

‘I Can Get Through Anything with Satsumas’: Agriculture, Landscape, and Productions of Knowledge

Shannon Dosemagan and Monique Hassman

Introduction

In 2009, we began working with UW-Milwaukee students who were participating in a program in New Orleans, doing service-learning projects at organizations that were involved in the rebuilding of infrastructure in the city. We became interested in the process behind rebuilding as we visited organization after organization that was run by people that were, for the first time, working in the city as a response to Katrina. In this paper, we specifically look at the ways that New Orleans’ Lower 9th Ward neighborhood is being developed around the visions of outside interests and how local residents have countered this development through community-centric projects- including multi-functional urban agriculture that relies on the continuity of public memory around emotional eating- addressing their own visions of local needs and assets. We use the particular case study of urban agriculture initiatives that have appeared citywide. We chose this instance as a point of departure because of our respective backgrounds- Monique is a small-scale rural farmer and urban agriculture/food justice researcher and Shannon is a New Orleanian, who works for a local nonprofit and became interested in this topic after observing the structural differences in food projects throughout New Orleans.

In a city that has been criticized for rebuilding in an area that faces heightened vulnerability to disasters because of its proximity to coastal waters and industrial misuse, this paper addresses our interest in the post-storm constructions of how social landscapes were being developed based on the visions of outside interests. In the case example of urban gardening, we find a realm that has become a prominent means of activism post-Katrina in terms of food justice and security, for both people that have relocated to the city and pre-storm residents. In exploring the cultural depths of urban food production in New Orleans and the importance of personal backyard gardens in pre-Katrina food security, there many times appears to be a gap in the incorporation of cultural knowledge and the direction that development interests take. We are thus interested in how the intimate local knowledge of food production has been incorporated and reconfigured with outsider knowledge and how local knowledge has managed to retain strength in the post-Katrina years of communal gardening. In our broader research, we’ve looked at how the outsider vision of creating communal spaces for people to grow food negotiates both physical and social geographies and how it creates inclusions and exclusions that urban community gardening incorporates. We use this case study to exemplify the way that local, generational knowledge in urban gardening practices has been put aside in some instances thus altering the regeneration and renewal of a cultural practice as performed by the community.

Disaster and Rebuilding

In a disaster context such as Katrina, and most recently in this region, the BP oil spill, communities receive an influx of support from organizations whose actions are many times prompted by reorganizing strategies that they have utilized in other locations, or strategies that are directed by the influence of funders. Funds are typically allocated to “middle” organizations, such as NGOs, and not directly to the residents of impacted neighborhoods. In this structure of power, residents lose the ability to reconstruct their neighborhood as based on public opinion or even to revision the way that they would like their neighborhood to be rebuilt. In the Lower 9th

Ward, as house after house was built by the Make it Right Foundation and an “edible playground” was erected in a neighborhood with few children, local infrastructures- grocery stores, medical clinics, public transportation, gas stations, and even road signs, were clearly missing. Only in the last year- 5 years after the storm-, have these pieces of the landscape begun to emerge.

In the redevelopment process of the Lower 9th Ward, outsider knowledge has also been used to reshape the way that residents use space and experience socialization. The City of New Orleans, through the last five years, has become a testing ground for new, innovative ideas such as tree house style living and green building projects. Many however have not taken into account the challenge that this creates for local residents in recreating and maintaining their city, as educational gaps come to exist in the way that innovative, green designs are presented and incorporated into the city infrastructure and the dissemination of education that such projects need- for example, repairing solar panels or green roofs.

The influence of outsider visions of development has altered the regeneration and renewal of cultural practices as performed by communities in many instances. For example, an ex-school teacher came to New Orleans after Katrina and set up a community garden and high school for students in the neighborhood to be used as a work-study program. Used as one of the service learning locations for students, we were instructed by the volunteers, transplants from after the storm, to go ahead and pull the foundation pieces- cement and piping- from the lot next to the grocery building, only finding out later that there had been no formal contact made with the lot owner prior to this process taking place and that underground wires had not been located beforehand. The five high school students that were at the site while we worked, played board games around a stove inside the converted building where little educational infrastructure was present. Asking residents of the neighborhood about their thoughts on the project, reactions were consistently skeptical, especially regarding the education that the children who spent each day at the site were receiving. This example of a project, created and maintained by post-storm residents, was a model that we saw with other projects as well- projects that were in philosophy beneficial for the neighborhood with sustainable models embedded in the process, but executed without the partnership of the community they were to be located in.

Despite the prevalence of such projects, community members have countered these models by using local knowledge of community needs and assets as well as cultural norms in their neighborhoods to create projects that are typically community-centric yet less publicly visible. In each disaster scenario, there is a place for NGOs and other individuals willing to volunteer time and services to help residents of an area, but done in a way that is navigable for residents.

Urban Gardening

Louisiana has a long-standing legacy of agriculture. In a not so distant past, the City of New Orleans and surrounding parishes had an abhorrent history of slavery in which tens of thousands of enslaved Africans were held in bondage to work plantations that made up majority of the territory of Louisiana¹. The history of Louisiana also entails the heroic 1811 Slave Revolt, the largest slave uprising in the history of the United States. This past, combining an informed yet contentious familiarity with agrarian practices and a subtropical climate, facilitates a variety of crops to be sown throughout an almost year round growing season, and has influenced the

¹ African American History Alliance of Louisiana. (n.d.). The Heroic 1811 Slave Revolt in St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, and Orleans parishes.

renowned traditions behind Cajun and Creole cuisine. Consequently, it is not surprising to find food being grown throughout this urban locale. From container gardens on porches to edible landscaped patios and courtyards, contemporary urban gardening practices in this city are prolific, have various forms, sizes, and are multi-functional.

One New Orleanian, a Community Food Security Coalition Board Member and founder of the nonprofit organizations WandA (Women and Agriculture) and SunHarvest Garden, notes approximately 47,000 vacant properties scatter the post-Katrina landscape. For urban agricultural enthusiasts, this vast amount of potential growing land holds endless project possibilities, some of which some have come to fruition. One initiative that has emerged since the storm includes the Hollygrove Market and Farm – a nonprofit store and education center. This urban agriculture endeavor, like many others in the city, has emerged in part through the assistance of organizations including the New Orleans Food & Farming (NOFFN) Network, Parkway Partners, the New Orleans Botanical Garden, and by means of university students and professors from both local and national networks.

Some local residents have decided rather to channel their time, energy, and resources into revitalizing urban agriculture initiatives that were in existence prior to Hurricane Katrina. As shared by a Lower 9th Ward Holy Cross neighborhood resident:

This garden actually has been around for a long, long time – it is called the Laurentine Ernest Community Garden because of this woman (who I think just celebrated her 82nd birthday)- it was named after her because she was a huge gardener and community garden advocate in the neighborhood. She actually started planting on the neutral ground over on St. Claude so this garden was created and named after her, but after Katrina it fell into disrepair... the garden is located on Forstall and Chartres, right there by the river, and it was in existence for about 20 years before I got started and when I came... it was this overgrown garden not because nobody cared, but because I think so many people had so many other things to worry about.

In continuing with her story about how she got involved in the project, the resident described her neighborhood landscape and in the process highlighted complexities in these revitalizing efforts:

...the area I live, on my block- my house is occupied and so is the house across the street. Everything else is an abandoned graveyard so I wonder what it is going to take to bring people back... people don't want to come back to an abandoned neighborhood, but its gonna stay abandoned if people don't come back... so I decided to take it upon myself to organize and revitalize this garden.

At the Laurentine Ernest Community Garden, other issues challenge urban agriculture toils. For example, this site is subject to historic district ordinances and regulations that have subsequently hindered the construction and creativity in erecting much needed structures, such as a tool shed and fence. Another issue pertains to these growers' inability to attain ownership of this parcel despite its long-standing establishment. In one resident's words, "I have heard that since Katrina the city has taken back these properties... that hasn't happened to us, thank goodness, and I hope it doesn't." This latter concern becomes particularly relevant in the post-Katrina landscape when considering the attraction of certain areas to developers. In the guise of

progress, developers may ignore the communal and historic relevance of such places and destroy them in the process of rebuilding new spaces. As this urban grower continues,

*the purpose of a community garden is for the community- for people to come together and it serves a social space- a place of beauty, tranquility and safety and also serves as a space for people to commune with nature and grow if **they choose to do that**, but it is not my job to push to make things happen that may not necessarily need to happen.*

Developers are also liable to disregard local urban agrarian practices, such as gardening in yards, and the importance this role has as a neighborhood security system as well as its innate ability to enhance neighbors' social networks. Architects and urban planning professionals have also contributed to controversial rebuilding discourses in New Orleans. Proposing that devastated residential areas make opportunistic post-storm prospects for developing wetlands, or regarding pre-storm residential neighborhoods as prime areas to implement large-scale urban farms (as was suggested for parts of New Orleans East), reveal instances of how space becomes dislocated from the people, contexts, and histories embedded in those places.

Consequently, urban agrarian efforts have become subject to varied sentiments from residents. For some, there is a critique of "the northern arrogance" regarding the ignorance of historic and socio-cultural norms that non-locals, also referred to as "new pioneers," exert on local New Orleanian growing habits and eating patterns. Many residents deem these outsiders as mostly "well intentioned" yet one comments that, "the best ones are the ones who try to position themselves within the community and work with the members of the community to start to assess people's needs and get it to a point where the community members are the ones who are in charge essentially. I think that the ones who don't tend to be welcomed are the ones who don't plug themselves in like that." The urban agriculture phenomenon from another resident's perspective considers it as,

Spectacular! I think that it is an economic necessity- even more people should grow stuff- everybody should have tomato plants in their yard, and citrus trees. They got some problems- it's not that easy to grow necessarily, but they are productive... I would love to see the city plant some stuff, if they would just plant pecan trees along the neutral ground, you know, grow some places in town where they used to have pecan trees and you would see people out there in the fall picking up nuts... I mean its food... You know, it would seem to make sense within a particularly poor community like New Orleans to have that kind of stuff.

Much like agriculture practiced in other urban locales, there is fundamental concern about soil in New Orleans. As historically framed by a Plaquemines parish citrus farmer who sells his produce at Sankofa, a Lower 9th Ward farmers market, the "problem is growing the stuff in the right area- the toxicity of the soils being an old city with old lead based paint, people working on cars, dumping in the side yard, fifty years ago- battery acids and those kinds of things, you know. You have to do those kinds of investigations first before you start to grow". Apprehension of growing in "toxic" and "soiled" soil has only been exasperated in the post-Katrina landscape given the fear of contaminants saturating permeable ground from levee-breached floodwaters. This worry has not only been a common response of residents in a recent survey conducted during planning stages for the Lower 9th Ward Villere Farm, but has also been a frequently

voiced concern heard elsewhere in the city by locals as well as non-residents. And yet, while many residents maintain legitimacy for this concern, one particularly engaged resident, who has worked on sunflower soil remediation research with a local university, critiques unawareness for what she considers even more devastating to the soil- the process of saltification brought on by the flood waters, and the issues this presents to urban agriculture.

Emotional Eating/Emerging Local Food Networks

This section discusses the close connection of urban growing decisions and the subsequent emotional bond associated with eating habits. Amidst images of drinking along Bourbon Street, the crescent curvature of the Mississippi, the infamous HBO Tremé neighborhood series and Mardi Gras Indians, and the timeless sounds of jazz, are the prominently embedded notions of eating in New Orleans. Just the mere mention of this city invokes to mind not only place-specific comestibles such as crawfish and alligator po-boys, filé spice and table hot sauce, but also the size of overly healthy portion servings. As a much-celebrated pastime, eating in New Orleans has over time and across cultures united native food traditions with African, Western European, and Asian influences.

Akin to the multi-functionality of urban agriculture, eating has a dynamic essence that creates and strengthens cultural bonds besides being a critical factor in identity and experience in New Orleans. To visit a resident at their home is a predictable invitation to sip sweet tea and taste the claim for the “best gumbo” around town. During an interview with Lower 9th Ward resident, Ms. Gloria discussed her community pre-Katrina. She recalled always running over a hot plate for her next-door, single female neighbor when she saw her pull in the driveway after work. Ms. Gloria and her copious offerings of food haven’t drastically changed since the storm, although due in part to the steep Make It Right porch stairs and her bad knees, family and friends now know to just come on up to her kitchen for a meal. And desert can found just across the street on Reynes by visiting Ms. Valeria who is sure to offer visitors her locally famous 7-Up cake or some other tasty treat. Even if one chooses to not leave the confines of a residence- Mr. Okra’s rhythmic calls of, “I have pineapple, I have cantaloupe” can be heard alerting residents to purchase fresh edibles outside the front door on the street from this elderly man’s pick-up truck which doubles as a traveling fruit and vegetable stand.

Although these briefly mentioned instances give the sense that food and eating are pervasive in New Orleans, there are cultural norms to these traditions that residents are sure to make explicit. Fieldwork is rife with such examples, particularly concerning the process of preparing entrees. When purchasing items for making a potato salad at a West Bank farmer’s market store, customers have removed and replaced from inside my cart, “wrong” ingredients with “correct” ones, not before getting a good laugh at a novice’s attempt to cook southern cuisine. Fieldwork experience has moreover shown that fusing old favorites, such as serving a sweet potato pie loaded with pecans on top of it, leads to residents’ confusion and dismay for an outsider’s un-traditional attempt at a pecan pie.

Food, cooking/baking, and eating are all matters of great significance in New Orleans. Through local knowledge of a family’s recipe and awareness of carnival-time delicacies and by means of cultural traditions from backyard barbecues to mobile bars converted out of coolers on wheels during second-line parades- it is these foundational aspects, which contribute to the formation of the New Orleans communal identity while at the same time securing and preserving social bonds.

In the immediate wake of Hurricane Katrina, food and eating have performed other roles. For example, during this time, while most residents were not permitted to cross-parish lines, citrus facilitated the access of a Plaquemines parish fruit farmer into Orleans parish from St. Bernard to distribute his no longer deemed sellable produce to a national natural food store. As explained in his own words,

I can get through anything with Satsumas- the fruit. I would give bags of fruit to the guards and well- you see a guy driving with a truck full of fruit and there's no stores open and you say, hmm- you can go through if you give me a bag! I just went into town- uptown, just started trying to sell some fruit that I had that I couldn't sell cause I didn't have any stores to sell to and we gave away all kinds of fruit too.

Within this farmer's brief excerpt of the post-Katrina landscape, the value of agriculture produce is illuminated beyond monetary gains to food's indicative influence and role on identity, communal bonds, and social networks. In his words to follow about the Sankofa farmer's market, eating as an emotional process is revealed by invoking memories of home:

Well, there's a lot of little markets going on around- I made a few dollars at that market, but it wasn't really worth my time. I mean, it was worth my time... but I want to do these little markets just to provide something that is a connection to this place and the people- you know, when I was selling fruit after the storm on the street- people were so excited.. and it was such a cathartic kind of experience for me and for them to have... and they couldn't buy fruit at places, there were no stores- there was nothing and to see the satsumas survived... you know, people love the damn satsumas down here and all ages, you know, you give it to a kid or an old woman with no teeth, and its ahh- it's a connection with something that people associate with a place they love.

Conclusion

In conclusion, non-local influences, including the twenty plus NGOs that have filled the Lower 9th Ward after Katrina, are critically involved in the way that New Orleans is re-shaped and organized. This influence has shown to affect how local residents construct cultural bonds and communal identity through their local memory of home, ever-emerging food networks modeled on generational knowledge in growing practices, and with regard to emotional eating.