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# Political Gardening in a Post-disaster City: Lessons from New Orleans

Yuki Kato, Catarina Passidomo and Daina Harvey

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## Abstract

The study examines the emergence of urban gardening activities in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Drawing on ethnographic and qualitative research conducted throughout the city between 2009 and 2012, it examines the ways in which various gardening projects in New Orleans exhibit different levels and scopes of political engagement, with a particular focus on how they manifest (sometimes in contradictory ways) in the projects' missions and practices. On the basis of these findings, it is argued that current conceptualisations of political gardening are too limiting and do not account for the nuances of how *politics* shape, challenge and materialise in urban gardening activities. By highlighting the ever-shifting social, economic, and political context of the post-disaster recovery, the study illustrates how urban gardening is inherently political, but cautions that the extent to which gardening can subvert social injustice in the city may be limited.

**Keywords:** gardening, gentrification, political gardening, post-disaster city, urban farming, urban garden

## Introduction

Following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, civic participation in New Orleans bloomed, including a rise in urban gardening activities throughout the city. Despite the increasing visibility of garden

projects, there is a relative dearth of systematic studies that examine the range, challenges, outcomes and possibilities of diverse urban gardening projects in post-Katrina New Orleans. The extent to which

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these garden projects can and should be labelled 'political' varies according to the project in question, and even according to the frame of analysis and the particular point in time during which the project is considered. If there is any characteristic that all of these projects have in common, it is their tendency to change and evolve over time. For that reason, we are careful to acknowledge that our analysis is situated within a particular spatial and temporal context; at the same time, however, we are interested in demonstrating themes and lessons offered by these projects that may be more or less universal in nature, and therefore instructive for other projects in other spaces.

This article therefore has three goals. The first is to describe how urban political gardening took hold in post-Katrina New Orleans, especially in the neighbourhoods hardest hit by the flooding. We identify some similarities and differences across various gardening projects throughout the city, in terms of the extent to which they are 'political' in their missions and practices, and the scope of their political agenda. The second goal focuses on illustrating and analysing the challenges that these gardening projects face. We examine how their political visions and practices guide the projects' responses to the challenges, and consider how these challenges shape the visions and practices as the projects mature over time. Finally, through examination of empirical research data, we propose a broader conceptualisation of political gardening than is currently being used in emerging scholarship on the topic. Through our research, we aim to unpack and understand more deeply both the potentials and the pitfalls of urban gardening projects, and to demonstrate the ways in which urban gardening can create spaces for other forms of political action or activism.

By using the post-disaster city as a case study, we offer a critical reconceptualisation of political gardening as a tool for social transformation by carefully examining the urban contexts in which gardening takes place. The dramatic devastation wrought by the levee failure following Hurricane Katrina represents a specific and visible crisis, but we emphatically acknowledge that people residing in poor and disinvested neighbourhoods have suffered crises of abandonment and discrimination for generations. We therefore argue that post-Katrina New Orleans constitutes a unique and yet generalisable case for examining the potential and challenges of political gardening in the face of both acute and chronic social crises. In particular, our study focuses on how gardening projects can be framed as immediate, catalyst or symbolic solutions to urban issues, and how various gardening projects shift their political engagements over time.

## Urban Gardening in Times of Social Disruption

Critical community gardening began in the US, in large measure, as a response to the social disruption inherent to early urban renewal and later as a component of civil rights struggles (Ferris *et al.*, 2001). Community gardens in the US have been established in times of major crises and social disruption, such as wars, or as a tool for civic improvement (Lawson, 2005; Turner *et al.*, 2011; Barthel *et al.*, 2013). Urban gardens, in addition to allowing participants to rethink urban space, allow us to recast the relationship between civic participation and urban environmental thinking. Certomà (2011), for instance, argues that critical urban gardening represents the most likely, and perhaps only, opportunity for re-establishing political control over both social structure and social space. Others suggest

that critical urban gardening has been instrumental in creating political communities of eco-citizens that have in turn helped to redefine civic identity and association (Barker, 2000; Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006). By contrast, Hou *et al.* (2009) portray community gardens not necessarily as a direct solution to urban issues, but rather as places where community needs, conflicts and concerns are addressed and resolved in relation to gardening.

Post-Katrina New Orleans presented many opportunities for political gardening to emerge and prosper. First, the vast area of the city that was physically destroyed by flooding produced vacant or neglected properties that eventually became blighted.<sup>1</sup> Turning these abandoned properties, some of which posed a threat to property values and public safety, into gardens was seen as a form of blight remedy. Second, immediately following Hurricane Katrina, many residents experienced an acute shortage in access to food, regardless of their socioeconomic status, because many food outlets never reopened or operated only on limited hours. This concern was most severe in predominantly African American neighbourhoods that suffered from long-term disinvestment and a lack of fresh food availability prior to the storm; in these neighbourhoods, markets took significantly longer to reopen and many did not reopen at all. The new public awareness of food insecurity in the city helped to facilitate a political and social climate in which the framing of urban gardening as a safeguard could garner stronger support than before. Third, the recovery process resulted in political and demographic shifts in the city, which created momentum for political organising and entrepreneurship. For example, the majority of urban gardening projects in New Orleans that started since 2006 are led by individuals who are not originally from New Orleans or from the

neighbourhood where the project takes place. A great number of them, predominantly White and well-educated, specifically came to New Orleans in recent years to work in urban gardening projects, although some organisers had been active in New Orleans years before Hurricane Katrina or returned to the community since 2005. Fourth, national discourses suggesting that gardening projects may function as a form of community redevelopment, by providing communal spaces for resident interactions and boosting the pride in place through beautification, animated considerable urban food activism throughout the city. Finally, these local changes coincided with the national economic climate of the Great Recession and increasing concerns over obesity and food safety.

All these factors made New Orleans a promising place for political gardening to take shape and succeed, although our empirical data indicate that many urban gardening projects in the city encountered numerous challenges, some more detrimental to the projects' operation than others. Indeed, there has been exponential growth in the number of urban gardening or farming projects in New Orleans since 2006. Among those projects, some are located in flooded areas with slow rates of recovery, while others are located in areas that either did not flood or have since regained much of their population. The dynamic and evolving nature of activism since 2005 makes it difficult to report comprehensively on the form, function, scope, participation and durability of gardening projects throughout the city, and that is not the intention of this paper; instead, we offer a snapshot of the variety of projects represented throughout the city eight years after Katrina and consider what they reveal about broader patterns and potential of urban political gardening projects.

**Table 1.** Forms of political gardening

<i>Form of political gardening</i>	<i>Diagnostic framing</i>	<i>Prognostic framing of gardening</i>
<i>Explicitly political</i>		
Broad scope	Concerned with broader social and political concerns beyond gardening and food (for example, structural inequality, racism, neoliberalism) Focus on food sovereignty as well as food access and sustainability	Gardening as catalyst for tackling broader social injustice
Narrow scope	Gesture towards social justice but focus on specific issues (for example, access to local food, environmental sustainability) Tend to focus less on food sovereignty, more on food access and sustainability	Gardening as immediate tool for resolving specific social issues
<i>Implicitly political</i>	Interested primarily in raising awareness about local food and gardening techniques May include educational or outreach components, but tend towards a market orientation or gardening as ends and means	Gardening as symbolic tool for raising awareness about social issues

## Forms of Political Gardening in New Orleans

While backyard gardening was prominent in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina, the surge in exogenously-led community-scale gardening projects post-Katrina generated a qualitatively different social and geographical construction. For the purposes of our research, we maintain a broad conception of ‘political gardening’, in order to differentiate the variety of forms (and degrees of ‘political’) represented by gardening projects in New Orleans. Broadly speaking, we conceive ‘political gardening’ to encompass projects which situate food production within a broader political framework, typically one that orients toward social justice. The degree to which gardening projects in New Orleans

(or elsewhere) may be described as ‘political’ depends on a range of factors.

In an effort to distinguish the various ways in which urban gardening projects exhibit political intentions or engage politically, we constructed three typologies by focusing on the ways in which the projects frame (Snow and Benford, 1988) their missions and practices, more specifically by diagnostic framing and prognostic framing. Table 1 summarises these typologies. First, we distinguish projects on the basis of their diagnostic framing, or their “identification of a problem and the attribution of blame or causality” (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 200). We categorise the gardening projects that point to some social issues as “explicitly political”, while ones that do not invoke diagnostic framing in their mission

statement or actions are categorised as “implicitly political”.

We further distinguish projects within the “explicitly political” typology on the basis of their prognostic framing, which serves to “suggest solutions to the problem but also to identify strategies, tactics, and targets” (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 201). ‘Broader’ political missions and engagement view urban gardening as part of a multifaceted approach to addressing systemic or structural inequalities in the food system. While focused on food security as a primary concern, they aim to use urban gardening as a catalyst for harnessing political forces to confront and change failing social and political institutions more broadly. In practice, these projects engage in public conversations regarding race and racism, poverty and economic inequality, gendered division of labour within and outside the food system, and other ways in which social and political oppression both compel and constrain the work of creating more ‘just’ food systems. By contrast, the ‘narrow’ prognostic framing shows concerns about specific social issues such as food access, environmental sustainability and local food production, rather than larger social-structural issues. We distinguish this typology from the broadly framed political gardening projects because their missions or practices do not explicitly address larger structural issues but rather see gardening activities and distribution of locally grown food as immediate solutions to the particular social issues of concern.

The “implicitly political” prognostic framing, on the other hand, views gardening as a symbolic solution with indirect effects on social changes, such as raising awareness about local food and offering practical guidance for novice gardeners. These projects are mostly focused on growing food rather than engaging in political actions. An example of this type of gardening activity is a community garden whose primary mission

is to provide a communal space for individual or family-scale gardening, or a larger organisation that aims to build a network of urban growers. Nevertheless, we call this category implicitly political rather than apolitical because in our study even these projects expressed hopes that gardening would produce some social benefits, even if they did not articulate the issues that needed to be resolved. For example, one of the projects that we studied, Hollygrove Market and Farm, fits the characterisation of being “implicitly political” when we assess its practice, because its primary goals are economic ones involving the operation of its on-site produce market. Nevertheless, the organisation emphasises the social and material benefits that accrue to small local farmers when people purchase locally grown food through their market.

While we feel that political classification is a useful strategy for making sense of the range of gardening projects represented in New Orleans, we also recognise that these projects’ dynamic nature often makes categorisation difficult or oversimplistic. Thus, it is important to note that we do not intend these typologies as diagnostic tools for classifying individual gardening projects. Rather, we use them to describe particular aspects of projects that embody these political aims and practices. We therefore generate and utilise this typology cautiously, with attention to the social, geographical and temporal contexts in which these gardening projects exhibit these political characteristics. For example, a project may exhibit “explicitly political” characteristics in its mission statement, while its practices are only “implicitly political” in their nature. It is also possible that a gardening project may start without an explicitly political agenda but take on narrow or even broad political visions as it faces challenges along the way. Moreover, although our study focuses on projects as a

unit of analysis, individuals working with an organisation could have a wide range of understandings about the political intentions and outcomes of their own actions or the organisation's. Despite these shifts—which we regard as interesting and important in what they reveal about broader trends in 'food justice activism'—we argue that *all* post-disaster community-scale gardening has the capacity and even the tendency to at least gesture towards some form of political concern, be it access to public space, the presence or absence of affordable food options, or other prominent community concerns.

### **'Political' Gardening Projects in New Orleans**

In the following section, we use four of the gardening projects that the three authors have studied separately for three different projects to illustrate how the political gardening characteristics that we have already outlined manifest in their mission statements and everyday practices. Furthermore, we analyse how their missions and practices changed over time, as the projects faced various challenges or matured. The Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition exemplifies a gardening project with explicitly political and broad missions, and its practices are executed carefully to align with these missions. The case of the Latino Farmers' Cooperative of Louisiana shows how a project's practices shift focus as it takes on 'food justice' as its key narrative over time. By contrast, the original intent and the current mission statement of Hollygrove Market and Farm indicate an explicitly political reference to food access issues, yet with a narrow scope. However, its practices fail to address this political agenda, despite the staff's awareness of the disconnect. Finally, the Lamanche Urban Farm started with an

implicitly political approach to urban gardening and then developed some narrowly scoped political undertones over time. Ultimately, though, the garden was turned over to new management and placed on hiatus when these missions failed to maintain the project. Throughout the descriptions that follow, we use the actual names of organisations but use pseudonyms for individual people in order to protect their privacy.

### **The Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition**

The Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition (LNWFAC) emerged as an offshoot of the pre-existing Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development (CSED) in 2012, to address both the chronic injustice and the acute force of disaster that conspired to limit food access in the Lower Ninth Ward neighbourhood. In late 2011, CSED hired a food security co-ordinator to organise a series of eight planning meetings of Lower Ninth Ward residents, with the goal of collaboratively creating a community-drafted plan to address food insecurity within the neighbourhood.

The first meeting of the LNWFAC was held in April 2012, in the community room of a church on a main thoroughfare in the Lower Ninth Ward. Nearly 50 people from the neighbourhood came out to the first meeting to share their own visions of food access for the neighbourhood. In keeping with the demographic constitution of the neighbourhood, nearly all residents who attended the meeting were African American. A smaller 'core group' of seven neighbourhood residents, all African American women, organised meetings, delegated tasks and consolidated community input from each meeting. Meetings were held monthly until November 2012



and the newly formed LNWFAC drew on community input during the meetings, as well as statistical research and survey data, to create its official Lower Ninth Ward Food Action Plan, which was released in February 2013.

The LNWFAC was founded with the ontological understanding that “access to fresh and nutritious food is critical to the health, sustainability, and economic redevelopment of the [Lower Ninth Ward] neighbourhood” (CSED, 2013, p. 5). Kendra, the food security co-ordinator, described the purpose of gathering neighbourhood residents to draft a food access plan

Our vision is to have the Lower Ninth Ward speak as one voice regarding what we want for food access in our neighbourhood. 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 then take the steps to attain it (CSED, 2013, p. 24).

The group also links ‘quality food’ to broader struggles for spatial justice by arguing that increasing food access would “promote sustainable economic growth and ... ensure the availability of proper nutrition for residents” (CSED, 2013, p. 5). As it articulates from the outset, “only Lower Ninth Ward residents had decision-making powers in regard to the food plan”, while representatives and professionals in the areas of planning, business and food, and local government were invited to “serve in support and advisory roles” (CSED, 2013, p. 5). Over the course of eight meetings, the group succeeded in drafting a Food Access Plan for the Lower Ninth Ward neighbourhood of New Orleans, which contains immediate, short- and long-term goals for increasing access to fresh healthy food. Among these goals are the creation of a mobile farmers market and, ultimately, a grocery store.

In an effort to generate public–private partnerships, and to drum up political support for the effort to increase food access in the Lower Ninth Ward, the Lower Ninth Ward Food Action Plan (LNWFAP) highlights relevant elements of overlap with the 2010 New Orleans Master Plan (*Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: New Orleans 2030*). As the LNWFAP argues, the City Planning Commission’s Master Plan for the next two decades

envisions New Orleans in 2030 as a resilient community that enhances quality of life for all and provides for equitable economic opportunities (CSED, 2013, p. 19).

Included within the Master Plan’s vision of enhanced health and human services is a commitment to provide “access to fresh, healthy food choices for all residents” (quoted in CSED, 2013, p. 19) by establishing and supporting healthy food retailers in locations that are accessible to currently underserved populations.

It remains to be seen whether or when these efforts will amount to substantive change for residents of the Lower Ninth Ward. It is notable that residents of the Lower Ninth Ward intentionally and collaboratively articulated a plan of action that they feel best meets their needs as a community. The following statement from the Lower Ninth Ward Food Action Plan epitomises the political mobilisations made possible through neighbourhood-scale initiatives

The Food Planning Initiative has engendered a wholesome dialogue and has prompted the formation of a committed coalition of residents in search of sustainable solutions to improving the quality, quantity, and variety of food in the Lower Ninth Ward. Residents are motivated to create change, to advocate for themselves, and to build collaborative



partnerships that facilitate progress toward actionable solutions (CSED, 2013, p. 36).

For community members who participated in the Lower Ninth Ward Food Action Planning process, it was especially important that their efforts be driven by community members, rather than by people from outside the community. Kendra expressed frustration that so many post-Katrina community development initiatives have been directed by ‘outsiders’ unfamiliar with the experience of living within a particular neighbourhood. As she explained in the interview

The overall energy and the conversation in the neighbourhood is people feeling disenfranchised, and people feeling like things are taken away from them; their voices are not heard, and nobody cares ... so I felt like, it’s important ... for us to be the ones who are creating what we want to see happen ... Like, for me, this whole neighbourhood is my home. So what happens across the street is just as important as what happens inside my house.

As Kendra’s comment illustrates, the perception among people residing within the neighbourhood is that residents are most invested in what happens there, and are therefore in the best position to direct community development projects. Because food access was a prominent and immediate concern for residents, it empowered them politically to effect changes they envisioned for themselves. In the next organisation we profile, the political nature of food access and gardening projects also changed over time.

### **The Latino Farmers’ Cooperative of Louisiana**

The Latino Farmers’ Cooperative of Louisiana (LFCL) emerged in early 2008 to address the social and economic needs of

the city’s growing Latino population. Following Hurricane Katrina, large numbers of Latinos migrated to the city from both domestic and international locations to assist in the rebuilding effort. The initial purpose of the LFCL was to foster collaboration and provide support among Latinos living in New Orleans, particularly in the realms of food provisioning and agricultural vocational training. Evelia, a native of Costa Rica who had lived in New Orleans for several decades, founded the co-operative with the intention to equip Latinos living in New Orleans with the skills and tools required to make a living in agriculture. This goal was grounded in two observations. First, despite a growing demand for fresh, local produce, there seemed to be a dearth of small farmers producing and distributing food within the city of New Orleans. Secondly, many (if not most) Latinos living in New Orleans had emigrated to the US from rural areas and had experience in agriculture, whether for subsistence or commercial purposes. Evelia thus envisioned the co-operative as a resource for Latinos seeking gainful employment and a response to market demand for particular food commodities. During the spring of 2012, when we conducted research with the LFCL, the organisation had roughly 200 members in its database. The organisation had a nine-member Board of Directors, but Evelia was the only full-time staff person. The LFCL relied heavily on unpaid interns from Tulane University and a few part-time staff members to oversee its operation.

On paper, the organisation is divided into two parts: the “Farmer Incubator Project” and the “Food Security Project”. The goals of the Farmer Incubator Project, from the inception of the LCFL as a 501(c)(3) non-profit, were to offer training and advocacy on behalf of Latinos who want to engage in farming or gardening for vocational or

personal purposes. This was, ostensibly, the founding goal of the co-operative. Over time, however, it became clear to Evelia and the board of the LFCL that food security was a primary concern within the Latino community living in New Orleans. Many new members of the co-operative were single women with children who were born in the US, who saw the co-operative as a place to find community and support. To meet the needs of its members, the LFCL began seeking funding and strategies to increase food security, and thus developed the Food Security Project. At its outset, the Food Security Project endeavoured to ensure convenient and affordable access to healthy, culturally appropriate food for the Latino community.

As the founder and director of the LFCL, Evelia has often struggled to convey the co-operative concept to members (who pay an annual fee to join) and to potential funders. Evelia described the use of the term co-operative this way

We use the word co-operative because it involves co-operation and it doesn't relate to any religious organisation, and it doesn't have the connotation of charity ... The community organising model is based on co-operation, on community, on unity, so the community can belong. So the co-operative is basically an association of people who have specific needs and interests and can work together to solve their own issues (interview, March 2012).

For Evelia, self-determination and collaboration are key components of the LFCL, although the organisation does rely quite heavily upon outside funding from private foundations and public entities like the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Over time, the work of the LFCL has focused increasingly on what it terms "food security" and, more recently, "food justice",

by helping members to apply for and collect Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (previously known as food stamps). While most members themselves do not qualify for assistance because they either are undocumented or have not yet fully acquired citizenship status, their US-born children do qualify for benefits, so the LFCL helps members to navigate the online SNAP application and serves as an official representative for nearly all of the members who do not speak English. In addition to connecting members with state benefits programmes, the LFCL runs a food pantry and a small store that sells culturally appropriate foods at cost to members. The food pantry and store are both important components of what Evelia calls 'food justice' because most other food pantries throughout the city require proof of citizenship in order to collect food. Evelia argues

Most of the food pantry providers hesitate about serving to immigrants because they have the impression that either they don't deserve the food or they are not qualified to receive the food. We at the Latino Farmers' Cooperative have taken every single opportunity to tell individuals that we spend millions of dollars sending containers of food to Haiti and other countries [far away], when there is a disaster we feed people we're never gonna see, and we can't feed people that [are] already here, because of bias ... A human being, no matter where he is located and in what condition, should be allowed to receive medical attention and food (interview, March 2012).

Evelia's argument that 'food justice' is about addressing fundamental flaws in both the food system and broader state institutions correlates with the organisation's shift in focus from community gardening activities to general concerns regarding food security. For Evelia and members of the Latino Farmers' Cooperative, community

gardening and other localised efforts are useful for empowering and even feeding individuals, but they are thought to be only a small part of broader struggles for a more just food system.

### Hollygrove Market and Farm

Hollygrove Market and Farm (HMF) was established by a local community development corporation (CDC) in Hollygrove neighbourhood, a predominantly African American working-class community, a few months after the neighbourhood was flooded with six feet of water. After the initial consideration of reinstating a backyard gardens programme as a part of the redevelopment project, an idea for a CSA-style market with an on-site community garden eventually emerged,<sup>2</sup> inspired by the CDC staff's introduction to popular food and agriculture writers such as Michael Pollan and Wendell Berry. As the original general manager, Claude, recalled, "We had all bought into the buy-local concept for all the various reasons and benefits" by that time.

Currently, HMF operates as a limited liability company (LLC) that runs a daily local food market with on-site community and mentor garden plots as well as a fifth-of-acre growing site for two mentor gardeners. The market aggregates produce from local farmers and packages it in CSA-style boxes to be purchased without a membership; it also sells produce by weight and volume. HMF's mission statement refers to various food-related issues, such as access, localism and sustainability, with an emphasis on the Hollygrove neighbourhood

Hollygrove Market and Farm exists to increase accessibility of fresh produce to Hollygrove, surrounding underserved neighborhoods, and all of New Orleans while promoting sustainability through support of

local farmers and the local economy as well as acting as a demonstration site for environmentally sustainable practices (Hollygrove Market and Farm, 2012).

Some gardeners saw HMF's practices of buying the on-site gardeners' produce to sell at the market as providing some economic incentives to grow there. Jess, an HMF staff member, explained that the growers pay HMF 10 per cent of the profit to set up a 'grower's table' during the market, 7 per cent of which goes into the growers' fund. She added

And I think that's good, because we want to support the community growers, but we don't necessarily have the resources to always be buying hoses, or always be buying shovels.

One of the mentor farmers grows at an industrial scale on site and sells his produce to both HMF and a local restaurant group for profit, which gives HMF the look of a highly productive urban farm; however, these activities do not fulfill the organisation's social mission regarding food access for the neighbourhood.

Despite the success of its daily produce market that attracts upward of 300 customers on a busy day, HMF has consistently struggled to engage neighbourhood residents as market customers, community gardeners or volunteers (Kato, 2013). The staff is keenly aware of this problem, but their efforts to reach out by engaging with local organisations and offering discounts to neighbourhood residents and accepting EBTs, have not been fruitful.<sup>3</sup> The fact that none of the five full-time staff members, who were all White and in their 20s-early 30s, lived in the Hollygrove neighbourhood may have posed additional challenges in building a rapport. Aside from the two who attended a local university, the rest of the staff and many of the volunteers had been in

New Orleans for less than five years. When asked how they felt about the market being used primarily by non-residents, the resident interviewees' responses ranged from indifference to favourable with some muted concerns regarding gentrification. One resident, who held a leadership role in a non-profit community organisation, responded to the concerns by the non-resident HMF customers that Hollygrove residents are not patronising the market by stating

I mean you seen people who are saying Black people are not shopping in our market. ... I know it's, there's a sense in which you're kind of being open minded and liberal about it, but if they're really open minded and liberal they would, progressive is a better word, then they would move into the community, set down roots, and then from within, begin to change the culture (Dean, resident and a leader of a local non-profit, in his 50s).

Despite their limited participation in the market portion of HMF, Hollygrove residents constitute the majority of the active community gardeners on site, when staff community gardeners are excluded from the calculation. These neighbourhood gardeners are all senior citizens who are new to gardening and they expressed a range of motivations from personal healing or educational experiences ("And I said, *my!* It was just amazing. Like I said, I never did something of that nature, and it was just awesome") to seeing it as a solution to what they viewed as a failing food system ("So this is a way that we can combat all of that. Maybe that's how you want to play. 'Guess what, I don't need you. I can grow what I want"). When asked why others from the neighbourhood were not coming to garden on site, the staff and the gardeners attributed it to lack of interest in gardening ("Not everyone would be into gardening"), time ("I'm retired so I can do this"), access

("Some people don't drive") or alternative gardening opportunities ("She has a beautiful backyard garden at home"). On the last point, it appears that HMF did at one point serve the community's needs through the backyard gardening programme. Several of the senior residents that we interviewed regretted its termination. When asked if she would like to see the programme reinstated, Ms Louise, an African American senior resident, responded

I really would. I really would. And I managed like the first group that participated in that. ... It's like we had, like even these seniors, the older people, they were giving you raised beds to work with, things like that. ... So, whatever happened with it I don't know. It just, like it faded away.

The original market manager ran the backyard gardening programme around 2008, but it became a low priority over time even before her departure from HMF in mid 2010.

Overall, despite initial intentions that were more directly engaged with issues of food security and community redevelopment, HMF's current day-to-day operations only partially fulfill its mission. It has been successful in supporting local farmers and acting as a demonstration site for environmentally sustainable practices, but not in engaging the local residents or making itself grounded within the redevelopment efforts in Hollygrove neighbourhoods. Furthermore, its struggle to deliver on the social justice mission poses questions as to whether the organisation should revise the mission or shift its operational priorities in coming years.

### The Lamanche Urban Farm

According to Terri, the director of [lowernine.org](http://lowernine.org), the Lamanche Urban Farm (LUF) began three years after Hurricane

Katrina to “support residents’ attempts to create a sustainable community”.<sup>4</sup> The staff of *lowernine.org* was comprised of long-term volunteers, all of whom were White and were from outside New Orleans—with one exception. The one resident of the Lower Ninth on staff, who was the only non-White member of the staff, had little to do with the garden—in part because it strayed from the organisation’s original purpose. The organisation was slow to embrace the possibilities of creating an urban farm on Lamanche St because: *lowernine.org*’s primary mission was to rebuild houses, and they were concerned that farming would take away both financial and human resources; previous farming projects had been politically confrontational, and the organisation did not want to be aligned with other political organisations; and few volunteers wanted to spend time on an isolated plot devoid of residents when they could work to help rebuild homes in more populated areas. For the most part, LUF sat idle until the summer of 2010, when Sankofa, the local farmers market that reopened in the Lower Ninth Ward, enabled *lowernine.org* to sell produce. The executive director of *lowernine.org* then allocated a handful of volunteers to the farm (but never more than two or three) and produce was used to supplement the organisation’s own food pantry for its volunteers and to sell at Sankofa.

In the spring of 2011 a number of events changed the organisation’s focus and approach to managing LUF. The first of these was a change in the executive director’s position and a possible shake-up of the board. A handful of board members who were pro-urban agriculture voiced their support and provided the financial backing for increasing the organisation’s involvement in food issues. Second, the organisation realised that through grants and the general success of Sankofa, the farm could be a way to help partially fund

the non-profit. Third, as the pool of potential clients for rebuilding dwindled, the organisation needed something for volunteers to do. This need was most visible during several large service days, when 30–70 volunteers would spend a few hours at the farm, usually cutting grass, raking or helping with small projects. These volunteers often stressed the working capacity of the farm. On one occasion when a group of close to 15 students from the Political Science Department at Tulane University volunteered for the day, one of the authors was told to find something for them to do at the farm. Upon learning that tools would have to be purchased for that many to do any meaningful work, the director of *lowernine.org* replied

If you can’t borrow the tools from Jeanelle [director of a community-based non-profit], then just have them pull grass, or have them sort seeds, just keep them busy until the crawfish boil in the afternoon.

Fourth, with food issues becoming a dominant focus within the community, the organisation saw farming as a way to become a more visible community partner and to enter into coalitions with other non-profits, which was much needed as many non-profits were becoming exasperated at regularly competing for the same funding to subsist month to month. Terri, the director, became visibly excited when she learned that there were a couple of dozen rainwater catchment barrels that were not being used on the farm that other organisations needed. At a meeting with other organisations at the Lamanche Farm, where she gave several barrels away, she noted “we are all in this together, so we should share resources”.

The result of these efforts was that LUF became one of the more visible urban farms in the community. The Farm, however, still

lacked community support as of late 2011, few residents showed any interest in maintaining plots there and their support was limited to sporadic visits, not actual interest in the Farm itself. During much of the time that LUF was in operation, a long-term volunteer, TR, managed the garden with assistance from one or two short-term volunteers. Following his departure in 2011, after a number of volunteers became tired of trying to manage the Farm, essentially because of the mismatch between the volunteers' expectations of helping to rebuild the neighbourhood and the reality of being in charge of abandoned plots of land turned farm, the *lowernine.org* advertised for the farm manager position at a website that connects volunteers with organic farms world-wide, to little avail. By late 2012, in part because of the lack of volunteers to run the Farm, the organisation turned the garden over to Sheaux Fresh Sustainable Foods, which has since announced that it is "taking a break" from operating the Farm but hopes to revitalise production soon.<sup>5</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we identify some key trends and issues facing the emergence of urban gardening projects in post-Katrina New Orleans. Our findings illuminate: how the gardening projects that sprouted in post-Katrina New Orleans exhibited varying degrees and scopes of political engagements; how these characteristics change as the projects mature, face challenges or as the city recovers from the disaster; and the potential and limitations of political gardening as a tool for social transformation, especially in a city in transition following catastrophe.

The urban gardening projects that we have observed in New Orleans since 2008 must be understood within the context of

the city's post-disaster redevelopment that posed a unique set of opportunities and constraints for these projects. We contend that contestations over urban space are inherently political (Swyngedouw, 2009) and, when gardening occurs in ways that are subversive or in spaces that are contested, larger political struggles bubble to the surface. The case of the LNWFAC is demonstrative of this; its self-directed struggle for food access led neighbourhood residents to engage with legacies of racism and segregation, and to collaborate with a diverse array of actors to achieve their stated goals. Similarly, the tensions among the activists and the residents along racial, class, age and nativity lines that we observed illuminate and reflect the broader issues of demographic shift in post-Katrina New Orleans and what it symbolised to different constituencies. In this regard, our data indicate that the local historical context of social inequality and race relations (see Lewis, 2003; Fussell, 2007; Campanella, 2008) is crucial to understanding how a gardening project's political engagement may shift over time or exhibit disconnects between mission and practice. In New Orleans, urban gardening activities in marginalised communities still recovering from the social disruption of Hurricane Katrina need to be seen both as countering practices to neoliberal abandonment and disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007) and as attempts to reclaim space and identity. At a minimum, then, political gardening in marginalised neighbourhoods like those in New Orleans represents a useful guide to urban agriculture in post-disaster space, a form of 'environmental self-governance' in insurgent spaces (Mares and Peña, 2011) and ultimately an apparatus through which citizens can engage in politicised conversations—even if somewhat tacitly. To be clear, we do not proclaim that gardening in the city is always or necessarily political. Rather, we



contest that gardening in the city at a time of crisis or major transformation is likely to take on political characteristics, whether intended or not, because during such times politics tend to manifest in realms of urban life that are not viewed as political during stable and uninterrupted times.

Thus, this study problematises current conceptualisations of political gardening, which celebrate its explicitly political actions that aim to use gardening as an immediate tool of subverting structural injustice and neoliberal urban policies through reappropriation of space for use-value (for example, food production, greenery, leisure) rather than exchange-value. In examining the complexities of the alignment between the organisational missions and praxis of gardening projects in New Orleans, we have developed typologies that treat 'being political' as a continuum rather than a binary (for example, a mission is either political or apolitical), with additional attention to the scope and consistency of political narratives and praxis. Our data show that urban gardening may take on political characteristics whether intentionally or unintentionally and, in either case, the extent of political engagement evolves according to organisational constraints or interests and other exogenous factors. Thus, we posit that the political nature of urban gardening must be understood as dynamic rather than static and that it may materialise differently in the mission and the practice of a single organisation. These findings also pose challenges to the overoptimistic view of the potential of political gardening as a tool for subverting systemic injustices in the city. While political gardening may be transformative, the day-to-day practices and outcomes are not necessarily always consistent with the stated goals, and who ultimately benefits the most from such activities remains to be carefully investigated (Allen, 1999).

Moreover, we argue that inconsistencies between a project's mission and practice, especially its fluctuating nature, should not be taken necessarily as an indication of a project's failure to engage politically. Rather, projects appear to adapt to the changing environment, either as they embed themselves in the community more deeply or as the social, economic and political climate around them shifts. This is especially important in understanding how some urban gardening projects that sprouted in post-Katrina New Orleans failed, morphed or reorganised over the course of a few years, because they were operating in the tumultuous context of a city that was going through several major changes in a relatively short amount of time, including demographic shifts, new mayoral governance, school reform, public housing redevelopment and broader rebuilding projects (Steinberg and Shields, 2008; Bullard and Wright, 2009; Flaherty, 2010; Arena, 2012). Under such circumstances, the gardening projects that adopted an explicit and broader framing appear to be more successful in maintaining their practice to be consistent with the missions that focus on structural social injustice, as in the case of LNWFAC and LFCL. By contrast, the projects that adopted narrower prognostic frames, which highlight possible solutions to the problem, that do not directly link the gardening with the social issues, have not succeeded in maintaining the political nature of the project (for example, HMF and LUF in this study). These projects suffered additionally from their inability to place the prognostic framing in the local context of racial and social issues.

This case study highlights the locally specific set of challenges and opportunities that determine the trajectories of urban gardening projects, indicating that the success of political gardening may not depend



on gardening activities or their underlying ideologies *per se*, but on the broader social and political climate of the particular city and neighbourhood in which the projects are situated. As many others have argued, space and place matter for social and cultural practices (for example, Gieryn, 2000; Massey, 2005; Harvey, 2010). When place is lost it can become a repository for identity and a source of collective action (Fullilove, 2005). It is not surprising then that, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures, when many communities fought to re-establish themselves, so many New Orleanians turned to food as one of the primary ways to restore their ontological security (Truitt, 2012).

While post-disaster New Orleans is a special case, we argue that the opportunities and challenges inherent to political gardening there can be found in most cities. Certainly, residents have used gardening to rethink urban space and to recast the relationship between civic participation and urban environmental thinking. The transformation of abandoned space into a community garden can be both socially and psychologically rewarding (Lawson and Sorensen, 2010), while it can also boost the vicinity's property values (Voicu and Been, 2008). In many neighbourhoods where social and environmental solutions to persisting problems remain elusive, transforming public space into gardens could have immediately tangible benefits. In some ways, then, urban gardening represents the low-hanging fruit of guerilla urbanism. In other ways, however, urban gardening can be seen as the initial step to civic activism and community control (Hou and Rios, 2003).

Ultimately, determining the rate and quality of successes among urban gardening projects in New Orleans remains a challenge on theoretical and ideological grounds. For example, our on-the-ground

observations find critical reflexivity on the part of the activists, many of whom are keenly aware of the limitations of their influences and struggle with their own positionality as White, educated outsiders operating in poor, predominantly Black neighbourhoods. Yet many of the local activists and their supporters have not been successful at gaining strong and widespread community involvement with their gardening projects. If the organisations intend to do good by and for the neighbourhood and few selected members of the community are actively supporting the mission, does this constitute 'community involvement' or 'self-determination'?

In conclusion, post-disaster New Orleans represents challenges to and a source of observations for the future of political gardening. While the stressors on marginalised communities in New Orleans may be seen as unique, they actually closely resemble those that contribute to the slow violence (Nixon, 2011) of environmental disruption in cities like Detroit and in the global South (see Auyero and Swistun, 2009). The lessons learned from attempts at political gardening here are thus instructive for other places. As residents of the Lower Ninth Ward are fond of saying, "If you can do it here, you can do it anywhere". As a cautious extension of that sentiment, what has not 'worked' in New Orleans may be equally effective for illuminating challenges that political gardening projects may face in other cities where the fight for 'good food' reveals broader struggles for social justice.

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## Notes

1. The number of blighted structures throughout New Orleans reached 60,000 after Katrina (Plyer and Ortiz, 2012).
2. Community-supported agriculture (CSA) typically requires membership and advance payment to support small farmers; in exchange, the supporters receive boxes of seasonal produce grown by the farmer on a regular basis during a specified time of the year.
3. Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) is an electronic system that transfers funds to recipients of various government programmes such as SNAP. Its appearance, similar to that of a debit card, reduces stigma for the recipients and facilitates the money transfer procedure by reducing time and cost.
4. Author communication, 22 April 2010.
5. Author communication, March 2013.

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