

Spring 5-18-2012

Growing Support: Localism, Nonprofits, and Food Access in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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Growing Support: Localism, Nonprofits, and Food Access in Post-Katrina New Orleans

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Urban Studies
with a focus in Anthropology

By

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B.S. University of New Orleans, 2005
M.S. University of New Orleans, 2012

May, 2012

I dedicate this to my siblings: Thaddeus, Lucy, and Cole. Granted there will be setbacks, they should never stop you from achieving success.

Acknowledgments

My inspiration for this thesis started with the very first seeds I planted at the South Pierce Community Garden in 2010. I would like the New Orleans Food and Farm Network and all the local growers that shared their experiences and thoughts that made this work possible. I would like to thank David Beriss and Jeffrey Ehrenreich of the Department of Anthropology and Renia Ehrenfeucht of the Regional Planning and Urban Studies Department at the University of New Orleans for their patience and dedication as my thesis committee. Their critical perspectives were crucial to the development of this thesis and, to me as an applied researcher. I would like to thank my family for their support and love. Lastly, I would like to thank all my friends who endured the late nights of drinking and grumblings: Indie, Lauren LaStrapes, Rafael Delgadillo, Ben Moriss, Tyler Chauvin, Brett Jones, and Jenna Mae Fricke.

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Abstract

Problems with food insecurity, such as a lack of access to healthy and affordable food in low-income neighborhoods, has been an ongoing challenge in New Orleans. The infrastructural damages to the local food system resulting from Hurricane Katrina and citywide flooding reduced the numerical count of food retail stores throughout the city. The consequence has been a widespread presence of food deserts and grocery gaps, particularly in low-income and working-class neighborhoods. This thesis explores the emergence of food localism practices by food advocacy professionals as a capacity-building tool for New Orleans residents to increase community food security and develop a sustainable local food economy. This paper finds although alternative agro-food networks have increased the availability of healthy and locally produced foods in New Orleans, it provides evidence demonstrating their limited capacity to provide healthy or affordable food in comparison to a grocery store situated in a low-income neighborhood.

New Orleans, Food Security, Food Localism, Nonprofit Organizations, Alternative Agro-Food Networks, Local Food Economy

Chapter 1: Problems With Access To Healthy and Affordable Food in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Introduction

Problems with access to healthy and affordable food in low-income neighborhoods has been an ongoing challenge in New Orleans. The damages inflicted by Hurricane Katrina and subsequent citywide flooding on the local food system reduced the overall numerical count of operational full-service supermarkets and grocery stores by half throughout the city. The result has been a widespread presence of “food deserts” and grocery gaps, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. “Food desert” is a term used to refer to a geographic area categorized with impoverished households that have little or no access to food retail stores, physically or economically. Since the 2005 hurricane season, concerns over the availability of food has led to a concentrated effort by food advocacy organizations, local growers, local politicians, and concerned residents to boost the New Orleans food economy with a large emphasis on sustainable alternative agro-food networks. Alternative agro-food networks, also known as direct agricultural markets, such as farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), and urban farms provide consumers with different avenues when purchasing locally produced food, often from the growers themselves. Ideally, by establishing a more sustainable and just food system that focuses attention on local food production and the consumption thereof, problems first identified by food security activists such as a lack of access to healthy food options would be lessened if not corrected in all New Orleans neighborhoods.

The present discourse and practices by food advocacy professionals suggests that food localism and alternative agro-food networks are potential solutions to the ongoing problems of food insecurity in low-income neighborhoods. This is not entirely true. Localists practices, which are commonly understood as a response to the “inherent” problems of globalization (See

Hess 2009, Hinrichs 2003, and Lyson 2004), do not automatically, nor do they inevitably address the problems raised by food security activists. The matter becomes increasingly more complex when one realizes that the community food security activists of pre-Katrina are also major advocates of food localism post-Katrina. This leads one to believe that since Hurricane Katrina, there has either been a shift in direction of food advocacy work in New Orleans, or the needs of food insecure residents have changed. This thesis examines the discourse and practices of food security and food localism in New Orleans from 2002 to 2011, incorporating data from ethnographic, demographic, and socioeconomic perspectives.

In 2010, I interned with the New Orleans Food and Farm Network (NOFFN) to become better connected with food advocacy professionals in New Orleans and to expose myself to the social, cultural, and political issues that were seemingly important at the time. Also known as Food and Farm, the locally based organization has been engaged in community food security and sustainable agricultural discourse and practices since 2002. In short, NOFFN seeks to do “good” (See Fisher 1997) by local standards while working to achieve authenticity and recognition from outside food advocacy authorities and institutions. Through the lens of NOFFN, I observed how the nonprofit organization mitigated between the “needs” of the New Orleans food insecure and the “desires” of the food justice and localist organizations that provided funding. I found that in order to achieve a balance of success by both local and non-local standards, Food and Farm must carefully select food advocacy practices that will be well received by both groups, which address the problems of food insecurity through the use of food localism. I put forward that this is where the tension over the discourse and practice of food security and food localism arise. Although food localism and alternative agro-food networks might be able to advance food security measures and the development of a more sustainable food system in New Orleans, I assert that

increased access to supermarkets and grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods would do more to meet the initial challenges first identified.

Food security problems in New Orleans refer to the inability of low-income households and individuals to access healthy food options, in particular fruits and vegetables, within their immediate neighborhood food environment. The stated problems of accessibility are rooted in a long history of high poverty rates and poor neighborhood planning. For example, research demonstrates that prior to Hurricane Katrina there was a correlation between the location of fast food restaurants and primarily black neighborhoods, which provide “understanding of environmental causes of the obesity epidemic in these population” (Block et al. 2004:217). Moreover, the state of Louisiana’s rate of obesity has exceeded the US national average between 1996-2006 (FPAC 2008:5) providing reasons of concern for the long-term health issues for Louisiana residents. According to the New Orleans Food Policy Advisory Committee (FPAC), the supermarkets and corner stores that did reopen since the 2005 storm season have not been able to meet the demand for fresh produce (2008:5). For example, only 18 of the previous 38 full service supermarkets reopened as of 2008. There is extensive research on the relationship between poor food environments, low physical and economic accessibility, and the rise of malnutrition-based epidemics and diseases, particularly in impoverished communities (See Hayden et al. 2003, Hendrickson et al. 2006, Robinson 2008, Rose and Richards 2004, and USDA 2009b). Widespread grocery gaps and food deserts are not unique to New Orleans. On the other hand, the sudden disruption of an entire food system as a result of an unexpected catastrophe makes the phenomenon place-specific. The dilemma caused by Hurricane Katrina provides a different perspective and new opportunity for academics and social scientists to study how communities rebuild their immediate and regional food system in the wake of disaster. To

be clear, current problems of food access are not exclusively a result of Hurricane Katrina. Nevertheless the storm did intensify such challenges making them more apparent to both local and national audiences.

In addition to food localism and the development of alternative agro-food networks, a noticeable amount of New Orleans residents are also growing their own produce, whether it is in their own backyard or in a community garden. The Times-Picayune reported that “hundreds of New Orleans residents are now growing their own produce, keeping backyard chickens and even experimenting with other livestock in a city whose laissez faire regulatory environment and long hours of sunshine make ideal conditions for a new breed of urban pioneer” in the news article titled *Urban Farming Tradition Taking Root in N.O. Area—Advocates Aim to Grow A Local Food Economy* (Davis 2010). The local newspaper presents urban farming in two different modes: the first, an enthusiasm for garden fresh produce and the development of a local food economy; the second, a necessity to counter the socio-economic injustices associated with the development of food deserts and grocery gaps. The article also demonstrates New Orleans significant history of growing vegetables and raising chickens in side the parish lines, as told through local testimony.

Davis notes that agricultural practices in New Orleans has been an on-and-off again tradition in New Orleans. However, local growers such as Macon Fry, a certified master gardener by the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center (LSU AG Center), are quick to point out that the impetus to grow one’s own food is different today than it has been in previous times. That is people who grew their own food in the 1980s and 1990s did it for sustenance. Furthermore Max Elliot of the Sustainable Food Center in Austin, Texas, a former resident and food activists of New Orleans, suggests that prior to the storm, growing one’s own food was a

necessary practice for poorer households to subsidize the costs of grocery bills. Elliot commented that it was possible to think that the only fruits and vegetables poorer households were consuming were the ones that they grew. Since Hurricane Katrina, Elliot believes more people are growing their own food as a means to join the emerging nationwide food justice movement while actively supporting their own local food economy and culture. The practice of growing one's own food is less of a need as it more of a statement, political or not.

The dilemma still remains that residents of New Orleans face very serious problems concerning the accessibility of fresh, healthy food options that are either lacking or non-existent in large areas of the city, especially in low-income neighborhoods. The rate of return for supermarkets and grocery stores have been dismal, while the majority of those presently open are located in wealthier areas of the city. Despite the prevailing research that demonstrates the positive health benefits of having nearby food retail stores, for example supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods that dedicate more space to fruits and vegetables (See Hayden et al. 2003, Hendrickson et al. 2006, Robinson 2008, Morland et al. 2006, and Rose and Richards 2004), the ongoing development of alternative agro-food networks are seemingly more “desirable,” at least in the view of many food activists.

Taking as its primary case study an examination of the New Orleans Food and Farm Network, this study concludes that the movement has, to date, not fully met the core challenges of food accessibility it first identified. This thesis aims to demonstrate how the 2005 hurricane season transformed the New Orleans food environment, i.e. the availability and accessibility of food throughout the entire city and not just the poorer neighborhoods. Thus it forced food advocacy organization to remodel their discourse and practices to meet the needs of post-Katrina residents as a whole. At least, this is what food advocacy professionals claim. Localists

ideology, in addition to the emerging food justice movement, is influencing the ways food advocacy professionals are trying to reshape the New Orleans food system. This thesis calls into question how much of the shift in food advocacy work has to do with “what New Orleans residents need” as oppose to what is popular with the movement today.

Methodology

In the following pages, I seek to analyze, understand, and criticize the discourse and practices implemented by NOFFN. It should be noted that when I started, in 2010, I was optimistic about the organization and its operations as a proponent of food advocacy work post-Katrina New Orleans. In 2012, I am still optimistic about the organization but I aim to be critical of the complex decision-making that takes place when trying to balance the organization’s commitment to aiding the food insecure in New Orleans, and accepting funding and the inherent regulatory process for grant spending from national philanthropic agencies. Because this study is about the field in which food advocacy professionals work in, and not about the food insecure themselves, I chose to immerse myself into the New Orleans food advocacy scene. My research field consisted of both the office in which NOFFN operated out of and the neighborhoods, farms, and gardens that the organization worked in. In addition, I attended several food security and sustainable agricultural events, volunteered at community gardens and urban farms, and became a local grower myself as a means to increase my exposure to the world in which NOFFN and other food advocacy professionals functioned in. In October 2010, I was also fortunate enough to be awarded a scholarship to attend the Community Food Security Coalition annual conference, which was held in New Orleans for the first time. By attending the CFSC conference, I met food advocacy professionals from different parts of the United States and other countries, and was able to compare and contrast the discourse and practices of their work with NOFFN’s work.

This was vital in determining how I understood the context of local and locality in localist practices and ideology.

My internship with Food and Farm was split between in office work and out of office work. I worked predominantly with two paid staffers and therefore their interviews and opinions largely represent the foundation of the knowledge I obtained on the organization. I was also able to interview other paid and non-paid staffers to obtain a more complete sense of the organization as a whole, but such interviews were limited in number. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. Initially, I chose not to formally interview people who grew food through NOFFN. In retrospect, I realize that it would have been beneficial to interview such people because they would have provided outside observations looking in. However, they do not go voiceless as our conversations on food and New Orleans helped me build greater understanding of the local food scene and the diverse group of people who referred to themselves as New Orleans local growers.

My time spent growing food in a community garden, interning at NOFFN, conversing with other food advocacy professionals, and, arguably most important, conversing with the New Orleans food insecure has inspired me to become an advocate for developing more comprehensive food security practices that address the needs of the food insecure directly. Inspired by Faye Ginsburg's question to anthropologists and applied social scientists, I too want to know if it is "possible to produce ethnography that simultaneously expands the intellectual scope of the field while also entering productively back into the lives of those we study and providing interventions into the broader public sphere(s) that we share with our subjects" (2004:ix). My goal is to present an ethnography that does more than "expands the intellectual scope" of anthropology and the applied social sciences. I want my analysis of food advocacy

work in post-Katrina New Orleans to provide a comprehensive look at the current food security and food localism discourse and practices and provide insight on how food advocacy organizations in turn understand their own work from the perspective of the food insecure.

Lastly, I attempt to follow what Ginsburg refers to as “cultural activism [which] calls attention to the way that people engage in *self-conscious mobilization of their own cultural practices* in order to defend, extend, complicate, and sometimes transform both their immediate worlds and the larger sociopolitical structures that shape them” (2004:xiii). New Orleans is not just the location of my research. It is the city from where I was born and the city I call home. I choose to do my fieldwork in New Orleans because I want to cause positive change by challenging people, particularly food advocacy professionals and activists, to reflect more critically on their work. I do not consider myself a localists because of the flaws that present itself when trying to create affordable healthy foods for low-income households and individuals, but I do support localist initiatives such as building stronger local food economy and supporting farmers directly. However, what food system localization does for the food insecure is not entirely clear, particularly when it comes to comparing accessibility and availability, and I aim to explore this topic.

There are two very important side notes I would like to include to give further transparency of how this thesis was written. First, during my internship, the organization went through an upheaval that forced the organization to consider closing. During that time I took additional notes of the situation as it unfolded, resulting in the force resignation of the executive director, the resignation of the deputy director, a four-year employee, and the dismantling and reassembly of the board of directors. Because the organization expressed clear concern about the upheaval being apart of this thesis, I chose not to include out of respect and belief that it did not

add to the major themes of food security and food localism. Second, in February 2011, my computer was stolen along with a significant portion of my notes, data, drafts, transcripts, and audio files of my interviews. I did not re-interview my research subjects and as a result, some of the data presented includes notes I had to reconstruct.

Chapter 2: Contextualizing Food Security and Food Localism in New Orleans: Pre-Katrina to Post-Katrina

The conundrum that food advocacy professionals and local growers face in post-Katrina New Orleans is seemingly simple, and yet not easily recognizable to its participants. The discourse and practices of food localism and food security have been combined into a single ideology by food advocacy professionals with aspirations of becoming a capacity-building tool for community redevelopment, post-Katrina. However, problems arise as the discourse and practices that underlie each respective philosophy do not neatly overlap. For example, a popular idea to correct the lack of access to healthy food in low-income communities is to install a neighborhood farmers' market. Although it may increase the physical amount of healthy food, the availability of such food does not make it necessarily accessible financially. Farmers' markets are well-known for being more expensive than supermarkets in short because the food has not been subsidized nor is it mass produced to cut product value.

According to Marion Nestle, "the food industry has given us a food supply so plentiful, so varied, so inexpensive, and so devoid of dependence on geography or season that all but the very poorest of Americans can obtain enough energy and nutrients to meet biological needs" (2007:1). However, recent trends suggest that support for local farmers and locally grown products (i.e. food localism) is increasing throughout the US. Between 2000 and 2005, farmers' markets in the US increased from 2,863 to 4,093 (USDA 2006:1). According to Qazi and Selfa, "small-scale farmers and 'responsible eaters (following Berry 1990) are looking for alternative ways to participate in a food system, ways that are outside the conventional distribution and marketing system, and that allow for greater local control over food" (2005:46).

This chapter reviews food security and food localism literature to help make sense of food advocacy professionals/organizations decision to shift from food security practices pre-

Katrina to food localism practices, or the localization of food security, post-Katrina. Rather than inquiring whether or not the process itself has been successful, I ask what food advocacy professionals intend to do and what are the implications for their actions. That is, were food advocacy professionals more responsive to the needs of the people of New Orleans, or were they following the current trends of food system localization?

Local Food and the Local Food System

The relationship in which food is produced, consumed, and distributed has long contributed to public debates in America, Europe, and elsewhere. Much of the debate has centered on the effects of globalization and post-industrial capitalism on the national and global food systems, for instance, the homogenization of food production practices and food itself (See Fonte 2008, Hinrichs 2000, Hinrichs 2003, and Lyson 2004). Through academic (Hess 2009 and Hinrichs 2003) and food activism literature (Petrini 2001 and Pollan 2006), the relative proximity, or localness, in which food produced and consumed has emerged as good, progressive and desirable. Local food is even said to taste better because it is grown on smaller farms as oppose to industrialized farms. It travels less than its supermarket counterparts from “seed to table.” This leads one to believe that local food has an unrivaled fresh quality and preserves more of its natural flavors rather than depending on specially designed chemicals and gases to aid its path to maturity and preservation while through transit (see Estabrook 2011 and Kenner 2008). In these discussion, “global” has become a proxy for bad and “local” has emerged as a proxy “good” (Hinrichs 2003:35). The oversimplification by academics and activists “overstates the value in proximity,” (Hinrichs 2003:35), and the most important elements and qualities of localness remain unspecified. Hinrichs warns that the term “local” often serves as a “talismán,” rarely ever being transparent in scope and meaning (2003:33).

In the context of defining local food systems, local remains vague or unspecified. Ideal food systems seem to signify healthy communities with strong sustainable local food economies. According to Gail F. Feenstra, “local food systems are rooted in particular places, aim to be economically viable for farmers and consumers, use ecologically sound production and distribution practices, and enhance social equity and democracy for all members of the community” (1997:28). Feenstra’s definition of a local food system does not suggest a tie to localness, nor locality, rather her definition suggests that sustainability is the key to successful local food systems. Her definition also does not address the cultural, social, or geographic boundaries that are inherent in food consumption or trade practices. According to Gottlieb and Joshi, the food system is “best described [for all practical purposes] as the entire set of activities and relationship that make up the various food pathways from see to table and influence the ‘how and why and what we eat’” (2010:5). Gottlieb and Joshi’s definition of the food system is based on the relationships and social patterns that guide dietary practices. Local in “local food systems” seems to suggest an undefined spatial territory that is left to the reader’s interpretation. Hinrichs suggests it is necessary to draw on how the term is socially constructed and “to understand how social and environmental relations are themselves spatialized” (2003:43). The definition of local is conceivably more complex than prior definitions.

What is defined as “local” is a controversial subject considering that its geographical scope depends on the context in which the term is being used. It also depends on the very people who may want to differ their product as being more local than a competitor’s product. With respect to localism, Hess states that the term is used not only geographically but also economically (2009:11). Local also has a different meaning when utilized on the national and global stage than it does at citywide and neighborhood levels. Economically, Hess writes that

localism in its most “pure” form merges “locally sourced resources or inputs into food and manufactured goods, production of goods by locally owned businesses, sales through locally owned organizations, and consumption by a population that shares a geographical locale with the producers and retailers” (2009:11). In the context of food production and consumption, local can be used to define food grown in the US as oppose to Mexico, such as tomatoes. It can also refer to food produced within the state, for example staple food items such as Jazzman rice grown in Louisiana. Then there are extremes such as hyperlocal foods that are grown in people backyards, urban farms, or community gardens that are sold at farmers’ markets or CSAs. In Louisiana, seafood is understood as a state and local commodity, especially shrimp and fish caught along the Gulf coast and even further into the Gulf of Mexico. The point is the lines of what is defined as local are constantly being blurred, for geographic and economic reasons. For many New Orleans residents and local growers alike, local is tentatively a regional boundary, that is it encompasses New Orleans, southeast Louisiana, and parts of neighboring states such as eastern Texas, parts of Mississippi, and Alabama if one wants to stretch it. Although there is no unanimous agreement that the previous mentioned areas are considered local by all, being that some people are more immediate in their geographic scope, it is common to find food from each mentioned area in New Orleans farmers’ markets.

Food Security, (Food) Localism, and Food System Localization

The crux of food security seems simple: the ability to access adequate amounts of food, both physically and economically, to sustain a healthy and active life style (Vyas 2000:4402). In spite of this simple nature, the discourse and practices associated with ensuring food security is highly debated. This section demonstrates the variety in ways in which food security is interpreted by academics, governments, and nonprofit organizations. According to Pottier, “part

of the problem is that the concept is concerned with interconnected domains; with questions of agriculture, society, environment, employment and income, health and nutrition, and public policy” (1999:9). Pottier’s own observation suggests that the dynamics of food security are complex. What is agreed upon food advocacy professionals and politicians, at the local, national, and global level, is that the food insecure suffer because of high rates of poverty and poor immediate food environments. For Vyas, food security is generally equated with the absence of hunger. Consequently he suggests if the current standard to correcting food insecurity is by making hunger absent in the human social condition, then the policies and programs put in place worldwide have failed to achieve its principal goal, i.e. eradicating hunger (2000:4402).

However, in New Orleans, according to Alicia Vance of the New Orleans Food and Farm Network, problems of food security are marked by resident’s ability to access “fresh affordable foods and not just food in general.” Vance states that anyone can purchase substance at a corner store to fill his or her bellies, inexpensively. However, it has become increasingly difficult in low-income post-Katrina New Orleans neighborhoods to find affordable fresh, healthy, and nutritional food choices. There are fewer grocery stores and supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods as a result of citywide flooding that ensued after the failure of the Federal levee system in 2005. Thus making it not only physically but also economically more difficult to access fresh and affordable food in such a neighborhood. For example, research clearly shows that New Orleans residents that do not have immediate access to a grocery store in their neighborhood typically make a single large shopping trip to a supermarket outside of their neighborhood and then make several “fill-in” trips to neighborhood corner stores (Bodor et al. 2007:417). Neighborhood corner stores typically dedicate less space to fresh food in comparison

to supermarkets and grocery stores because it is not cost effective for the storeowner (See Cluster 2009). Consequently, low-income peoples typically have less opportunity to buy fresh, healthy foods within their neighborhood. The danger is low-income residents are more likely to consume more unhealthy foods as a result of their poor food environment, therefore subjecting themselves to higher rates of dietary related health problems. Nonetheless, research by Bodor et al. and Morland et al. both suggests that the presence of vegetables in low-income neighborhood food retail stores has a positive correlation with the increased consumption thereof. The opposite seems to be true about the presence of non-nutritional foods. Block et al. (2004) warn that the increase presence of fast food restaurants may be contributing to the environmental causes that lead to high obesity rates in New Orleans.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (2011:10). The USDA reported for 2010, approximately 14.5 percent, or 17.2 million American households, were categorized as food insecure. Using the USDA’s definition, at some point in time during 2010, 17.2 million people in American were unable to provide enough food for all of their family members due to a lack of resources (USDA 2011:7). In addition, approximately 5.4 percent, or 6.4 million US households had what the USDA categorizes as “very low food security,” which is defined by reduced or disrupted eating patterns due to limited resources. Such data demonstrates that food insecurity in America is a genuine threat to the well-being of approximately 23.6 million citizens.

I suggests that the indicators, or symptoms, of food security are easily recognizable at all levels (i.e., local, state, national, and global). Even so, what makes it difficult to define is less about the symptoms of food insecurity, and more about the course of action that is suggested by

policymakers, activists, organizations, and governments. As mentioned previously, the United States government measures the rate of food insecurity by the lack of access to food that contributes to a “healthy, active life.” The New Orleans Food and Farm Network measures food insecurity by the amount of access low-income peoples have to fresh fruits and vegetables within their neighborhoods. The Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), a national collective of people and organizations, defines community food security as “a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice”

(http://www.foodsecurity.org/views_cfs_faq.html 3/6/12). To be clear, the CFSC own definition of community food security has been the model for many organizations throughout the US, including Food and Farm’s definition. This is likely because the CFSC takes a large initiative lobbying for farmer and consumer friendly policies that concern the production, distribution, and consumption of food in America. Moreover, they actively lobby against the homogenization of food production practices typically found in large-scale agro-corporations that produced food essentially for quantity rather than quality. To add one more perspective, the 1996 World Food Summit defined food security as:

At the individual, household, national, regional and global level...exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life...[the definition recognizes that poverty is a major cause of food insecurity and that] poverty eradication is essential to improve access to food (Pottier 1999:13).

Food security, I reiterate is an easy problem diagnose but a difficult task to overcome. Pottier notes that “if policymakers are serious about responding to the ‘diverse nature of the problem as experienced by poor people themselves’, then they will need to focus on how people – as a *diverse* category – experience not only agrarian change, but also the presence of aid programmes

and markets” (1999:14). Pottier’s own words suggests that to better understand the problem of food insecurity in New Orleans, for the sake of this thesis, academics and activists must consider how the poor experience food insecurity and aid programs first hand. Perhaps then food security practices should be considered as a place-by-place issue, whereby assessing the cultural and social norms of poverty and poor food environments are understood in the context of place. This seems to be a reiteration of Hinrichs suggestion that local as a socially constructed term. Therefore aid programs need to be designed more as a response to the people of that particular environment, and not developed from standards of national organizations or governments. This is not a new argument as Hinrichs and Lyson make this a primary argument in their co-edited book *Remaking the North American Food System: Strategies for Sustainability*.

To counter globalization and globalized food systems, localism and the relocalization of food systems has emerged under the banner which people can support their local farmers, participate in localized food movements, and contribute to their local economy by “discriminating” in favor of local products over their global counterparts (Hess 2009 and Hinrichs 2003). Localism as a political ideology is dynamic, acquiring virtues from neoliberals, centralists, liberals, and socialists ideologies. For example, the notion to develop a viable local economy and support local small-businesses as a solution to social and environmental issues sits well with neoliberals, while advocating for more policy support for healthier food environments and land use (e.g. blighted properties turned into green spaces) is a liberal concept (See Hess 2009). For Hess, localism is best described as a movement as oppose to a simple strategy that favors small-businesses and opposes corporations. “Arguably, localism is...a movement in the more technical social-scientific sense, because it involves a social-change agenda based on a

long-term, multi-organizational challenge to power social institutions, specifically an economy and polity dominated by large multinational corporations” (Hess 2009:9). Food localism presents itself as an attractive alternative to the dominance of multinational corporations that are the target of activists and social documentaries that have exposed the negative effects post-industrial capitalism has had on the production of food (See Food, Inc 2008, Fowler and Mooney 1990, Nestle 2007, Pollan 2006, and Schlosser 2002).

Campaigns such as “Locavore,” “Eat local,” and “buy local” are designed to encourage consumers to “explore what the implications are for the local economy and for one’s lifestyle if some consumption is diverted to locally grown products” (Hess 2009:135). Notion such as “social embeddedness,” or the social ties and personal connections made between consumers and producers, are thought to have positive effects on the price and distribution of farm fresh foods (Hinrichs 2000), particularly in food insecure communities. The novelty of knowing ones local farmer, according to Hinrichs, has become popular as consumers shop at direct agricultural markets such as farmers’ market and community-supported agriculture (CSA) (2000). According to Lyson, author of *Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food, and Community*, the return to locally-based agriculture and food production are activities linked to a community's social and economic development (2004:1). Food system localization presents itself as desirable response to the pitfalls of globalization. In return, localization is understood as a process “done by people, not something done to them” (Hines 2000:31).

In the North America (the US and Canada), the local food perspective is understood to be driven by political agendas that oppose dominant industrialized corporate/global food systems and “is directed at establishing an alternative food economy based on the principles of social

justice and environmental sustainability” (Fonte 2008:201). In contrast, the European perspective, according to Fonte, “is considered to be more reformist in nature, aiming mainly at incorporating into economic development small rural farms and businesses and marginal economies” (2008:201). The food justice movement in the US and the Slow Food Movement in Europe are two entities that represent the prevailing paradigms that are challenging the dominant food system. Though both paradigms are working towards similar goals, each has their own desired outcome and method on how to improve the local food system. The current discourse and practices carried out by food advocates in New Orleans utilizes both paradigms in attempt to remedy its own place-specific food system problems. Food localism is urban by nature and aims to develop the desirability of urban farms and producers into the local food economy through grass roots efforts to develop an alternative agro-food system.

The discourse and practices of food security and food localism in New Orleans revolves around the dual perspectives on local food networks described by Fonte as the reconnection perspective and the “origin of food” perspective. The former “takes into account the grass roots initiatives for relocalising the food system that aim at rebuilding the link among producers and consumers” while the later “repositions local food production in relation to the values associated with territory, tradition, and pre-industrial production practices” (Fonte 2008:202). While local food advocacy professionals are trying to develop a more sustainable local food economy by linking producers and consumers at alternative agro-food markets, such as farmers’ markets and urban farms, concerned eaters are trying to promote and increase the social value attributed towards cultural food products as a means to reestablish local food traditions and culture. According to Darlene Wolnic, the market consultant for Market Umbrella, a principle goal for the Crescent City Farmers Market has been to reintroduce cultural food items such as Creole

cream cheese, Creole tomatoes, mirlitons, and andouille sausage, just to name a few. For locals, these are necessary ingredients when cooking at home. For tourists and newcomers, these are exotic, trendy food items that are not commonly found outside of New Orleans.

Food Justice

Food justice is a unifying theme designed to connect food advocacy professionals and organizations to the larger goal, “food justice for all in the food system, whether producers, farmworkers, processors, workers, eaters, or communities,” according to Gottlieb and Joshi authors of *Food Justice* (2010:223). It insists that citizens should have the power to determine how their food system operates at the local, regional, national, and global stage. By and large, food justice is an emerging movement that can be made sense as an ongoing dialogue, nationwide, between food advocacy professionals, concerned eaters, and policymakers about the concerns and interests of the national food system (and global food system), and how it effects local communities. The conversation is led by larger food advocacy organizations such as CFSC and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, but the actions and success of smaller organizations such as The Rethinkers, The Food Project, and The New Orleans Food and Farm Network provide insight and background knowledge to help spur the term into a emerging movement. The term developed out of the environmental justice advocacy movement and community food groups concerned with their immediate food environments (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010:15). Gottlieb and Joshi, point out, “The environmental justice slogan that the environment is ‘where we live, work, and play,’ ...could be extended to “where, what, and how eat’ (2010:5). The food justice movement immediately sought out to revolutionize the where, what, and how food was grown, produced, accessed, transported, and finally eaten (Gottlieb 2010:5). From this perspective, the

term is open for diverse interpretations and pathways for transforming both the national and global food systems.

Food advocacy groups that did emerge in the early stages were able to identify successfully the many problems that existed with respect to their food system and food related policies. According to Gottlieb and Joshi, unifying themes have emerged since, such as a need to develop a healthier food system, but there has not been an established “central metaphor” to guide participants on how to change the food system (2010:5). This is one reason why the authors consider the food justice movement a “work in progress.” Rather than define food justice, they opt to express what they hope the movement will achieve as oppose to what it actually does. They characterize food justice as a process that ensures the “benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are fairly shared” (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010:6). However, Hassanein notes that there is a growing tension regarding the potential for meaningful change to occur in an alternative agro-food system. She writes:

For one perspective, individual and organizational actors working to change the dominant agro-food system need to be engaged on a daily basis in political and social struggles and accomplish what is presently possible given existing opportunities and barriers. From an alternate view, such incrementalism and pragmatism are woefully inadequate for achieving the complete transformation of the food and agricultural system that many movement actors and academic analysts see as necessary (2003:78).

Both set of authors stress the importance of understanding that different people experience food injustices differently.

Gottlieb and Joshi seem to be calling for more unification and a collective agreement or discourse on how to transform the food system. They are also cautioning that the movement needs to be aware of place-specific practices, invoking the need to understand the complexities that arise when dealing with social, cultural, and political processes. Hassanein notes that the

“pressures to democratize” can be problematic for unified smaller dispersed groups or coalitions due to conflict of interests or disconnectedness between movement activists (Hassanein 2003:80). She cites “sustainability” as an example because it is a “powerful symbol and the goal of a social movement focused on food and agriculture in the United States,” that has been highly contested in its concept and definition from the beginning. Hassanein concludes that “sustainability *must* be defined socially and politically, and our collective understanding of it will evolve over time as conditions change” (2003:85). What is not necessarily clear is how smaller organizations should go about unifying. Unlike Slow Food, food justice does not have a central organization or clear leader to help steer the emerging movement in a single direction. This can be understood as both a benefit and setback, I suggest. If left to individual organizations, food justice practices remain varied and perhaps site-specific, thus allowing for the term to develop based on the needs of the people.

Conclusion

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, food security practices were understood to be apart of community-building practices and social work. It was less of a movement to itself as has been recognized presently. Health related diseases such as obesity and diabetes were prevalent in New Orleans prior to August 2005, especially in low-income primarily black neighborhoods. Residents of New Orleans were dealing with the same dilemma as everyone else in America, i.e., lack of access to healthy food options and a contradiction of exceeding rates of diabetes and obesity in the same population. The exceeding health problems were understood as a result of the abundance of unhealthy food options, such as processed foods typically found at fast food restaurants and corner stores. The irony is food insecurity and food deserts were intensified as a result of the 2005 Hurricane season, however, food advocacy professionals have shifted their

focus to developing a new New Orleans food system. i.e., one that reflects the virtues of food justice and food localism. The following chapter examines the present New Orleans food system and provides examples of the newly established alternative agro-food networks.

Chapter 3: The Current New Orleans Food System

The New Orleans food system suffered significant damage in 2005 disasters. Many businesses were simply unable to return as a result of structural damage, while others choose not to return because of fear that another hurricane would inflict more destruction. To summarize what has happened since August 2005 to present, New Orleans residents have experienced an overall reduction of full service supermarkets and grocery stores, while alternative and direct agricultural networks, such as farmers' markets and urban farms have become increasingly popular to the public. Residents, food activists, local chefs, and local growers are all working in their respective fields to initiate change in the local food system in ways that encourage residents to buy and consume locally. Food editor Judy Walker of the Times-Picayune lists in her article *Ways Hurricane Katrina Changed New Orleans' Food Culture* that "locals' appreciation for food deepened," urban farming and markets have become more prominent, and chefs are driven to buy locally grown and produced products (2010:C 01). This chapter presents an analysis of the present New Orleans food system by examining reports issued by the New Orleans Food Policy Advisory Committee (FPAC), the Healthy Food Retail Study Group (HFRSG), and the School of Public Health and Tropic Medicine of Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana. In addition, I utilize local newspaper articles from the Times-Picayune to demonstrate the growing awareness and attention directed towards alternative agro-food networks and support for local food production and consumption.

Grocery Gaps and Food Deserts

The ability for low-income peoples to access adequate amounts of healthy foods has been a principal concern in the United States (Fitchen 1997, Mead 1997, Nestle 2007, and Rose et al. 2009). This can be attributed to the growing concern over the nation's public health and poor

social dietary patterns that lead to malnutrition-based diseases such as diabetes and obesity, which are commonly found in black and poor communities (Block et al. 2004, Bodor et al. 2007, and Cummins and Macintyre 2007). Current research suggests that in addition to low-income households, neighborhood food environments have a significant role in determining the quality of life and the health for all consumers (Rose et al. 2009). A lack of healthy food options and an excess of highly processed, and low-nutritional value food options increases the susceptibility consumers have to malnutrition-based diseases. Inversely, if neighborhoods have adequate access to affordable fruits and vegetables, residents are more likely to purchase healthier foods. “Food desert” has become a common term used to refer to the geographic areas with low-income households that have little or no access to food retail stores, physically or economically. Rose et al. research *Deserts in New Orleans? Illustrations of Urban Food Access and Implications for Policy* demonstrates that food deserts can be found in post-Katrina New Orleans. Depending on the criterion used to operationalize the term, “rates [of access] change substantially if the definition is based on ‘socially deprived areas,’ (e.g. poverty rate above a certain threshold) or simply on ‘areas’ (no poverty criterion).” Statistics vary from 61% of city census tracts with a poverty rate greater than 20% and 1 km distance to the nearest supermarket, and 87% if no poverty criterion was used (Rose et al. 2009:10). Increasing the distance threshold to 2 km from the nearest supermarket, while maintaining the same poverty rate, dropped the classification of census tracts as food deserts to 46 percent. Of all the city census tracts used by the researchers to measure the accessibility of food, only one tract in Uptown was never classified as a food desert, while only one tract in the Lower 9th Ward was always considered a food desert (Rose et al. 2009:10).

Due to the sizable variations of food deserts found in their research, Rose et al. question the worthiness of food desert research when trying to make sense of the relationships between the accessibility of food and low-income populations. They argue that, “it is useful to consider the issue to geographic access to healthy food and nutrition, food security, and community development” as a means to help create social and political change (Rose et al. 2009:11). From a policy and practicality standpoint, studying food deserts can help guide targeted assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP or more commonly known as food stamps) to help increase the purchasing power of poor people and improve the effectiveness of the program.

Lastly, the authors bring forth a new term that gives consideration to the problem of abundant non-nutritional value foods commonly found in food insecure areas. The term “food swamps” warns that there is an abundance of unhealthy food options. Rose et al. suggests that the “excess of unhealthy foods [found] in low-income neighborhoods is a more pressing problem” than food deserts citing that food insecurity may be a problem for only 12% of the US, but two thirds of the twelve percent are characterized as overweight or obese (2009:16). Rose et al. suggest that food advocacy professionals are only addressing half the problem of food insecurity. Food swamps allows researchers to identify and make sense of the other half of the problem.

In their first report, *Building Healthy Communities: Expanding Access to Fresh Food Retail*, the New Orleans Food Policy Advisory Committee analyzes the food retail system, post-Katrina. FPAC presents 10 recommendations aimed at bringing diverse fresh food retailers into neighborhoods that currently lack such access. The report is structured around policy

suggestions directed towards curbing the obesity epidemic in Louisiana. Accordingly, the report suggests that the threat of obesity can be reduced if more consideration was directed towards fixing poor neighborhood food environments that have little or no access to fresh, healthy food options by rewriting city ordinances and comprehensive neighborhood development schemes to include “fresh food retailing as a priority” (2008:10). For example, the report lists:

- The City of New Orleans should reduce regulatory barriers to businesses that sell fresh food.
- The City of New Orleans should provide tax incentives to encourage the sale of fresh food.
- The City of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana should address the need for transportation to supermarkets, grocery stores, and farmers’ markets (2008:11-15).

FPAC’s report states that under-served neighborhoods would benefit from a comprehensive plan focusing on “stimulating new investments and improvements in the fresh food retail sector” (2008:10) as neighborhoods rebuild. They believe that the presence of supermarkets and farmers’ markets make such neighborhoods more attractive to potential investors and residents.

To prove that New Orleans is suffering from insufficient levels of access to food in general, FPAC provides analytical statistical data explaining how residents have been affected by the reduction of full-service supermarkets and grocery stores:

In August 2005, there were 38 full-service supermarkets in the city and today there are only 18. While estimates show the population at about 70% of its pre-storm size, the city has lost more than half of its stores. To meet the needs of the current population, the city needs to more than double the number of supermarkets it present has” (New Orleans FPAC 2008:7).

Accordingly, the city needs roughly the same amount of full-service supermarkets it had prior to August 2005 to sustain the current population. To demonstrate its point by comparing statistics, the report cites that there were about 12,000 residents per supermarket, collectively, prior to Hurricane Katrina. In 2008, there were about 18,000 residents per supermarket. The national

average is 8,8000 (FPAC 2008:7). Even though the data presented does not account for the size of the store, the data does suggest a significant increase in residents per supermarket pre-Katrina to post-Katrina. Residents are more dependent on fewer supermarkets and the locales thereof, while supermarkets are expected to supply more food to more people without increasing store size. The recommendations put forth by New Orleans FPAC are all geared towards preventing obesity, improving communal health, all while creating economic opportunities in under-served communities. However, it is unclear as to how much influence the report or the committee has had on the city of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana decision-making process with respect to food retail initiatives. Since 2008 to 2011, there have been two new grocery stores to open, one in the affluent Central Business District and the other a Co-Op in the Bywater selling primarily organic ingredients that rival the prices of Whole Foods. Neither store financially caters to poorer neighborhoods that surround the respective areas.

In 2008, the Healthy Food Retail Study Group prepared a report for the Louisiana Legislature explaining how limited access to fresh and healthy foods has affected specific urban and rural communities throughout the state of Louisiana. Much like the New Orleans FPAC's report, the HFRSG report makes it clear from the beginning that many of New Orleans neighborhoods lacked appropriate access to fresh, healthy foods prior to the 2005 hurricane season. It clarifies that most of the present supermarkets that have reopened are located in wealthier areas, while private and public transportation remains limited in low-income neighborhoods (2008:17), thus making commute to and from food retail stores difficult for those dependent on public transportation outside of their neighborhoods. Citing from a 2007 survey of low-income New Orleans residents conducted by Tulane University, HFRSG strongly suggests

that people are more likely to purchase healthy foods if they were more accessible within their own neighborhood:

- The majority (59%) of low-income residents surveyed shop at a supermarket less than once per week (while Americans on average shop at a supermarket about twice weekly). Just 6% said that they live within “walking distance” of a supermarket; but only about half (58%) owns a car.
- On average, respondents shop at corner stores over three times per a week. Sixty-seven percent said they live within “walking distance” of a corner store.
- Residents surveyed like to eat fresh fruits and vegetables as much or more than unhealthy foods. Strong majorities (over 80% for popular foods) also said that they “would buy” or “might buy” a variety of fresh produce items if these foods were sold in their neighborhood stores (2008:17).

The HFRSG insists that poor food environments contribute to unhealthy communities. It also urges that under-served communities do in fact want to eat healthier and would if more healthy food options were available within their own neighborhood. Therefore, direct intervention such as awarding grants to retail food projects are considered viable options when trying to repair poor neighborhood food environments and restore healthy communities. For the HFRSG, the most prudent way would be to focus on US census tracts that are classified as food deserts, so long as the residential poverty rate is greater than 20 percent and located more than one kilometer from the nearest supermarket. The goal would be to achieve economic viability and neighborhood attractiveness to spur the rebuilding process. The HFRSG suggestions seem to validate the questions of “why research food deserts” by Rose et al., as mentioned earlier, to highlight and target specific city census tracts that need more attention and remediation.

The primary issue noted in each of these reports is that New Orleans residents have an insufficient amount of food retailers to adequately supply the current population with affordable and nutritionally acceptable food. Thus the challenge is to make healthy food both affordable and accessible in both affluent and impoverished neighborhoods. However, poorer New Orleans neighborhoods post Katrina have had difficulties attracting viable businesses such as

supermarkets due to the overwhelming amount of structural damage and blight remaining. I suggest this is one reason why alternative agro-food networks are on the rise in New Orleans. As I pointed out in the first chapter, the city's "laissez faire regulatory environment" has allowed for residents and activists to take ownership of their and neighboring land parcels, and immediate food scene without fear of breaking city ordinances. The general belief seems to be if the grocery store will not rebuild in areas in demand of food retailers, then the activists will find other ways to bring the fresh food to the residents by way of community gardens and neighborhood farmers' markets.

"Louisiana Grown": Building Alternative Agro-Food Networks

Following Hurricane Katrina, there has been a concentrated effort to redevelop how locals think and experience food production and consumption in Louisiana. The shift is in large part an attempt to secure a stable food economy and system that serves all of its residents: consumers and producers alike. Potentially, this is where issues of food insecurity have been re-imagined to fit the needs of post-Katrina New Orleans residents. If activists can successfully devise a more sustainable food system, then everyone can benefit from have open access to locally grown and produced foods, which are presumed to be of better quality and healthier due to their proximity. Local and regional farmers are encouraged to take advantage of the current desire for locally grown products, while residents are motivated to support urban farms and attend farmers' market. Louisiana state officials and food advocacy professionals tell residents by consuming Louisiana grown food they are improving the local economy and preserving local food traditions/cultures.

In Louisiana, local food production has grown steadily following Hurricane Katrina (Walker 2010). According to Mike Strain, Commissioner of the Department of Louisiana

Agriculture, “agriculture is the largest sector of Louisiana’s economy and contributes more than \$9.9 billion to the benefit of our state” (2011). In a recent national publication, the US Department of Agriculture boasts that American farmers are selling \$4.8 billion a year in fruits and vegetables in their local markets (Shute 2011:1). Louisiana claims to have over 150 farmers’ markets and roadside stands. In 2010, Umbrella Market, a nonprofit organization that oversees the Crescent City Farmers’ Market, notes that its three markets collectively contribute back to the greater New Orleans area, especially the neighborhoods that host the markets, nearly 10 million in their Sticky Economy Evaluation Device (SEED) methodology. In short, vendors that sell at the market and consumers are likely to make purchases at nearby businesses outside of the farmers’ market. Market Umbrella is suggesting that some of the money spent at markets is being reinvested directly back into the community, thus increasing its economic impact. The revival of public markets, roadside stands, and the development of urban farms in New Orleans and Louisiana are making headlines locally and nationally as different media observe the rebuilding of New Orleans.

Tracie McMillian’s *5 Urban Farms Reshaping the Food World in New Orleans* demonstrates how urban agriculture has grown from common backyard gardens to urban farms (2011). Whether these urban farms are actually reshaping the New Orleans food scene has yet to be seen, but what they are doing is encouraging residents to think about farming as it pertains to local food production and the beautification of once blighted properties. The five farms listed are engaging their surrounding communities, challenging the purpose and potential of what urban farms and activists/growers can add to their communities. The Sun Harvest Kitchen garden located in Central City provides fresh herbs to Café Reconcile, a restaurant that hires at-risk youth and teaches them skills needed to work at restaurants. Hollygrove Market and Farm

hosts a bi-weekly public market in Hollygrove neighborhood, buying produce from local and regional farmers, and local growers. In addition, the market sits in the middle of a city plot designated as farm space with a certified master grower on hand to teach willing participants how to grow and cultivate fruits and vegetables. Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG) doubles as an urban farm and school for children in the Lower 9th Ward. In 2010, the federal Department of Agriculture awarded the school with a Community Food Project Grant that will provide \$300,000 over three years. OSBG considers itself an “independent alternative school and sustainability education center” that aims to prepare and serve both its students and community (cite, website).

Since Hurricane Katrina, farmers’ markets have grown in popularity and numbers throughout New Orleans and surrounding parishes. They have been covered by the Times-Picayune and other local news sources as “cultural events,” suggesting that New Orleans is returning to a nostalgic past of neighborhood public markets. Founded by Richard McCarthy in 1995, the Crescent City Farmers’ Market (CCFM) is arguably the most well known and attended of the operational farmers’ markets. According to Darlene Wolnic, the principal goal for CCFM was to reconnect residents with New Orleans’ food culture and tradition. In comparison, Wolnic also notes in the mid-west the driving force for reviving farmers’ markets has been to remind people of their farming tradition and heritage. Nationwide, farmers’ markets increased 43% from 2000 to 2005 (2,863 to 4,093), according to the USDA National Farmers Market Survey (2006:11). In attempt to make local markets more accessible to a variety of household incomes, CCFM pioneered methods to allow for non-cash payments such credit/debit cards, electronic benefit transfer cards (EBT/Food Stamps), and vouchers for seniors and WIC (Women, Infant, Children) recipients.

Although farmers' markets such as CCFM now provide alternative payment options and some relief to food deserts, there is only so much a market can provide to a community when it operates one or two days a week for a few hours a day. On the other hand, farmers' markets are relatively easier to assemble in comparison to building a grocery store or convincing a supermarket to invest into a poor neighborhood. The challenge for farmers' markets is making them more affordable and accessible to poor people while keeping them financially fulfilling for the farmers.

Conclusion

With little or no visible action by city officials to build new supermarkets and grocery stores in poorer neighborhoods, localist organizations and food advocacy professionals are stepping in to establish informal/alternative agro-food networks that rely less on post-industrial capitalism, i.e. global food systems, and more on local farmers and producers. In essence, localists and activists are following national trends of denouncing industrial food systems while trying to ensure that some type of fresh product is available, physically, even if it may not be entirely affordable to begin with. If the fastest way to circumvent food insecurity in poorer neighborhoods in post-Katrina New Orleans is to create alternative agro-networks that sell directly to the people, then the next maneuver for food advocacy professionals is to find a way to make the food not only affordable for the poor, but profitable for the farmers and growers participating. Hinrichs warns that direct agriculture markets focus on "exclusive products and exclusive customers" (2000:31). On the other hand, researchers claim that "social embeddedness," or the face-to-face links between producers and consumers, creates positive relationships that benefit both parties. Hinrichs also warns that though social embeddedness may present opportunities for positive social ties, "in no way [does it] preclude instrumental behaviors

or the relevance of price” (2000:296). Farmers still need to be paid adequately to continue running the farm.

In the years following Hurricane Katrina, there has been more dialogue between residents, city officials, and food advocacy professionals about the problematic state of the current food system. However, the attention itself has shifted from issues concerning the ability poor and working-class residents to access fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables, to developing an affordable and stable local food economy. Eating healthy has been tied to eating locally, or within proximity, a motto that is the same throughout the US.

The general consensus is that locally grown and produced food taste better and fresher because it did not travel thousands of miles nor was it grown by large-scale agri-businesses.

Furthermore, the state of Louisiana and food advocacy groups implore residents to participate in “locavore” challenges designed to encourage residents to “explore what the implications are for the local economy and for one’s lifestyle if some consumption is diverted to locally grown products” (Hess 2009:135). The current fresh food retail and buy local initiatives being invoked by the state of Louisiana and food advocacy professionals in New Orleans are all commonly used throughout the US for the same purposes. The problem still remains the same in New Orleans; there are not enough fresh food retailers to adequately feed the current population.

Chapter 4: The New Orleans Food and Farm Network: “Being A Good Neighbor”

From February through October of 2010, I interned with the New Orleans Food and Farm Network (NOFFN). At the time, I knew relatively little about the organization other than the information posted on its website, and from the little that I had gathered the few times I visited NOFFN as a volunteer for another organization. I based my decision to intern with Food and Farm after listening to Pamela Broom, Deputy Director at that time, give a speech at the grand opening of a community garden in Mid-City, a New Orleans neighborhood. She spoke eloquently on how community gardens were more than green spaces designed to beautify New Orleans, noting how each garden has the potential to generate empowered communities through food. The use of food as a medium for community-building made sense in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans, where all communities were in the process of rebuilding, socially and structurally.

Prior to my internship with NOFFN, I volunteered for a community garden start-up organization in the Mid-City neighborhood that was completely organized by a single business entrepreneur/grower. The community garden start-up organization was interested in developing a network of community gardens as a business model for selling locally grown fruits, vegetables, and herbs; much in a similar manner to a CSA. For this particular grower, the development of community gardens in Mid-City served as a business opportunity and not a medium to develop stronger communities. However, Food and Farm was addressing issues such as community food security and accessibility, in addition to environmental and social justice dilemmas prevalent in poorer New Orleans neighborhoods. The New Orleans Food and Farm Network stressed the possibilities of how community gardens, backyard gardens, and other forms of alternative agro-food networks could strengthen the bonds and quality of life in poorer communities. This is

what attracted me to intern with NOFFN. For a while, I interned at NOFFN and volunteered at the community garden start-up simultaneously before dedicating myself to NOFFN. I became more interested in learning about the philosophy and practices of the New Orleans Food and Farm Network as it modeled itself as a “good neighbor,” to use the words of one staff member, suggesting the organization’s primary goal is to develop the capacity for individuals to participate in community-building practices that would enhance access to healthy foods and healthier communities.

I based my decision to use Food and Farm as a case study because it pre-dated Hurricane Katrina. Therefore, I could monitor the organization’s actions before and after the storm to see if Hurricane Katrina did have an affect on how the organization addressed community food security in New Orleans. In short, Food and Farm did transform itself as local growers collective to a more food justice oriented organization. Through the lens of NOFFN, I reviewed what were the authentic food justice issues in New Orleans, and how did that compare to other cities in the US. Both in office and out-of-office work was imperative to learn if I were to understand how the organization developed its philosophy within its organization walls and how that compared to its practices in the field. A primary goal was to understand how the organization’s staff and volunteers understood the work carried out by NOFFN. How much of Food and Farm’s work was done under the context of community-building and food justice? In exchange for allowing me to use NOFFN as a primary case study, I was assigned to two staff members as an assistant, both in office and out in the field. I dedicated two full workdays a week and any additional time when I was not working at my full-time job.

Throughout my time, I was introduced to several former key members of NOFFN, whom were still engaged with food security or local growing initiatives in New Orleans. I learned that

NOFFN had a very particular history, which paralleled the history and practice of community food security in New Orleans prior to the storm and the its transition to food justice and food localism following the storm. Hurricane Katrina did not cause food insecurity in New Orleans, and neither did it usher in an era of food localism. To suggest a parallel, practices addressing the problems of food insecurity in New Orleans did not start with the New Orleans Food and Farm Network, nor is the organization singularly responsible for the shift to food localism practices. I argue the “shift” is a result of the collective of newcomers, entrepreneurs, and nonprofit organizations that arrived post-Katrina, in addition to NOFFN and other like-minded local organizations and peoples, who capitalized on place-specific unique opportunities. NOFFN’s own decision to reopen after Hurricane Katrina played an intricate role in guiding food justice and food localism to the forefront of food advocacy in New Orleans. Their national recognition as a local organization doing good work in post-Katrina New Orleans positioned NOFFN as the ideal nonprofit by both outside food advocacy organizations and locals that were familiar with Food and Farm.

As I made my way through the “who’s who” of NOFFN, I began to collect the organization’s history, from the early days when it was a discussion group of local growers and activists to the pinnacle of the organization’s public attention when it issued the NOLA food assessment maps post-Katrina. I discovered these two particular periods, the development of a discussion group to a nonprofit and decision to remain an operational nonprofit organization in post-Katrina New Orleans, had significant impacts in the organization’s discourse and philosophy. The data collected through interviews, observations, and ongoing conversations raised questions about the organization’s own legitimacy, locally and nationally, and challenged whether NOFFN served as a public advocacy or people-centered advocacy organization (See

Samuel 2007 and Walker and McCarthy 2010). Such classification may seem irrelevant if it is not for the fact that NOFFN and its staff saw itself as a local organization that operated in the best interests for New Orleans residents. Not to be confused with an organization that addresses the needs of locals, as stated by the locals. This section examines the discourse and practices of NOFFN, specifically during its initial starting period as a collective of growers and activists prior to Hurricane Katrina, the months following Hurricane Katrina the organization developed the NOLA food assessment maps, and the time in which my internship took place. The following accounts are based on interviews and continuous dialogue with current and past NOFFN employees.

Creating A Niche: The Development Of Community Food Security In New Orleans

In the 1990s and leading up to Hurricane Katrina, community food security was recognized as a form of community rebuilding and focused on rebuilding low-income neighborhoods food environments. During this time, the food security and food justice movement that was beginning to take shape nationally had not reached New Orleans, which allowed for New Orleans activists to engage its activists in a more people-centered advocacy approach (See Samuel 2007). According to local activists, many of New Orleans poorer residents had little if any access fresh food retail stores. In some instances, the only access to fresh, healthy foods came from backyard and community gardens, which were reportedly common in low-income neighborhoods. According to several New Orleans growers and activists, residents who grew food in the 1990s and early 2000s did so out of necessity and subsistence, and not to be apart of a national food movement, which was the case for many major metropolitans across the US. Max Elliot explains:

There really wasn't this larger food movement [in New Orleans]. It wasn't a hobby in the sense that there were locavores or talks about food pantries. They [New Orleans

residents] were growing a lot of vegetables that they were consuming, and in fact, it may have been the only vegetables that they were consuming. It was much more about subsistence growing. They weren't even thinking about growing or gardening sustainably, but it wasn't a big topic either. People were just going by what they knew...but there definitely was a lot of people that were growing all over the city.

It was unanimous by the local growers and activists mentioned previously that there was no discernable food movement taking place in New Orleans, as there was in other larger cities. For the most part, activists were unaware of what each other were doing in other neighborhoods and communities throughout New Orleans.

In an interview, Elliot stated while he was working for a new community gardening organization in New Orleans, he became frustrated by the lack of collaboration he observed amongst different people engaged in food and farm issues. In an attempt to get local growers and organizers in a room together, he invited people he knew who were engaged in similar activities and issues throughout the city. The very notion of having a meeting to discuss food security and sustainability in New Orleans was stated by local growers and activists to be a “radical” and an “aggressive” idea. From this meeting there was a collective agreement that there were organizations doing their small part but there was not a “true” food security organization, looking at urban food access and regional food systems. To summarize, local residents were growing fruits and vegetables that they were familiar with, while local organizations were “working in the dark” on what may have seemed like independent issues to them because they had to do with different neighborhoods but that were all interconnected through notion of food security.

For the group organizers, Anna Maria Signorelli, Marilyn Yank, and Max Elliot, it was a chance to initiate a movement in New Orleans that was growing in popularity nationwide. For the attendees, it was a chance to see who else in the city was exploring the notion of food

security and wanted to become better, more effective growers. For three years the group met weekly, with people representing different organizations coming and going. According to some of the group attendees, it was never the intention of the original group to become a nonprofit organization. The very idea of becoming a nonprofit was considered a controversial topic that never gained support from the entire group. However, the idea of becoming a nonprofit was always a centerpiece discussion topic. When the group decided to finally become a nonprofit organization, the decision forced some participants that disagreed with the very idea out of the group. For those that left, their concern was that the organization would have to set limits on what it could or would do because of funding and other pitfalls of being an official organization. As opposed to a discussion group, which was not an official organization of any kind, had less restrictions or limits to what it could do. The organization could just be, but would have to find alternative ways to be self-sufficient.

For Marilyn Yank, one of the founding organizers, the decision to become a nonprofit organization was made when the members agreed that there was a niche to be filled in New Orleans. In actuality, it took the group three years to develop a niche that was worth fulfilling. I suggest that the niche did not develop out of concerned residents drawing from national community food security initiatives; rather it developed from the very ideas and conversations by the discussion group that were drawing inspiration from the larger food security movement. According to the group attendees, it was an opportunity to get together with other local growers and activists, share knowledge, develop a collective vision of what food security would look like in New Orleans, and see if there were ways to collaborate. Elliot stated in an interview that this was not a true neighborhood grassroots movement because it was not residents coming together to acknowledge their inadequate food situation and wanting to do something about it. Instead, it

was a collective effort of activists from different organizations coming together to see if their efforts could be strengthened through collaboration. Elliott is right to suggest that “there is kind of subtle difference, but [it is] pretty big.” The difference is whether activists are localizing a movement, utilizing power structures already in place, or neighborhood residents starting their own grassroots movement as a means for social empowerment.

The food insecure stand to benefit from an organization like NOFFN, but does this change the way one understands the development of the organization and its motives for sharing their knowledge with the public? Does this inhibit food insecure populations from growing self-sufficient from nonprofit organizations so that they may develop their own food systems, or does it ensure that nonprofit organizations always have a place and population in need of their services? At no point in time during my internship with Food and Farm did I ever get the impression that the organization had ulterior motives other than helping communities become more food secure and local growers how to become better agriculturalists. The path to becoming a nonprofit organization, gaining the support and funding that is needed, may have unintended consequences.

Meeting The Needs Of The People, Post-Katrina: Learning From The NOLA Food Maps

Following Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Food and Farm Network was faced with a new challenge; identifying and meeting the changing needs of New Orleans residents as they rebuild their homes and neighborhoods. Leading up to the storm, the organization was busy installing backyard gardens in Hollygrove neighborhoods. Hurricane Katrina disrupted the organization by scattering the board and employees throughout the US. The board was forced to debate whether the organization could afford to exist given its predicament and at what capacity.

NOFFN was working under Southern Sustainable Agriculture Work Group, utilizing their nonprofit status as they awaited for their own to become finalized by the state. According to Max Elliot, if the organization were going to move forward, it would be necessary to engage residents in a very different way; one that was less about building backyard gardens in low-income neighborhoods, which was what NOFFN had become most synonymous with. Max Elliot explains the lived reality for residents:

Everybody was really talking about all the ways New Orleans needed to be rebuilt but there was not a lot of discussion about what the food system would look like and what immediate food looked like. That was most stark after [Hurricane] Katrina when there were no corner stores open and there was only one grocery store open. The Winn Dixie was only open till 5 [pm] and the shelves were bare. What was happening was the Salvation Army and the Red Cross were driving emergency food trucks through the neighborhoods, kind of like ice cream trucks with the music. They were handing out hot meals throughout the neighborhoods that way. Before that the government had distributed meals-ready-to-eat [MREs] all over the town. Other organizations were having drop off or pick up spots so you could get cleaning supplies as well as bulk fruits and dry goods.

Given the severity of destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, in particular to the local food system, NOFFN saw their opportunity to introduce food justice to New Orleans residents, and most notably, New Orleans to the national food justice movement.

The board of directors finally decided to move forward by hiring Max Elliot and Marnie Genre as co-chairs who would get back to New Orleans immediately after the return restrictions were lifted and residents were able to return back to the city. Even though the organization had no funding at the time, both Elliot and Genre had committed six to eight months of work to the organization. They worked out of coffee shops meeting with different city and neighborhood officials. One of their first actions was passing out free rye grass seeds to residents. The floodwaters that inundated upwards of 80% of the city had killed off much of the greenery. The city was visually blanketed in brown dead grass. The organization saw their action, as both a

psychological boost to symbolize New Orleans would grow back, as well as an introduction to post-Katrina New Orleans.

Elliot and Genre eventually decided what New Orleans residents needed most was a food assessment map to help inform where food retail stores were open throughout the city and alert them when more had reopened. More importantly, according to Elliot, the food assessment map served as a political organizing tool for neighborhood officials and residents to demonstrate where food was not coming back. i.e. tracking the development of food deserts in New Orleans. Elliot and Genre had also envisioned the food assessment map as an organizing tool to aid residents in the rebuilding process. Elliot asserted it was a particularly interesting time because neighborhood leaders could really envision how they wanted to rebuild their neighborhoods and communities. To capitalize on the moment, Elliot and Genre attended several neighborhood redevelopment meetings urging residents to think about what they wanted their immediate food environment to look like while they were in the process of rebuilding. In addition to being an organizing tool for neighborhoods, Elliot and Genre intended the developmental process for the map would in turn create “neighborhood food leaders,” who were ideally residents already engaged and well connected in their community, socially and politically. However, this did not occur as planned. When Elliot and Genre sought out volunteers to help create the maps, the majority of their volunteers were out-of-towners looking for hours to assist. It was then Elliot and Genre realized that the people they were attracting to help create a food assessment map had different priorities of assistance than those who were locals were actively rebuilding their own communities. This fact alone for Elliot made the maps less successful in his eyes as the information and knowledge that was being accumulated was being shared with non-locals. The maps were not empowering the right people per se.

Nonetheless, the NOLA food assessment maps were successful upon their release. Even though the maps did not develop neighborhood food leaders who could maintain continuous relationships with targeted communities, they did serve as a political tool to increase urban food access awareness. Tulane Public Health at Tulane University acquired the maps, turning them into an interactive online map, which was supported by Google Maps. Overtime the maps became outdated as it was exceedingly difficult to update in a timely manner as more corner stores, restaurants, and grocery stores reopened faster than could be surveyed. When asked what was the biggest obstacle for NOFFN during the making of the food assessment maps, Elliot responded that not being able to recruit neighborhood residents, stating:

I think it would have been great if we could have been able to recruit more neighborhoods to get involved and get more behind some of these food maps so that we could have been really empowering these neighborhood community members to be food leaders and advocates in these neighborhoods that were hit so hard.

The maps were successful in the attention that it received, locally and nationally. The work done by Elliot and Genre was well received by national food justice focused organizations and internet blogs. For example, the Prevention Institute in Oakland, California presented a report with eleven examples of organizations advocating for improvements in low-income neighborhoods and better policy direct towards healthy food and activity environments in the US. The report highlights the NOLA food maps and other work done by NOFFN in the year following Hurricane Katrina. Food and Wine 2006 Tastemakers Awards spotlight Anne Baker of NOFFN and her contributions with the NOLA food assessment maps as 1 of “15 spectacular talents who have changed the world of food and wine by age 35” (Krader and Tap 2006:1).

As a result of Elliot and Genre not being able to hire or gather locals to assist on the food assessment maps, he and Genre did all of the canvassing and data collection. Elliot concluded that he gained a tremendous amount of knowledge from providing free consultation on how to

re-envision a neighborhood food system, and how to approach neighborhood/community rebuilding in a post-disaster setting. Unfortunately, according to Elliot, he was not able to pass that knowledge on before he left New Orleans. Elliot states he would have preferred to have paid neighborhood residents to assist in the project so that such knowledge could have been shared and passed on, but the organization had no finances at the time. For this reason, Elliot believes he and the organization missed its chance to have a greater capacity at building true neighborhood food leaders. Instead, Elliot suggests when he left, so did all of the knowledge he gained.

Final Conclusion

This thesis has sought to understand the current discourse and practices of food security and food localism in post-Katrina New Orleans. In the preceding pages, it has examined food security and food localism literature as it pertains to developing healthy communities and sustainable local food economies. Next, it analyzed the current New Orleans food system including: the lack of grocery stores and increase of food deserts in low-income neighborhoods, the development of alternative agro-food networks, and increased support for and attention focused on locally produced food directed by public officials, the state of Louisiana, local chefs, concerned local eaters, local growers, and food advocacy professionals/organizations. Lastly, this paper investigated the New Orleans Food and Farm Network as a leading food advocacy organization in New Orleans. It concluded that following Hurricane Katrina, food security practices became more nuanced and dynamic in an attempt to address the problems and needs of New Orleans residents and the local food system.

The New Orleans Food and Farm Network saw the redevelopment of post-Katrina New Orleans as an opportunity to install a local food system that exemplified the virtues of the

national food justice movement; thus Food and Farm became more aware of concerns such as social justice and environmental issues, sustainability, food security, and food localism. Even though the development of alternative agro-food networks did well increasing locally grown and produced foods throughout the city of New Orleans, this study suggested that food advocacy professionals would do more for the food insecure by supporting the development of healthy and affordable food retail stores located in poorer and working-class neighborhoods. Presently, alternative agro-food networks in New Orleans only provide temporarily relief to food deserts and grocery gaps because of their limited capability to maintain regular hours and accessibility (socially, economically, and/or physically) in comparison to operational full-service supermarkets.

The analysis of NOFFN provided academics and food advocacy literature with new data on how food advocacy organizations attempted to redevelop their own food system while trying to meet the needs of its residents in a post-disaster environment. I suggested that NOFFN is genuinely trying to be more responsive to the needs of the people of New Orleans, focusing primarily on historically food insecure neighborhoods. However, their response to the needs of the food insecure also included Food and Farm's own vision of the New Orleans food system, specifically in a way that reflected their own philosophy of food justice and food localism. This has caused unforeseen consequences that are not easily recognizable to food advocacy professionals. That is, the development of urban farms, community gardens, backyard gardens, and other forms of alternative agro-food networks in New Orleans are simultaneously having a seemingly positive impact on the local food economy and the availability of local, healthy fresh produce; however, the primary beneficiaries to such networks are not the poor and working class residents but the middle class and up. As previously mentioned and shown through research and

data, the availability of local, healthy food is not the same as accessibility. If food advocacy professionals are serious about alleviating the problems of the food insecure, this thesis advises them to focus on making healthy foods (and locally grown and produced foods if they are so inclined to do so) more accessible by economic, physical, and social standards.

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