

Rewriting the Erased History of Blacks in New Orleans Urban Gardening and Farming

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Abstract

Urban agriculture has gained prominence over the last decade in New Orleans, but the majority of the new gardens and farms that have emerged in the city since 2010 are neither culturally nor socially connected to the vibrant history of local food provisioning in the city’s Black communities. The history is tied closely to the region’s economic boom and bust, systemic oppression and segregation, and the cultural co-optation and devaluation of Black folk foodways in the city. By relying on the oral history to complement where the official or academic documentation has failed to capture the rich history of urban gardening by Black New Orleanians, this article demonstrates that the residents of Black communities in New Orleans once grew their own food, both as a form of collective efficacy and as a way of passing on horticultural knowledge and skills.

Keywords

food justice, environmental justice, urban agriculture, land justice, racial segregation, New Orleans

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Personal Reflexive Statements

Pamela Arnette Broom was born in New Orleans to parents from rural bayou community of Raceland, Louisiana. Pamela's passion for farming grew out of summer vacations to the country and the gift at age eight of a tiny front yard garden plot from her daddy, which swelled during her master's in urban studies: applied anthropology focused on urban agriculture as a tool for community revitalization. She has dedicated community-engaged scholarship and practice to connecting her rural agrarian roots to strengthening healthy urban food systems. Yuki Kato was born in Japan and was raised by parents that grew food in their suburban backyard. Since completing her PhD in the US, she has been studying urban agriculture through environmental justice and food justice frameworks. Shawn "Pepper" Roussel is an attorney, ecoculinarian, and food activist. Pepper worked in all phases of life cycle development for many years before returning to school for a JD with certificates in both Environmental and International Laws from Loyola University New Orleans School of Law. She is completing an LLM in Agriculture and Food Laws at the University of Arkansas Fayetteville and now practices in food policy cannabis compliance.

Introduction

"Gardeners, scholars say, are the first sign of commitment to a community." - Anne Raver

Urban agriculture has regained prominence in New Orleans in the years following Hurricane Katrina, with over 100 lots across the city being cultivated as urban farms and community gardens between 2010 and 2020 (Kato 2020). But the majority of the new gardens and farms that emerged in the city during this period are neither culturally nor socially connected to the vibrant history of local food provisioning in the city, specifically in its Black communities. The long history of urban food production by Black communities, despite its prevalence throughout the first half of the 20th century via backyard gardens, communal orchards, and community gardening has been consistently overlooked and forgotten. Throughout the last quarter of the 20th century, the number of Black growers in the city declined for various reasons, resulting in the loss of knowledge, skills, and memories of the practice that was once a prominent form of collective efficacy. By the time urban agriculture gained popularity and legitimacy in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the memory of the thriving urban gardening culture in the Black community had faded or been paved over.

In this article, we recognize and honor the legacy and the historical significance of urban gardening and farming to Black New Orleanians. In doing so, we situate the emergence and subsequent decline of this practice in the context of the "plantation ecologies" (McKittrick 2011) that continued to shape their relationship to the land, labor, and the community as they made their journey from the rural Southern states to the city. The history of urban food provisioning among Black New Orleanians is tied

closely to the region's economic boom and bust, systemic oppression and segregation, and the cultural co-optation and devaluation of Black folk foodways in the city. In fact, the migration of Black folks from rural Southern states to New Orleans was preceded by centuries of their labor being extracted in the agricultural industry, first through the systems of slavery then through sharecropping. This history and contemporary resurgence of urban farming in the city is not unique to New Orleans. The most recent rise of urban agriculture popularity in the US has been examined through the lens of green gentrification (Sbicca 2019) or grassroots food justice activism (Myers 2022). Nevertheless, the contemporary urban agriculture's general disconnects from the legacy of local food provisioning practices in the city, especially in Black communities, has not been explored in depth.

Residents of Black communities in New Orleans once grew their own food, both as a form of collective efficacy and as a way of passing on horticultural knowledge and skills. Yet this history has not been systematically and formally documented, when compared to the similar practices by other immigrant communities (Airriess and Clawson 1994; Campanella 2020) or the undeniable contributions of African, African American, and Caribbean chefs to the city's culinary traditions (Elie 2010; Galli 2013). Lack of historical records on the prevalence of such practice is not merely an unfortunate omission in documentation. By not recognizing the robust history of urban Black communities' capacity to feed themselves, contemporary urban agricultural scholarship and practice reinforce the simplistic and inaccurate portrayal of the relationship between Black folks and their relationship to the land; that they left such relationship behind when they moved into the city. Our data analysis focuses on structural factors that led to why Black urbanites grew food for themselves and their community and how such practice discontinued in many cities, by highlighting the role of federal and state institutions that consistently worked to disempower Black farmers in American South, as they migrated from rural regions into the cities. Pamela Broom's family history exemplifies the impact of such migration onto one family.

Historically Situating Black New Orleanian's Urban Agricultural Practices

Due to the nature of studying what has *not* been documented, we have relied on multiple, unconventional data sources to build our arguments in this article. The stories of Black New Orleanians growing food for themselves and their community are passed on and retold by the few who remember the old days. Thus, oral histories are used to complement the official or academic documentation that has failed to capture the rich history of urban gardening by Black New Orleanians. Broom and Roussel each conducted oral history interviews with individuals with memories and experiences related to this history. We consulted *The History Makers*, a national oral history archive, and legislative records for the federal and state actions that created or constrained opportunities for Black growers in rural and urban Louisiana from the 1800s through

1900s. For the contemporary urban agricultural practice, we used data from Kato's sociological research on post-Katrina development of urban cultivation.

This article resulted from a practitioner-scholar collaboration, whereby we each presented the data to which we had access, and worked together throughout the writing process by relying on each of our expertise. As a result, the structure of the article deviates from the typical sociological research writing format with an intention of centering the experiences of the people in the narrative in our theoretical discussion of the data. The article begins with one of the authors' (Pamela Broom) personal account of her family history that exemplifies the trajectories of the migration of Black families from rural Louisiana to New Orleans. We then present the historical overview of the emergence of urban gardening and farming practice in New Orleans' Black communities by first discussing the policies that forced them from rural agricultural land into the city, followed by the description of communal nature of the practice. The next section presents the loss of this tradition and memory as a form of cultural erasure, which contextualizes our description of the disconnect of the urban agricultural practice that emerged in the city after Hurricane Katrina from its precedent. We return to Pamela's personal reflection on the disconnect between the contemporary and historical urban food provisioning in New Orleans, before we offer our conclusive remarks.

The Trajectory of Migration as Deeply Personal: Pamela Broom's Family History

Rural Blacks migrated to cities seeking better opportunities, but maintained their connection with the family that was left behind. The accounts of Black rural flight to urban centers like New Orleans were shared and experienced through the story of my family from Raceland, Louisiana. My father, born in 1910, was the eldest of 11 children and my mother, born 1914, was the 14th of 15. As a young man in his teens and 20s, my daddy worked at the Godchaux Plantation and sugar mill in Raceland, Louisiana. (Figure 1) My mom often told stories of her siblings and she eating raw vegetables from the fields.

My parents also experienced the kind of horrific brutality that paralyzed with fear tens of thousands of Southern African Americans that sought escape from their rural homes. As a young married couple while my mother was pregnant with their first child, their home was burned in the middle of the night. After my father safely got my mother out of the house, he ran to the road where several white men were reveling in a ditch at their accomplishment of terror. When my dad approached them, there was collective recognition. They worked together at Godchaux's. Their response to him was, "Broom, we did not know that it was you!" My parents' baby was born early and lived for 5 days past that traumatic event. Soon after, my mom and dad became part of the 1930s wave of rural Louisianians who moved to New Orleans. As a child growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, I recall that whenever we visited "the country" and passed Godchaux's, my daddy would proudly say, "Me and my Pa worked there, 12 hours on and 12 hours off."



Figure 1. Laborers cutting sugarcane and loading it into a cart at Godchaux Plantation in Raceland, La. (State Library of Louisiana).

My family on both sides was large. A good number of them remained in Raceland. Migration saw some resettle in New York, California, Michigan and New Orleans. The familial bridge from Raceland to New Orleans was connected through the exchange of food traditions. My grandmother, aunts and uncles would arrive at our house in uptown New Orleans laden with packages, called *bouquette* (that they pronounced ‘bu-jit’), of freshly cured meats and vegetables from the garden. The unveiling of the package’s contents meant joy! My mother’s eldest sister, born 1899, was the first of her siblings to move to New Orleans and found work as a domestic with a prominent St. Charles Avenue family. She was praised as an extraordinary cook and she and her husband kept one of the most prolific kitchen gardens in their neighborhood on Soniat Street. As an eyewitness to the wonders of what grew in their garden and others across the City of New Orleans as well as the examples of growing excellence provided to me by my parents, I remain a practitioner and cheerleader of Black urban agriculture that is at best passed down in the oral tradition.

In 1964, at age eight, I became a passionate gardener. That was not the norm among my playmates. In those days, gardening was done by our older family members and children were often drafted to weed or harvest. My generation experienced the end of how rural Black families that settled in urban areas gardened to supplement the family table. By the late 60s, the convenience of neighborhood supermarkets and the popularity of easily accessible packaged foods ushered in a shift from the reliance on garden-fresh produce. Having food that was grown and shared from home gardens became more of a special occurrence. I saw a resurgence of urban cultivation during the

mid-to-late 70s and into the 90s with a focus on community gardens. However, the numbers of participating Black youth and adults were marginal. This trend revealed both a widening generational gap as well as one of interest. Current gardening practices among Blacks in New Orleans consist of those like me that have devotedly done it over a lifetime, those that embrace urban cultivation as part of the pursuit of a healthy lifestyle, and programs that are actively working to engage and educate youth and adults in a revival of the tradition.

The Land Loss and the Migration of Rural Black Population to New Orleans

Systemic inequities in urban agriculture in New Orleans, past and present, are historically rooted in the tragic circumstances of the African American experience of chattel slavery, the post-slavery peonage system, and sharecropping arrangements. In this section, we highlight the role that federal and public institutions played in forcing Black farmers off their land and out of rural Louisiana in what came to be known as The Great Migration. The politics of knowledge theorists point to the powerful role that the US government has played in “the production and regulation of official knowledge” through government-produced statistics and policy language (Apple 2003). The state and the industry justified devaluing of Black farmers’ labor and land while legitimizing the relative success of their white counterparts through unequal distribution of the resources. In response, rural Black farmers and their urban descendants wielded their agricultural knowledge as their tools for survival, precisely as the state attempted to undermine their capacity to survive or even thrive.

Following the Civil War, reconstruction programs such as the Freedmen’s Bureau were created to support the efforts of newly freed Southern Blacks in obtaining land to grow their own food and become self-sufficient. Some of the more successful efforts did yield the purchase of hundreds of acres by Black people who had been enslaved and the white adjacent, meaning white passing, mulatto, or Creole (Copeland 2013). But Special Order No. 15 that famously promised “40 acres and a mule” to each family was never fully realized, and the government did not implement any major land resettlement programs profiting the freedmen after slavery was ended. Although farming was by and large the skill set of Black Southerners, without land of their own and unable to depend upon the law to protect them, many found themselves in the economic entrapment of sharecropping or wage labor in which they experienced wage theft and housing instability. Threats of eviction, complaints of maltreatment, uninhabitable dwellings, and unjust practices became *de rigueur* for landowners. Mechanization, introduction of herbicides, and the legal system that collectively threatened rural Black farmers from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century added layers of oppression and continued to extract labor at unfair rates (Hinson and Robinson 2008). By 1930, Black farm labor that once constituted half of Black labor declined significantly as the Great Migration out of the rural Louisiana began, and the number of farms of 1,000 or more acres being operated by Black farmers dropped by nearly 50 percent since 1910

(Christian 1942). Yet in addition to the white fear of empowered and self-determined African Americans, we must recognize the failure of public agencies to protect these Black farmers.

Educational institutions and extension agencies emphasized technological and scientific advancement that would undermine the Black farmers' knowledge and potential for economic prosperity. The 1862 Morrill Act established land grant colleges and universities, including Louisiana State University, whose mandate was to engage in public education and engagement in research, but these institutions were not accessible to Black students. The second Morrill Act in 1890 established historically Black land grant institutions in the South, including Southern University A&M in Louisiana, but these institutions never received federal support on par with the historically white institutions (Daniel 2013). These land grant institutions, both white and Black, taught new, methods of farming sanctioned by the US Department of Agriculture that shifted farming practices away from heritage style farming to newly developed methods.¹ Extension agents were deployed to assist and support farmers through these universities and colleges. Extension agents working in rural Louisiana in the 1920s worked with both white and Black farmers, while facing strong opposition from the white landowners and officials who saw these services as the threat to their dominance in the agricultural industry (De Jong 2000, 2002). Black extension agents worked to assist Black farmers, but faced multitude of challenges from white landlords refusing services to their Black sharecroppers, to Black farmers' own skepticism that these agents were spying on them (De Jong 2002; Jones 1976; Schor 1986). Black farmers by all accounts did not receive the same type or level of support as their white counterparts, including assistance with grant applications or being made aware of changes to rules or policies (Daniel 2013).

The most egregious form of oppression came in the form of land extortion of Black farmers, sanctioned or executed by the USDA and state constitutions creating and supporting Jim Crow laws. The number of U.S. Black farmers declined by 98 percent between 1920 and 1997, and Black farmers lost 90 percent of the land they had owned, which was as many as 926,000 farms across the country at its peak in 1920 (Browning 1982), when compared to only 2 percent among the white farmers during this time period (Rosenberg and Stucki 2019). Scholars have attributed such staggering loss of land and agricultural enterprises among the rural Black population to the national and state policies that operated to systematically discriminate and devalue Black farmers, as well as to the explicit and implicit practices of agencies that continue to undermine the reconstruction rhetoric and the Civil Rights legislations.

Emerging scholarship confirms that New Deal farm policies, especially Agricultural Adjustment Act and Farm Security Administration, played a significant role in pushing Black farmers and laborers out of the trade across the South, including Louisiana (Rosenberg and Stucki 2019). The Agricultural Adjustment Act paid subsidies to the farmland owners to reduce crop production in hopes of keeping the commodity prices from falling. This resulted in decreased labor demand. Despite the mandate that the funds be used to retain workers, who were largely Black, many large-scale white

planters found the legal loopholes to ignore these obligations and enrich themselves (Conrad 1965). Farm Security Administration was set up to provide low-interest loans and other assistance to marginalized farmers, yet in reality the evidence suggests that Black sharecroppers were evicted to make the land available for the white clients while systematically excluding Black farmers from being able to gain ownership of the land (Adams and Gordon 2009; Scott and Brown 2008). Some Black farmers and laborers fought back by forming the interracial Louisiana Farmers' Union (De Jong 2000), but the land dispossession of Black farmers during this time, combined with the terrors of violence perpetrated by the Night Riders, pushed many to join the Great Migration out of the rural Southern regions to the Northern cities or Southern urban areas.

Many discriminatory farm policies continued well after the Jim Crow era ended. As recently as 1999, the U.S. Department of Agriculture settled a \$1 billion class action lawsuit *Pigford v. Glickman* which alleged discrimination in farm loans and technical assistance in the years spanning 1981 to 1996. The Justice for Black Farmers Act was introduced in the U.S. Senate in 2020 to recognize and begin to address the systemic racism in land and agriculture policies at the federal level. Beyond farm policies, a series of small and somewhat disconnected policy decisions further spurred Black people to emigrate from rural areas to cities after World War II. Despite the promises of the GI Bill, Black servicemen returning to rural communities in the Deep South faced challenges in economic opportunities in skilled labor, forcing them to return to laboring on farms where they were abused and severely undercompensated (Onkst 1998). Reassignment of train stops increased the difficulty of moving people and products from the rural towns. Small Black farm operations were particularly negatively affected by these changes because not all had trucks to make the days long journey to the new or remaining stops, which was perilous. By removing train stops from towns that had been wholly dependent upon train traffic left those towns to die.²

Black folks who migrated to New Orleans from rural Southern states faced federal and state policies that gave legitimacy to white supremacy during the first half of the 20th century through real estate ordinances in the 1920s,³ redlining starting in the 1930s (Rothstein 2017), and urban renewal in the 1960s (Lewis 2003), all of which constrained and delegitimized their place in the city despite their significant cultural and economic contributions. The oppressive plantation ecologies in the rural persisted in the city, as Black urbanites' relationship to and experiences on the land, continued to be violated through state-sanctioned institutional violence and exploitation, shaping what McKittrick (2011) calls "black sense of place." Segregation, exploitation, and policing of Black bodies occurred in the context of disinvestment in and destruction of Black communities and entrepreneurialism. Under such circumstances, then, growing food for oneself and the community was an inherently political act of defiance and resilience through reclaiming of one's "right to the city" (Harvey 2003) especially when the white power elites deemed urban life precisely in juxtaposition to the rural, agricultural life.

In these environments, Black New Orleanians activated their agricultural proficiency to augment the meager earnings from what jobs they were able to secure, even though being in the city meant they had limited spaces to grow. As such, urban food

provisioning was a form of collective efficacy, as the urban growers in the city's Black communities cultivated their land to nourish themselves, their family, and the community.

Urban Agriculture as a Form of Collective Efficacy

Urban agriculture was a familiar sight all across New Orleans from the late-19th to the mid-20th century. It took the form of beekeeping, cultivating the land to grow produce, and small animal husbandry. Although the activity was not described as "urban agriculture," they had long dotted the landscape of the city in two forms: subsistence gardening and truck farming. For example, during the conversation with Pepper Roussel, George Lafargue, the owner of a New Orleans produce business that he inherited from his father, remembered how prevalent Black farmers were when he was "coming up." He described his generation of Black New Orleanians as being "less than a full generation removed from rural life" of sharecropping in the 50s and 60s. He continued to recount how the Black folks in the city knew how to grow and, just as cash strapped immigrants from other countries did, relied upon their kitchen gardens to augment the content of their dinner plates or to earn extra money. He spoke nostalgically of going to work at their family's produce stand in the French Market with his father, who could have easily passed for white, and his Italian business partner. They were pioneers in the practice of selling produce directly to restaurants. Mr. Lafargue recounted watching Black men being paid less than white-identifying immigrants for the same type and volume of produce at the market. After the two World Wars, he recalled, many of the returning Black servicemen could neither get well-paying jobs nor make a living as farmers selling produce on their own. Consequently, they resorted to working for white and white-identifying landowners as their gardeners, growers, or produce sellers to be able to care for themselves and their families.

Subsistence gardening in Black community was for sustaining the family and to share with the community. Cities such as New Orleans experienced a boom in gardening when Black Louisiana agriculturalists abandoned country life and made their urban migration. Mr. Lafargue confirmed that these individuals maintained growing practices in part to keep connection to culture, kith, and kin, but also for economic and health reasons.⁴ He grew wistful when he spoke of a time when food was used as medicine, when Black people were still herbalists. Part of this circumstance was because science had not yet altered the DNA of the plants and nutrient dense fruit and vegetables were the order of every day. But more than that, Black people weren't permitted in some grocery stores and couldn't always be seen by physicians let alone afford the prescriptions. Growing and knowing which herbs were appropriate for home remedies, as Mr. Lafargue described in his conversation with Pepper Roussel, was then a skill that had not yet been lost. He explained that in a time of open racial prejudice in the Jim Crow South, Black people would neither be seen nor treated by white physicians.⁵ Therefore, they grew herbs and applied remedies passed down through generations to get and remain healthy. Similarly, honorable Paul R. Vauteau, Jr.,

recounts in the *History Makers* oral history recordings how the food grown or harvested in the community during the mid-20th century was shared with their neighbors, especially during challenging economic times.⁶ Equally as important, Black people retained their culture through food and grew items they could not afford to purchase or could not find in grocery stores.

For-profit truck farming was also present in New Orleans at the time. Back, side, and even front yards were for personal consumption, but vacant lots were used creatively to grow for commercial sale. Much has been written about how immigrant growers, especially Italians, who went on to dominate the New Orleans grocery store space, started with truck farming in neighborhoods like Gentilly and Algiers in the early 20th century (Campanella 2010). These neighborhoods at the time were predominantly white, and Italian, an ethnic identity that eventually became a part of the “white” racial category. Thus the prominence of this group in written historical accounts creates the impression that only white people knew how to and ultimately did grow, despite the historical presence of Black growers and Black truck farmers in many neighborhoods (Bennetts 1972).

Urban gardening for Black migrants was directly connected to their displacement from the rural land and trade, and their continued struggle in the city where they were segregated, discriminated, and denied access to land and resources. The plantation ecologies that exploited their labor, simultaneously disconnected them from their ancestral land and bound them to the foreign land where Black bodies and communities continue to be terrorized in the US today, most notably in prison.⁷ But it also extended into the city where it shaped racial geography in many American cities, including New Orleans. As McKittrick (2011) argues, “diverse spatial practices—wherein the structural workings of racism kept black cultures in place and tagged them as placeless, as these communities innovatively worked within, across, and outside commonsense cartographic and topographical texts—help form a black sense of place” (949).

In fact, Black people had been the de facto farmers in the city, just as they were on the plantations. Black men who had returned home to New Orleans post-WWII found the best and sometimes only jobs they could hold were related to farming. These truck farmers planted in and harvested from neighboring lots to sell for profit the same as white farmers. However, Black truck farmers could not command fair prices from the French Market purchasers let alone the same prices as European immigrant farmers did.⁸ Getting less per haul discouraged the independence of truck farming for Blacks while simultaneously strongly encouraging them to return to the dependence of having a farm employer. Yet Black urban farming did not cease. Despite the diminished civil rights protections, various types of cooperatives, including farmer associations, were organized in black farming communities prior to the 1960s, which received a new emphasis during the civil rights movement (Reynolds 2002). However, during the 1970s and the 1980s, Black truck farmers, who had been a staple in New Orleans, began to decline drastically just as farming in the Vietnamese enclave in New Orleans East began to flourish.

The Vietnamese immigrant enclave in New Orleans East began in 1975 as a settlement for the refugees. Soon afterwards, the residents of the Versailles Village, located on the far eastern edge of New Orleans, began cultivating the spaces on and behind their apartment complex. Gardening proliferated both as leisure for the elderly residents and for food security. Culturally appropriate crops were consumed privately but also sold at informal markets for income, primarily within the ethnic enclave (Airriess and Clawson 1994). The successful and continued expansion of urban farming in this community owes in part to the fact that these immigrants were from rural Vietnam and were familiar with cultivating in the tropical climate, similar to the rural Black population that migrated to New Orleans in the early 20th century.⁹

The key difference between the trajectory of urban farming in the Vietnamese ethnic enclave and Black communities was the institutional support that the former received on land access and cultural centrality of agriculture within the community. The population's original settlement was facilitated by the Catholic Charities in cooperation with the Resettlement and Immigration Services, and the Mary Queen of Vietnam (MQVN) Catholic Church played a significant role in facilitating the land access for the gardeners on the levee behind an apartment complex (Airriess and Clawson 1994; Bankston 1998). Meanwhile, urban gardening in Black communities underwent significant changes during the 1960s.

The activists who joined the Black Power Movements across the US, including in New Orleans, embraced gardening and farming by reframing their relationship with the land as a form of reclaiming their sovereignty and cultural heritage as rural Black Power movements did (White 2018). Civil rights activism and the resulting 1964 Civil Rights Act forced desegregation of public and commercial spaces including grocery stores, including in New Orleans. The new opportunities to access these amenities, along with their desire to participate in the mainstream economy as consumers and professionals, meant declining needs and desire to produce one's own food among many Black residents in New Orleans.

Perhaps because of the dire needs in low-income Black communities for self-sufficiency in food provisioning, the practice of subsistence gardening became prevalent as it once had been in these communities. Black truck farming had declined in number and scale by this period (Peters 2020). Smaller public or private gardens had also become less prominent as the older generation began to age out of the practice and the younger generation were not encouraged to continue. New Orleans saw community gardening proliferate during the 1980s through the 1990s near and on adjudicated properties. This movement was spearheaded by Parkway Partners to engage residents and encourage them to start tending the space as community gardens. At one point there were over 100 gardens across the city, including in neighborhoods that were predominantly Black.¹⁰ Although it had not completely disappeared, by this time active gardening by long-term residents had become sparse.

One notable exception was the urban gardens at Lafitte Public Housing. The project was funded by the federal Urban Gardening Program in the 1980s, and received some assistance from Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service and Parkway Partners. The

limited written records of these gardens note a prolific production on the ground, aided by elderly men from the nearby community (Doughty 1990). Much of the food grown was given away, and those who remember these gardens do so fondly (Cherrie 2014). Yet even these gardens were no longer active by the 2000s, likely due to the aging of these growers and the declining physical and social conditions of the housing development.

Cultural Erasure

We define cultural erasure as a practice in which a dominant culture, for example a colonizing nation, attempts to negate, suppress, remove and, in effect, erase the culture of a subordinate culture. The historical contributing factors regarding the long and challenging struggle by African Americans to own and operate land independently are attributed to unfair policy legislation, institutionalized racism, the mechanization of agriculture, and increased agricultural technology. We can glean from these institutional and infrastructural barriers that the magnitude of loss to the generational wealth opportunities to Black farmers and their families is irreversible (Brown, Christy, and Gebremedhin 1994).

In September 1942, Booker T. Washington High School opened as the vocational and public high school serving African Americans in Uptown New Orleans with an enrollment of 1,600. Entries in a 1959 Yearbook bear witness to a robust agriculture and horticulture program featuring faculty and student members of a New Farmers of America (N. F. A.) Club (see Figure 2). Mr. Floyd Jenkins, former head faculty of the Booker T. Washington High School agriculture and horticulture program shared experiences of his tenure, 1971-2005 (National Park Service n.d.). Mr. Jenkins's account is a testament to the affirming force of culture and agency. His philosophy was "learning by doing." He was often quoted as saying "We'll be a Third World country if we don't know how to grow and prepare our own food." These declarations represented how he approached teaching hundreds of Black students the methods and business of agriculture. A forerunner in aquaponics, Booker T. Washington High School converted a former welding room into a system of ten 800-gallon tanks with a complete network of filters and a huge generator to support the production of cold-water fish and lobster (National Park Service n.d.). The Future Farmers of America Chapter at the school formed a cooperative with a focus to crossbreed, not in-breed fish (Ibid.). The school, led by Mr. Jenkins, formed a distance-learning contract with Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, and Alcorn State University in Mississippi to expand the aquaculture program teaching students the mastery of breeding Tilapia, catfish, and striped bass.

Booker T. Washington High School also partnered with George Washington Carver High School, another local educational gem, where instructor Clarence Righteous upheld Black agricultural traditions. In the interview, Mr. Jenkins proudly shared how former Sheriff Charles Foti sought the guidance and engaged the expertise of Booker T. Washington's aquaculture program to set up a tank-to-table operation at the prison.¹¹

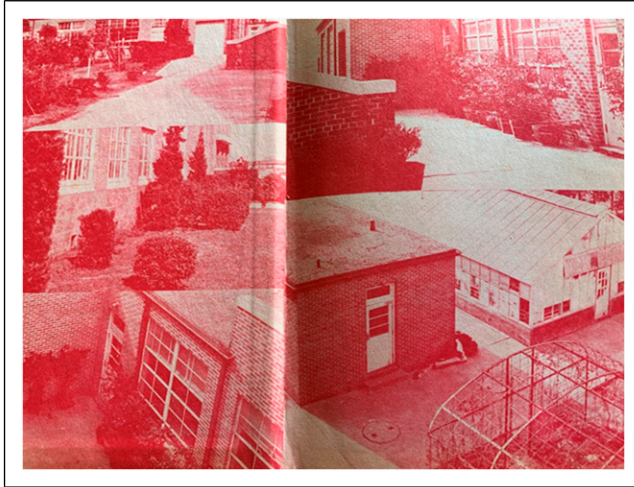


Figure 2. Booker T. Washington High School's campus showcasing the agriculture and horticulture areas. (Source: the 1959 Yearbook courtesy of Cynthia Broom-Bankston).

Both school's agriculture and horticulture programs incorporated a business skills-building component where local legal and business professionals were invited to serve as mentors to students. Booker T. Washington's program established local landscaping contracts with city agencies and private companies, including Louis Armstrong International Airport.

For decades, the students from Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver High Schools who chose the agriculture and horticulture program as an elective were exposed to the culture of Black farming. The program offered students opportunities to actualize individual and collective efficacy, as many of them pursued higher education at 1890 Land-Grant Institutions and Programs and beyond as well as starting their own landscaping businesses and farming operations. Mr. Jenkins closed the interview by recalling the extraordinary legacy and influence of Tuskegee University's renowned educator, humanitarian, champion of regenerative agriculture and the science of living in harmony with nature and the land, George Washington Carver: "Carver used the community as a classroom, I'm teaching students the importance of bringing community to the classroom."¹²

The program was still thriving with an expansive list of contracts until the disruption by Hurricane Katrina, when the school building was severely damaged and did not reopen. The agricultural program did not resume when the new KIPP Booker T. Washington High School reopened in 2016. Despite such a successful run, the record of the agriculture and horticulture program at the original Booker T. Washington High School is not widely known in the city today. This process of the memories of these programs being erased contradicts the dominant narratives of the post-Katrina recovery

and redevelopment agenda advanced by the that casted the city as the “blank slate,” justifying the funding priorities for the experimentation with *new* idea brought in by outsiders rather than looking inward to the pre-existing systems of resiliency within the city’s Black and working-class communities (Johnson 2011; Sakakeeny 2015). Regardless of the reasons for the new charter school bearing the same name not to reinstate the horticultural program, the discontinuation reinforces devaluing of the agricultural knowledge and skills and their prominence in the city’s Black communities. This is especially ironic considering that urban agriculture gained popularity and public support in the years following the 2005 disaster, as we demonstrate in the following section.

In searching for the corroborating documents to validate the information, we combed various sources and could only find limited records of the programs, including just a few mentions in The Times-Picayune newspaper and the Historical American Building Survey on the school’s historic architecture. Thus, we had to rely on a personal recollection of Mr. Jenkins to gather information for this section.¹³ The limited archiving of the active agricultural work by Black folks in the city, from the earlier urban migration periods to the 2000s consistently overlooks, undervalues, and erases the existence and significance of these practices in New Orleans’ Black communities. Thus, while the loss of practice and erasure of its memory did not appear to result from explicit, intentional oppression, it reflects the city’s history of unequal access to housing, employment, and education along racial lines.

A path forward from manifestations of the cultural erasure of Black agriculturist traditions in New Orleans and the surrounding region is to consider the function of culture and agency. Culture is the cord that binds and sustains local interpretation of values, beliefs, and practices across the greater New Orleans community. When the land is lost and the written record is slight, memory is a vital tool of agency. In fact, in the process of drafting and publishing this article we received the news of Mr. Jenkins’ passing. There must be a sense of urgency to qualitatively document and professionally archive what oral treasures remain from a generation of local Black growers and those that remember the fruit of their labor.

Post-Katrina Emergence of “Urban Agriculture”

“Urban Agriculture” is the new term that has increasingly come to be used to describe gardening and farming in New Orleans since 2005. Only 13 of the community gardens that predated Hurricane Katrina continued or resumed operations during the years following the storm.¹⁴ The fastest growing and the most visible forms of gardens were distinct from the traditional community gardens. They were either initiated by non-profit organizations that used gardening or farming spaces for community outreach or youth education and training. Others were for-profit enterprises that grew food or flowers at scale for sale to the local restaurants or directly to individual consumers. The demographic profile of the growers in these new growing spaces began to reflect the city’s demographic shifts over time; post-disaster transplants, younger, white, and

college-educated. By one estimate, 70 percent of the full-time growers operating in the city in 2015 were white (Kato 2020), even though about 60 percent of the city's population was Black (U.S. Census 2015). Fully 70 percent of these projects were located in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

The expansion of urban agricultural practice took place in the context of the rapid and extraordinary demographic and economic transformation in the city over the decade following the 2005 storm, making gentrification the major topic of conversation by its 10th anniversary. These new gardens and farms were not a revival of the historical practice, but reflected the city's new population, shifting political and economic interests of the dominant group, and the loss of the prominence of the practice in the city's Black communities by then. Although the development of urban agricultural activities in post-Katrina New Orleans was not initiated by government agencies or nonprofit organizations, though over time both the state and the NGOs took note of its relevance to the redevelopment of the city. For example, the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, a public agency, began to offer various programs for growers to lease the lots that it had acquired through the Road Home Program, such as Growing Home in 2009 and Growing Green in 2012. These programs encouraged the gardening or greening use of the lot. By 2018 NORA reported 55 completed Growing Green projects across the city on lots sold by owners who did not return after Hurricane Katrina (New Orleans Redevelopment Authority 2018).¹⁵ The lots leased through the Growing Green program are eligible for purchase after completing the initial leasing program, according to the program description. Such program only promoted urban agriculture as an effective, temporary land use, rather than to embrace local food provisioning as a permanent fixture in the city (Kato, Andrews, and Irvin 2018). Similarly, the city only legalized the use of residential lots for "agriculture" for the first time during the comprehensive zoning ordinance revision in 2015 (Article 20.3). The initial language in the code required an extensive list of soil-testing, which was subsequently revised to reflect the testing protocol set by the Louisiana State University's Agricultural Center (Article 20.3.C.2). Preparation, processing, or packaging of plants or livestock, except for canning, is prohibited in residential districts, requiring growers to rent commercial kitchens for these operations (Article 20.3.C.3). These regulations seem to define urban agriculture as a commercially-oriented enterprise, rather than community-based food provision, further departing from the historical practices of growing food in the community, by the community, for the community.

The growers' intentions and practices were quite diverse, despite relative homogeneity of their demographic characteristics (Kato 2020). Some embodied the characteristics of the "well-intended saviors" (Guthman 2008; Harris and Romero 2018), while others sought to use gardening and farming as a part of the community rebuilding in ways that made sense to the long-term residents. Nevertheless, the new language and notions of urban agriculture that had been imported to the city aligned better with the national popularity of the alternative food movement that emphasized the health and ecological benefits of *locally-grown* food. The practice of gardening itself was mostly not presented as a revival of history, except for when the growers or the organizers had

some personal roots in the city or had studied the history, thus urban agriculture came to be understood as a “new” phenomenon in New Orleans, especially among the post-Katrina transplants.

We must also note that even as more growers began growing commercially, with varying levels of success, and gained increasingly support from the public, many continued to find land access and tenure challenging, as they realized the precarity of leasing urban lots for growing food, flower, or composting, and only a handful successfully managed to purchase lots specifically for cultivation purposes. By 2018 dozens of urban cultivation projects ceased operations, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of the new wave of urban cultivation practice that were not connected and did not mostly reconnect with the history and legacy of urban cultivation in the city’s Black communities.

Urban Agriculture in New Orleans Today: Pamela’s Reflections

Since my post-Hurricane Katrina return to New Orleans in late 2008 to this present moment, my aspirations remain the same regarding the underutilized incorporation of urban agriculture as a tool for revitalization. I long for a visual balm of well-maintained tree-lined streets in neighborhoods across the city, not just in more resourced areas. These musings are driven by youthful “I remember when...” reflections of attractively kept *neutral grounds* (medians) teeming with azalea bushes, Formosa, pecan, and oak trees. Wide-eyed recollections of food growing in my aunt’s and uncle’s tiny backyard where that was not an out-of-the-ordinary occurrence throughout the city’s neighborhoods inspires my ongoing work to revive those traditions. Expecting ‘just picked,’ shelled, and cooked buttah’ beans beside a plate of steaming rice with a smothered pork chop was a reasonable expectation.

When approaching New Orleans from the air, I am still in awe of the wild beauty of the landscape. When speaking about the potential for restorative urban agriculture reuses in a city with year-round growing seasons, I encourage a focus on ways that New Orleans could model community connectedness, fresh food production, healthy ecosystems creation, and economic development. What a vision! New Orleans is a food heritage city in an agricultural state that heavily relies on the hospitality sector. Presently, the city boasts an increasingly dedicated community of growers and social justice activists that many were post-disaster transplants with some now rooted in solidarity with native New Orleanians. An ongoing pledge among lifelong Black growers is to remain unshakeable concerning equitable resource access to establish and sustain community-based urban farming operations. The challenge remains to get firm and substantive capital and infrastructure support from the City of New Orleans municipal government. I am jubilant and resolute in my commitment to honoring the legacy of New Orleans’ Black urban gardening traditions while inspiring current generations to “grow it forward.”

Conclusion

Our central argument in this article is that the development and the loss of the practice, as well as the erasure of the memory of Black urban gardening in New Orleans are all rooted in the historical injustices around labor, land, and food traditions, or more specifically the plantation ecologies that expand time and place beyond the antebellum rural South into the modern and contemporary Black urban experiences (McKittrick 2011). What happened with urban gardening in New Orleans was a pre-emptive erasure of the memory before the new framework of urban agriculture was introduced to the city in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when the practice became widely recognized and legitimized. The loss of the practice and the memory denied recognition of Black communities' capacity and tenacity to feed themselves, both literally and figuratively. It also conceals the role of the federal and state governments behind their complicated relationship with the agricultural work that followed them from the rural Parishes into the city. Black residents in New Orleans turned their agricultural know-how, which was once exploited for white wealth accumulation through slavery and sharecropping, into a tool for activating collective efficacy, by engaging in productive cultivation practices.

Even though the discontinuation of urban gardening and farming practices and the erasure of this memory did not result from intentional and explicit efforts by the local political power elites, policies that promoted and justified segregation and discrimination devalued and constrained the resiliency of Black communities to thrive against all odds. In other words, if there had been better recognition of and support for these forms of localized food provisioning as they were taking place during the 20th century, the practice would have not only survived but Black growers could have benefitted from the new popularity of urban agriculture in the 21st century. The trajectory of urban farming practices in Vietnamese immigrant communities that persisted into the post-Katrina period juxtaposes the practice's discontinuation in Black communities. Similarly, the emergence of the post-Katrina urban agricultural practice was not initiated by the state, yet unfolded in the context of the neoliberal recovery policies that prioritized influx of newcomers and businesses while undermining the opportunities for the long-term Black residents to return and rebuild (Fussell 2015; Gotham 2012). Thus, the emergence and decline of urban agricultural practice in New Orleans' Black communities do not merely reflect changing interests among urban residents, but are significantly being shaped by the federal, state, and local political-ecology that consistently devalue Black labor, culture, and land, except when they benefit white interests.

This article is an effort to capture the stories of the memories and knowledge that have not been heard, valued, or recognized before they are lost. Urban gardening and farming in Black communities represented and were forms of concrete embodiment of their sovereignty and self-empowerment. Sadly, the history depicted here was not unique to New Orleans. As Black folks migrated out of rural Southern states into cities in response to the land and labor exploitation and continued to face residential and educational segregation in cities, we speculate that urban gardening and farming must

have taken place in the cities along the Great Migration path as a form of collective efficacy (Gregory 2005; Wilkerson 2010).¹⁶ Nevertheless, these memories are often forgotten or not formally documented as has been the case in New Orleans. Recognizing these practices is not just a matter of acknowledging the long-term impacts of the historical racial policies, but also about specifying the accountability of the institutions that enforced, or continue to enforce, racially disparate access to resources for growing one's own food in the city, especially land.

As the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) begins to provide more resources toward these practices through its new Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production, ensuring the equity in access to its funding should take into consideration the role the agency has played in discouraging and undermining the capacity of Black farmers, in rural areas or in the city. Similarly, states, cities, and land grant institutions that manage the USDA funding should recognize how historical local policies shaped land access and food injustices along racial and class lines. Dedicating resources to urban agriculture without explicitly and intentionally recognizing and addressing the historical precedents will not only be counterproductive, it risks repeating the history. Policy implementations must be vigilantly monitored to protect from civil rights injustices of misappropriations, misuse, or suppression, as it could exacerbate injustice and cause more harm (Harvey 2017).

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Notes

1. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) was created by act of May 15, 1862 (7 U.S.C.A. § 2201).
2. *Texas Pacific Railway Company. v. Louisiana Public Service Commission*, 136 So. 2d 385 1962.

3. The Supreme Court struck down the city's effort to pass ordinance that allowed a majority of neighboring residents to obtain a variance by petition to block a white owner from selling their property to a Black buyer (Schneider 2006: 65).
4. October 14, 2020, Interview with George Lafargue conducted by Pepper Roussel.
5. October 14, 2020, Interview with George Lafargue conducted by Pepper Roussel.
6. Archived interview with the Honorable Paul R. Valteau, Jr. (*The History Makers*, Archive # 631991).
7. One of the most infamous prison agricultural labor (Chennault and Sbicca 2023) at Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, a former plantation, has been well-documented (Smith 2021).
8. October 14, 2020, Interview with George Lafargue conducted by Pepper Roussel.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Parkway Partners archive. Compiled and coded by Kato.
11. December 18, 2020, Interview with Floyd Jenkins, conducted by Pamela Broom.
12. December 18, 2020, Interview with Floyd Jenkins, conducted by Pamela Broom.
13. The lack of local recognition for his work contrasts to his receiving the National Association of Agricultural Educators Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009.
14. Parkway Partners archive. Compiled and coded by Kato.
15. Fifty-five is a small number in the context of a total of over 1,500 lots that NORA sold through Lot Next Door program for land stewardship during the same time period, as noted in the 2018 report. NORA has not published the total number of lots that were formally or informally designated for the Growing Green program.
16. For example, Karida Brown's (2018a) historical research of the Great Migration into the Appalachian coal mines finds Black migrants tending gardens for personal and communal provisioning.

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