

Angier, The Last Frontier:
Representation and Gentrification in the Alternative Food Movement
Giszell Dymond Weather, Class of 2017
Department of Anthropology
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Abstract

The Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm is located in predominantly Black East Durham, yet, Black residents that live in the neighborhood rarely participate in activities at the site. East Durham is also on the brink of major socioeconomic shifts; public and private developers are reinvesting in the neighborhood, planning the constructions of breweries and pizza shops that attract White middle class culture. This poses key problems for the sustainability of the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm and its ability to fulfill the present food and gardening needs of the community. The Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm is a unique space to question certain patterns that exist in the alternative food movement. Why is there a lack of participation among Black people in the alternative food movement? What are the assumptions that explain why Black people are resistant to agricultural work? Why do urban farms and community gardens tend to be White spaces? What is the role of urban farms and community gardens in accelerating the process of gentrification? Based on 7 months of participant observation, interviews, and food systems research, I theorize the relationship between urban farming and gentrification. I argue that equitable and representative community food projects must actively incorporate the cultures and histories of Black East Durham residents if they are to truly function as a sustainable source of fresh, culturally relevant, affordable food.

Keywords: Food Justice, Gentrification, Urban Farming, Alternative Food Movement

Introduction

Downtown Durham is a buffer between East Durham and West Durham. East Durham houses the Department of Human services, the Durham County Criminal District Court, Food and Nutrition Services, Public Housing, and North Carolina Central University. West Durham is home to a host of coffee shops, eateries, and most notably, Duke University. East Durham is heavily populated with used tire shops, mini-marts, tobacco stores, barbershops, ethnic grocery stores, and abandoned community food markets. West Durham features a voluminous spread of grocery stores, like Harris Teeter, Whole Foods Market, and the Durham Coop Market. At the imaginary gates of East Durham, Black men stroll the sidewalks and lounge around bus stops. In West Durham, Duke graduate students cruise in the bike lanes and walk their dogs along the periphery of the Duke Wall.

The contrast between East Durham and West points to a larger trend—the social and economic disparity between predominantly White neighborhoods and predominantly Black neighborhoods. While predominantly White, relatively affluent neighborhoods have abundant access to food sources and the purchasing power to make use of them, predominantly Black neighborhoods have limited access to nutrient dense, culturally relevant, and low cost food. The conditions in East Durham are consistent with the definition of a food desert, an area that lacks consistent and reasonably close access to healthy, affordable foods (Phillips and Wharton, 2016: 75). This is not coincidental, but rather a reflection of a long history of racism and divestment in minority communities. This trend has had severe implications for food security, the ability to procure culturally acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways, in predominantly Black neighborhoods (Phillips and Wharton, 2016: 75).

The Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm is a half-acre urban-mini farm and community garden in North East Central Durham. Founded in 2012, its premise is community supported agriculture that is “capable of selling and distributing vegetables to garden members throughout the community” (*Bountiful Backyards*). When I arrived at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm in August of 2016, it seemed more like a forest than community supported agriculture. Aang, a recent addition to the farm’s labor force, invited me to participate in Angier’s Saturday workday. I had just moved to Durham a couple weeks prior and was looking to navigate the network of food projects. The weeds at Angier were five feet tall; I couldn’t see where one plot ended and the other began. The city of Durham threatened the farm with citations as the brush continued to violate its bounds. Sweet potatoes, molasses, arugula, and carrots were hidden beneath the chaos. The farm suffered from long periods of neglect. After several workdays, I noticed that not many people in the immediate neighborhood came to the farm. Not many people came at all for that matter. Only two of the five recurrent volunteers lived in the neighborhood. I also noticed that these two volunteers were White, despite the farm being located in a predominantly Black neighborhood. The word of the season in East Durham is *gentrification*, so I found it especially problematic that few Black residents living in the neighborhood volunteered at the farm. Housing renovations, street improvements, pizzerias, and microbreweries are becoming neighborhood features that attract White middle class culture; there’s a real fear of displacement of minority, low-income residents and that the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm may be a factor in that process.

Research Questions

The Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm is located in predominantly Black East Durham, yet during my 7 months as a workday volunteer, the only other frequent volunteers were two white residents and three black non-residents. Black residents that lived in the neighborhood rarely

participated. Furthermore, East Durham is on the brink of major socioeconomic shifts. Public and private developers are reinvesting in the neighborhood, planning the constructions of breweries and pizza shops that have the potential to fuel the displacement of low income and minority residents. This poses key problems for the sustainability of the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm and its ability to fulfill the present food and gardening needs of the community. The Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm is a unique space to question certain patterns that exist in the alternative food movement. Why is there a lack of participation of Black people in the alternative food movement? What are the assumptions that explain why Black people are resistant to agricultural work? Why do urban farms and community gardens tend to be White spaces? Finally, what is the role of urban farms and community gardens in accelerating the process of gentrification?

In this thesis, I seek answers to these questions. Based on 7 months of participant observation, interviews, and food systems research, I theorize the relationship between urban farming and gentrification. I argue that equitable and representative community food projects must actively incorporate the cultures and histories of Black residents in the neighborhood if they are to truly function as a sustainable source of fresh, culturally relevant, affordable food.

Methods

I used participant observation, personal journal entries, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews to conduct this research. From August to December of 2016, I attended Saturday workdays at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm. During workdays, I got to know five of the most frequent volunteers. As we scrapped grass, raked plots, and harvested vegetables, we had informal conversations about our motivations for working at the farm and imagined what the future of the space would look like. I used our informal conversations as a

starting point to ask questions about the farm and the neighborhood. During workdays, I took field notes, observing physical details of the farm, activities, and conversations. After establishing rapport with the five most frequent volunteers, I solicited their participation in a semi-structured interview. I used an interview protocol designed to elicit responses regarding their relationship to the neighborhood, their participation at Angier, their thoughts on farming, their thoughts on gentrification, and how they thought urban agriculture affects the Black community. All semi-structured interviews were recorded with a tape recorder, transcribed, and analyzed for patterns and emerging themes. In addition, I spoke with four residents that lived around the farm but who were not regular participants. I listened to their account of the farm and reasons why they weren't involved. I went on several self-guided tours of the neighborhood, observing demographic changes, talking to local business owners, and generating written descriptions of the landscape. To round out this work, I consulted sources from the downtown Durham County Library to learn more about the local history of the neighborhood.

Literature Review

Several scholars address food insecurity and representation of people of color in the alternative food movement, creating a foundation to extend the discourse. According to Food Systems and Community Development Scholars Rhonda Phillips and Christopher Wharton, food insecurity disproportionately affects minority populations (Phillips and Wharton, 2016: 73). A number of other food systems scholars write profusely on the topic (Allen, 2013; Broad, 2016; Bowens, 2015; McCutcheon, 2011). Despite numerous scholarly publications on the connection between minorities and food insecurity, addressing the problem is a challenge. Phillips and Wharton outline some of the challenges with addressing food insecurity in low income and minority communities. First, food producers may not have the logistical capacity to deliver food

in these areas. Second, retailers can't stock large volumes of food in convenience stores that populate urban food deserts. Regardless of these technical challenges, Phillips and Wharton assert that local food producers are strategically positioned to meet the needs of local communities (Phillips and Wharton, 2016: 77).

Though local food production is seen as a potential solution to food insecurity in low income and minority communities, there are other challenges that must be considered. Local food production is imbedded within the larger context of the alternative food movement, which champions local, environmentally sustainable, healthy, and socially inclusive growing practices (Lyson, 2014). Despite its benefits, the alternative food movement is not representative of people of color. Rather, white cultural practices and discourses dominate the alternative food movement. Sociologists Alison Alkon and Christie McCullen (2010), analyze the white-centered discourses and practices of the alternative food movement. Alkon and McCullen introduce the concept of the "community imaginary", the idea that community is defined to draw in whites and push out people of color (Alkon and McCullen, 2010: 947). They cite the clustering of white bodies in the farmers' market, where the valorization of white vendors and farmers compounded by high prices, reinforce whiteness (Alkon and McCullen, 2010: 940). For Alkon and McCullen, the "community imaginary" works to exclude people of color from the alternative food movement and overlooks the structural barriers that prevent low income people of color from participating. Furthermore, sociologist Yuki Kato (2013) investigates a popular phenomenon in the alternative food movement—white-led community food projects that target low income and minority communities. Projects like these attempt to educate low-income and minority communities about healthy eating and sustainable food practices, yet they fail to garner the wants, needs, cultures, and histories of the communities they wish to serve. Kato's study reveals

the differing perspectives between predominantly White staff members leading the urban agriculture operation and the predominantly Black residents of the neighborhood in which the operation is located. While White staff members reflect on their noble effort to serve as a source of fresh produce, Black residents feel that the operation is a space for White people that fails to represent the culture and history of the neighborhood. Julie Guthman (2008), a prominent researcher of alternative food movements, echoes the findings in Yuki Kato's study. Guthman asserts that White-led community food projects often target low-income and minority communities. She argues that these projects fail to incorporate the wants, needs, cultures, and histories of the communities they wish to serve, resulting in widespread skepticism and lack of engagement among people of color.

In this thesis, I argue that it is crucial to incorporate the history, cultural practices, and individual narratives of the neighborhood to effectively reap the environmental, economic, and social benefits that the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm offers. I utilize qualitative methods to gain a holistic understanding of the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm, its participants, and residents of the neighborhood. My thesis offers reflections on the legacy of agriculture in the Black community, the gentrifying force of urban farms and community gardens, and perspectives on how we can make the alternative food movement more representative of people of color.

Structure of the Thesis

In the food justice film *Can You Dig This*, Spicey, one of the protagonist's in the film, plainly expresses that growing food is "really some White people stuff". His blunt assertion reflects the general sentiment that the alternative food movement is dominated by White culture. At first listen, Spicey's claim may be taken as a discouraging truth, that people of color have been excluded from ownership over community food projects and generally have no desire to

participate. However, I interpret Spicey's claim as a call to action, a call to garner the African American perspective in community food projects. Chapter 1 of this thesis discusses the legacy of food cultivation in the Black community, highlighting the role of the Black farm in meeting local food needs and serving as the foundation of socioeconomic mobility. I use the family histories of the participants at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm to challenge the notion that Black people are resistant to agricultural work largely due to the legacy of slavery and the Jim Crow era. This chapter extends the scholarly discourse on the alternative food movement, as I actively garner the local histories of participants at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood farm and residents of the surrounding neighborhood. In this chapter, I further the claim that it is critical to understand the cultures and histories of the neighborhood to increase the level of engagement among people of color in community food projects.

In Chapter 2, I address the issue of representation of people of color in the alternative food movement with particular reference to gentrification. As cited in the literature, the alternative food movement is largely dominated by White culture. There is concern among participants that the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm may attract more White bodies into the space, thus accelerating the process of gentrification in East Durham. Though participants and residents in the neighborhood express a legitimate concern regarding the displacement of low-income and minority residents, I argue that the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm may serve as a community stronghold. Given the social and economic benefits of community supported food projects, Angier has the potential to serve as a nutritious, culturally relevant, local food source and gathering space for residents in the community. Again, to accomplish this, it is critical to incorporate the local histories and cultures of the residents of the community in order to create a sense of belonging at the farm. Without the careful and sincere consultation of community

residents, the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm may miss the opportunity to properly align itself with the needs of the neighborhood, and consequently, accelerate the displacement of its residents.

I conclude this thesis by asserting that growing food is not “some white people stuff”. Rather, Black Americans have a rich history in agriculture. Community food projects like the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm fulfill an important niche in providing a dependable source of nutritious, culturally relevant produce all while strengthening the social networks in predominantly Black communities. The Angier Avenue Neighborhood farm is the last frontier in East Durham. Employing a strategic and intentional effort to incorporate the historical and cultural narratives of neighborhood residents at the farm may sustain the racial demographic of the neighborhood and reinvigorate the deep connection between farming and people of color. Based on my ethnographic research at the farm, I argue that it is crucial to incorporate the local history and culture of the neighborhood to reap the health, social, and environmental benefits of urban farming and to promote true equity in the alternative food movement.

Chapter 1

The Legacy of Farming in the Black Community

To understand the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm as it is now, it is worth situating in a broader history of farming in Black communities. Throughout the 20th century, the United States government and White society more generally, took actions against the Black community to erode the foundation afforded by farming and land ownership. After emancipation, Black citizens remained in a state of servitude under the sharecropping and tenant farming model. Sharecropping required Blacks to give portions of their harvest or sales to White landowners, while tenant farming required Black tenants to pay White landowners for use of the land (Reynolds, 2012: 16). Privately negotiated contracts between landowners and Blacks kept freedmen in a state of peasant proprietorship, undermining efforts to support Black viability through agriculture and shared land. Even so, Black farmers arrived at landownership through working relationships with White planters. This window of opportunity enabled Black farmers to secure land and by 1910 over 200,000 Blacks bought the land they farmed. The year 1920 was the peak of Black land ownership; 50% of all blacks lived on farms and cultivated over 16 million acres of land (Williams and Ficara, 2006: xiii).

As Black farmers presented the very real prospect of attaining social and economic equality through land ownership, institutional racism limited the socioeconomic mobility of Black farmers. White landholders and government officials created legislation, like the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), to diminish the ability of Blacks to access services, like land purchase incentives and farm acreage expansions. Established as a piece of New Deal legislation, the Agricultural Adjustment Act increased White land ownership by 35 million acres between 1930 and 1935. Meanwhile, nonwhite farmland decreased by 2.2 million acres during

the same period, manifesting as a decade of foreclosures of Black owned farms (Reynolds, 2012: 17).

Racism combined with a shift to industrial agriculture especially devastated Black farmers. Toward the middle of the 20th century, the small scale farming model that predominated American agriculture found itself running up against big agribusiness, as corporate farms began to dominate food production through government subsidies and sourcing from international markets (Williams and Ficara, 2006: xii). This strategy annihilated small farmers, and more largely, took the food system out of the hands of those most affected by it. All farmers suffered economically, however, Black farmers were forced to back of the line for government assistance. From 1985 to 1994 Black farmers averaged only \$10,188 in yearly subsidies; less than a third of the average amount given to White farmers (Williams and Ficara, 2006: xiii). This vast disparity in government assistance highlights the discrimination that continues to saturate institutions, contributing to the steady erosion of Black farmers and divestment in the Black community more generally. Between 1910 and 1970, 6.5 million Blacks left the south seeking relief from political, social, and economic oppression, resulting in the large scale abandonment of the farming tradition (Gilbert, 2015: 4). The wealth and opportunity cultivated through land ownership was gradually replaced by an urban lifestyle. Massive amounts of land were lost due to foreclosure and abandonment, resulting in a 96% decline in Black land ownership overall (Gilbert, 2015: 7). By the year 1984, Blacks were officially declared a “landless people” (*A Legacy of Land Ownership*, 1999: 9:08).

At first glance, this phenomenon may seem insignificant, but a sober analysis of the matter reveals negative implications for food security in Black communities. After emancipation, farmland was the foundation of the Black community. From the farm, Blacks fed

their families, started banks, and built solid social networks (Williams and Ficara, 2006: xi). Historically, Black farmers have worked collaboratively to fulfill the food needs of rural communities, contribute to the local food movement, and cater to individuals in dire need of food security, particularly in Black neighborhoods (Wright, 2013: 50). The erosion of black farmers has had adverse effects on food security and representation of people of color in the alternative food movement.

Shattering the Slave Narrative

As I have demonstrated earlier in this chapter, agriculture occupies a special place in Black history. During the 20th century, Black land ownership and farming served as the core of Black wealth in America. However, the legacy of land ownership and food cultivation is overshadowed by a legacy of hardship and land loss. Two volunteers at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm share their reflections regarding this legacy.

I'd like to introduce Sozin, an experienced permaculturist and co-founder of the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm. Sozin is a White male in his late thirties and lives within walking distance of the farm. A self-proclaimed radical anarchist, Sozin feels strongly about the power of local food cultivation in disrupting Western Imperialism. During Saturday workdays, he would enthusiastically share his vision for Angier as a tool to empower the community and undermine the industrial food system. However, Sozin, like many other volunteers, recognized that there are not many Black residents in the neighborhood that participate. During our semi-structured interview, Sozin theorizes on why this may be the case. He says:

There's a stigma in the predominantly Black community about not wanting to do agricultural work because of all the negative legacies of sharecropping and slavery...when

I've talked to young people, there's very much a thing of,
'oh, I'm trying to escape that.'

Then there's Aang, an amateur permaculturalist and volunteer at Angier. Aang is a Black male in his late twenties and lives in the Western part of Durham. Since October 2014, Aang has driven across town to the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm to support the Saturday workdays. He's very passionate about sustainable agriculture and critiques the lack of representation of people of color in farming. Like Sozin, Aang suggests that the legacy of slavery and sharecropping explains why Black people are not involved at the farm. During our interview, Aang expresses, "With Black people, a lot of people talking that slave talk. 'My people already been out there in the field, so I don't have to be in the field.' You get ignorant talk like that. Sozin and Aang suggest that the legacy of slavery and sharecropping explain why Black people are not as likely to be engaged in agricultural work. The assumption that Black people are not inclined to farm work due to slavery and sharecropping is popular, yet problematic. This narrative abstracts the legacy of land ownership and farming in the Black community; a legacy of memory and pride; a legacy beyond slavery and sharecropping. Iro and Zukko, two founding members of the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm, trouble this assumption. They shatter slavery and sharecropping as the dominant narrative that is associated with Blacks and agricultural work.

Iro is Black male in his mid-thirties. Though he does not live in the neighborhood, he has been a part of Angier since its early phases. As part of the founding team, Iro works alongside Sozin to strategize a path forward for the urban farm. A California native, Iro does not put too much pressure on "success". However, he does strongly advocate that the people's experience be placed at the forefront of this social venture. Iro's personal experiences and family history are

important when considering the role of agriculture in the Black community. His past and present realities disrupt the assumption that slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow are sources of tension between young Black people and agricultural work.

Iro's relationship to farming extends back at least two generations. His grandmother was a farmer who grew alfalfa in Nevada. "She always raised rabbits," he says, "was always killing a chicken or something like that so we could eat it. It was a cool farm." His grandfather also taught him a great deal about the natural world. "He taught me how to put seeds in the ground, encouraged me to plant herbs and things like that." Iro's mother continues the farm legacy in northern California; she grows a small garden and raises livestock from time to time. His grandparents and his mother set the tone for his love and appreciation for agriculture.

By the time Iro became a young adult, he was fully primed for the farm life. After leaving his mother's farm, he lived on a farm for over ten years before moving to Durham. He reflects on that time in his life:

I had a small shack by the river... We used to heat
it with kerosene in the nights. We would always play
music as loud as we want, people shooting in the back,
fishing, back roads, no posted speed limits. It was
awesome.

Iro's life on the farm symbolizes self-sufficiency and freedom. From his grandmother slaughtering chickens and rabbits, to his mother's small garden bursting with zucchini bread during the summers, Iro's family used farming to ensure their nourishment and independence. Iro inherited the agricultural torch on his shack by the river. He sang and celebrated alongside his comrades whenever he felt compelled. There were no neighbors telling him to turn down his

music, nor were there authorities to dish out speeding tickets during his late night joy rides. The self-sufficiency and freedom that the farm life provided for Iro is the same sense of freedom that Black farmers and land owners enjoyed during the 20th century, before racism swept the land from underneath their feet.

The saga continues with Zukko, a Black male in his early twenties and an East Durham native. He is a founding member of the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm. Even though he lives close to the farm, he doesn't attend workdays very often. However, Zukko, like Iro, has a rich family history in farming that serves as a counter-narrative to slavery and sharecropping. Zukko's relationship to farming and land ownership extends back at least two generations in East Durham, right around the corner from the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm.

Zukko's grandfather was born and raised in East Durham. A key neighborhood figure and local entrepreneur, his grandfather, Paul "PC" Bellamy, taught Zukko to be "resourceful". Zukko proudly states, "I know resourcefulness and how to save and hold on and build, knowing how to do it myself." In addition to modeling resourcefulness, Zukko explains that his "granddaddy was so skilled with his hands." He was a carpenter, a landscaper, and a gardener. He kept a small garden in his backyard and exposed Zukko and Zukko's father to the practice of farming. He recalls, "Sometime my granddaddy took [my father] out to the farms and they would shovel horse shit together. My grandpa took my daddy under his wing." Zukko's reflection on his family history demonstrates how farming served as a tool for relationship building and knowledge transmission; Zukko's granddaddy used the farm as a platform for teaching his kin.

As I mentioned earlier, Zukko's grandfather had a small garden in the backyard of his home where Zukko's father did the majority of the gardening. Zukko explains, "The gardening my daddy did. My grandpa didn't do the gardening... They never had to pay for food. That's a good thing too." Zukko reflects on how the garden at his grandfather's home served as a source of provision for his family. This resonates with the sense of self-sufficiency created by the farm life for Iro's family and the Black community as a whole during the early 20th century. Zukko's recollection of his family's history with farming and growing food demonstrates how the farm served as a foundation to develop his community. The skills of food cultivation fed Zukko's immediate family and the community, not to mention it provided a source of supplemental income for the household. Zukko states,

I come from that type of stuff. We had gardens,
squash... We sold our own vegetables to the people
in the community. They didn't have any money so
we sold it cheap. It's just how we lived.

Zukko demonstrates the entrepreneurship that stems from growing food. Zukko's family knew the market they were serving. These people were friends, family members, and neighbors. Zukko also proudly asserts that he "comes from that type of stuff," suggesting that he knows and takes great pride in his family's relationship with farming and growing food. Zukko suggests that he is no stranger to farming and local food. His family used food cultivation to directly fulfill the food needs to the community, as did many Black farmers.

Zukko's family history demonstrates that Black residents in the neighborhood know about the farm life; they know about growing food for the community. Too often, food justice advocates and leaders of community food projects overlook the cultural connection that

volunteers and community members have with the neighborhood, food, and farming. This creates a culturally skewed food movement that is not representative of and meaningful for the Black community.

We Come From This Stuff

There is an assumption that people of color want to distance themselves from agricultural work due to the legacy of slavery and sharecropping. Iro and Zukko demonstrate otherwise. They both discuss the farm as a means of self-sufficiency. They discuss how the generations before them grew vegetables to feed their families, and even communities. Both Zukko and Iro are proud of their family's history with farming and express how much they have learned as a result of that experience. Iro's grandfather taught him to plant. Zukko's grandfather taught him what it means to be resourceful. Zukko proudly states, "I come from that type of stuff," demonstrating that farming and growing food is something to be embraced, all while refining a skill that benefits family and unites entire communities. To use Zukko's words, all Black Americans, and humans for that matter, "come from that type of stuff." But, as long as the Black community is not encouraged to reflect on the legacy of farming and land ownership, valuable life skills will evaporate from the cultural and historical narrative. The field of anthropology is strategically positioned to place humans at the center of community food projects; to encourage individuals to dig more deeply into their own cultural memory to (re)develop an appreciation for living off the land. This is the starting point to rewrite the dominant cultural narrative and increase representation of people of color in the alternative food movement.

The Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm must reflect the interests of the residents that live in the community. Otherwise, it won't effectively accomplish its goal of serving as a source of locally grown, culturally relevant produce and engaging residents in the practice of growing

food. I argue that community food leaders should encourage residents of the neighborhood to search for the meaning of growing food from within their own cultural memory bank. The more engaged residents are, the more Angier will be fulfilling its function as community supported agriculture. This is critical, given that the neighborhood is undergoing rapid demographic transitions. Giant cranes, condos, luxury apartments, and parking garages map the skyline of downtown Durham. East Durham is feeling the forces of gentrification, as White middle class families and young professionals settle into the scene. With the popular assumption that urban farming and community gardening is “some white people stuff”, some volunteers at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm fear that the farm may accelerate the displacement of current residents. In the next Chapter, I explore gentrification in East Durham and the implications for the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm.

Chapter 2

Feel the Force: Gentrification and Urban Farming

In Chapter 1, I described the legacy of agriculture in the Black community. I discussed how some participants at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm are continuing the legacy, despite the popular assumption that people of color have developed an aversion to agriculture. I demonstrated the importance of conversing with participants at the farm and residents of the community to recover the historical and cultural connection that people of color have with the land. In Chapter 2, I discuss the relationship between community food projects and gentrification. Some participants at the farm are concerned that Angier is a gentrifying force, reflecting the larger phenomenon of “eco-conscious” spaces that appeal to the White middle class. Indeed, it is important to consider Angier’s role in facilitating demographic transitions. However, as I show ethnographically, the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm may strengthen the existing community, rather than aiding its displacement. I use Durham’s local history to understand the process of gentrification. Insight from my interlocutors provides a ground-level perspective of gentrification in the neighborhood and Angier’s role in the process. Drawing on my ethnographic engagements, I make the claim that community food projects do not necessarily magnify the villainous effects of gentrification. Rather, I argue that the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm may strengthen the community through relationship building and serve as a potential source of fresh, culturally relevant produce for residents in the neighborhood.

Old Money, New Neighbors

The Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm stands humbly on the corner of Angier Avenue and Maple Street in East Durham. The farm is not the most attractive place in the neighborhood. The weeds, scattered litter, degraded birdhouses, and faded signs add a post-apocalyptic feel to

the space. Part of the dejected landscape is due to the lack of sufficient labor force. On the other hand, weeds and abandoned bird houses are actually quite intentional. I asked Sozin, co-founder of the farm who we met in Chapter 1, how he thought the work being done at Angier impacts the community. He went on to describe Angier as a place for skill building, growing food, and learning about other possibilities within the eco conscious realm. He went on to describe some of the challenges he sees with fulfilling this vision. He shares, “I think we need to make the place a lot more attractive...but I think we’ve also been conscious of not making it look too nice.” Why is it that there is a conscious effort to keep the farm in state of discord? Shouldn’t the leaders of the farm strive to make the space more aesthetically pleasing to invite in residents, rather than deter them from it? I listened to Sozin as he explained, “We’ve always been conscious of...not wanting to be a contributor to raising property values...there’s a lot of articles out there about how community gardens can really accelerate the process of gentrification.”

Contrary to the old money and prestige that characterizes West Durham, East Durham is known for its high volume of racial minorities. The neighborhood is predominantly Black. Fayetteville Street, the main drag in East Durham, is decorated with barbershops, mini marts, and the skeletons of community food markets. Images of divestment coexist alongside houses undergoing renovation. The intersection of Angier Avenue and Driver Street, two blocks away from the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm, foreshadows the economic and demographic changes coming to neighborhood. Newly renovated homes and mid-sized utility vehicles have settled in. There’s even talk of a pizzeria and brewery opening at the intersection. The planned development of the neighborhood invites in a new demographic, a pattern reflected across all cities in the United States. Low-income and minority communities are being (re)claimed by the White middle class, spurring a fear of displacement (Freeman, 2011). As downtown Durham

constructs condominiums, luxury apartment homes, and retail spaces for the new arrivals of college graduates, start-up entrepreneurs, and young professionals, those whose livelihoods and histories are imbedded within the city are at risk of urban removal at the expense of urban renewal.

To better understand the relationship between community food projects and gentrification, first, it's necessary to consider the popular understanding of the term *gentrification*. In *There Goes the Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up*, Lance Freeman, Assistant Professor at Columbia University writes, “[gentrification] is a process that benefits the haves to the detriment of the have-nots. It is a continuation of the history of marginalized groups being oppressed by the more powerful. And always, gentrification leads to the displacement of poor marginalized groups” (Freeman, 2011: 59). In his case study of gentrification in predominantly Black neighborhoods in New York City, he goes on to describe gentrification as a socioeconomic process. It's a force that increases property values and “brings to mind yuppies and the upscale specialty shops that serve them” (Freeman, 2011: 62). Scholar Melissa Checker (2011) at the City University of New York takes the understanding of gentrification a step further, relating gentrification to discourses on the environment and sustainability. She coins the term *environmental gentrification*, stating, “Environmental gentrification operates through a discourse of sustainability which simultaneously describes a vision of ecologically and socially responsible urban planning, a “green” lifestyle which appeals to affluent, eco-conscious residents” (Checker, 2011: 212). The Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm is one of these ‘eco conscious’ space that attracts affluence and amenities. In Checker's words, it's environmental gentrification that appropriates the environmental justice movement to serve “high-end redevelopment that displaces low income residents” (Checker, 2011: 212). Both

Freeman and Checker discuss gentrification as a process reflecting development, reinvestments, and an upward shift in socioeconomic class.

Black neighborhoods in urban areas have a nationally recognized reputation for “crime, danger, and unpredictability” (Freeman, 2011: 82). This is coupled with a history of divestment that manifests in the form of depressed housing prices, limited access to pharmacies, few grocery stores, and many other resource deficiencies (Broad, 2016; Bruggman, 2009; Anderson, 2011; Freeman, 2011; Checker, 2011). Similar to many predominantly Black neighborhoods located in urban centers, East Durham has a history of divestment. Historian Jean Bradley Anderson (2011) synthesizes a compelling history of East Durham in *Durham County: A History of Durham County, North Carolina*.

What is now commonly called ‘East Durham’ was once ‘Hayti’. Anderson writes, “The first documented use of the name Hayti in Durham is found in a deed of 1877 in which a lot was sold ‘near the town of Durham in the settlement of colored people near the South East end of the Corporation of said town known as Hayti’” (Anderson, 2011: 132). Angier Avenue, where the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm is located, is named after Malbourne Angier, a prominent figure in local politics and prominent landowner in the Hayti district during the 19th century (Open Durham, 2011). The Hayti district became known as an “expression of black culture and vitality”, bustling with black owned businesses and bursting in the arts (Anderson, 2011: 343). Despite its significance among Blacks in Durham, it was badly run down and became the target of urban renewal during the last half of the 20th century. With financial assistance from the local and federal government, Anderson writes that “Durham’s planning director, Paul Brooks requested students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Department of City and Regional Planning to do a study...they responded with a plan for a 200-acre blighted area of

Hayti that could be renovated for \$600,000” (Anderson, 2011: 342). Many other Black neighborhoods in Hayti were targets of urban renewal and subject to demolition at the command of the city (Anderson, 2011: 343). Throughout the process, the city took the homes of Black residents and relocated them to subsidized housing in the southeastern part of the city with the intention of creating a Black ghetto (Anderson, 2011: 345). The destruction of the Hayti district, construction of Highway 147, and relocation of Blacks in the latter half of the 20th century disrupted the sense of place, rootedness, power, and unity in the Black community which is seen and felt by Bull City Natives and newcomers. Anderson writes, “years later, the land that had bustled with life was still a wasteland overgrown with weeds” (Anderson, 2011: 345). This is reflected in Angier’s landscapes as well as the surrounding neighborhood.

Anderson’s historical account of urban renewal shapes the perceptions of gentrification in East Durham. Zukko, lifelong resident of East Durham who we met in Chapter 1, offers his reflections on the state of the neighborhood and his family’s history within it. He describes his childhood memories growing up at his grandfather’s house on Young Street, just a few blocks away from Angier. His grandfather, PC Bellamy, owned his home for over forty years. During our interview, I asked Zukko if the house was still around. He explained that after his Grandfather died the home was torn down by the city:

They tore it down the first chance they got. Then they gentrified it...I grew up on that street for like fifteen years.

All my childhood memories on that street. I would love to go back and be able to buy a house on that street. But by the time I’m ready for it man, it’s going to be too high for me to afford...So now all my childhood memories in my area, my home,

are somebody else's.

This quote highlights Zukko's understanding of gentrification as a phenomenon that displaces people, erases memories, and increases property values; this points to the biggest fear of black residents in gentrifying neighborhoods—displacement (Freeman, 2011).

Iro, who we also met in Chapter 1, is well aware of this trend, noting, "Buildings are taller in downtown Durham. Downtown is more crowded, a lot less vacant houses in the East Durham area. Everything was vacant... a lot of like five empty houses in row type of thing. Whole blocks were kind of run down." This reflects back to Anderson's account of neighborhood's history of divestment, where urban renewal largely meant the destruction of Black neighborhood throughout the Hayti district. Now that the ground in East Durham has been leveled by the city, it's primed a phase of demographic and economic shifts within the neighborhood. As Sozin states:

The gentrification that's occurring in East Durham is definitely changing things and driving the price of houses up and forcing people out of the neighborhood... What you're starting to see in East Durham is suburban people are moving in and house prices are going up... on the main drag there on Angier and Driver, there's a brewery going in, fancy pizza place, and some other stuff that's basically white, white culture

Instead of investing capital and resources in the neighborhood for existing residents, developers are creating an infrastructure that attracts White suburbia. The question then becomes, how does

the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm factor into the gentrification of the neighborhood? Is it another space that aids the displacement of current residents and invites white culture? Or is the farm a catalyst for strengthening community and increasing food security?

Gentrifarming

The Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm occupies a unique space in East Durham. It sits atop a hot plot of land, neglected by its residents, coveted by developers. Sokka is a Black male in his mid-thirties and a resident in the neighborhood. He was a part of Angier's volunteer force in the past, but his participation has since faded given the demands of his work and personal life. As a community impact director for the United Way and a neighborhood resident, Sokka offers a critical perspective on gentrification in the neighborhood and Angier's place in it. During our interview, I asked Sokka what he thought the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm represented. In his response, he attested to Angier as a representation of "independence and freedom", as a subtle protest to the rapid development and increasing property values. Sokka declares:

A space like that in East Durham, an urban, low income neighborhood, it's also prime real estate. It could easily be a 300, 400-thousand-dollar house built on it, but it's not. There's houses going up, getting renovated and built all over that community and I'm positive somebody wants that space.

Angier still stands in the midst of development, weeds and all, bursting with potential to serve and unite the community. But as I have shown earlier in this work, the alternative food movement is dominated by white culture and discourse (Lyson, Guthman, McAllen, Alkon, Kato). Urban farms, community gardens, and other 'eco-conscious' practices reflect the white cultural imaginary, failing to incorporate communities of color into the alternative food

movement. This pattern is reflected in Angier's leadership, where the co-founder and primary leader, Sozin, is a White male.

Before exploring the leadership structure of the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm, it is important to consider its relationship to a small eco-conscious company called Bountiful Backyards. Bountiful Backyards is an edible landscaping company based in Durham (Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm, 2011). They have been in business for over 10 years working with, "beginning and experienced gardeners to create beautiful, diverse and delicious edible landscapes at the residential, neighborhood, and community scale" (*Bountiful Backyards*). Members of the Bountiful Backyards Cooperative attempted to expand their outreach efforts through the creation of "an abundant and beautiful community farm that is self-sufficient and not dependent on grants or other subsidy" (Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm, 2011). The project also aimed to "promote summer programs for local teens to gain work experience, environmental education, and hands on gardening skills" (Stirrup, 2013). To realize this vision, Bountiful Backyards initiated a kickstarter funding campaign, spanning from December 2011 to January 2012. During the campaign, Bountiful Backyards members asserted, "we have in place solid community relationships, the necessary skills, and a strong base of interest and support. We are not grant funded; we are people funded" (Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm, 2011). Using community and food justice rhetoric, Bountiful Backyards acquired over \$11,000 in grass roots funding in less than 52 days to purchase the empty half-acre lot and begin their expansion of a community supported agriculture program. Hence, the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm is an extension of the Bountiful Backyards Cooperative. All of the members of the cooperative are white; two of the current members are co-founders of Bountiful Backyards and residents of East Durham; one of these members is Sozin.

I have posited Angier's leadership structure based on Angier's relationship to Bountiful Backyards, participant observation during workdays, and the level of participation among five of Angier's core volunteers. I organize the leadership at the farm into five tiers. At the top is Sozin, a white male in his late thirties. He moved to Durham about 10 years ago and currently lives within walking distance of the farm. Sozin is a permaculturalist with an incredible knowledge of plants and tons of experience growing food. As mentioned before, Sozin is the co-founder of Bountiful Backyards Cooperative and the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm. He rarely misses a workday and gives directions regarding the farm's weekly tasks. Below Sozin is Iro. Iro is a Black male in his mid-thirties that does not live in the neighborhood, but has been a part of Angier since its inception. His love for food and appreciation for growing it bring him to the space. He offers honest and constructive feedback regarding Angier's mission and vision, but doesn't seem to be involved in more administrative decision making. Below Iro is Aang. Aang is a Black male in his early twenties and Angier's newest volunteer addition. He does not live in the neighborhood, but has shown an impressive commitment to attending Saturday workdays. Though he labors intensely on the farm, he recognizes that he is not directly involved in making decisions about Angier's future. He follows Sozin's vision and direction. Next, there's Sokka. Sokka is a Black male in his mid-thirties that lives in the neighborhood. He comes and goes when he has time, but respects Angier's aspirations as a community food project. At the lowest level of engagement is Zukko a Black male in his early twenties, and the only East Durham native that has participated somewhat regularly since Angier's birth in 2012. Though he has lived in the neighborhood the longest, I did not see Zukko at any of the Saturday workdays during my seven months of fieldwork at the farm.

Based on this leadership structure, the Black residents that volunteer at the Angier Avenue

Neighborhood Farm are the least engaged in the space. Sozin, a white male, is most engaged with the space and has the most decision making power over Angier's present and future goals. This poses problems for Angier's ability to serve the needs of community members. Melissa Checker's environmental gentrification describes the phenomenon of 'eco-conscious' projects attracting white, middle class culture into low income and minority neighborhoods. Given the structure of Angier's leadership and volunteer participation, the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm attracts white residents and nonresidents to the neighborhood. This fosters a culturally exclusive environment that does not appeal to Black residents in the neighborhood. At first glance, it seems that Angier is another factor contributing to gentrification. The farm, and the alternative food movement more generally, is viewed as something for white people.

Gentrification is not an inevitable consequence of locating an urban farm in a Black neighborhood. There are countless examples of community gardens and urban farms in inner cities led and frequented by people of color. One example is the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, which builds food security through urban agriculture, policy development, and cooperative buying. They focus specifically on food security in the Black community and work to "build up African American leaders to improve the local food system and government policies" (Phillips and Wharton, 2016: 203). There's also Community Services Unlimited (CSU) in South Los Angeles, originally founded as an arm of the Black Panther Party. The mission of CSU is to "use food as a vehicle to advance broader projects related to social justice, economic empowerment, and urban sustainability using local food organizing to combat legacies of discrimination and inequity in their own communities" (Broad, 2016: 53). Finally, there's Growing Power, Inc. a Milwaukee based community food project co-founded by Will Allen, an African American male credited as the founder of urban agriculture in the United States.

Growing Power, Inc. strengthens the fabric of minority and low-income communities through the “production, marketing, and distribution of food on a community level” (Allen and Wilson, 2013: 145). These people-of-color led community food projects match food cultivation and distribution to the needs of the community, a key feature of the success and sustainability of their operation. What is common to each of these projects is their focus on engaging people of color through the community’s local history and culture. I argue that this is critical to effectively engage people of color in the alternative food movement. Dr. Garrett M. Broad, Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Media Studies of Fordham University and author of the book, *More Than Just Food: Food Justice and Community Change*, offers a set of criteria for successful food justice organizing. It must:

- Be driven by local storytelling about food and justice
- Be characterized by a theory of change that situates local food system struggles within broader legacies and visions of social justice activism
- Cultivate networked partnerships that provide programmatic sustainability and fiscal sustainability
- Exhibit a willingness and capacity to develop community-focused action into large scale cultural and political transformation

(Broad, 2016: 26)

The first criterion, “Be Driven by local storytelling about food and justice”, is a critical first step to engage residents that live close to the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm. As I demonstrate in Chapter 1, Zukko has a long family history growing food within the neighborhood. The food grown by his father and grandfather’s hands fed Zukko’s family and his neighbors. However,

Zukko admits that he very rarely reflects on this legacy and his relationship to food cultivation.

During our interview, Zukko cheerfully states:

I'm glad you asked me about them. I come from that type of stuff. We had gardens, and squash and all that shit.

We sold our own vegetables to people in the community...

They did favors for us and we did favors for them.

Zukko's father and grandfather exposed him to the practice of gardening, using it to model resourcefulness and effective community engagement. In prompting Zukko to reflect on his relationship to food and farming, I was asking him to share a piece of his story. He searched for the meaning of farming from within his own cultural narrative, generating a sense of nostalgia and pride in his family's role in contributing to the wellbeing of the community. Prompting residents of the neighborhood to explore their personal connection to land, food, and farming puts them at the center of food justice practice and discourse. Sokka, who we met earlier, strongly emphasizes how important people are in successful community projects. His story working for Durham Parks and Recreation highlights this:

I got a job working for the city of Durham in parks and recreation...

They ended up putting me in what they call 'neighborhood centers'

which are essentially one or two room facilities with no amenities

whatsoever...I realized pretty early that kids would come, adults would

come, seniors would come to the space because of the relationship

they had with me and my staff...Putting the emphasis on that allowed

us to be successful...it also allowed me to start understand the importance

of relationships and if you're looking to engage and meet the needs of

communities, that you need to focus on the relationships that you have in them...You certainly could have ran a neighborhood center without that community engagement focus, but it would have been a shitty community center.

I assert that the same logic holds true at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm. As a community food project, the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm must put the people in the neighborhood at the center of the space. As Sokka suggests, the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm could survive without concentrating its efforts on relationship building with neighborhood residents. It's functioned in that way for 7 years and has managed to make it through the seasons. However, time and time again the space has suffered from lack of participation and general neglect leading to an accumulation of weeds, litter, faded signs, and vacant birdhouses. Angier's programmatic vitality and ability to serve current residents of the community depends on how much time and energy the current leadership invests in building relationships in the community. Iro echoes this as he elaborates on the strategies that have worked well for Angier in the past:

The most effective tactic thus far has been the people who live near the neighborhood just participating...There's been sort of a regular occurring potluck, there's been community gardening days around...We've been able to think creatively and use a community situation to give people who are obviously the youth of that neighborhood a stake in the community.

Efforts like these have fallen short in Angier's most recent activities. There are several reasons for this including lack of time among participants, lack of resources, leadership deficiencies, and

an unclear vision for the future. These factors are further complicated by the shifting social and economic demographics of East Durham. As Karen Schmelzkopf, Associate Professor of History and Anthropology at Monmouth University claims, one or two residents may take the initiative to start a garden, but more than a number is needed to transform it. She states, “the success of most community gardens requires the combined effort of residential gardeners” (Schmelzkopf, 1995: 372). The maintenance at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm depends on an organized, collective effort among current residents of the neighborhood to make the project sustainable, meaningful, and culturally relevant.

Is Urban Farming Alarming?

Based on my ethnographic study of the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm, I conclude that it is not gentrification itself that poses a problem, as it attracts more capital and services to Black neighborhoods. It is the fear of displacement so often associated with gentrification that makes residents in minority communities cringe. As Sozin mentions, he’s very conscious of not wanting the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm to contribute to the displacement of residents. White people often spearhead and participating community gardens, farmers market, urban farms, and other eco-conscious projects. While this pattern holds true at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm, it is not inherent to all community food projects in Black neighborhoods.

Community food projects are unique; they have the power to cultivate a shared vision of physical and environmental health among residents. Malik Yakini, founder of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, asserts that people of color “should defend the right to define what is best for [their] communities based on [their] understanding of the historical factors that have created [their] circumstances and on [their] own lived experience” (Broad, 2016: 55). Leadership at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm is aware of its potential to facilitate a

shared community vision. However, it's critical that they build relationships with current residents, to incorporate their cultural connections into Angier's vision, to avoid moving alongside the tides of gentrification and displacement.

Conclusion

In the introduction of this thesis, I highlighted notable socioeconomic differences between East Durham and West Durham. While East Durham features the relics of divestment—abandoned houses, vacant lots, and mini marts—West Durham features abundant foodscapes—Whole Foods, the Durham Coop, and community gardens—that appeal to eco-conscious, relatively affluent families and young professionals. The differences in race, class, and culture in East Durham and West Durham are stark and pose challenges for a more representative and equitable alternative food movement.

I outlined popular discourses in the alternative food movement: food insecurity in low income and minority communities, white cultural discourses and practices within the alternative food movement, and the lack of people of color in spaces that champion local food production. These patterns are not coincidental, but rather, reflect a long history of racism in land ownership, agriculture, and the United States food system.

Chapter 1 of this thesis discussed the historical and cultural significance of farming and land ownership in the Black community. This legacy fulfilled the food needs of the Black community and served as the foundation of socioeconomic mobility and political representation. However, the fear of Black equity led to the creation the racist public policy, reinforced by Jim Crow laws in the South. This accelerated the decline of Black farmers and has produced a situation where few people of color are involved in the alternative food movement. In Chapter 1, I disrupted the assumption that Black people are resistant to agricultural work. I relied on my interlocutors at the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm to shatter this dominant narrative. I delved into the local culture and family histories of Iro and Zukko, two Black volunteers at Angier, to bring out the cultural relevance of food cultivation in the Black community.

Chapter 2 of this thesis described the historical trends of gentrification in East Durham and addressed the concern that the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm may be a gentrifying force. I highlighted the national wave of ‘eco consciousness’ that has spurred a new phenomenon— environmental gentrification— where parks, community gardens, and other ‘green’ spaces aid the displacement of low income and minority residents. Based on Angier’s present leadership structure, I explained how this white-led community food project poses challenges for the farm’s ability to create a culturally inclusive space that serves the neighborhood. I concluded this chapter by asserting that the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm must prioritize relationship building with residents in order to ensure their longevity in the neighborhood and to create a food cultivation experience that resonates with the Black community.

Urban farming is a promising solution to food insecurity in predominantly Black urban areas. It has the potential to serve as a source of fresh, nutrient dense, culturally relevant, affordable, and locally grown produce within the community. There are countless examples of people-of-color led community food projects that are effectively addressing food insecurity in low income and minority communities (Community Services Unlimited, Detroit Food Security Network, Growing Power Inc.) Similarly, the Angier Avenue Neighborhood Farm is strategically positioned to fulfill the food needs of the Black community in East Durham. The land is fertile, the volunteers are hardworking and knowledgeable, and the farm is accessible to residents in the neighborhood. However, it is absolutely critical for Angier’s leadership to prioritize relationship building with neighbors in the community. This is the most important first step in creating an urban farming experience that is representative of the Black community.

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