Food for Black Liberation: Exploring the Plant-Based Possibilities in New Orleans

by Chris Lang

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” This is a quote by Indigenous Australian Activist Lilla Watson.

Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy’s Executive Director, Colette Pichon Battle, spoke these words four years ago, when I first moved to New Orleans and joined Gulf South Rising, a collective of climate justice activists who support southern Black and Indigenous empowerment around ecological equity. With its post-Katrina experiences of ethnographic theft, disaster capitalism, and volunteer-turned-gentrifier influx, New Orleanians and southerners are rightfully defensive around who they let in. As an outsider, I was and continue to be weary of repeating others’ past missteps in the name of “help”.

In the trunk of North America, in the gut of the Mississippi, in the first African American neighborhood of this country (the Tremé), I let the city work its magic on me. New Orleans gave me historical context for my west coast existence. New Orleans challenged my views of the South, my mixed race ancestry, my Blackness. For two years I worked as server/bartender in a hip vegan restaurant while I voluntarily organized around issues of eco-social justice. New Orleans showed me how the continent is connected through rivers and pipelines, through foodways and petrochemicals. Through the Diaspora. New Orleans guided me to nest my academic passion for animals, environment, and sustainability in Black and Brown healthy futures.

At the 2016 Southern Movement Assembly in Chattanooga, TN, we chanted WEB Dubois’s famous line, “As the South goes, so goes the nation!” Philanthropically, southern states receive about half the grant funding of non-southern states, and about a quarter the amount for social justice organizations. Despite the high economic promise of the oil industry, car manufacturers, petrochemical producers, and tourism, these profits are not widespread, particularly across racial lines. Eight of these 13 states are top ten in lowest household income, and five of these suffer from the greatest levels of economic inequality (Grantmakers for Southern Progress). The South consistently has lower percentages of high school graduates, and lower life expectancy coupled with higher premature death rates.

According to the 2010 census, of the 317 counties in the United States where the black population made up 25 to 50 percent of the total population, only seventeen of these counties were *not* in the South (United States Census Bureau). With well over half of the country’s African American population, and given the uneven industrial and socio-economic development across racial lines, the South leaves for much needed philanthropic investment in Black spaces fighting environmental and social injustice.

It is in knowing these statistics that I have chosen to follow my academic pursuits in connecting the South and the West across diasporas, following my passions for veganism, zero waste living, eco-social health, and cooperative economics.

A recent Prosperity Index from the New Orleans Data Center revealed that 71% of Black households in the city earn less than a livable wage. Forty-seven percent of Black New Orleanian children grow up in poverty, compared to just nine percent of their white peers (The Data Center, 2018). Combining these disparities with racially significant rates of unemployment, uneven grocery store distribution, and convenience store inundation, one might presume bleak prospects for managing food health in Black parts of the city. African Americans develop hypertension at earlier ages and receive less medical treatment (Hollar et al, 2004), and die from cancers at higher rates than white people and other minorities (American Cancer Society).

In *Lose Your Mother,* Saidiya Hartman writes that "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery--skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (Hartman, 2007, 6). When the federal government ended transatlantic and international slave trade in 1808 shortly after the Louisiana Purchase, the regional success of the Deep South through sugar and cotton crops placed New Orleans at the capital of the southern slave market in America antebellum (Sublette, 2008, pp223). This is not to understate the amounts of free people of color who lived in New Orleans before abolition, and the ways the African American inhabitants of this region past and present resist racial orders with innovation, rebellion, and self-reliance. The residual effects of slavery, and resulting resistance, are both thus inevitably embedded in the logic of New Orleans in modernity.

Within 4 blocks from where I lived in the 7th Ward, on any given day I could walk past four convenience stores, two Cajun Seafoods, a Manchu's Chinese Food & Fried Chicken Joint, a meat mart, and Circle Foods (the historically significant and only Black-owned grocery store in the city at the time, which as of April this year is closed due to repetitive flooding and aggressive mortgage loan payments that the owner could no longer keep up). Aside from what used to be Circle Foods, none of these stores are Black-owned.

The historic grocer's former owner, Dwayne Boudreaux Jr, recently said in an interview: "I'd rather sell it to someone in the community than see it go away, but no one had the kind of money the property needs" (McNulty & Adelson, 2019). Aside from Circle Foods' produce section, which last summer began to boast a variety of vegan options, these predatory food & liquor and fried chicken shacks sell what I've heard to be called "death food." Several mornings a week, I would wave across our home's front stoop to my neighbor, who suffers from diabetes and psoriasis concurrently. In the house I lived in for those two years, as well as last summer, high blood pressure and chronic chest pain regularly affected one of my close friends and roommates, a young male in his alleged prime at 28.

Despite these obstacles and very limited infrastructural realities, in the city we also see an ever-growing surge of resistance concerning food as folks build capacity for Black Veganism and healthy Black Food Futures. Last summer presented the first inaugural Vegan 2 the Soul Festival in Washington Park, which boasted a fresh vitality of Black vegan food entrepreneurs. I sought out such persons as key informants, building on my prior relationships and snowballing from there.

The questions guiding my research were as follows: *In what ways are Black New Orleanians resisting the predominant food paradigm (processed foods, meatified foodscapes)? What are some obstacles to realizing food and community health in this city and beyond? What are motivators/reasonings behind those who choose/refuse a plant-based lifestyle? How are folks organizing to build community capacity for healthy lifestyles? What infrastructures are necessary? What are some constraints, if any? How has the recent gentrification of various parts of New Orleans changed the foodscape for natives of the city?*

Here in New Orleans, the evidence of Afro-Caribbean diasporic food awareness is apparent, though it is juxtaposed starkly against the realities of the standard American diet that is dominated by processed foods, low quality meats, dairy products, and refined sugars, in conjunction with "southern soul food" subculture that we see saturating US African American foodways.

Just a year ago, there were three or four vegan-friendly restaurants to depend on in the city, almost all white-owned and in white or gentrifying neighborhoods. But when I returned last summer, my jaw dropped when I saw a list of fifteen Black-owned Vegan establishments that had quite literally, popped up. Only two of the featured establishments had storefront, semi-permanent locations.

One pop-up owner I chatted with recalled how he had to borrow money to pay for all his ingredients for the recent Vegan2theSoul Food festival, and was not sure how it would pan out. The hustle, self-determination, and teamwork required to accomplish a pop-up event is worth noting: self-made entrepreneurs must build their social media following, design their menus, shop for produce, set up the venue, take orders, receive payments, give change, and cook for the clients. The need to monetize is palpable. As competition for space increases, resources remain low, and the trendiness of veganism reaches an all-time (yet very constrained) high, the environmental conditions were summed up to make one entrepreneur feel like one of many "crabs in a bucket." And though family members and friends come to assist, it is difficult for a pop-up to guarantee longevity as well as a loyal, consistent consumer base with ever-changing locations and times. The transiency and segregation marked by the city's tourism economy imposes a tension whether one should create for natives or for visitors, for transplants or locals, which often are in very different locales.

I first reached out to one of the two permanent establishments that I had learned about through social media. When I asked her about her motivations for going vegan, she said it wasn't about the animals, not even the health, it was about *everything*. She doesn't think in that single-issue logic, she said.

In *Sistah Vegan*, Breeze Harper compiled thoughts from Black female vegans on food, health, and society. One contributor wrote: "over 80% of all Black people are lactose intolerant and most don't even know it. We have accepted another race's diet for our own...Diet is the racial oppression that Black people have to get over in order to survive" (Earth, 2010, pp70). It is here that Black veganism inserts itself as a praxis for liberation. The politics of Black veganism extend into community health, environmental justice, incarceration issues, and animal rights, while also addressing core tenets that uphold patriarchy and racism.

The reasons why Black Americans are switching to plant based diets are varying and not monolithic to personal health objectives, environmental safeguarding, or compassion towards animals. Breeze Harper reminds us of the social and environmental justice components that vegans of color also consider: "Your consumption of unsustainably produced animal products may not only be increasing your chances for cancer, obesity, and heart disease, you may be (in)directly oppressing and causing suffering to people who look *just like you*" (Harper, 2010, pp25).

This references the exploited factory farm laborers (Ribas, 2016, pp49), a profession with the most occupational hazards, comprised often with undocumented and/or formerly incarcerated persons, as well as impacted communities of color from the toxic wastes of industrialized concentrated animal feeding operations (Starmer and Wise, 2007). The meatified foodscape is yet another form of racializing health outcomes on the consumer end through diet-related disease. Twenty seven percent of African American deaths in this country is attributed to preventable heart disease (Paige, 2010, pp6).

With the success of Black Vegans Rock, the Afro Vegan Society, and Hip Hop is Green, among countless other web-based influencers, veganism is entering mainstream Black culture through the digital door. Netflix releases like *What the Health?* and *Feel Rich: Health is the New Wealth* have also spurred African Americans to trial plant-based lifestyles en masse. Closed social media groups like "Black Vegan Social" or "Melanated Vegans of New Orleans" serve as resource and community pipelines for sharing humor, recipes, ecological information, local vegan venues, and general consciousness raising content.

The owner of the new vegan storefont and I talk about the location of her restaurant, how it could have been uptown off Magazine St and follow the moneyed tourists and white folk. But when this location opened up off Broad St, it was a divine sign to settle here, in a very Black part of the city, on the outskirts of the Tremé. She remarked, "So many people have come up to me and said, 'Thank you for bringing this into the community.'"

This tension of following the money is not divorced from racial social-economic realities nested within New Orleans. The unofficial "vegan consumer hotspots" in the city have been said to exist in the Marigny and Bywater, areas marked by high gentrification and increased affluence. Without upfront capital to invest in permanent space, we see this flare of Black veganism expressed in a highly innovative, yet vulnerable pop-up culture. Ashanté Reese writes that "geographies of self reliance call attention to how spatial, historical, and racial dynamics insist that Black folks navigate inequities with a creativity reflects a reliance on self and community" (Reese, 2018, 9). The pop-up flare reflects such qualities of self reliance in the face of food apartheid and the racial wealth gap.

While pop-ups do not bring the stable income of permanent restaurants, they do possess other advantages; namely, the lack of required capital to lease a storefront in a gentrifying city. One pop-up entrepreneur I spoke with works during the daytime as a barber, and finds venues at night to advance his side hustle as a pop-up entrepreneur. The flexible timing allows him to create his own schedule and follow crowds according to where he has social capital, where is available, and his perceptions of busyness. He can find consistent gigs at "anchor venues" like the New Orleans Jazz Market on Wednesday's open mic nights. This pop-up culture capitalizes on the lax food permitting enforcement in New Orleans, something which gets increasingly more stringent, and can be viewed as alternative paradigms of self reliance within capitalism to engage for those who do not possess sufficient capital or desire to start storefronts.

Nevertheless, I fear, without infrastructure to support these entrepreneurs, the city's inequitable environment is conducive for Black-owned vegan pop-up businesses to be a short-lived reality. Saidiya Hartman asserts that "flexible and elastic kinship were not a 'plantation holdover,' but a resource of black survival, a practice that documented the generosity and mutuality of the poor" (Hartman, 2018, 91). Excluded from normative means of wealth accumulation, large portions of the New Orleanian Black vegan food entrepreneurs resort to pop-ups as means to monetize and provide food alternatives that counter the prevailing, meatified foodway. *What implications could this have for community aspirations towards long-lived improvements in Black health in the New Orleans foodway?*

Vegan dining, Black-owned or not, often comes with extra costs due to organic produce selection and the projected mark-up value of niche consumer desires in a meat-saturated foodway. Eating prepared vegan food is not cheap in comparison to cooking it for oneself. *Can the presence of Black vegan establishments alone lead to self actualization of healthy food consumption in more Black households?*

Times were not always this way, one woman of the 7th Ward Revitalization Project explained. "When I was growing up, we had everything we needed, Black-owned. The milk man, the mirlitons, the mechanic, the blacksmith."

I also used this time to network with Black urban farmers, gardeners, and other community revitalizers. Just as pop-ups lacked upfront capital for permanent space, vacant property sites leased by Black community gardeners could be sold at any moment in gentrifying neighborhoods of appreciating land value, instantly dissolving the sweat equity they have invested into the space. The racial wealth gap impacts both food producers and food entrepreneurs in this way.

I had the great fortune to visit and provide media assistance for Backyard Gardeners Network (BGN), a food justice-motivated non profit founded by Jenga Mwendo. BGN leads a 10-week "Food As Medicine" workshop series and serves as a community lifeline for hands-on plant based meal prep and information on diet-related disease prevention and remission. The work of BGN, which also grows food and teaches gardening to residents of the lower 9th Ward, complements the activities of Black vegan entrepreneurs. Here, workshop participants learn new shopping pathways and cooking strategies not only to select healthier food options that can manage/prevent/reduce risk of hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease, but to thrive in the household through self-efficacy. Collective cooking classes serve as weekly efforts to build and strengthen communal ties in this predominantly African American Ward.

To limit "Southern" or "soul" food as a static stereotype of "death and disease" is to deny the dynamic ways in which food cultures have historically shifted across time and space. I grew up routinely eating Gumbo and collard greens in my own households in the West Coast, a testament to the dispersion of Black foodways through diasporic movement out of the South in the US. *What are the eco-social impacts of Black people veganizing "soul food" in New Orleans? What networks exist via the basin of the largest continental US watershed to reorient our literal and national microbiome in the direction of food health?* Resistance lies in the ways these culinary creatives have navigated the dietary landmines of the Big Easy, recombining healthier, plant-based ingredients to imitate culturally relevant meals like Gumbo, Jambalaya, and Étouffée. In this resistance, folks are redefining food subculture that can shift Black health outcomes for the better.

There are benefits and limits to Black-owned vegan food businesses, of course. While they provide people with nutritious meal options, they nevertheless maintain customer financial dependency for those who do not know yet how to cook or shop for vegan food. As we discuss community vitality, I see that there is increasing need for cooperation amongst stakeholders to bring better health outcomes. These partners may include: food producers, health food entrepreneurs, health information disseminators, workshop leaders, grocers, and bankers/credit unions in Black spaces. At the same time, while we can admire these acts of innovation, resistance, and self reliance, Black people in this city face regional and racial marginality. It is important to recognize the role of resource and care distribution to support new Black-led food paradigms in this region. As progress continues, and more visionaries are activated to examine and redefine the existing foodways through a Black vegan lens, I remain hopeful.

Breeze Harper writes: "Sadly, those who were originally enslaved to harvest sugar cane (Africans and Indigenous Americans) are now enslaved in multiple ways: as consumers of sucrose, hormone-injected processed meat and dairy products, and junk food" (Harper, 2010, pp28). In a city so clearly marked by slavery, despite tourist-attracting attempts to overwrite the actual histories of the French Quarter and Congo Square, the past undoubtedly seeps into modern inequalities that perpetuate premature Black death along multiple fronts, though I focus here on food.

The decolonizing process to un-desire addictive, unhealthy food is different for each person. To improve Black health collectively might not only mean to sow proper seeds as such Black-owned vegan establishments, but also to uproot the destructive sources of addiction that tempt and leech livelihoods from the community. The neural network of Black veganism across the country is firing, redefining the very definition of soul foods. In post-Katrina New Orleans, where gentrification and the repercussions of disaster capitalism are ongoing and exacerbating, one thing is for sure: if native New Orleanians and allies can organize to collectively liberate from these dietary shackles, the national eco-social implications expand beyond the waterways of the Mississippi itself. Knowing our liberations are bound, like a leaf to its tree trunk, I repeat to myself, “As the South goes, so goes the nation.”

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