

# Whose right to (farm) the city? Race and food justice activism in post-Katrina New Orleans

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**Abstract** Among critical responses to the perceived perils of the industrial food system, the food sovereignty movement offers a vision of radical transformation by demanding the democratic right of peoples “to define their own agriculture and food policies.” At least conceptually, the movement offers a visionary and holistic response to challenges related to human and environmental health and to social and economic well-being. What is still unclear, however, is the extent to which food sovereignty discourses and activism interact with and affect the material and social realities of the frequently low-income communities of color in which they are situated, and whether they help or hinder pre-existing efforts to alleviate hunger, overcome racism, and promote social justice. This research and corresponding paper addresses those questions by examining food justice and food sovereignty activism in the city of New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina as understood by both activists and community members. I argue, using post-Katrina New Orleans as a case study, that food projects initiated and maintained by white exogenous groups *on behalf* of communities of color risk exacerbating the very systems of privilege and inequality they seek to ameliorate. This paper argues for a re-positioning of food justice activism, which focuses on systemic change through power analyses and the strategic nurturing of interracial alliances directed by people residing in the communities in which projects are situated.

**Keywords** Food justice · Food sovereignty · Urban geography · Right to the city · New Orleans · Racism · Activism

## Abbreviations

HMF	Hollygrove Market and Farm
LFCL	Latino Farmers' Cooperative of Louisiana
LNWFAC	Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition
RTTC	Right to the city

## Introduction

Food justice activism in New Orleans has developed apace with efforts throughout the United States to generate diverse and sustainable food systems that provide adequate nutritious food for all people. As in other cities throughout the United States, the vast majority of “food justice” practitioners in New Orleans are white. Despite demographic shifts following Hurricane Katrina, which left the city “richer, whiter, and more educated” than it was before the storm, New Orleans still has a majority African American population (GNOCDC 2012). Also, as in other US cities, communities of color in New Orleans suffer disproportionately high rates of institutionalized disinvestment and structural inequality—in “majority-minority” neighborhoods, schools are poorer, access to health services is dismal, and residents have fewer (if any) options for purchasing affordable nutritious food close by Dyson (2006).

The pervasive phenomenon of spatialized racial inequality has been well documented (c.f. Massey and Denton 1993) but is often all too easy for white America to ignore. Purported “colorblindness” has, with rare and notable exceptions, plagued the movement(s) for “good food” as well. The high-profile exposure of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and the federal levee failures, which devastated the Gulf Coast in August of 2005, forced white U.S. Americans to reconsider entrenched myths about

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“equality and justice for all” in the twenty-first century. Katrina happened to come at a time, and in a place, when and where racial and class oppressions were overshadowed by tropes of color-blindness and national pride, and couched within the post-9/11-context of stark neoliberal policies and rhetoric that venerated individual achievement and toughness above solidarity and compassion. The sheer visibility of the violence and death absorbed primarily by poor people of color following the storm exposed the country and world to US state and social policies of abandonment and betrayal that pre-date the storm by decades at least (Braun and McCarthy 2005; Giroux 2007).

In this paper, I offer a portrait of post-Katrina New Orleans and situate emergent food movements there within broader patterns of racial and class disparities. I focus on the important ways in which New Orleans has changed since Hurricane Katrina, but also discuss the entrenched effects of racism and segregation, which fostered the geographies of vulnerability that determined the fate of so many in the wake of the storm and created spaces for the emergence of justice-oriented food projects. To highlight the various forms these projects can take, and the distinctive ways in which they emerge, I draw three vignettes of food justice projects situated in different geographic and social contexts; these vignettes illuminate themes and phenomena that reflect New Orleans’ unique history and geography but also, I argue, offer insights for food justice and food sovereignty initiatives throughout the United States. All effective food justice projects, I argue, must confront both the chronic and acute injustices that circumscribe food access and constrain food sovereignty; otherwise, they risk reinforcing and exacerbating the very conditions that have generated the dominant and unjust contemporary food regime these initiatives purport to undermine.

In the discussion portion of this paper, I draw on food sovereignty discourses and Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” framework to understand how the post-Katrina influx of volunteers and well-intentioned outsiders helped to shape the landscape in which newly established food justice projects emerged. I suggest that the transformative potential offered at the intersection of discourses on food sovereignty and the right to the city offers a useful conceptual framework for (re)considering food as a *lens* through which structural inequalities may be more fully appraised. Such appraisal, I argue, is a critical precondition to both activist and academic endeavors to envision and enact a more just (food) system. The three organizations I profile in this paper engage with notions of inhabitance, participation, appropriation, and sovereignty to varying degrees. Taken together, these examples suggest a radical and transformative potential in shifting discourse and activism toward broader civic projects, and demonstrate the theoretical efficacy of both the food sovereignty and right to the city frameworks.

Ultimately, then, the primary goal of this paper is to argue that mobilizations seeking to unite food and justice

may be better conceived and executed by (rather than on behalf of) people residing in communities where projects are situated. Such a repositioning of urban food justice activism—which draws on the central tenets of food *sovereignty* and the *right to the city*—would emphasize systemic change through analyses of power, rather than focusing on food itself as the impetus for social change.

## Situating New Orleans as a post-disaster city

In the years since the US Army Corps of Engineers-constructed levee system failed to hold back the surge of Lake Pontchartrain into the city of New Orleans in August of 2005, the disproportionate destruction Hurricane Katrina caused in low-income predominantly non-white neighborhoods has been well documented (Dyson 2006; Pastor et al. 2006; Bullard and Wright 2009; Braun and McCarthy 2005). In Orleans parish, flooding or damage displaced an estimated 272,000 African-American residents, accounting for 73 % of the population affected by the storm in that parish (Gabe et al. 2005). Data from the 2010 decennial US Census reveals the city lost 118,526 African Americans since 2000, compared with 24,101 whites; this number, of course, does not reflect all the people who were displaced by the storm, but rather the net loss between 2000 and 2010. Immediately following the storm, the number of black households in the city proper suffered a 72.2 % drop (Louisiana Recovery Authority 2007). Because majority-African American neighborhoods suffered the most severe housing damage, black residents returned to the city at a much slower pace than did white residents, even after controlling for socio-economic status and other demographic factors (Fussell et al. 2009); the percentage of Latinos living in the city actually increased following Katrina (Plyer 2011). An influx of mostly white, mostly educated, mostly middle-income rebuilders, combined with a slower rate of return for African Americans, has made New Orleans whiter and wealthier than ever before (Luft 2008; Mildenberg 2011).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Despite the ubiquity of statistics like these, and the power of the Census and other counting measures for demonstrating numerically the disproportionate effect of the storm on people of color, they must be approached with some hesitation, as the effect of state counting mechanisms, ultimately, for people of color (for “racialized others”) remains unclear and ambivalent. Invoking Goldberg’s racial state theory requires attention to the problematic potential of racial categories, such as those called forth in census data discussed herein. As Goldberg (2002) and others have argued, state measurement apparatuses that rely on racial categorization can exacerbate racial inequality by reifying socially constructed racial categories. Rather than throw the proverbial “baby out with the bathwater,” I refer to this data for what it reveals about disproportionate exposure to risk and death, but acknowledge the potentially negative implications of doing so.

### Pre-Katrina inequities: segregation and vulnerability

Prior to the storm, structural inequalities contributed to a higher vulnerability among the African American population in New Orleans (Bullard and Wright 2009). As Bakker (2005, p. 797) observed, the “uneven geography of Katrina’s devastation has roots in the uneven geography of New Orleans...[America’s] segregated past is still visible in the spatial and social geography of cities such as New Orleans, where housing for black, working-class communities is located in the least desirable areas, with limited employment, social services, and amenities.” Lewis (2003, p. 51) describes the racial patterning of the city as “less malevolent” than the strict segregation that characterized other cities during the middle decades of the twentieth century, but notes that “the poorest blacks simply lived where they could,” typically “along the *battures* or the backswamps.” These were areas situated close to poorly constructed artificial levees and lacking adequate flood protection. Even as the city continued to grow, and wealthier African Americans moved “up” (quite literally, to higher ground), poor blacks continued to live in increasingly isolated low-lying areas, cut off from decent housing and educational and economic opportunities (Dyson 2006, p. 7). While all urban landscapes are social products (Lefebvre 1991), in the case of New Orleans—an unlikely city constructed on what Pierce Lewis (2003, p. 20) has described as an “evil site” due to its geographic location below sea level—the ubiquitous acts of racial exclusion and unequal access to resources “led to a [localized] concomitance of poverty and vulnerability” (Ballard-Rosa 2010, p. 179). By the time Katrina struck, nearly all the city’s extreme poverty neighborhoods were predominantly black; these racially and economically segregated areas bore the brunt of the disaster (Fussell et al. 2009).

### Post-Katrina visibilities: lifting and reinforcing the veil

Although people living in New Orleans were cognizant of a bifurcated class system based largely upon race, this social reality had been effectively veiled from the national consciousness until early September of 2005, when the “natural” disaster of Hurricane Katrina exposed the pervasive racial inequalities persisting in New Orleans and, by extension, other North American cities (Sanyika 2009). As was quickly and violently revealed after the levee breach, and throughout the response effort—widely acknowledged to be inadequate—Katrina was as much a “social disaster” as a natural one. Reflecting on Katrina, Neil Smith (2006) argues, “in every phase and aspect of a disaster—causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction—the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser

extent a social calculus.” Indeed, while the historical and cultural importance of African-Americans in New Orleans is often celebrated and understood as generating a complex socio-cultural landscape (Lewis 2003), the storm and its aftermath brought the harsh implications of social differentiation and segregation into sharp relief; New Orleans was not, evidently a “post-racial” city after all (Steinberg and Shields 2008).

What was, perhaps, most extraordinary about Katrina and its aftermath, was not the continued pattern of state abandonment of poor, mostly black residents, but that this abandonment was “rendered *visible* for all to see, a shocking failure on the part of an administration that ha[d] gone the extra mile to carefully stage what counted as ‘news’ in America” (Braun and McCarthy 2005, p. 802). That there existed disproportionately high rates of poverty among African Americans was something this nation knew, in the abstract; Katrina, however, “gave the numbers flesh and bone and blood. And voice: *We’re still here*” (Robinson 2010, p. 109).

Katrina thus both lifted and reinforced the “veil” (DuBois 1999 [1903]) of racial inequality. Katrina revealed “the way the nation still thinks and feels about black people” (Dyson 2006, p. 138); those thoughts and feelings were on display in media and popular interpretations of the disaster, which “confirmed a long-held impression of New Orleans as a prime example of the black, decadent, crime-and poverty-stricken city that is the antithesis of an American national mythology that, in its essence remains white, wholesome, safe, wealthy, and rural or suburban” (Steinberg and Shields 2008, p. 16).

### Demographic shifts: a whiter and wealthier New Orleans

It was into this milieu that thousands of well-meaning people flocked to the city from throughout the nation and world in the months and years following Hurricane Katrina, to help it rebuild and recover. They were driven variously by anger at a broken system, a religious or humanitarian commitment to offer support to those in greatest need, a desire to participate in the salvation of a distinctive and important American city, or any number of other reasons—many “good” and some less so (c.f. Klein 2007). These individuals, families, churches, and community groups joined existing non-profit organizations or founded their own, recruited volunteers to assist in the rebuilding of homes and schools, helped to clean up debris, and advocated on behalf of those who had lost their homes or worse in the wake of the storm. Many of them remain in New Orleans, now nearly a decade later, and have no intention of leaving the city anytime soon; many intend to

or already call it home. The social and economic impacts of this migration are still unfolding.

After spending 3 weeks volunteering with a prominent relief organization following Katrina, McClure (2005) contrasted the mobility of the many “activists and volunteers” with the long-time residents still stranded in other cities throughout the US. Reflecting on her time spent volunteering, she asks, “How did it come to be that we are able to travel to and around New Orleans, while many survivors still can’t go home?” McClure’s musing points to the often awkward and uncomfortable reality acknowledged by many well-meaning people who have contributed to the rebuilding effort. Bierra and colleagues add, “Unfortunately, white progressive and radical Left volunteers that have come to ‘rebuild’ in the name of altruism and charity also contribute to the changing demographics of the city” (Bierra et al. 2006, p. 39). Utilizing terminology that might make “white progressive and radical Left volunteers” bristle, Luft (2008, p. 23) points to the accelerated risks of gentrification in a disaster zone with a limited housing stock, where “the occupation and purchase of limited space [and] the whitening of culture” are counter-productive to genuine rebuilding, and may in fact represent a form of neocolonial occupation.

Despite these unintended consequences of exogenous rebuilding efforts, they accompany tangible goods that have enabled many to rebuild their homes and return to their communities. Thus, native New Orleanians’ feelings towards both temporary and long-term “transplants” are nuanced and complicated. My extended research experience in the city taught me that native New Orleanians are kind to visitors, proud to show off their city, and generally grateful for the material and personal or time contributions of long and short-term volunteers and relief workers; at the same time, however, many native New Orleanians are suspect of outsiders’ intentions and may be hesitant to accept various contributions—whether in the form of physical labor, food and seeds, or redevelopment plans—in the spirit in which they are offered. This tension is certainly clear throughout the emerging and evolving food justice movement in New Orleans, as I discuss below.

### Situating food justice activism in post-Katrina New Orleans

Among the many efforts and initiatives to emerge and expand in the years since Katrina have been projects and programs that endeavor to increase access to nutritious food within low-income communities. In 2009, New Orleans ranked among the 10 most food-insecure cities in the United States (Food Research and Action Center 2010). Immediately following the storm, there were literally no

stores open and no places from which to obtain fresh food. People did what they could to get by. The New Orleans Food and Farm Network, a local food justice organization, quickly drew up maps of the city, indicating where people could find any kind of food; any restaurants or corner stores that had reopened were included in their map. Backyard and community gardens, too, emerged as viable and necessary sources of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Since 2005, however, the pace of food-related activism and alternative food project development in the city has accelerated considerably. From new food cooperatives, food banks and farmers markets to community gardens and other forms of urban agriculture, alternative modes of food production and distribution within the city have mobilized different strategies for addressing a perceived lack of access to affordable, nutritious food for all residents. New Orleans’ legacy as a “food city” has contributed to its renaissance among well-known hometown chefs and their broadening clientele of residents and visitors who seek locally and sustainably sourced, high-quality fare. These expectations of and demands for quality have transformed the agricultural awareness of many wealthy and even middle-class people in New Orleans and elsewhere, and have facilitated the emergence of new modes of food provisioning for both residents and visitors; while residents seek out farmers markets and organic food cooperatives in greater numbers—and frequent the shiny and bourgeois Whole Foods in the Uptown neighborhood—visitors may make reservations months in advance at Antoine’s or Commander’s Palace, where the menus feature humble-sounding regional fare, like Côtelettes d’agneau grillées for a mere \$43.75.

Very few people would argue that initiatives such as these, which increase the purchasing and consumption of craft, artisanal, and locally sourced food products among relatively or quite wealthy people, constitute (or correlate with) “food justice” for people who struggle to feed themselves and their families. However, mainstream conflation of “local” or “quality” food with “food justice” may be at least partially responsible for the plethora of initiatives aiming, with various motivations, to “bring good food to others” (Guthman 2008a). Among people of means, access to preferred high quality food items typically means access to markets and restaurants that offer sought-after items of reasonably high quality, and “access” may be defined as within easy driving distance. Access to land for growing or raising one’s own food is, in many cities, a romantic notion not even the rich can realize, despite the historic use of gardens in the United States for subsistence and survival in times of need (Lawson 2005).

While gardening—particularly the backyard variety—was prominent in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina, the powerful role of mostly exogenous nonprofits and

volunteers following Katrina shifted the form and function of gardening projects throughout the city. While backyard gardens historically have provided important supplemental (or even fundamental) nutrition and served as leisure or recreational spaces for residents, post-Katrina community-scale gardening has relied heavily upon popular tropes suggesting the alimentary, salutary, environmental, and social benefits of gardening at family and community scales. The purported benefits of urban agriculture and community gardening have become common parlance in New Orleans and elsewhere, as national-level efforts to address a so-called “obesity epidemic” and foster more localized food systems are embraced and promoted by First Lady Michelle Obama, food celebrities and chefs like Jamie Oliver, and increasingly well-known authors like Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser. These national-level discourses have fomented a groundswell of support from communities throughout the country, but most prominently among well-educated, mostly white people of some means—precisely the demographic that was drawn to assist with the rebuilding of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. The sudden availability of approximately 44,000 vacant lots, representing roughly 20 % of all residential addresses in the city (Plyer and Ortiz 2010), following Katrina facilitated conceptually, among food justice advocates, a physical “empty space” for enacting and materializing food justice.

### **Three approaches to food justice in post-Katrina New Orleans**

In this section, I present three vignettes that demonstrate how three distinct food justice projects have materialized in separate neighborhoods or communities of New Orleans. These vignettes illuminate some key themes that characterize food justice work in New Orleans. Each vignette represents a different community struggling to make sense of challenges related to food justice, and working towards a specific plan of action. The vignettes draw from meetings I attended during the course of my research, between the fall of 2010 and the fall of 2012, as well as interviews and conversations I had in both research and social settings. All three vignettes present composite scenarios to both respect and anonymize the identity of research participants, and to introduce relevant themes that will be discussed in the concluding subsequent sections of this paper.

The first vignette describes an effort by mostly white exogenous food justice advocates, and relies heavily upon conversations I had with those advocates, during which I asked them to reflect on the process of developing their project in a low-income community of color; these conversations, combined with participant observation of the

project and organization, enabled me to generate the composite characterization that appears below. This vignette introduces themes of white privilege and race in the food system, particularly illuminating the tendency of food justice projects to be initiated and run by white people.

The second vignette draws on my notes and observations from a series of meetings organized and attended by residents of the primarily African American Lower Ninth Ward, in their struggle to increase access to healthy foods within their neighborhood. The vignette is a composite characterization of a series of eight meetings of the Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition (LNWFAC) and members of the Lower Ninth Ward and Holy Cross neighborhoods, which took place between April and December of 2012. This vignette introduces themes of access, appropriation, community participation, and the right to the city.

The third vignette offers a snapshot of my experience volunteering with a Latino food justice organization and draws on observation and interviews to characterize how leadership and members of that organization characterize food justice and food sovereignty. This vignette introduces themes of translation, advocacy, and the state, and demonstrates the embodied connection between transnational corporate agriculture in the Global South and a need for public assistance in the Global North.

#### Vignette 1: Hollygrove market and farm

Among white food justice advocates, the mental calculus that equates specific food projects and programming with improved livelihood outcomes for poor people of color typically goes something like this:

**PROBLEM:** Poor people do not have grocery stores in their neighborhoods, and in most cases they lack transportation to get to a supermarket to purchase fresh nutritious foods. This leads people to choose food from fast food outlets or convenience stores, which is easier to access than “fresh” food, both economically and physically. Eating the food offered at these kinds of places makes people fat, unhealthy, and likely to die before they otherwise might. The food procurement options of specific communities correlate with race and class, meaning there is an explicit injustice underlying the basic act of providing food for oneself and family. Hence, poor people lack self-determination when it comes to food; they are constrained by the limited food landscape in which they live (this is often termed a “food desert”), and they lack viable options for healthy food they can afford. People need to be liberated from this false choice, and should not have to rely on the paltry possibilities laid out for them by entities that clearly are not concerned with their health and well-being.

In New Orleans, one solution to the access problem has been to consider the productive potential of all the lots that once held houses and families, still vacant since Hurricane Katrina flooded entire neighborhoods in 2005. Why not put those empty lots to good use by growing food? This could solve a number of problems. Overgrown or unkempt lots could be made aesthetically pleasing, rather than signaling despair and decay. They could become spaces for community members to come together in solidarity, to break free from the shackles of the global-industrial-corporate food system by taking matters into their own hands, sowing seeds of revolution, redemption, and resistance to the oppression that constrains them.

Gardens, and their promise of empowerment and self-sufficiency, offer an elegant and alluring solution to the related problems of (healthy) food access and obesity, one often attractive to potential funders. But not, incidentally a simple one, or one that is easy to implement. Three years after he helped create a market and farm in the primarily African American neighborhood of Hollygrove, Steve Canfield, a white man who is a non-native but “pre-Katrina” resident of New Orleans, describes the long and arduous process for getting the project off the ground.

“After Katrina, I was working on community development projects in the Hollygrove neighborhood, when a friend who worked with a social services agency at the time invited me to help start a Community Development Corporation in the neighborhood. The purpose was to help residents come back to the neighborhood, to navigate the ‘maze of programs’ that emerged after Katrina, and to focus on neighborhood revitalization as well as training and planning programs.”

Like most neighborhoods in New Orleans, the boundaries of Hollygrove are not official or firm. The City Planning Commission, the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, and residents of the neighborhood all have slightly different distinctions for bounding the neighborhood. The Carrollton-Hollygrove Community Development Corporation, which emerged after Katrina to help “revitalize the neighborhood” and develop affordable housing infrastructure, bounds Hollygrove at South Carrollton Avenue, the Jefferson Parish line, Interstate-10, and South Claiborne Avenue. Those boundaries enclose an area of .62 square miles, home to 4,377 people in 2010 (US Census). The neighborhood was badly damaged by the storm; by the 2010 census, 33 % of homes remained unoccupied. The racial and economic demographics of Hollygrove have not changed much since 2000; the neighborhood is still 94 % African American, and one of the poorest in the city.

Steve continues the story of collaboratively founding a market and farm in Hollygrove after Hurricane Katrina: “Hollygrove was a food desert. What we wanted to do was

to get fresh fruits and vegetables into the neighborhood. We thought about starting a market but were told by the folks who run the Crescent City Farmers Markets that a farmers’ market would be too much work, and probably wouldn’t survive. So we pursued other possibilities. We thought about trying to sell fresh fruit and vegetables at existing corner stores, but when we visited the corner stores we learned that fresh produce is too expensive for it to sell well; the stores would have to sell it at a loss for people to actually buy it. That was the perception anyway. So, finally we decided we could start our own store. But at the time [early fall 2008] we had no money, no nothing. We signed a lease for the current location, on the edge of the Hollygrove neighborhood, in September of 2008. We partnered with the New Orleans Food and Farm network to apply for a couple of grants, found a couple of farmers, and started selling produce by calling people up and asking them if they’d be interested in purchasing a box for \$25.”

I ask Steve whether, after the long and arduous process of getting the project off the ground, there had been any shift in goals or priorities, or if Hollygrove Market and Farm (HMF) serves the functions it was originally intended to. By the time I interview Steve, I had been volunteering at HMF for several months, and perceived it to be a vibrant market space that catered mostly to white customers who drove into the neighborhood once or twice a week to purchase a box of fresh produce, local dairy, or hormone-free and free-range meat. Two or three neighborhood residents tended plots in the garden space surrounding the market, but the leadership of the organization was mostly white and not from the neighborhood. Because of these observations, I was curious to hear how Steve would characterize the current priorities and purpose of the organization.

He responded to my question, “The original mission was to make fresh fruits and vegetables available to Hollygrove and surrounding neighborhoods, but we always knew that the customer base would be much larger than that. The profit we got from selling to people outside the neighborhood could subsidize our sales to Hollygrove residents. We give lots of gift certificates [to neighborhood residents], and they get a 20 % discount when they shop at the market. But still only about less than 10 % of the sales go to people in the neighborhood. Certainly now our mission has evolved. We realized—we’re really supporting these local farms. Small-scale rural farmers, and a growing number of urban farmers. So our mission is evolving to support small farms. And one of the greatest successes of the market has been turning a blighted lot into green-space. The market brings tons of people into the neighborhood who otherwise wouldn’t set foot there. It has fostered tremendous neighborhood revitalization.”

Steve’s characterization of the evolving mission of Hollygrove Market and Farm and its efforts to engage the

community in a project that largely excluded it during early phases of decision-making was, I discovered, endemic to post-Katrina food justice projects throughout the city. Despite initial—and genuine, I would argue—missions to enhance food access and improve health outcomes for neighborhood residents, the mandates to secure and maintain funding and to remain viable as either a nonprofit or LLC in many cases trumped the organization's founding social justice principles.

#### Vignette 2: Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition

According to the 2000 US Census, the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood (consisting of Holy Cross and the Lower Ninth Ward) had a pre-Katrina population of 19,515. Mostly black and working class, 60 % of neighborhood residents owned their own homes, many for generations. Prior to the storm, the neighborhood contained a diversity of locally owned businesses: barber and beauty shops, corner stores, eateries, day care centers, public schools, and 72 churches. Historically, the neighborhood contained numerous truck farms, and backyard gardening was common in the decades before Katrina.

The near-total destruction of the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and subsequent investment and charitable efforts by big name celebrities like Brad Pitt, pushed the neighborhood into international purview. The levees protecting the Lower Ninth Ward breached in two places, sending a surge of water that lifted homes from their foundations and tossed cars about like playthings. The floodwaters reached twenty feet in the lowest lying parts of the neighborhood, and in some cases did not recede for over a month. The devastation of this part of the city is hard to overemphasize. One hundred percent of the neighborhood was flooded, and even those residents whose homes were marginally habitable were not allowed to return until nearly two months after the storm. Return to the neighborhood has been slow and appears to have stagnated; the 2010 census counted 5,556 residents, just 28 % of pre-Katrina levels (GNOCDC 2012).

The Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition (LNWFAC) formed in the spring of 2012, as project of the Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development (CSED). LNWFAC is a collective of residents of the Lower Ninth Ward who are frustrated by the slow pace of recovery, and especially their neighborhood's lack of a grocery store or other option for accessing fresh food. Kendra Brown, CSED Food Security Coordinator, organizer with the LNWFAC, and second-generation resident of the Lower Ninth Ward, described the importance of food access for her community:

Food security remains a vital element of any sustainable community—and in fact is a return to the traditions of urban farming and independent living rooted in the Lower Ninth Ward...The Lower Ninth Ward is considered a “food desert” by the USDA. There is no grocery store. The stores that do sell food items offer a limited variety of junk food, processed foods, and prepared foods. Since Hurricane Katrina, the community has struggled with redevelopment and one of the core issues has been lack of food options. Businesses are hesitant to open in an economically depressed neighborhood with drastically decreased population ... Our vision is to have the Lower Ninth Ward speak as one voice on what we want for food access in our neighborhood. As a community, we must define what it is that we want, whether it be a grocery store, an urban farm, or better food policy, and take the steps to attain it.

Enacting this vision has required steady and deliberate work, and significant community participation. Decisions have been made via consensus over the course of eight monthly meetings, each with a specific purpose and plan. As food security coordinator, Kendra moderated the meetings, but all neighborhood residents were encouraged to contribute ideas and thoughts throughout the planning process. Over the course of eight meetings, the group accomplished the following tasks, according to the framework laid out at the first meeting: (1) defined a healthy food system as “a community-controlled environment that is planned strategically by the community, where we have the food we want and need, and where the market is sustained by educating the vendors and consumers, involving the youth, creating jobs, and respecting our culture”; (2) assessed the food access needs of the community, by surveying existing options and juxtaposing them with what they desired for their community; (3) explored, through research and conversation, what other communities have done to solve their food access problems; (4) reviewed existing plans for the City of New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward to determine how LNWFAC actions could align with those; (5) examined how racism has shaped the current food access situation, by organizing a 2 days “Dismantling Racism in the Food System” workshop; (6) articulated a vision statement (“The Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition envisions a strong and proud Lower Ninth Ward community where access to fresh, quality food is convenient and affordable”) and mission statement (“Our mission is to increase access to fresh, quality, convenient and affordable food in the Lower Ninth Ward through researching, soliciting, and supporting projects that will meet the food needs and quality standards of the Lower Ninth Ward community”); (7) worked to understand

and articulate the obstacles that have constrained food access; (8) collaboratively determined what the community wants and needs in terms of food access; (9) brainstormed actionable solutions to food access problems; (10) produced a detailed food action plan, which incorporates immediate actions, short-, intermediate- and long-term plans to reach agreed-upon goals. The group has worked in collaboration with the City of New Orleans and other area nonprofits to secure funding for projects at each time-scale and hosted a popular and successful “Grocery Store for a Day” event in the neighborhood to draw public attention to their food access struggle (Harden 2012).

The efforts of the Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition represent claims by neighborhood residents on their right to appropriate and reshape urban space to meet their needs. These efforts constitute neighborhood-scale claims on the right to the city, and highlight the importance of neighborhood autonomy in both envisioning and enacting these claims.

### Vignette 3: Latino Farmers’ Cooperative of Louisiana

During a preliminary research trip to New Orleans in the summer of 2011, I met with Evelia Morales, the director of a nonprofit organization working to increase food security for Latinos in New Orleans. Early in our introductory meeting, Evelia asked me to tell her about my research. I described my interest in food justice organizing and activism in New Orleans. She responded by saying, “how do you define ‘food justice’? Because I don’t think much of that is really going on here.” This response, of course, caught me off guard. Evelia proceeded to give me two examples of what food justice means to her. The first was a community garden project that her organization, the Latino Farmers’ Cooperative of Louisiana (LFCL) had established in the Central City area of New Orleans. She said the garden was really lovely, and Latino members of the cooperative used it frequently, not just to garden, but also to gather, to cook and eat, to commune. They had some chickens in the garden. It wasn’t too long before one person in particular was complaining, saying they didn’t have a right to have chickens in the garden. This person—this white man, who served on the board of the organization that had granted the garden space to the LFCL—succeeded in closing the garden. To Evelia and the other Latinos who used and valued the garden space, condemning the garden was a clear case of racial discrimination. By failing to accept the cultural practices of the Latino community to use the garden as a communal gathering space, Evelia explained, the white man used his power to eliminate those practices that did not meet his own understanding of what a community garden should be.

Evelia demonstrated the second example of “food justice” by presenting me with a petition entitled, “Define client eligibility policy at Second Harvest Food Pantries to facilitate equal access to food.” The petition addresses a practice at local food pantries that prohibits giving food to anyone who does not possess a valid US drivers’ license or other form of government-issued identification. Food access is prohibited to individuals possessing foreign passports or foreign government-issued IDs. Evelia and the LFCL protested the practice of denying emergency food to undocumented individuals, and felt that all people—regardless of their immigration status—should have access to emergency food when necessary. Despite New Orleans’ long connection with Spanish heritage and culture, the city was not a major destination for Latin American immigrants until after 2005. Evelia explained that more than 33,000 Latinos have moved to New Orleans since Katrina, and have been instrumental in helping to rebuild the city. Despite their contributions, Latinos are often the victims of wage theft or other practices that take advantage of their unfamiliarity with the English language and American legal system.

Evelia explained that each of these examples is truly about *food*—they are about getting real food into people’s bodies. They are about justice because, in Evelia’s eyes, that universal need is *denied on the basis of race*. Evelia spoke with conviction and passion about institutional racism within the food system (and everywhere in society). She said she was puzzled to hear me use the term food justice in New Orleans, because she felt that people in New Orleans refuse to acknowledge racism, despite it being a crucial feature in determining who has access to what food and why. She criticized people—typically white people—who like to use the terms “food justice” and “food desert” without ever really defining what they mean. She asked me, rhetorically, I hope, “how do you know what justice is if you are a white person?” To Evelia, food justice is completely inseparable from institutional racism.

During my time volunteering with the Latino Farmers’ Cooperative in 2012, I came to understand the extent to which food access was severely circumscribed for non-resident, non-English-speaking immigrants who rely on state benefits programs to meet their families’ subsistence needs. Most of the members of the cooperative had an agricultural background in their country of origin, but lacked the space or time to continue the cultural or subsistence practice of growing food. Evelia and the LFCL helped enroll qualifying members in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), which the LFCL saw as crucial for increasing “food security” among its members. Over time, I came to see the paradox of relying upon SNAP benefits; they provided crucial (though insufficient) aid in feeding families, but appeared to tether those

who were able to ultimately access SNAP benefits to the very system of corporate food and agriculture that may have likely contributed to their exile from their country of origin. The links between struggles for “food sovereignty” in Latin America, and the struggle of Latino immigrants in New Orleans to access funds to procure cheap processed food became increasingly apparent as I spent more time working with the LFCL.

Taken together, these three vignettes offer a descriptive portrait of the diverse forms food justice activism has taken in post-Katrina New Orleans. Post-Katrina New Orleans constitutes a distinct space and time for situating food justice activism, but there are elements to its story that correspond and link with narratives that have become dominant in other spaces as well. Among these are prominent discourses about food justice and food sovereignty, and the roles of race and racism in constraining not just food access, but also the ways in which food access struggles are articulated and fought. Therefore, having introduced three specific, and quite different, food-related projects in New Orleans, I would like to suggest a framework for considering such projects. By combining elements of food sovereignty discourses with Henri Lefebvre’s formulation on the right to the city, this framework proposes a more holistic understanding (and, perhaps, critique) of urban food justice projects as they encounter race- and place-based inequities.

## **Discussion: a food sovereignty and right to the city framework for analyzing food justice**

### Race and food justice activism

The flourishing of academic interest in food systems over the last decade had, until quite recently, resulted in lamentably little attention to how race intersects with food activism, or with food systems more broadly. Guthman (2008a, b), Slocum (2006, 2007, 2010), Alkon (2008), and Alkon and McCullen (2010) offer notable exceptions.<sup>2</sup> Using her own students’ experiences with “urban food security” service-learning projects in Berkeley and throughout the United States, Guthman demonstrates the tendency of food justice advocates to focus on “food itself,” rather than on the structural inequalities that lie at the heart of disparities in food access (and the attendant health and economic consequences). As Guthman argues, “the problematic inheres in the research question itself:

<sup>2</sup> Geographers’ interest in the connections between race and the food system has increased considerably, as evidenced by a series of sessions and panels on that topic, organized by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, at the 2013 meeting of the Association of American Geographers.

namely, that trying to understand how the African Americans who are the target of these efforts appear to reject them in some way replicates the very phenomenon being addressed—the effect of white desire to enroll black people in a particular set of food practices” (Guthman 2008a, p. 433). This fundamentally flawed agenda—however cloaked in real or imagined efforts to effect social change—suggests to Guthman that “a set of discourses and practices that reflect whitened cultural histories are what animate [her] students” (Guthman 2008a, p. 433). In other words, the very desire to change the *kinds of food* that people of color eat—rather than addressing the historic and contemporary systems that generate the particular *landscapes of availability* for people of color—is in keeping with the privilege afforded to white people throughout white cultural history. Whether they intend it or not, Guthman argues, her students’ efforts “reflect white cultural desires and missionary practices, which might explain [their] lack of resonance in communities of color” (Guthman 2008a, p. 433).

While the food itself—specifically the quantity and quality available in low-income communities of color—may galvanize white people, as evidenced by the case of Hollygrove Market and Farm, for people actually residing in those communities, “the paucity of quality food in their communities is seen as evidence of [a] lack of [political and economic] power” (Block et al. 2012). This discrepancy in identifying the problem—evident in the disparate discourses of HMF staff and members of the LNWFAC—reflects, in many ways, the difficulty that inheres in seeking solutions, and may begin to explain why food justice projects aiming to promote social justice or, more specifically, to increase healthy food access for people of color, so often fail to address the underlying systems and structures that helped create the unjust food landscape that characterizes American cities.

### Food sovereignty

In an effort to move beyond alternative food spaces coded as white, a burgeoning movement for food sovereignty in the United States employs a discourse that commits to “rebuilding local food economies in our own communities [and] to dismantling structural racism,” among other social and environmental justice objectives (US Food Sovereignty Alliance 2010). Such framing offers a powerful stance against (white/capitalist/patriarchal) hegemonic structures that have systematically disempowered specific individuals and groups while empowering others (Windfuhr and Jonson 2005; Patel 2009; Schanbacher 2010; Wittman et al. 2010), but it remains unclear how these frames fit into, structure, or impede the actual work of marginalized peoples engaged in food production or procurement. As

Guthman has suggested, the discursive tactic of “inviting others to the table” does not imply a radical shift in who gets to set the table (2008b, p. 388); in fact, such frames may perpetuate the very systems of white privilege they purport to undermine (Slocum 2006) by failing to account for the social and historical (and racialized) contexts in which food activism is situated, and the unique identities and experiences of those individuals and groups directly and peripherally involved (Holloway 2000; Kurtz 2013).

The movement for food sovereignty in the United States is still fledgling, and I lack the space or breadth of purpose to engage thoroughly with that movement’s potentialities and pitfalls here. However, I argue that *discursively*, food sovereignty’s explicit attention to power and to the democratization of food systems offers one possible alternative to white hegemony within US food justice initiatives, and points to a central distinction between food justice and food sovereignty.

At its core, the movement for food sovereignty argues for the right of food producers and local people (those who suffer the consequences of existing neoliberal policies) for self-determination and conceptually links residence in a particular place with the authority to manage the activities occurring there. The 2002 “Statement on People’s Food Sovereignty: Our World Is Not For Sale” enumerated the following rights of food producers within their own territories: “the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets; and to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority of managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources.” These demands emerged in direct response to the increasing hegemony of a global food system characterized by market distortions, corporate control of genetic material and life forms, and the consolidation of agricultural lands and assets driven by the industrialization of agriculture in less-developed countries. The processes of corporate consolidation and control, they argue, conspired to generate two major negative outcomes for farmers and fisherfolk in the developing world: (1) artificially cheap staple foods, generated by subsidies to large-scale farms in industrialized countries, flooded markets in the developing world (referred to as “dumping”), making it impossible for local producers to compete with the cheap supply of imports; (2) no longer able to produce for local markets, smallholders who stayed afloat did so by producing export crops or products, thus diminishing their capacity to produce subsistence-quality foodstuffs for their families and communities, and leading to paradoxically high levels of hunger and food insecurity among food producing peoples (Rosset 2009). Such externalities of

industrial agriculture have been particularly pronounced in many of the Latin American countries of origin of post-Katrina immigrants to New Orleans.

While the impetus for and continued momentum of an international grassroots movement for food sovereignty is in many ways territorialized within the global south, the central demands for self-determination, autonomy, and democratic food and agricultural systems have gained considerable conceptual purchase throughout the United States. In a subsequent paper, I will engage with this “spatial translation” of food sovereignty discourse and activism from rural areas of the global south to both rural and urban areas of the global north. For the purposes of this paper, I would like to suggest that the process of spatial translation has created a gap within food sovereignty discourse, which renders it insufficient to the task of articulating grassroots, race-, and place-conscious urban food activism in the global north. Insights from Henri Lefebvre’s formulation on the right to the city offer tools for bridging this conceptual (and, ultimately, action-oriented) gap.

#### The right to the city and the right to food

Lefebvre’s “right to the city” (RTTC) framework reframes the arena of decision-making in cities to enfranchise inhabitants to produce urban space that meets their own needs (Lefebvre 1996). Lefebvre presents the RTTC framework as a radical transformation of urban space, which, he argues, “should modify, concretize, and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller and user of multiple services...” (Lefebvre 1996, p. 34). Among the “rights” to which urban dwellers are entitled are the rights to participation and appropriation. Participation implies that urban inhabitants, or “citadins” to use Lefebvre’s term, should have central decision-making capacity in any action that contributes to the production of localized urban space. Lefebvre situates active participation at scales ranging from the body to the supranational, but the outcomes are, at least initially, localized within specific urban spheres. Appropriation articulates the right of citadins to “physically access, occupy, and use” urban space, and to produce urban space “so that it meets the needs of inhabitants” (Purcell 2002, p. 103). Both participation and appropriation are predicated upon active and engaged urban citizenship (or inhabitance), though which residents are materially and socially connected to one another through the urban space in which they live.

For participation and appropriation to even be possible, Lefebvre argues, residents of a particular space have both the power and the responsibility to realize their roles as inhabitants within the urban system. Lefebvre characterizes inhabitance as more than just the physical and bodily occupation of space, so often suggested in contemporary

notions of urban citizenship and private property. On the contrary, inhabitance implies an expectation to “take part in social life, a community, village or city” (Lefebvre 1996, p. 76)—in short, to value urban space for and through its use (city as *oeuvre*). Prior to the dehumanizing effect of capital and its emphasis on exchange value (city as commodity), inhabitance was thus the central feature of urban life. The radical potential of asserting the RTTC lies in acts of appropriation of space by inhabitants, which “provides a direct challenge to the prioritization of exchange values that is pursued by neoliberal regimes of urban governance” (Butler 2012, p. 145).

## Conclusion

RTTC’s explicit characterization of urban inhabitance as active participation in the decisions and actions that impact (city) life expressly articulates with food sovereignty’s demand for self-determination. It also places self-determination within a meaningful spatial context for food justice practitioners in the global North. Like food sovereignty, RTTC implicates neoliberal economic and social policies in the disenfranchisement of “citidins,” and argues that meaningful social change can only come from within. The three organizations I profiled in this paper engage with notions of inhabitance, participation, appropriation, and sovereignty to varying degrees. Taken together, these examples suggest a radical and transformative potential in shifting discourse and activism toward these broader civic projects.

In the context of post-Katrina New Orleans, the “success” or “failure” of urban agriculture and other “food justice” projects to address concerns regarding food access and hunger (or, conversely but relatedly, obesity) relies on a complex matrix of factors, including the race and nativity of the project organizers (i.e., whether or not they are from New Orleans), the sense of mutual social and cultural understanding among project organizers and community residents, and the ability of project organizers to examine and confront historic and contemporary legacies of racism and structural inequality. The recent acute disaster of Hurricane Katrina has made these structural inequities more visible on the landscape but has not necessarily facilitated robust power analyses among those individuals who have come to the city to help it rebuild.

Thus, considering the diverse forms “food justice activism” has taken in the city of New Orleans (and throughout the United States) in recent years, I argue for the need to resituate and reframe this sort of activism in such a way that offers explicit analyses of race and power. The food sovereignty movement is still young in the United States, and is experiencing growing pains as it too struggles with crises of definition, but its fundamental commitment to restructuring power within the food system is, I argue,

leaps and bounds beyond current discourses and actions that fail to account for structural and systemic racism and power imbalances within the food system. Current analyses still focus too much on food as a commodity to which people deserve access, and do not consider deeply enough how entrenched power structures exacerbate and reinforce landscapes of access. Furthermore, I argue that theoretical contributions from the right to the city concept (and related movement) can enhance the formulation of food sovereignty discourses in the United States and perhaps offer a robust and pragmatic framework for both academic and activist projects to reimagine (a) more just and democratic food system(s). Ultimately, both food scholars and activists may do well to consider “food itself” not as an object of analysis, but rather as a lens through which more basic (and more trenchant) structural inequalities may be made visible. We need to move beyond thinking about food as emancipatory in and of itself; if anything, when white people use food to enhance “social justice” for people of color, they run the risk of exacerbating injustice and reifying racialized power differentials. However, because food seems to effectively animate many white people, activism around food can serve to illuminate structural inequalities that may encourage them to mobilize their privilege toward broader social struggles.

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