toward a process-based sustainable agricultural system – what gets enforced is ultimately a list of allowed and prohibited substances (Buck, Getz, and Guthman 1997). Most notably, farmers cannot use most synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and must come up with other methods to fertilize their soil and manage weeds and pests.

Despite the stated end goal of sustainability, many rules regulating organic cotton production are focused on preventing contamination of the final product.⁵ These purity-focused certification standards appear to echo the logic of an inverted quarantine, which prioritizes the protection of consumer bodies. This intense focus on end-product purity in organic is illustrated

⁵ To be clear, we are not arguing that all organic rules are focused in this way; some of them are indeed focused on more safe and sustainable farmer practices.

by a sign the first author observed next to a coffee grinder in Whole Foods: “This grinder is used for both organic and conventionally grown coffee beans. Those customers who are passionate about maintaining the organic integrity of their coffee may want to consider grinding their beans at home” (found in Boulder Colorado, 2012). In other words, even the leftover dust of conventional coffee in the coffee grinder might be considered too contaminating for those passionate about organic “integrity,” or purity.

In this section, we describe how some rules for organic cotton production are designed not to promote a socially or environmentally sustainable production process, but to prevent any *contamination* of the final product. We illustrate how these strict criteria regarding contamination, rooted in a model of purity for the consumer, actually make organic production more difficult to implement and sustain for farmers and for the organic cotton sector. We examine this through the three-year rule, rules to prevent contamination during production, and rules around the cotton ginning process post-harvest.

5.1 The three-year rule: preventing contamination before production

First, organic certification requires that farmers grow on land that has not been treated with prohibited substances for at least three years. This stipulation in organic certification emerged in part from early conflicts over organic codification in the U.S., based on concerns from pre-existing organic farmers who wanted to protect their market position and/or prevent farms from switching back and forth between organic and conventional (Guthman 2004a). The three-year rule is generally justified, however, on the grounds that it allows for any residual chemicals to disappear and leave the ground free of contamination. Importantly, in Burkina Faso, this rule translates the idea that the final cotton cannot contain even traces of pesticides from

three years prior. Through this rule, extreme purity of the final product is prioritized over helping farmers transition into organic.

The three-year rule also produces obstacles to adoption and incentivizes farmers to clear new fields from forested land (also see Chapman 2018). In the fieldwork conducted for this study, nearly all farmers and organic sector employees interviewed, and several conventional cotton sector observers, stated that farmers wanting to grow organic get around this rule by clearing new land, often by burning brush or felling trees. This was explained as an economic necessity to access easily certifiable land.⁶

In other words, rather than promoting the better management of existing land or helping farmers transition from conventional, the three-year rule actually creates an additional push for farmers to clear forest in order to obtain readily certifiable fields. This may be particularly the case for women farmers who must ask for permission to use land from their husbands or male family members and find it much easier to clear a new parcel (if they have access) than to ask their husband to take land out of production. We cannot make a claim about what percentage of organic land falls into this category. Nonetheless, rather than supporting the transition of conventional cotton growers into organic and adoption of more sustainable methods, by prioritizing end-product purity, the three-year rule appears to actually prevent this shift and encourage less sustainable land management.

5.2 Preventing contamination during production

Farmers must also comply with rules that seek to prevent chemical contamination during the production process, not just from the farmer's own practices, but from other farms or fields. Importantly, our point here is that these rules regarding contamination *from outside sources* are

⁶ Some farmers also explained that newly cleared fields were also desirable for organic because soil fertility and weeds are worse in older fields, and organic prohibits the use of synthetic inputs.

not aimed at synthetic chemical use on the farm itself, nor are they aimed at promoting sustainable on-farm practices. Instead, they seem designed to ensure that the final cotton product is pure from any possible pesticide contamination when it gets shipped out of the country, thus reflecting an inverted quarantine approach to contamination management.

Organic cotton producers must follow the following rules (translated by author from French from the 2015 organic cotton production manual):

Mixing or duplication

One producer who grows several fields in the same zone, growing both organic and conventional, must not produce vegetables or varieties that are identical or indistinguishable to the eye to a non-expert. Growing during the same season identical varieties or easily distinguishable varieties in organic and conventional will lead to decertification of all production to the status of conventional.

Isolation, identification, and position of the field

It is advised in organic agriculture to take all precautions to avoid contamination coming from neighboring fields that are grown via conventional methods. This separation distance, or buffer zone, must be evaluated in taking into account the neighbor's crop type, farming practices, direction of the slope, etc.

Storage

Places where final products will be stocked must be managed to ensure that products can be identified, to avoid any mixing or contamination by products or substances that are not allowed in organic production. Organic products must be clearly identified at all times. This precaution must be respected at all stages of the chain of production.

These rules regarding contamination led many organic cotton growers to be very concerned (and fearful) about losing certification, and often created extra burdens of work (also see Flachs 2019: 158). Folks we interviewed said they went to great lengths to comply with the above rules to prevent losing certification. For example, one woman explained that: “you can get de-certified if you are too close to a regular field. Sometimes other people come and plant too close to you. Or, they plant higher up on the hill. So that is a problem too. Then they (the certifiers) say that it's not organic, and they de-certify your cotton.” Another woman told us that

the extension agent “comes and tells people if there are bottles of pesticides in the neighboring fields to go clean them up. But we can’t do that. They aren’t our fields. We can’t go meandering around in peoples’ fields!” Another woman explained that she had been de-certified because the extension agent came to look at her (.25 hectare) field and said it was too close to a conventional field, and that bees would come over and contaminate her field. She was left selling her cotton at the conventional price, though she insisted she had followed the proper buffer zone distance.⁷

These concerns about de-certification because of outside contamination often result in reduced acreage in organic production and dis-incentivize farmers from growing organic. Organic farmers explained that *they* take the “buffer zone” out of their own land, since obviously their neighbors will not. They report a required 50 meter buffer zone, which is a significant distance for people with small parcels, and nearly doubles the average amount of land that an organic farmer would need, given that the average size of an organic cotton field is .5 hectares (roughly 70m x 70m). For women asking for permission to use land from their husbands, this burden of creating a buffer zone creates an additional obstacle to organic production. Some ex-organic farmers explained that the constant difficulty of monitoring contamination from neighbors, or the simple fact of being downhill from other farmers, contributed to their decision to leave organic production.

The “mixing or duplication” rule also poses challenges. It makes it difficult for farmers who want to grow some organic cotton and some conventional cotton *or* who have a family member growing conventional cotton. Despite voicing serious criticisms of the conventional cotton system, many farmers grow conventional cotton in order to access fertilizer via the credit and input system of conventional cotton production, and they often use this fertilizer for other

⁷ The extension agent explained that “I de-classify her so they don’t de-classify me,” referring to his own fears of inspection.

crops (Dowd-Uribe 2014b; Gray and Dowd-Uribe 2013; Luna 2020). Several organic farmers we interviewed explained that they still use synthetic fertilizer on their other fields (particularly corn), and that access to fertilizer outside of the conventional cotton system is generally difficult. Because the mixing rule means farmers cannot simultaneously grow organic and conventional cotton, organic cotton farmers lose access to this important source of synthetic fertilizer for their other crops (Métouolé Méda et al. 2018). Thus, a rule *designed to prevent contamination* creates difficulties for farmers who want access to synthetic fertilizer for their other farm operations – constituting another obstacle for farmers to transition from conventional to organic.

5.3 Preventing contamination during the ginning process

Once the cotton is harvested, additional rules protect the cotton from outside sources of contamination. The entire organic cotton sector must gin cotton in a “certified organic” facility. Because Burkina Faso does not have a separate ginning facility for organic cotton, they must use a facility that also gins conventional cotton. For this to happen, though, according to one organic sector employee:

We have to stop the factory, and wash the entire factory. We must wash all the machines and dry them correctly so that we are only processing organic cotton... All of this happens under the control of the organic certification body to ensure that all aspects are being taken into account, *and for avoiding any contamination* at the level of the (ginning) factory.

This process is costly and cumbersome and means that organic cotton doesn't get processed until after conventional cotton has been processed. This delay can in turn result in very late payments for organic cotton farmers and can also result in late seed dissemination for the next season. In other words, these extra precautions – that are designed to make sure organic cotton remains free

from contamination even after it leaves the field – result in extra costs to the sector (in terms of cleaning the ginning facility) and delays in both payment and seed distribution to farmers. These consequences have caused some farmers to leave organic. Some farmers explained to us that they were frustrated by the late payments and general delays of trying to do organic cotton. However, the opening of a dedicated organic cotton ginnery in 2020 may help alleviate some of these concerns.

This section examined three stages (pre-production, production, post-production) where organic cotton production rules require, in addition to chemical-free practices on the farm, extra steps to prevent any outside contamination. These rules raise questions about how organic cotton — as a codified agricultural production system, as a global commodity chain, as a brand label demanded by consumers. Despite its promises of sustainability and improving the lives of producers, these regulations operate from the logic of protecting consumers’ bodies from contamination, a logic that can at times contradict the above promises. As Bassett points out, Burkina Faso’s entire market for organic/fair trade cotton “hinges on the consumption choices of ‘ethical consumers’ in the Global North who are willing to buy higher priced fairtrade” (and organic) goods (2010:45). Organic cotton certification standards transposed to Burkina Faso appear to be rooted in a neoliberal “Not-In-My-Body” (Guthman 2007; Johnston 2008) (or in the case of cotton, “Not-*On*-My-Body”) politics that saturate ethical consumerism in Western countries. Desires for purity have translated into organic standards, which then translate to production practices for farmers in Burkina Faso. As shown in this section, this quest for purity for the consumer makes organic more difficult for producers and, thus, ironically creates obstacles to expanding sustainable agricultural production and incentivizes environmentally questionable practices in the name of purity.

6. Racialized imaginaries of purity and contamination

Priti Ramamurthy has argued that global commodity chains produce “more than just commodities; individual and collective identities are constituted in the process of production” (2004: 741). Andrea Marson (2011) has also explored how codified systems like fair trade have material as well as semiotic impacts. In this section, we highlight how the emphasis on purity for the consumer not only creates obstacles for improved farmer livelihoods and sustainable production that limits the expansion of organics, but that the focus on end-product purity may reproduce historically racialized logics that link purity and Whiteness. In this section, we explore not the “consumer” imaginary (which other studies of alternative agricultural systems have done), but the imaginaries that are invoked and also contested by Burkinabè producers.

6.1 Historical logics of Whiteness and purity in Africa

Historically racialized logics of purity and contamination provide an important context to the ways that Burkinabès interpret organic’s regulatory emphasis on purity and their own role in organic production. Racial ideologies that constructed Whiteness⁸ as purity and Blackness as dirt and contagion (part of trans-Atlantic efforts to justify slavery and colonialism) were propagated throughout Africa (and the world) during the 20th century (Burke 1996, Freidberg 2003, Newell 2020, Thomas 2020, Zimring 2016), as illustrated by overtly racist soap advertisements and “civilizing” campaigns that framed Africans as dirty, but capable of being “cleansed” and even physically whitened by soap and Western civilization (Burke 1996). These racist framings had powerful consequences on urban space and residential segregation, and also impacted subjective

⁸ We capitalize both “Black” and “White” when referring to the racialized identities of people, to remind us that White, just like Black, is a socially constructed identity that should not be left invisible or naturalized; however, this crisp delineation of what constitutes a distinct socially constructed category of identity isn’t so neat. In this section, we explore ways in which broader cultural meanings about purity and cleanliness get interwoven with ideas of w/Whiteness, both in terms of color, and in terms of racialized meaning.

experiences and interpretations of race, ethnicity, and the mapping of meanings related to purity/contamination, ideas of progress and development (Burke 1996; Newell 2020), and gendered ideals of beauty and modernity (Thomas 2020).

Given this complex history and contextually specific practices of negotiation and resistance, we can't assume a static or monolithic cultural landscape regarding how "Africans" or even rural Africans in a particular place interpret or employ racialized discourses of purity or of dirtiness. Yet, this history can inform our understanding of how organic agriculture (as a set of practices and meanings) *arrives into this layered history*, where Burkinabè grapple in multifaceted ways with residual racial formations that tie "dirt" and dirtiness to racist conceptions of "backward" Africans. Whether or not Burkinabè people agree with those conceptions, they are often quite aware of them.

6.2 How Burkinabè interpret the "purity for the consumer" model of organic

Many Burkinabè people expressed a perceived association between White consumers and purity, cleanliness, and a lack of contamination (Luna 2018), and furthermore interpret the emphasis on end-products free from contamination within organics through this lens – as intended to produce pure products for White people. Part of this logic may arise because organic was introduced and supported by European and American NGOs, and most Burkinabè imagine that White people are the majority of end buyers of organic products. Ramamurthy (2004) reveals the importance of global commodity chain approaches that account for not only "real lives, but also how they are imagined" (738), making a strong case for going beyond macroeconomic patterns to also include interpretive analysis of "people's everyday lives, experiences, and imaginaries" *within* commodity chain analysis (741). While respondents grappled with the purity/Whiteness link in organics in diverse ways, their varying responses are

united by a shared awareness of *an imagined White consumer base concerned with (and able to purchase) purity*.

Many people expressed a belief that White consumers are willing to pay more money for organic because they are intensely concerned about contamination. For example, one man wondered whether White people buy organic because they are so sensitive to chemicals that they “break out into a rash” when they wear conventional cotton clothing. In a second example, in a community meeting about organic shea butter (in the conventional cotton research site), the first author observed the following:

Several times the men running the meeting gestured to me (the first author, a White woman) and asked me to add something, saying “you’re a *tubabu* (White person), so of course you understand organic. It’s your thing, after all.” They explained to the women, “*Tubabus* want to buy this shea butter, and they are willing to pay more money for it, but they only want to buy it if they know it hasn’t touched anything that might make them sick later. So they only want to buy it if it is *propre* (clean) and it hasn’t touched any chemicals” (Excerpt from fieldnotes).

In this example, it is worth noting that the French word *propre* (clean) carries local connotations of whiteness; for example, the expression to clean something well in Dioula is to clean *until it is white* (*fo ka gwe*), and several encounters during fieldwork indicated that White people are often assumed to be clean or associated with cleanliness. Furthermore, this interview excerpt reveals an explicit linking of organic’s strict standards of purity with *tubabu* (White) desires for purity (“they’ll only buy it if they know it hasn’t touched anything”).

Through the idiom of purity, connotations of Whiteness with cleanliness shape interpretations of organic. Many people explained that they could tell the difference between

organic (whether cotton or shea butter) and conventional because organic is “white.” For example, in an interview with a female organic cotton farmer, in response to the question, “Who buys organic?” a woman said, “They said that *tubabus* (White people) come to buy it.” When asked why they want to buy it, she replied: “Ours, the organic cotton, it is white, white, white. *Kori gweman* (white cotton).” This is an interesting perception, given that there is no technical reason why organic cotton would be *whiter* than conventional cotton. Instead, this answer (also expressed by others, and to describe organic shea butter; see below) appears to draw on deeper conceptual intersections between cleanliness, racial w/Whiteness, and purity. The “pure” product that is free of contamination is viewed as physically whiter, but also desired by and produced for White people.

Some producers were critical of what they saw as an arrangement wherein White people get the “pure” products while locally consumed products are contaminated (echoing Galt’s 2014 findings in Costa Rica). In this example from fieldnotes, a woman and her husband discussed organic shea butter:

She and her husband both said, “It is organic.” I asked what that meant. She said, “It is natural, there is no fertilizer.” He said, “It is pure... It’s for export. For export to the White people countries. They want the pure shea butter.” I asked if they saw any difference. She said, yes, she saw a difference, the organic was “whiter.” (I didn’t understand why that would be so). I said, but most of the organic shea gets sold, right? She said, yes, most is sold. I said, isn’t that a little bit like the good stuff leaves for the *tubabus* (White people)? She said, “Yes, that is exactly how it is. The *tubabus* get the pure stuff, and the people here consume the *jugu* (ugly/bad) stuff.”

This woman was critical of what she saw as a material inequality in organic shea butter being produced for export, while non-organic (*jugu*) shea butter was consumed locally. In another example, an organic cotton sector employee expanded on this contradiction of production versus consumption:

(People who buy organic in Europe), they are people with money, and they like to spend it with good intentions. There are also, it's like, let's say it's like a brand, the organic label gives them status. It's not just anyone who can wear organic... The shirt I'm wearing right now, I can buy it for (\$2 or \$3), but the same shirt in organic, that is going to cost (around \$50). It's for rich people. Even myself, I'm employed as a technician in the organic sector, but I'm not crazy enough to buy organic clothing. Even organic food, they advise us to eat organic food, but we buy conventional. We don't have the money to get into organic.

In other words, many Burkinabès critique organic as “a market for the rich”: creating pure and uncontaminated products for wealthy people, who are also presumed to be White (Fanon 1952; Pierre 2013). This critique is corroborated by the fact that most urban Burkinabès consume produce that is contaminated with chemicals (Korbéogo 2018; Yonli 2019) and increasing numbers of rural people (including several organic farmers we interviewed) use chemicals on their own food crops.

6.3 *“Getting back to the dirt” or “getting out of the dirt”?*

Organic production in Burkina Faso also raises questions about shifting and/or culturally disparate racialized meanings of “dirt” and “contamination.” Historical conceptions of purity in the U.S. emphasized a state of being free from dirt or bacteria (Berthold 2010; Bobrow-Strain 2012; Douglas 2003; Zimring 2016), yet many U.S. food reform movements, including the

organic food movement, have focused on contamination arising from industrial or synthetic pollutants. The organic movement has nostalgically reclaimed the moral and corporeal benefits of “*getting your hands dirty*” (Guthman 2011), re-framing purity around the threat of contamination from synthetic chemicals and using discursive referents such as “the dirty dozen” (Johansen 2003). The concern, nonetheless, remains on policing a boundary between what is defined as clean and pure and what is seen as contaminated or polluted (DuPuis 2016). However, this (romantic) shift from nature as dirty to nature as pure and clean has not occurred in the same way in Burkina Faso, where many Burkinabès are still well aware of the historical connotations of dirt and the disparagement of “backward,” rural, uncivilized Africans. Indeed, the local expression for development is to “get *out* of the dirt” (*ka bo nogo la*).

In this context, there is a certain cultural paradox produced by organic’s call to “get back to the dirt” and rules that require farmers to do many tasks by hand rather than with chemicals. Western (often White) consumers may romanticize an idyllic image of working the soil with one’s hands — an image which, when transposed to African producers, may implicitly draw on racialized ideas of who belongs in fields/ who makes for “natural” field labor. However, many Burkinabès see hand labor such as weeding as signs of stigma, poverty, and going “backward” — associations that are shaped, of course, by the history of colonial racism and ongoing racism in the global world system (Pierre 2013; Thomas 2020; Winant 2001). Compost (made by hand from decomposing organic matter) is called locally “*farafin nogo*” (literally “black skin dirt/compost”), while purchased synthetic fertilizer is called “*tubabu nogo*” (literally “white peoples’ dirt/compost”).⁹ The local expression for development is “*ka bo nogo la*” (literally “getting out of the dirt”), which seems to directly contradict the U.S. organic movement’s idea of

⁹Expressions that might also be read as a “description and critique of colonial and globally-uneven agricultural relations,” as one of our reviewers insightfully pointed out.

getting back to the dirt. As one Burkinabè man with a long history in the organic cotton sector explained:

Look, for some, when herbicides came to help farmers, and even better, when the selective herbicides came and were even more helpful, for example to be able to farm corn without bending over a single instant except for planting, and you (referring to organic farmers), you are still weeding by hand with the little hoe? Look, there are some people who just don't want to do that... some people see that as if it is degrading work, they pull back from it, because that's how people worked before. But today, why are people going to want to continue to do that?

Similarly, a woman who grew a .25 hectare organic cotton field explained that:

People see us as if we are the *folofolo* (old-style) farmers. Our parents used to work like this. They say they don't want to farm like that anymore – they want rest, not fatigue... most of those who tried organic switched back to conventional cotton.

In another example, a middle-aged woman said that in some ways organic was seen as going backward. She said that hand weeding is seen as poverty, and if your yields are lower, people will judge that too and see you as a less-successful farmer. In his work in India, Flachs also found organic farmers negotiating the social difficulty of adopting what are seen locally as “primitive techniques” (2019: 185).

Thus, ironically, Burkinabè organic farmers are engaged in demanding physical labor that they see as producing “pure” products (and status) for White consumers, while they themselves may struggle against local norms that frame this labor as lower-status and dirty. By requiring farmers to hand weed and make their own compost, organic standards ask farmers to push back against their local cultural field. In some cases, organic farmers are ideologically committed to

this push-back, and some create new social identity performances around being “model” farmers, connected to international NGOs (also see Flachs 2019), or in some cases “belonging to a new ‘community of practice’” (Glin et al. 2012). In other cases, farmers are unconcerned about status connotations as long as they can make a livelihood. However, in other cases, farmers feel that organic farming positions themselves locally as “backward” farmers. This signals a paradox between the status politics and racial connotations of dirt and purity for Western consumers and those of many organic producers in rural Burkina Faso. In other words, the presumption that a focus on purity for the consumer (with a focus on chemicals rather than dirt) will be beneficial for all parties overlooks the cultural worlds and aspirations of farmers themselves. We would, however, suggest further research and theorization here, along the line of Stephanie Newell’s (2020) exploration of the complex layers, tensions, and changes in how diversely positioned Africans employ “dirt” as an interpretive category and how these interpretations overlap with racialized meaning. Brian Williams’ work (2018, 2020) on agrarian racial regimes in the U.S. South also offers insights into how racialized meanings – and their attachment to different technological practices – can shift (in response to both resistance and efforts to maintain White supremacy) yet nonetheless maintain and justify racial inequalities.

7. Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored how, within organic cotton in Burkina Faso, the focus on end-product purity reflects an implicit prioritization of consumers within regulatory standards. Thus, despite the win-win-win discourse of organics, this regulatory focus on purity poses a paradox – actually acting as a barrier to improved farmer livelihoods, sustainable practices, and the expansion of the organic cotton sector. Organic farmers (and the organic sector) must comply with a variety of rules to prevent the slightest contamination of the final product, many of which

act as a burden and barrier to transitioning into organics, while doing nothing to advance environmentally sustainable objectives and in some cases incentivizing less sustainable practices. We contend that these rules exhibit attributes of an inverted quarantine model of protecting individual (Northern) consumers' bodies and create various "paradoxes of purity" – undermining farmers' ability to take part in organic agriculture or in sustainable practices. Furthermore, through this particular model of contamination management, organic cotton certification standards unwittingly reanimate a historical racialized imaginary linking purity with racial Whiteness. While our Burkinabè respondents offered disparate responses to and interpretations of this association – varying from quasi-acceptance to more explicit critical challenges – there is nonetheless a cohesion in the recognition that for them, Whiteness and purity in organics are clearly entangled. While unspoken and perhaps unintentional within organic regulation and certification bodies, this coupling is distinctly visible to Burkinabès and appears to shape their perceptions and experiences of organic cotton production.

This article thus contributes to existing literature on the contradictions between the organic movement's aims and its outcomes, and the tensions inherent in the win-win-win discourse of organic. Numerous scholars have critiqued and debated the "conventionalization" of organic into a system of input substitution rather than a fundamental transformation of production practices (Allen and Kovach 2000; Best 2008; Nikol and Jansen 2021). Guthman (2004b, 2014, 2018) has identified further paradoxes produced by organic's location within capitalism: in constructing organic food as scarce, the imperative of rent production (and rising land values) impedes organic growers' capacities to achieve many of the more holistic and transformative aims that the movement foreshadowed.

Our contribution builds on – but extends – political economy analyses that examine the dynamics of capitalism for understanding the paradoxes of organic agriculture (Guthman 2004; Nikol and Jansen 2021). Our finding indicates an additional internal contradiction of organics: that the intense focus on purity may ultimately undermine sustainability, as when farmers clear land in order to get around the three-year rule or abandon organic because of the difficulties of preventing contamination from a neighbor’s fields. Despite protections from chemical contaminants that organic participation has the potential to provide – which are indeed important – organic’s standards of purity nonetheless emphasize an end-product free from contamination for Northern consumers, which ultimately creates additional obstacles and labor burdens on poor, Black, largely women growers. Furthermore, the compartmentalization of organics as a mode of contamination management means that many organic cotton growers are still exposed to agricultural chemicals via other sources (i.e. household food crops). In this way, the discursive and material consequences of the pursuit of purity – in part a product of the inverted quarantine model – have been transported down the commodity chain, producing contradictions within the organic cotton project in Burkina Faso.

In addition to identifying this paradox, we point out the specifically racialized dimensions of organic’s focus on a pure final product for Northern consumers imaginatively presumed and (structurally positioned) to be White. We have sought to expand on how race is theorized and examined in critical agri-food literatures, building on wider efforts to globalize critical race theory (Arat-Koç 2010; Bacchetta, Maira, and Winant 2018; Christian 2019; Go 2018; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Pierre 2013). Our contribution also dovetails with recent theorizations of agrarian racial capitalism (i.e. Williams 2018, 2020), and in particular, examinations of how ideologies and representations of agricultural progress, modernity, and technology are broadly

interwoven with racism and capitalism (Eddens 2019; Luna 2018; Montenegro de Wit 2021; Rock 2019, forthcoming; Williams 2018, 2020). We contend that racialized dynamics extend beyond “Green Revolution”-style technological modernization projects in agriculture. Just as Guthman (2004a) alerted us to the ways that organic still (like conventional) operates within capitalist dynamics, we hope to add to other voices in critical agri-food studies that alert us to the ways that organic (like conventional) still operates within racialized dynamics. Nonetheless, as Williams (2020:425) reminds us, these dynamics are transient and contested; “because race has no universal essence... a focus on racial capitalism demands a sensitivity to the historical and geographical specificity of the structures and modes of racism.”

Because the organic movement pivots on the notion of purity, certification rules that emphasize strict adherence to a standard of purity for consumers may ultimately reproduce historically embedded connections between purity and Whiteness. Many Burkinabès are distinctly aware – and critical of – a dynamic in which the “clean and white” product (Zimring 2016) gets exported for “clean and White” consumers who use their wealth to buy purity. Yet, we also reveal shifting and contradictory meanings in racialized definitions of contamination: whereas Northern (mostly White) organic consumers romanticize dirt and vilify chemical contamination, many Burkinabès are aware of how dirt was/is connected to racialized conceptions of backward Africans – seen in local terms for compost (“Black skin dirt/compost” as opposed to “White peoples’ dirt/fertilizer”) and development (“getting out of the dirt”). We note a cultural paradox wherein Northern agri-food romanticism around “getting back to the dirt” requires African farmers to hand weed and make compost, laborious practices seen by many Burkinabès as signs of going backward in the global (racial) hierarchy (Ferguson 2006).

By drawing together this racial analysis with Szasz's concept of the inverted quarantine, we delineate the process by which racialized discourses of purity in organics not only allow consumers to "shop their way to safety" (DuPuis 2000; Guthman and Brown 2016) and protect their own bodies, but also inadvertently reinscribe a racialized purity politics. Further research should explore place and culturally-specific histories of racial formation, ideas and standards of purity, and organic food (including historical connections between eugenics movements, race-related nation building, and ideas of building the "healthy body") (Bobrow-Strain 2020; DuPuis 2000, 2016; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003). Organic, in its current manifestation, may reproduce and institutionalize racial imaginaries on a global scale, while materially limiting its transformative potential.

Our point is not an indictment of organics altogether. We recognize the enduring harm of chemical pollutants to human and ecological health, particularly the highly toxic chemicals regularly used and even embraced in cotton agriculture (Stein and Luna 2021). Instead, our aim is to highlight how alternative systems such as organic must grapple with these (often unexamined) racialized associations and dynamics in order to achieve their promise. As long as consumer-focused certification schemes are narrowly focused on purity and contamination, rather than deeper questions of sustainability and social justice, these systems may reproduce unsustainable and socially unjust outcomes. We end up with a system, like the one documented here, where farmers are clearing forest in order to have uncontaminated fields and jumping through hoops to ensure purity for the consumer, which disincentives participation and reproduces notions of racialized difference. This is likely not the intention of those writing the rules for organic certification nor of organic consumers.

In contrast to a narrow inverted quarantine approach, efforts to transform agri-food systems must prioritize all participants along the global commodity chain. If the organic movement seeks to make agricultural systems more sustainable, standards must be developed through more collective, participatory, and locally sensitive mechanisms. This paper has sought to provoke reflection and conversation on this topic, and we don't propose to have the right "fixes" for policy or for organic codification. One path may be to loosen up some standards of "contamination" to make organic production more accessible and more sustainable, in particular rules that are focused on maintaining end-product purity rather than promoting sustainable production, such as those analyzed in this paper (i.e. the three-year rule, the buffer zone, the uphill/downhill rules, or the gin contamination rules).¹⁰ By doing so, organic cotton could open more pathways for conventional growers to transition into organic, an outcome that can advance both ecological sustainability and producer-livelihood goals. More broadly, we hope to prompt deeper reflection among those who espouse the "win-win-win" discourse of organic to question their assumptions about purity, to question the romanticization of the burdensome labor that current models require, and to pay more heed to local priorities and cultural fields of meaning. What this tangibly means, we leave open for future debate. We think these questions may help us rethink what agri-food models could look like, as not only *pure*, but liberatory.

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¹⁰ Clearly this would be easier to do for cotton, which is not consumed, than it would be for organic food products, where consumers are likely more focused on end-product purity.

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