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**ROOTS OF RESILIENCE: REFRAMING FOOD ACCESS THROUGH ORAL HISTORY**

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## **Abstract**

Terms like “food justice” and “food sovereignty” have become promising progressive alternatives to existing hunger narratives, which often ignore crucial structural and cultural context of food insecurity. Despite this progress, food access programs among communities of color across the urban United States continue to rely on deficit narratives to guide solutions. Beliefs of inherent deficiency and restriction have thus infiltrated the collective identities and memories of these very communities. Through intergenerational oral interviews, this project seeks to understand the local foodways created by communities of color that have been erased, and the implications of this exclusion on food security work. While these stories have historically informed local food practices, a lack of formal recognition has rendered them wrongfully disregarded by public policy. Oral history provides an opportunity to not only formally address flaws in food security work, but ensure that these narratives continue to be shared and utilized within families and communities as a form of cultural resilience.

## **Introduction**

While a wealth of scholarship has emerged in recent years in response to rampant hunger across the United States, little has proven to be effective in breaking away from what has been identified as an academic “food fetish.” (Page-Reeves et al., 2017) The ease of studying food as a commodity, and therefore framing communities as individual and identical consumers with varying access to such goods, has led to a depoliticized and oversimplified understanding of food security. Food research now faces the task of shifting this narrative effectively in order to bridge a fatal gap between food security as a trending research topic and the human experience of food insecurity and hunger.

Existing scholarship that serves to counter this narrative often begins with a critique of current programming. So-called “alternative food movements” in urban areas, including new high-end grocery stores and community-based urban gardens, have been revealed as markers of gentrification rather than contributions to more equitable food access. Anguelovski argues that such detrimental outcomes of seemingly “progressive” initiatives stems from an isolation of “healthy food” from the economic

realities of these communities. By allowing white outsiders to control the narrative of what healthy and accessible food looked like, the Jamaica Plain neighborhood studied by Anguelovski saw disproportionate suffering for Black and Hispanic residents at the loss of a staple grocery store, while spurring gentrification by catering to wealthy transplants (Anguelovski, 2015).

In her study of a nutrition education program in Kansas City, Kolavalli revealed the detrimental depoliticization of government funded nutrition programming. Despite their origins as an attempt to contextualize hunger and counter narratives of personal failure, Kolavalli identifies terms like “food deserts” as perpetrators of the deficit narrative prevalent in social welfare discourse today. (Kolavalli, 2019) By implying an inherent bareness to these communities, this paradigm parallels paternalistic attitudes that appear in historical justifications for colonization and occupation of non-white populations. (Kolavalli , 2019, p. 100)

While scholarship like Kolavalli and Anguelovski problematize current hunger narratives in different populations and through investigations of vastly different policies, a common factor in their criticism is a lack of historical context. Both policies rely on the assumption that communities of color do not have the capacity to feed themselves. Therefore, institutions designed to address insecurity must ignore or reject historical narratives of when, how, and why these communities have become food insecure, and how they have been able to thrive in spite of intentional governmental and corporate exclusion. Thus, the first step in finding comprehensive and effective solutions to political food insecurity is an examination of existing foodways in BIPOC communities in recent history.

### **Collective Memory**

Following the Great Migration at the turn of the 20th century, land ownership became a crucial source of freedom and community among Black Americans. Urban neighborhoods north of the seemingly bygone “rural south”—such as Deanwood, DC, investigated by Ashanté Reese for *Black Food Geographies*—saw a flourishing of local development. New black homeowners created abundances of foodways and community networks in geographies that often lacked formal funding and infrastructure from white-controlled governments (Reese, 2019). Despite this rich history, modern

understanding of food provisioning and security, particularly among urban and BIPOC communities, lacks this historical context. While structural exclusion of non-white and low-income communities undoubtedly contributes to this fault, dynamics of collective memory offer greater insight. The concept of collective memory helps explain the mechanisms of remembering and forgetting such practices within communities.

After conducting research in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, investigating the erasure of black agriculture in the post-disaster city, Dr. Yuki Kato relocated to Washington DC and encountered similar responses in regard to why such practices stopped over generations. Consistently, answers drew on values of social mobility and modernization, as new generations were encouraged to escape the oppression associated with black southern farming in the 20th century. The memories shared by families, and therefore by larger communities, “are characterized by involving specific local experiences that often confront the canonical or socially dominant narrative” (Rojas-Granada, 2024, p. 5). As social mobility became equated with ‘modernity’ due to the prioritization of technology and advancement and the antagonization of manual labor, a distancing from outdated or seemingly oppressive practices such as agricultural labor becomes necessary. Community collective memories reflect the same shame and apprehension, leading to a forced forgetting and often abandonment of such practices.

When these beliefs are passed down through generations, they are further complicated by the implication of family responsibility. As Pickering explains, “Memory invests imagination with social responsibility, which is observable in calls to ‘never forget’ or indictments of ‘never again’. It prevents us from wandering too far from our obligation to others who preceded us in time, and to those who exist alongside us in time.” (Pickering, 2013, p. 123) The concept of collective memory, and particularly how it is shaped by social narratives outside of direct intergenerational conversations, is a key variable in understanding why local food provisioning practices in communities of color have been ostracized.

At the policy level, these memories are structurally excluded due to a lack of representation in local government or the prioritization of profitable gentrification over effective reform. Within families

and communities, the collective cultural memory of food provisioning is tainted by broader social associations of agriculture with poverty, oppression, and ‘backwardness.’ Combined, these factors have rendered the history of self sufficiency and abundance largely ignored by modern understandings of food justice. This has formed the foundation for deficit narratives, namely the assumption that these neighborhoods and communities have always been hungry, and therefore require a reintroduction of food rather than structural reform. I suggest that these misinformed and decontextualized historical narratives are a principle cause of the ineffective food policy previously outlined.

### **Example: Urban Gardens**

The impact of the deficit model employed by urban development and food access policy is especially visible when concentrated in the context of community gardens. By more narrowly defining the scope of phenomena like gentrification and exclusion in the confines of a single garden, or even a network of them across a city, these dynamics can be identified and applied more broadly to food justice narratives. Whether they be in long-abandoned city lots or on the rooftops of high end new-build apartments, urban gardens are filling US cities. Urban food cultivation has been at the heart of black American communities since long before the rapid gentrification currently redrawing large swaths of urban land. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, New York City saw the establishment of community gardens specifically as a source of resistance, as detrimental local policy worked its way across low-income communities of color “through the withdrawal of public and social services and the bulldozing of infrastructure.” (Alkon et al., 2020, p. 245). This historical context necessarily frames urban gardens as a crucial iteration of perseverance and resistance in the face of intentional exclusion and harm.

Yet, a new era of community gardening has become emblematic of displacement and gentrification rather than the foundation of protection and resistance against such forces. Longstanding community members and urban activists have identified the physical “co-opting” of gardens, spurred on by assumptions that existing leadership and community-led structures are uninformed, inefficient, or harmful. Detached from its history as resistance, community gardens are

more easily morphed to fit the needs of modern city developers and high income white transplants; aesthetics, curb appeal, and profit. There are economic mechanisms that help explain the startling relationship between communal green space, land-use, and gentrification (Alkon et al., 2020, p. 93). However, this historical lens reveals patterns that can be more widely applied to other food access networks.

### **Oral History as a Solution**

This summer I assisted Dr. Yuki Kato with an oral history project funded by DC Humanities' Oral History Collaborative. In partnership with the DC Public Library, the collaborative offers opportunities for members of the DC community to engage with oral history to share and preserve perspectives on history that are often overlooked. Oral history is a particularly effective medium to explore Dr. Kato's research question regarding public perceptions of hunger in communities of color. In contrast to traditional interview-based social science research, oral history accepts and emphasizes personal subjectivity in memories. By focusing on the individuality of the narrator, oral history reveals not only historical events, but also how these experiences interact with social, cultural, and psychological factors. Since Kato's research aims to understand not only the local food and agricultural history of DC but also the memories and perceptions associated with it, oral history promises to be an effective research methodology.

In order to emphasize the familial dynamics of these memories, Kato's project employs youth in DC to interview their own family or community members about their experiences with food networks in the mid 20th century. During my work this summer, this decision posed logistical challenges for the project. While oral history is by design more freestyle than traditional interviews, its intentions are still guided by a research question. To design an authentic conversation between loved ones that remains relevant to specific sociological research was tricky to navigate, and required multiple iterations of "Interview Guides" which included guiding questions and prompts, while emphasizing that the youth interviewer maintained full control over the conversation.

Our efforts to organize and execute just a single interview required multiple weeks of coordination. The intergenerational style of the interview meant that multiple meetings were required to share initial details on the research project and its intentions, provide a general training for interviewers in oral history guidelines, and finally record the actual conversation. These logistical challenges provided unique experience for me as a research student, but also revealed questions about social research and interviewing that are more easily overlooked in traditional research strategies. Oral history, at its core, is intended to provide a more holistic and authentic environment for storytelling, incorporating external social factors and circumstances into otherwise pointed research. When I was first learning about what exactly oral history is, it appeared to be a more hands-off approach to social research that was less tainted by the strictness and implicit bias of academia. Through practice, however, I learned that such authenticity still requires intentional planning, training, and organization. These slower, almost bureaucratic aspects of social research are not necessarily drawbacks or obstacles, but opportunities to ensure that stories are accurately and fairly shared and documented.

Oral history should not replace the casual, personal storytelling that occurs within families, out of reach of historical documentation. These two practices are not interchangeable, and should not be treated as such. Instead, oral history provides a crucial middle ground between academia and reality, which allows for the preservation of often forgotten perspectives on modern history without tainting the subjectivity and privacy that stories benefit from within families and communities.

### **Jalen and Nathaniel Gant**

The final product of my research this summer with Dr. Kato was a contribution to a larger oral history project, funded by DC Humanities' Oral History Collaborative. Dr. Kato's project, *Local Food Provisioning in DC's Black and Immigrant Communities*, was designed in response to patterns across her work with urban food provisioning in post-Katrina New Orleans and Washington DC. Our first interview was between Jalen Gant and his uncle, Nathaniel Gant, residents of Wards 8 and 5 in DC proper. This interview not only acted as a trial run for the interview materials created throughout the summer, but also as the first installment of Dr. Kato's collection for the Oral History Collaborative.

After four weeks of preparation, which included training Jalen in oral history interview strategies, preparing prompt cards, and scheduling with both Jalen and Nathaniel, the interview took place at the Southwest DC Public Library. The build up to the interview itself—from identifying Jalen as a potential candidate through connections in the public gardening community, to recording the final interview—forced me to consider the core of our research question. With less control over where the conversation went, the intention and question couldn't be quite as narrow. I worked to reframe Dr. Kato's theory-based research question regarding food provisioning as a narrative: what memories would be associated with these sociological food networks? How would somebody's day-to-day life change in response to shifting food policy attitudes?

The final interview guide was organized into notecards with broader themes related to the research question, and more particular sensory and narrative questions and prompts related to each one. The themes began broad with the interviewee's personal background, and gradually focused on food provisioning, and changes in food access over time. Nathaniel Gant's story didn't exactly align with the narrative I had in mind as I crafted the interview questions. His childhood memories emphasized a sense of community in his neighborhood and his love of sports, but gardening only really came up in the context of his own grandmother. Nathaniel first described the generational divide in personal interests.

*Jalen:* Do you know, like, do you think people still garden at all in the city?

*Nathaniel:* Well ... they do more. But it's just in certain parts of the city.

*Jalen:* Why do you think that is?

*Nathaniel:* [...] Because the interests of growing up, and the knowledge of it. You know [...] we were more afraid of bugs than we was doing gardening.

*Yuki:* Uh, your grandmother had a garden.

*Nathaniel:* Yes

*Yuki:* Um, how did she know how to garden herself?

*Nathaniel:* Well, she's from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and they grew a lot of things down there. And, um, her father was, um, part farm owner. So, um, she knew how to slaughter pigs and milk cows and all of this. And by me being from the city, I can only hear about it.

Despite it varying from my expectations, these responses provided significant insight regarding the forgetting and remembering of food and farming practices. Nathaniel considers himself to be “from the city”, and therefore distanced from the southern farming practices of his grandmother. Just as in the aforementioned studies in collective memory, there was a generational shift between Nathaniel and his grandmother; a change in geography manifesting in a shift in identity, and therefore in food provisioning practice. My initial research on collective memory discussed the association between southern farming practices and oppression, and this impact on memory. Nathaniel did not directly reference this historical context in his interview, however the dynamics of this generational break in memory and skill transfer signal parallels to this phenomenon.

The secondary focus of Dr. Kato's project was on the importance of intergenerational conversation in order to pass down these skills and memories that otherwise fade out in response to passing time or environmental and social pressures. In continued discussion of his grandmother's farm, the potential for oral history to bridge gaps in generational memory and therefore preserve local food networks became clear.

*Yuki:* Do you know what happened to the garden that your grandmother was tending?”

*Nathaniel:* “Well, they [...] remodeled that territory ... But I feel if I had known more about gardening, it would have been worth fighting for.

[...]

*Nathaniel:* Yeah, I do look back and wish I had more knowledge of it, because that house that my grandmother used to live in, I probably could have taken more care of the garden, and probably someday or one day it wouldn't have been bulldozed down because I probably could have, you know, been taught more about it. And that would have become one of the most precious things in my life, you know.

Completing the first interview legitimized our theory that oral history as a research medium could provide uniquely holistic context to sociological questions regarding urban studies and food access. In the final portion of the interview, Jalen shares his desire to hear and learn more about his uncle's experiences with gardening: "I want to learn more about [your grandmother's garden] if you allow me to learn, if you want to talk about it later, then we can." This final exchange emphasizes the impact of this intergenerational format. The project itself—the recordings in a public archive—preserves the stories of Nathaniel and his grandmother, and their experiences growing up in a rapidly changing and gentrifying DC. However, the act of interviewing is also a form of preservation. Opportunities for official documented conversations emphasize the utility of storytelling in history, and the importance of individual experiences in understanding historical, political, and sociological topics in urban studies. For younger generations, the act of asking questions encourages and legitimizes curiosity in collective memory, which is necessary to effectively inform discourse and reform in these areas.

## **Conclusion**

When food insecurity is remembered as an inherent condition, or a historical constant, it becomes depoliticized, and therefore misunderstood in crucial policy discourse. Oral history has unique potential to combat these misconceptions because it encourages storytelling and intergenerational memory and skill transfer within the very communities that have been overlooked. Urban food provisioning has long been a form of cultural resilience and community solidarity in the face of structural oppression and exclusion. Forgetting this—or forcing others to abandon such histories due to societal shame surrounding agriculture and manual labor—decontextualizes many of the food security solutions in place today, rendering them culturally insensitive, irrelevant, and ineffective.

Urban gardens are a useful example when considering the potential for food policy to be harmful if it is not rooted in this rich history. The deficit narrative, which legitimizes the idea that the

hungry have always been hungry. As a result, urban green spaces are appropriated by the white and wealthy to cater to their own aesthetic and economic needs. Similar patterns are seen in the flawed food policy discussed at the beginning of this paper: nutrition education programs, for example, ignore and ostracize the existing food practices rather than address the structural causes of food scarcity. Oral history interviews, like the one conducted with Nathaniel Gant, not only allows us to learn from these communities' histories, but reiterates the importance and legitimacy of sharing them.

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