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## Right to (Feed) the Neighborhood: The scalar politics of the right to food in the Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood of New Orleans

*Abstract: Lefebvre's right to the city (RTTC) framework argues for a renewed politics of inhabitation in cities which enfranchises urban residents to imagine and create urban space to meet their needs. In this paper, I explore the theoretical foundations of the RTTC to consider what lessons it can offer for grassroots struggles to increase access to fresh food in the Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood of New Orleans. I argue that struggles for food sovereignty, or the right to determine and shape local food systems, constitute a specific form of claims on the right to the city, and that these claims play out at the scale of the neighborhood, rather than that of the city. I characterize specific, neighborhood-scale demands for food sovereignty as "political moments" (Becher, 2012), which, despite their locational and topical specificity, offer profound potential for broader urban social change.*

*Keywords: New Orleans, Right to the City, Political Moments, Food Sovereignty*

In August of 2005, a category 5 hurricane wrecked the coastal areas and towns of southern Louisiana and Mississippi, displacing more than a million people, causing at least 1,833 deaths, and incurring over \$108 billion (2005 USD) in damages (GNOCDC, 2012; Knabb et al 2005; NOAA, 2011). Despite the undeniable power of Hurricane Katrina as a natural disaster, many argue that the extraordinary loss of life and property could have been much less severe, particularly in the city of New Orleans; a dilapidating levee system (long known to be inadequate if confronted by a category 4 or larger storm), government inaction leading up to and immediately following the storm, and a desire to preserve the historic and profitable French Quarter exacerbated the damage and destruction of the poorest neighborhoods of New Orleans (Dyson, 2006). In the days and weeks following the storm, public news stations around the United States and world broadcast images of unmoored homes, whole neighborhoods drowning under ten or more feet of water, people stranded on rooftops with nothing to eat or drink, and the floating corpses of those who could not escape the surge of Lake Ponchartrain. That most of these images captured people of color unsettled the notion that Katrina was a "natural" disaster; on the contrary, the sheer visibility of the violence and death absorbed primarily by poor people of color following the storm has made Katrina a "touchstone for public debates about the relationship between class, race, capitalism, the state and environment in America" (Bakker, 2005: 795). Thus,

Katrina did not *cause* urban racial and class disparity; it merely capitalized on it and rendered it visible.

Now, seven years after the storm, it is useful to reflect on what Katrina has meant for the urban fabric of New Orleans. The years since Katrina have witnessed a demographic shift in the direction of whiteness and wealth, and an array of efforts to rebuild or reimagine the city, including efforts to address food insecurity among low-income residents. Many scholars and activists have remarked on the tendency of rebuilding efforts to privilege exogenous ideologies and the interests of capital while disregarding the substantive needs and desires of those residents who have returned home (Hartman and Squires, 2006; Luft, 2008; Klein, 2007; Dyson, 2006). Rather than reiterate their arguments, I pursue a different trajectory in this paper. Using the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood of New Orleans as a case study, I explore the applicability and transformative capacity of Henri Lefebvre's concept of *the right to the city* (RTTC) for addressing a specific grievance: a lack of fresh food access. I share stories and observations from a grassroots initiative led by residents of the Lower Ninth Ward to challenge both the systemic and particular circumstances that have circumscribed their access to fresh food. I situate their struggle within the RTTC framework to address the following question: *Where, if at all, are there indications that post-Katrina food access initiatives do or do not facilitate a 'right to the city' in which marginalized individuals and groups of color have renewed ability to access, participate in, and produce urban space?*

To contextualize this question, I begin with a theoretical engagement of Lefebvre's RTTC framework, and draw on insights from other efforts that apply the framework to actual struggles for social justice. I consider arguments that the RTTC concept is either too narrowly (Harvey, 2008: 38) or too broadly (Leontidou, 2010; Purcell, 2003; de Souza, 2012) applied, and focus on those elements of RTTC that are most salient to my investigation of a particular project in a particular city. I argue that RTTC has broad applicability "in the real world;" dwelling too long in the realm of theory, and bickering over what lies within the conceptual bounds of RTTC and what does not, subsumes energies that could be better utilized in support of the struggle. With that said, however, I am sympathetic to cautionary references to the "slippery slope" that may result from trivializing the Lefebvrian formula, leading to co-optation by the very interests from which *RTTC* demands power be wrested (Purcell, 2003; de Souza, 2012).

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief overview of Lefebvre's formulation on the RTTC, followed by more detailed examination of pertinent themes and interventions it invites. The second section presents an ethnographic portrait of post-Katrina New Orleans, the Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition (LNWFAC), and the latter's discursive and activist efforts to generate a community-controlled food system. The third section links themes from the RTTC framework to the rights claims of the LNWFAC, and demonstrates the transformative potential of what Becher (2012: 203) describes as "political moments": the "intentionally temporary, grassroots organizing around small-scale, specific claims." I conclude by linking RTTC discourses and possibilities with the same from food sovereignty to imagine an emancipatory vision for the city that starts from neighborhood efforts to radically incorporate the human needs for food and self-

determination, to challenge corporate domination of the food system, and to collaboratively create useable urban space.

### **Theorizing the Right to the City**

Henri Lefebvre's "right to the city" (RTTC) framework reframes the arena of decision-making in cities to enfranchise inhabitants to produce urban space that meets their own needs (Lefebvre 1996). Lefebvre presents the RTTC framework as a radical transformation of urban space which, he argues, "should modify, concretize, and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller (citadin) and user of multiple services..." (1996: 34). Among the "rights" to which urban dwellers are entitled are the rights to participation and appropriation. *Participation* implies that urban inhabitants, or "citadins" to use Lefebvre's term, should have central decision-making capacity in any action that contributes to the production of localized urban space. Lefebvre situates active participation at scales ranging from the body to the supranational, but the outcomes are, at least initially, localized within specific urban spheres. *Appropriation* articulates the right of citadins to "physically access, occupy, and use" urban space, and to produce urban space "so that it meets the needs of inhabitants" (Purcell, 2002: 103). For participation and appropriation to even be possible, Lefebvre argues, residents of a particular space have both the power and the responsibility to realize their roles as *inhabitants* within the urban system. Lefebvre characterizes *inhabitation* as more than just the physical and bodily occupation of space, so often suggested in contemporary notions of urban citizenship and private property. On the contrary, *inhabitation* implies an expectation to "take part in social life, a community, village or city" (Lefebvre, 1996: 76)—in short, to value urban space for and through its *use* (city as *oeuvre*). Prior to the dehumanizing effect of capital and its emphasis on *exchange* value (city as commodity), *inhabitation* was thus the central feature of urban life. The radical potential of asserting the RTTC lies in acts of appropriation of space by inhabitants, which "provides a direct challenge to the prioritization of exchange values that is pursued by neoliberal regimes of urban governance" (Butler, 2012: 145).

In a sense, then, the space of the city and the nature of urban citizenship are co-constitutive. David Harvey argues, "The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city" (Harvey, 2008: 23). Because enactment of the RTTC requires some degree of community engagement and a deepening of "the social" within cities, it is also a right to change the city by changing ourselves. Smith and McQuarrie (2012: 3) emphasize this potential by engaging the changing nature of urban citizenship, arguing that claims on the RTTC "mobilize people on the basis of propinquity and membership in a more legally ambiguous community than the nation-state." That is, vital urban citizenship and the distinctive civil societies it fosters may trump citizenship claims and identity formation at broader scales, generating a renewed "consciousness of the city and of urban reality" as dynamic spaces for political intervention (Lefebvre, 1996: 80). Inhabitants can, through claims on the right to the city, begin the work of changing the city by changing their perception of and relationship to it.

Such a characterization of the transformative potential of RTTC framing belies the structural constraints on disrupting the status quo within cities, where exchange value

supersedes use value to residents, and illuminates the need for radical repositioning of power within urban systems. Harvey (2008: 38) acknowledges that the true RTTC, as currently constituted is “restricted in most cases to a small political and economic elite who are in a position to shape cities more and more after their own desires.” That average citizens lack the capacity to determine the structure, safety, and resources that constitute their built environment energizes and animates the cry and the demand of the Right to the City: the cry publicizes and announces an inherent injustice; the subsequent demand articulates and enacts a collective alternative vision.

While we are given a sense of how a renewed and revitalized RTTC may enfranchise urban residents to work collaboratively in generating “city as *oeuvre*,” Lefebvre stops short of prescribing how such a transformation of power may actually occur. His primary interest, in *The Right to the City*, is to explore the historical processes that have contributed to contemporary urban formulations, and to suggest openings for challenging neoliberal capital’s violent affront on cities and the people who call them home. The indeterminate character of Lefebvre’s depiction of *how* the RTTC may actually transform urban space is, arguably, intentionally attentive to the scalar politics of urban inhabitation; struggles for the RTTC are inherently spatialized, and, as a result, there is no specific formula for universally enacting new forms of urban citizenship and claims on the RTTC. The particular circumstances characterizing specific struggles determine how the fundamental vision of the RTTC is made manifest. Such flexibility has practical appeal, and the central message of RTTC—that citizens, rather than corporations or the state, should have ultimate decision-making power in issues that directly affect them—has earned considerable cache amongst urban activists and scholars. Much discourse and activism that explicitly utilizes a RTTC framework does so in an effort to support grassroots efforts to enact systemic, structural, or specific changes. While some of this work engages deeply and critically with Lefebvre’s original framing, most of it, Purcell (2002: 103) argues, does not:

Few in or out of academia have offered a detailed exposition of just what the right to the city would entail, and they had not developed what benefits or detriments it might have for the enfranchisement of urban residents...We lack a comprehensive explanation of what the right to the city is or how it would challenge, compliment, or replace current rights. And we are left without a good sense of how the right to the city might address the specific enfranchisement problems associated with neoliberalism.

Purcell’s critique actually aligns with a cautious perspective increasingly demonstrated by academic and activist advocates for a new RTTC, which acknowledge the danger of cooptation by the very institutions RTTC seeks to *disenfranchise*. In a report on efforts to reclaim the RTTC in Rio de Janeiro (particularly pertinent in light of upcoming global sporting events scheduled to take place there in coming years, and the historic tendency of the Olympics and World Cup to purge urban space of low-income dwellers), Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2012) comments on the risks associated with misusing the language of the RTTC, thereby opening it up for use by those seeking “specific material gains.” He and others (c.f. Leontidou, 2010) remark on the “slogonization” of the RTTC, evident in the “increasing

number of politically weak usages of this expression—which has been gradually converted into a vague slogan that is used for the convenience of interests as diverse as those of emancipatory social movements, leftist intellectuals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and even government institutions and international organizations” (de Souza, 2012: np).

Cognizant of those critiques, I argue that there is a practical possibility of enacting a *version* of Lefebvre’s vision of the RTTC at the sub-city or neighborhood scale. Even at the scale of the city (particularly in the case of larger cities), governance outside the realm of state control is virtually inconceivable within capitalist systems. For example, RTTC advocates argue that any agenda aiming to reduce poverty and increase equity within cities must acknowledge “the locationally specific impediments to the realization of rights, and the multi-scalar nature of the state’s actions that are necessary for the full realization of human rights” (Parnell and Pieterse 2010, p. 146). Such a perspective imbues the state with the capacity to determine and to enforce rights, thereby contradicting the very spirit of urban citizenship and claims on the RTTC; even when this process endeavors to be cognizant of locational specificities and multiple scales, it is not clear that state-generated rights will always (or ever) ensure the emancipation of socially marginalized individuals. As Don Mitchell (1997; 2003) has pointed out, for example, advocating for a universal and democratic RTTC becomes especially tenuous in the case of individuals who are systematically denied not only rights but also recognition as legitimate inhabitants of a particular space. For individuals lacking adequate access to nutritious food (from grocery stores, markets, or gardens), laws prohibiting the growing and harvesting of food in public parks and gardens may constitute a similar infringement on the right to the city. On the other hand, the transformation of public space by marginalized urban inhabitants of that space—enacting claims on the right to the city—may represent a democratization of the very processes by which cities take shape (Carrasco 2010), and thus a profound reorganization of existing social relations.

Systematic social reorganization does not rely on the participation by all residents of a particular city, and, in fact, that requirement would be untenable in most cases. While urban movements for the RTTC may “acknowledge and reinforce the city as a primary place of politics” (Samara, 2012: 45), they must simultaneously acknowledge and support the transformative potential of community- or neighborhood-based movements. While city-scale rights claims offer a public image of substantive change, organizations like the U.S.-based Right to the City Alliance (RTTCA) support movements which “operate only in part of the city; all are neighborhood- and community-based, not city-based” (Samara, 2012: 45). Because the neighborhood, not the city, is the “scale of everyday life” (Samara 2012: 45), it makes sense for rights claims to be made within that scale, but the “scaling down” of rights claims does not suggest those rights are provincial or ends unto themselves. As Nicholls and Vermeulen (2012) argue, the RTTC should be reconceived as “rights *through* city;” the space of the city provides a political site for claiming rights that can then extend to larger scales. Referring to gay rights activism in the city of San Francisco, Nicholls and Vermeulen (2012: 81) point out, “the aim was not to gain rights to this one city and stop the struggle at the city gate, but to build on the relational and political advances made in this city to sustain the broader goal of gay rights in the country.” Rights claims made at the scale of the

neighborhood may also serve to “catalyze rights mobilizations” at the scale of the city and beyond, which is one reason neighborhood- and community-scale initiatives should be taken seriously for their transformative potential to generate a new “trickle-up” urban social politics.

As Purcell (2002) explains, the “nested scales” within which citizens operate complicate and often contradict their ability to affect changes to urban space and/or policy. Participation at the scale of the city is tightly linked to processes playing out at state, national, and supranational scales, which in most cases fall outside the purview of individual or groups of citizens, and may counter localized progress or efforts toward systemic change. Mitchell (1997: 304) highlights the ways in which processes of globalization signal “the end of space” by “effectively masking the degree to which capital must be located” and permitting decision-makers at all scales “to argue that they have no choice but to prostrate themselves to the god Capital.”

While community-scale interventions may not interrupt the “annihilation of space” by globalized capital, they do offer “political moments” which can secure durable changes with the potential to “trickle up” spatial scales. Becher (2012: 203) defines political moments as “intentionally temporary, grassroots organizing around small-scale, specific claims.” Political moments are important, Becher argues, because they can secure durable changes for previously or historically disenfranchised urban residents, giving them “enduring control over their parts of the city in ways that other forms of politics may not make possible” (2012: 203). Political moments have three distinctive outcomes for engaged urban inhabitants, which arguably generate a new, neighborhood-scale RTTC: (1) They may mobilize people who don’t consider themselves to be especially political; (2) They can develop inhabitants’ personal commitments and abilities to access political power; and (3) they can change the function, purpose, or interest of local institutions to better meet residents’ needs.

In the sections that follow, I offer a portrait of a community-scale initiative in the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood of New Orleans as an example of a political moment that has transformative potential for claims on the right to the city. To situate the work of the Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition (LNWFAC), I introduce the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood and the city of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and position LNWFAC’s demand for fresh food access within broader demands for food sovereignty and the right to the city.

## **Right to the (post-disaster) City: Food justice activism in post-Katrina New Orleans**

### *Situating New Orleans as a post-disaster city*

In the seven years since the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-constructed levee system failed to hold back the surge of Lake Pontchartrain into the city of New Orleans, the disproportionate destruction Hurricane Katrina caused in low-income predominantly non-white neighborhoods has been well documented (Dyson 2006; Pastor et al. 2006; Bullard and Wright 2009; Braunn and McCarthy 2005; Hartman and Squires, 2006). In Orleans parish, flooding or damage displaced an estimated 272,000 African-American residents,

accounting for 73% of the population affected by the storm in that parish (Gabe et al. 2005). Because majority-African American neighborhoods suffered the most severe housing damage, black residents returned to the city at a much slower pace than did white residents, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and other demographic factors (Fussell et al, 2009). An influx of mostly-white, mostly-educated, mostly-middle-income “rebuilders,” combined with a slower rate of return for African Americans, has made New Orleans whiter and wealthier than ever before (Luft 2008; Mildenberg 2011)

Prior to the storm, structural inequalities contributed to a higher vulnerability among the African American population in New Orleans (Bullard and Wright 2009). As Bakker (2005: 797) observes, the “uneven geography of Katrina’s devastation has roots in the uneven geography of New Orleans...The American South’s segregated past is still visible in the spatial and social geography of cities such as New Orleans, where housing for black, working-class communities is located in the least desirable areas, with limited employment, social services and amenities.” Lewis (2003:51) describes the racial patterning of the city as “less malevolent” than the strict segregation that characterized northern cities during the middle decades of the twentieth century, but notes that “the poorest blacks simply lived where they could,” typically “along the battures or the backswamps.” These were areas situated close to poorly constructed artificial levees and lacking adequate flood protection. Even as the city continued to grow, and wealthier African Americans moved “up” (quite literally, to higher ground), poor blacks continued to live in increasingly isolated low-lying areas, cut off from decent housing and educational and economic opportunities (Dyson, 2006: 7). While all urban landscapes are social products (Lefebvre 1991), in the case of New Orleans—an unlikely city constructed on what Pierce Lewis (2003:20) has described as an “evil site”—the ubiquitous acts of racial exclusion and unequal access to resources “led to a [localized] concomitance of poverty and vulnerability” (Ballard-Rosa 2010: 179). By the time Katrina struck, nearly all the city’s extreme poverty neighborhoods were predominantly black; these racially- and economically-segregated areas bore the brunt of the disaster (Fussell et al 2009).

It was into this milieu that well-meaning people flocked to the city from throughout the nation and world in the months and years following Hurricane Katrina, to help it rebuild and recover. They were driven variously by anger at a broken system, a religious or humanitarian commitment to offer support to those in greatest need, a desire to participate in the salvation of a distinctive and important American city, or any number of other reasons—many good, and some less so (c.f. Klein, 2007). These individuals, families, churches and community groups joined existing non-profit organizations or founded their own, recruited volunteers to assist in the rebuilding of homes and schools, helped to clean up debris, and advocated on behalf of those who had lost their homes or worse in the wake of the storm. Many of them remain in New Orleans, now seven years later, and have no intention of leaving the city anytime soon; many intend to or already call it home.

The economic and social impact of this migration is still unfolding. In 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau identified New Orleans as the fastest growing large city in the country between April 1, 2010 and July 1, 2011 (US Census Bureau 2012). The Greater New Orleans Community Data Center examined postal service data from that same period to determine that 66 of New Orleans’ 72 neighborhoods have experienced population gains since 2010;

heavily flooded neighborhoods have grown the fastest, as both new and returning residents occupy rehabilitated homes and properties receiving multi-family tax credits (Plyer 2011). While many pre-Katrina residents did return home in the months and years following the storm, the rate of return correlates closely with race and class; within three months of the catastrophic flooding, fully one half of white residents had returned to the city; fourteen months after the storm, less than one half of residents of color had come home (Fussell et al, 2010). Fussell and colleagues' study of Displaced New Orleans Residents identified housing damage as the major factor slowing or preventing the return of displaced residents, but fail to account for the steady flow of non-residents into the most devastated neighborhoods. As McClure (2006: np) reflected just months following the storm, when she visited the city to aid in the rebuilding effort, "How did it come to be that we are able to travel to and around New Orleans, while many survivors still can't go home?" McClure's musing points to the often awkward and uncomfortable reality acknowledged by many well-meaning people who have contributed to the rebuilding effort. Bierra et al add, "Unfortunately, white progressive and radical Left volunteers that have come to 'rebuild' in the name of altruism and charity also contribute to the changing demographics of the city" (2006: 39). Utilizing terminology that might make "white progressive and radical Left volunteers" bristle, Luft (2008) points to the accelerated risks of gentrification in a disaster zone with a limited housing stock, where "the occupation and purchase of limited space [and] the whitening of culture" are counter-productive to genuine rebuilding.

#### *Situating food justice activism in post-Katrina New Orleans*

Among the many efforts and initiatives to emerge and expand in the years since Katrina have been projects and programs that endeavor to increase access to nutritious food among low-income communities. In 2009, New Orleans ranked among the ten most food-insecure cities in the United States (Food Research and Action Center 2010). Immediately following the storm, there were literally no stores open, and no places from which to obtain fresh food. People did what they could to get by. The New Orleans Food and Farm Network, a local food justice organization, quickly drew up maps of the city, indicating where people could find any kind of food—any restaurants or corner stores that had reopened were included in their map. Backyard and community gardens, too, emerged as viable and necessary sources of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Since 2005, however, the pace of food-related activism and alternative food project development in the city has accelerated and broadened considerably. From new food cooperatives, food banks and farmers markets to community gardens and other forms of urban agriculture, alternative modes of food production and distribution within the city have mobilized different strategies for addressing a perceived lack of access to affordable, nutritious food for all residents. New Orleans' legacy as a "food city" has contributed to its renaissance among well-known hometown chefs and their clamoring clientele of residents and visitors who seek locally and sustainably sourced, high-quality fare. These expectations of and demands for quality have transformed the agricultural awareness of many wealthy and even middle-class people in New Orleans and elsewhere, and have facilitated the emergence of new modes of food provisioning for both residents and visitors; while residents seek out farmers markets and organic food cooperatives in greater numbers—and

frequent the shiny and bourgeois Whole Foods in the Uptown neighborhood—visitors may make reservations months in advance at Antoine’s or Commander’s Palace, where the menus feature humble-sounding regional fare, like Cotelettes d’agneau grillées for a mere \$43.75. Very few people would argue that initiatives such as these, which increase the purchasing of craft, artisanal, and locally-sourced food products among wealthy people, constitute “food justice” or a renewed “right to the city” for people who struggle to feed themselves and their families. While a number of initiatives have emerged with aims explicitly oriented towards social justice and food sovereignty, many of these efforts have been spearheaded or funded by external groups or the newly-arrived. One initiative, however, stands out for being intentionally and democratically envisioned and controlled by residents of the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood.

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

The Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood (consisting of Holy Cross and the Lower Ninth Ward) had a pre-Katrina population 19,515 (US Census, 2000). Mostly black and working class, 60% of neighborhood residents owned their own homes, and most had been in their families for generations. Prior to the storm, the neighborhood contained a diversity of locally-owned businesses: barber and beauty shops, corner stores, eateries, day care centers, public schools, and 72 churches. Historically, the neighborhood contained numerous truck farms, and backyard gardening was common in the decades before Katrina.

The near-total destruction of the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and subsequent investment and charitable efforts by big name celebrities like Brad Pitt, pushed the neighborhood into international purview. The levees protecting the Lower Ninth Ward breached in two places, sending a surge of water that lifted homes from their foundations and tossed cars about like playthings. The floodwaters reached twenty feet in lowest lying parts of the neighborhood, and in some cases did not recede for over a month. The devastation of this part of the city is hard to overemphasize. 100% of the neighborhood was flooded, and even those residents whose homes were marginally habitable were not allowed to return until nearly two months after the storm. Return to the neighborhood has been slow and appears to have stagnated; the 2010 census counted 5,556 residents, just 28% of pre-Katrina levels (GNOCDC, 2012).

The Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition (LNWFAC) formed in the spring of 2012, as project of the Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development (CSED). LNWFAC is a collective of residents of the Lower Ninth Ward who are frustrated by the slow pace of recovery, and especially their neighborhood’s lack of a grocery store or other option for accessing fresh food. Jenga Mwendu, CSED Food Security Coordinator, organizer with the LNWFAC, and second-generation resident of the Lower Ninth Ward, described the importance of food access for her community:

“Food security remains a vital element of any sustainable community—and in fact is a return to the traditions of urban farming and independent living rooted in the Lower Ninth Ward...The Lower Ninth Ward is considered a ‘food desert’ by the USDA. There is no grocery store. The stores that do sell food items offer a limited variety of junk food, processed foods, and prepared foods. Since Hurricane Katrina, the community has struggled with redevelopment and one of the core issues has been

lack of food options. Businesses are hesitant to open in an economically depressed neighborhood with drastically decreased population...Our vision is to have the Lower Ninth Ward speak as one voice on what we want for food access in our neighborhood. As a community, we must define what it is that we want, whether it be a grocery store, an urban farm, or better food policy, and take the steps to attain it"

Enacting this vision has required steady and deliberate work, and significant community participation. Decisions have been made via consensus over the course of eight monthly meetings, each with a specific purpose and plan. As food security coordinator, Jenga moderated the meetings, but all neighborhood residents were encouraged to contribute ideas and thoughts throughout the planning process. Over the course of eight meetings, the group accomplished the following tasks, according to the framework laid out at the first meeting: (1) defined a healthy food system as "a community-controlled environment that is planned strategically by the community, where we have the food we want and need, and where the market is sustained by educating the vendors and consumers, involving the youth, creating jobs, and respecting our culture"; (2) assessed the food access needs of the community, by surveying existing options and juxtaposing them with what they desired for their community; (3) explored, through research and conversation, what other communities have done to solve their food access problems; (4) reviewed existing plans for the City of New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward to determine how LNWFAC actions could align with those; (5) examined how racism has shaped the current food access situation, by organizing a two day "Dismantling Racism in the Food System" workshop; (6) articulated a vision statement ("The Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition envisions a strong and proud Lower Ninth Ward community where access to fresh, quality food is convenient and affordable") and mission statement ("Our mission is to increase access to fresh, quality, convenient and affordable food in the Lower Ninth Ward through researching, soliciting, and supporting projects that will meet the food needs and quality standards of the Lower Ninth Ward community"; (7) worked to understand and articulate the obstacles that have constrained food access; (8) collaboratively determined what the community wants and needs in terms of food access; (9) brainstormed actionable solutions to food access problems; (10) produced a detailed food action plan, which incorporates immediate actions, short-, intermediate- and long-term plans to reach agreed-upon goals. The group has worked in collaboration with the City of New Orleans and other area nonprofits to secure funding for projects at each time-scale, and hosted a popular and successful "Grocery Store for a Day" event in the neighborhood to draw public attention to their food access struggle (Harden 2012).

### **The Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition and the Right to the Neighborhood**

Lefebvre's characterization of the RTTC—as a radical entitlement of urban inhabitants to produce space to meet their own needs—provides a productive theoretical base from which to launch an investigation of urban food sovereignty discourse and action, because such activism often operates on the premise that the ability to access, consume, and even produce culturally-appropriate nutritious food is a basic right contained within what Nik Heynen has referred to as the "geography of survival" (Heynen 2010). According to Heynen,

the geography of survival comprises both the “spaces of social reproduction essential to human survival” by the very poor, as well as the spaces in which grassroots activism engages corporeal concerns of sustenance and inhabitation. I argue that themes and rights claims central to the RTTC framework also characterize discourses and ideologies contained within movements for food sovereignty, which argue that individuals and communities should have the power to access and create a food system that meets their basic nutritional and cultural needs. Furthermore, I argue that the spatially-specific nature of demands for food access among low-income inhabitants—which constrain urban space to walkable scales—may more appropriately be considered claims on the right to the neighborhood. Such claims are examples of “political moments” because of their topical and temporal specificity, but they also signal towards broader struggles for justice and equality, and may contribute to rights claims at the scale of the city and beyond.

A central theme of Lefebvre’s characterization of the RTTC is that of inhabitation, the notion that urban residents do not just occupy physical space, but rather are socially and personally involved in the creation and use of that space. Members of the LNWFAC meet Lefebvre’s criteria as urban inhabitants; they reflect on historic legacies of segregation and oppression that have contributed to multi-generational citizenship claims within the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood, and identify themselves collectively as “a strong and proud Lower Ninth Ward community.” As inhabitants concerned with the use value of their neighborhood, LNWFAC members join other LNW residents in opposing efforts to commodify their neighborhood in the wake of the destructions caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. “Disaster tourism” is a lucrative business in the LNW, with around thirty companies offering bus tours of the “devastation that displaced hundreds of thousands of residents” (BigEasyTours.com). Big Easy Tours charges \$50 per person for its “Hurricane Katrina—America’s Worst Catastrophe—Bus Tour,” which travels through the Lower Ninth Ward and other devastated neighborhoods. Residents of the Lower Ninth Ward have resisted these efforts to cash in on their misery and cast their neighborhood as spectacle; as one resident told a reporter for the Associated Press, “We’re fed up and tired of them coming through the neighborhood like we’re some sideshow. After all the suffering we have been through, we deserve more respect than this.” (Telegraph, Oct. 5, 2012).

Rather than permitting their neighborhood to be characterized as a “Jungleland” (Rich 2012) or capitalized upon by exogenous greed, Lower Ninth Ward residents and members of the LNWFAC consistently work to publicly proclaim that their neighborhood is worth saving and worth celebrating. Responding to March 2012 article in the *New York Times Magazine* that characterized the Lower Ninth Ward as a “jungleland,” LNWFAC member and Food Security Coordinator Jenga Mwendo (2012) countered with pride and determination:

“Contrary to the article, residents of this community are not reconciled to life in the wilderness and we don’t live in an untamed mess of overgrowth or in a forgotten wasteland. We are not resigned to anything; we are fighting to revive our community... [W]hile writing about broken people, vacant lots and weeds may be sexy journalism, the community needs the outside world to understand how implicit and unconscious bias caused by a history of racism pummeled us.”

Mwendo's comments, and those of other Lower Ninth Ward residents who prioritize their neighborhood affiliation and situate their rights claims within the space of the neighborhood, demonstrate the scalar politics of claims on the right to the city. Food access is not a citywide problem in New Orleans; like other disinvested communities throughout the United States, "food deserts" cluster in low-income communities and tend not to characterize entire cities. Wealthier parts of New Orleans (where most residents own personal vehicles anyway) have seen remarkable rebuilding and have consistent and convenient access to fresh foods within easy walking distance. The mobilization of Lower Ninth Ward residents who lack sufficient access to fresh food was thus inherently *neighborhood*-based. Smith and McQuarrie's (2012: 3) argument that claims on the RTTC "mobilize people on the basis of propinquity and membership in a more legally ambiguous community than the nation-state" rings especially true at the scale of the neighborhood, which is the scale of everyday life, and the scale at which LNWFAC members feel capable of demanding and enacting changes to their lived urban landscape. Thus, citizenship claims by LNWFAC members also occur at the neighborhood scales. At meetings of the LNWFAC, residents introduced themselves as "born and bred in the Lower Ninth Ward" or "second [or third, or fourth] generation resident of the Lower Ninth Ward." By proclaiming the primacy of their role as Lower Ninth Ward residents to "decide what we want for our community," the LNWFAC exhibits radical urban inhabitation through claims on the right to their neighborhood.

In conclusion, the indeterminacy of Lefebvre's characterization of how the RTTC might be enacted suggests the need for articulations that are spatially and contextually specific. The LNWFAC's focused demand for food that is "fresh, quality, convenient and affordable," and their collaborative effort to transform the limited food options available in their community, constitute a legitimate claim of the right to transform the urban space in which they live. Their efforts are an example of the transformative potential of a "political moment" (Becher, 2012) which enacts substantive change through (1) mobilizing people who don't consider themselves to be especially political; (2) develop inhabitants' personal commitments and abilities to access power; (3) can change the function, purpose, or interest of local institutions to better meet residents' needs. Members of the LNWFAC mobilized around a specific goal that they recognized as situated within a broader struggle for economic and racial justice. Their collaborative visioning and activism demonstrate the potential of neighborhood-scale political moments to spark participation and appropriation among historically marginalized groups. Because food access represents an urgent individual and collective need, localized struggles for food sovereignty open up productive spaces from which to launch broader campaigns claiming the right to the city; the LNWFAC's grassroots structure and neighborhood-scale organizing offer instructive examples of what the beginning of a renewed right to the city might look like.

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