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Intersections of Regenerative Agriculture and Food Justice: A Journey

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Abstract: This paper explores research and transformative community organizing done in North Minneapolis, MN. The North Minneapolis community is working to transform their local food system through a bottom-up, community-based, community-led multi-layer organizing plan. As part of my research I supported the community in exploring what their vision was and what plan would need to be built to make that vision a possibility. Regenerative agriculture was key to this.

Keywords: North Minneapolis, Food Systems Transformation, Local Food, Sustainability Education, Journey

Note: This article was taken from my doctoral dissertation project at Prescott College. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015 (3705933).

Cirien Saadeh is a freelance journalist and community organizer as well as a student in Prescott College's Sustainability Education program in Arizona. As a Ph.D. student Saadeh researches "journalism of color" and is developing a community-based journalism curriculum for low-income communities of color, as well as a cooperative journalism model based in those communities. As a former graduate student at Prescott College, Saadeh's research focuses on social movement development and food systems transformation. Professionally and academically, her work focuses on the intersections between journalism, sustainability, and social movements.

Justice is regenerative, a process of growth and restoration that leads to more resilient, adaptive, and sustainable community ecosystems within a liberated world. Food justice is the embodiment of this process in sometimes literal ways. Regeneration is threaded throughout every aspect of food justice, where it be developing resilient communities and community leadership or the restoration of healthy soil and urban and rural farm land.

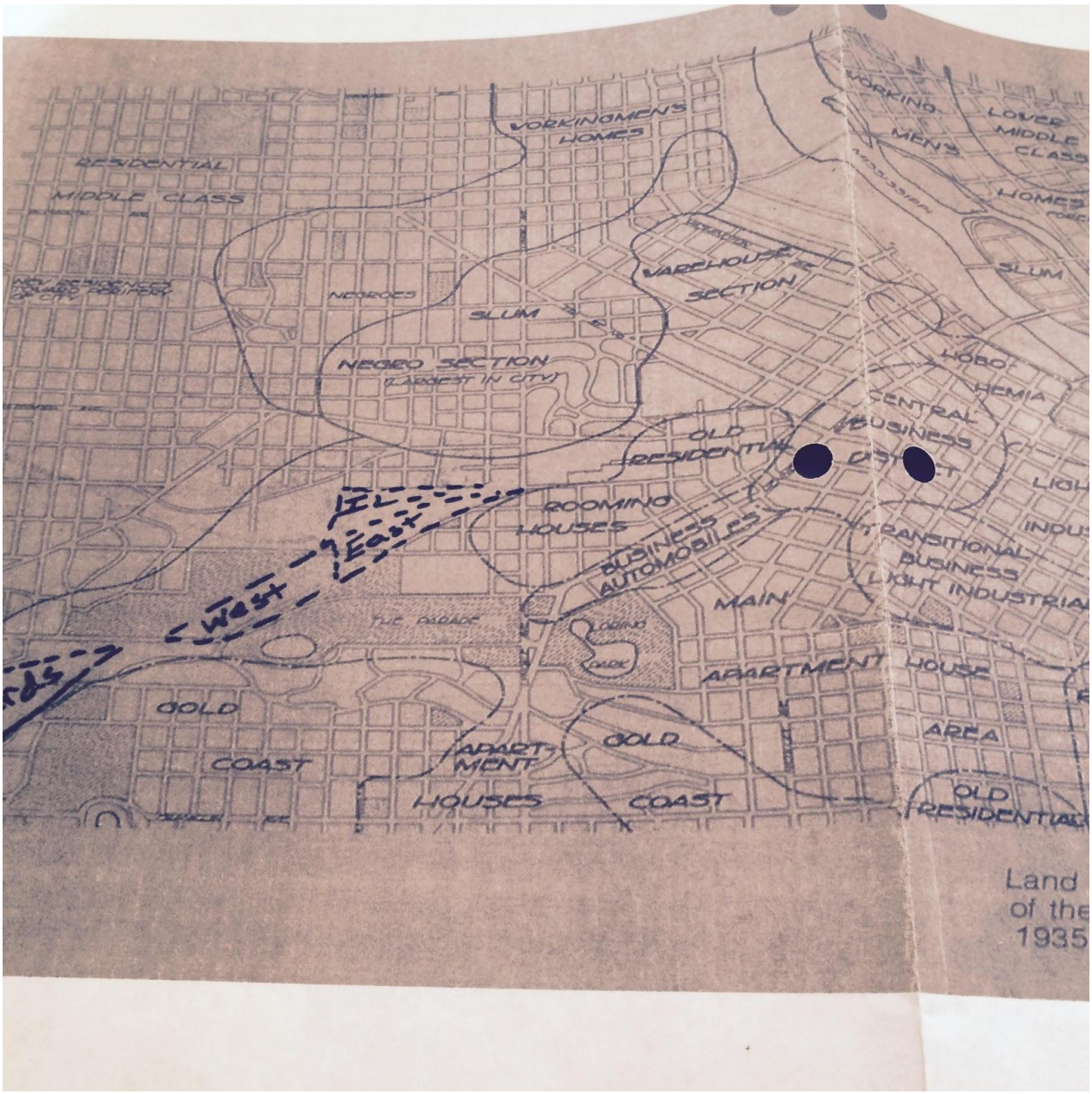
This is because the core of food injustice is to halt regeneration: historically marginalized communities must make their food-related decisions for the now and not for the what's coming, because historically marginalized communities have been stripped of the ability to make decision about the long-term. Food injustice strips away the power of our communities to live in the world in healthy, sustainable, and regenerative ways. Food injustice is systemic, hierarchical, and a result of racism, sexism, capitalism, and classism (Treuhaft & Karpyn, p. 8-9). On the other hand, food justice is naturally regenerative. This is because it's focus is not about dismantling systems of oppression, but rather building community vision and community resilience in order to use that power to transform the food system and the communities supported by that system. This transformation, and the intersections and connections between food justice and regenerative agriculture, was explored in a research product I conducted in 2014 in North Minneapolis, a neighborhood in Minneapolis, MN.

Introducing North Minneapolis

North Minneapolis organizer Michael Chaney describes the food system in North Minneapolis as a form of systemic genocide. He believes food production is an issue of national security and a matter of self-preservation, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance for communities like North Minneapolis. He explains, "we'll never change the narrative if it's about growing radishes and tomatoes and not about changing the system."

North Minneapolis—or the Northside as it is commonly known— is a historic community with a large and growing African-American, Southeast Asian, and East African populations, with people of color making up more than 50% of the community's population (Helmstetter, Brower, & Egbert, 2010). North Minneapolis is, like many other communities of color, highly-marginalized, often ignored as a whole in favor of its crime rates, graduation rates, and gang violence. North Minneapolis zip codes have a population that is, at least, 80% people of color (Helmstetter, Brower, & Egbert, 2010, p. 6). Those same zip codes have, at least, a 33% poverty rate and a college graduation rate under 10% (Helmstetter, Brower, & Egbert, 2010, p. 6). Approximately 20% of North Minneapolis residents do not speak English as a first language (Saadeh, 2015, p. 12). As well approximately 50% of the population is defined as "[having] incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty guideline" (Helmstetter, Brower, & Egbert, 2010, p. 6). This is not an accident; a 1931 city planning map notes a citywide intention to make the Northside neighborhoods into "slums." This is seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: 1931 City Planning Map. It labels a main North Minneapolis neighborhood as a future "slum."



Introducing the Research

The goal of my research in North Minneapolis in 2014 and 2015 was to help the community develop a roadmap for the development of a community-based food system which would integrate elements of food access[1], food security[2], food justice[3], and food sovereignty[4]. This was done through an Integral Food Systems Theory of Change[5] and contextualized by an analysis of systemic oppression and historical trauma, local food system[6] development, and alternative food systems paradigms. Regenerative agriculture (socially and ecologically) was key to this analysis, because healthy soil and sustainable growing practices is key to the community's efforts to transform the neighborhood. This research was accomplished through community interviews, informal meetings and observation sessions, as well as through participation in community meetings and mealtime gatherings. Both a participatory action research framework and decolonizing methodologies were used in this research project. The community's priority in supporting this research was the development of a community-based, community-developed framework that would engage, impact, and grow the work happening in North Minneapolis in order to transform the North Minneapolis food system.

The goal of the Northside food systems transformation is reclaiming the land, reclaiming the resources, reclaiming the community's future and building health and wealth for all.

> "What we're growing is a green economy and youth enterprise; food is our path. We believe that if we grow the food, we know the food, and we then can know each other. We're planting the seeds of change," said Chaney in an interview I conducted with him for this piece.

For Chaney and others, food and food justice are tools on a battleground and the fight is for both sustainability and survival, socially, economically, and ecologically.

Results

In order to transform the North Minneapolis food system, the community worked to explicitly name what it believed the end-result of that transformation should be. The goal of this research was to support the community and develop a roadmap for the development of an integral food system, which incorporated elements of food access, food security, food justice,

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[1] The food access movement seeks to provide better access to quality, healthy, fresh, affordable foods through traditional grocery stores, as well through corner stores and other community food sources, including farmers markets and urban farms (Treuhaft & Karpyn, n.d.).

[2] Food security emphasizes economic development, sustainability, localized food systems, and a longer-term vision for food systems change (Morales, 2011).

[3] Gottlieb & Joshi (2010) note that food justice and the food justice movement provides a new narrative, a new way of thinking about the relationship between food and systemic oppression This is because it names both a vision and issues to organize around, which then provides a space for multi-layered organizing and movement-development (Gottlieb& Joshi 2010, p. 223). It emphasizes a local and global perspective on the dominant food system and transformative food systems work.

[4] Via Campesina defined food sovereignty in April of 1996 as "the right of each nation to maintain and develop their own capacity to produce foods that are crucial to national and community food security, respecting cultural diversity and diversity of production methods" (Holt-Giménez, 2011, p.142). Further, it is the basic human right of peoples and nations to have access to culturally appropriate, environmentally sustainable food, grown and sold or shared in whatever way they wish (Holt-Giménez, 2011, p.142). This definition of food sovereignty includes an implicit restructuring of global power relations and systems of oppression, as well as oppression and suffering between groups and individuals (Holt-Giménez, 2011, p.143).

[5] A theory of change attempts to organize a framework for social change in order to support strategic planning attempts to organize a framework for social change in order to support strategic planning or funding.

[6] A local food system is based on localization, decentralization, democracy, equitable resource allocation, civic engagement, and self-reliance (Feagan 2007) (Saadeh, 2015).

and food sovereignty. This was call an Integral Food Systems Theory of Change and is illustrated in Figure 2: Results.

Figure 2: Results

Outcome

A local food system that simultaneously co-produces both health and wealth

Building Blocks

Producer Cooperative, Black-Owned Grocery Store, Workforce Development Center, "Model" Corner Store, Extended Growing Season

Challenges

Land Access, Community Buy-In, Historical Trauma, Policy Barriers, Non-Sustainable Funding

Pre-Conditions

- Access to Land that is controlled and owned by North Minneapolis residents
- Strategic and intentional community engagement
- Mental health services
- Translating information to create a space for invisible people to participate, dealing with the root causes of oppression honestly
- Implementing a "village model" where everyone has a say in decision-making, conflict resolution, and strategic planning
- Reclaiming historical processes, including sharing means and communal storytelling as spaces for healing
- Controlling, changing, and framing the North Minneapolis narrative
- Developing a community-based policy change framework
- Building sustainable funding models

Assumptions

- Transformative food systems actors in North Minneapolis have the capacity to develop a strategic plan and implement it
- There are sustainable funding models and opportunities that can support the food system work in North Minneapolis
- The community can buy into this work and engage with it, taking a role
- The necessary support structures and systems for this transformative food systems work can be in place by 2020

Questions to Consider

- What other research might support our work?
- What solutions have been developed by organizations elsewhere conducting similar work, even if on a smaller scale?
- How can connectivity be developed between the building blocks and work being done to dismantle the challenges that might or will be faced?

- What capacity do North Minneapolis organizers and organizations have to meet the priorities and challenges laid out in the Integral Food Systems Theory of Change?
- How will North Minneapolis organizers and organizations priorities the information laid out in the Integral Food Systems Theory of Change

A foundational element for this vision was healthy soil and agriculture and growing methods which helped the community to build power, resilience, and justice. For example, one story that I heard throughout the process was regarding compost and the need for the community to make and keep its own compost, what one organizer called "Black Gold." The only way this vision could occur was if the community continued to prioritize regenerative agriculture. A healthy, local, community-based, socio-ecologically sustainable food system requires healthy soil and it had been key to the organizing efforts of the community.

It is easy to think about regenerative agriculture as purely an ecological action, but the repercussions of such work can be vast. If a community is stripped of access to healthy soil, that what opportunity does it have to grow upon that soil? But if a community like North Minneapolis is able to create its own healthy soil, then they might have the opportunity to change their food system and change the systems of oppression which surround them. The soil becomes the foundation for gardens, for businesses, for community gatherings, for education and wisdom-sharing and for empowerment, resilience, and liberation. This is discussed further below.

Reflection & Conclusion

The food systems transformation occurring in the Northside is occurring at a phenomenal pace and I believe that it may offer a great opportunity for others communities to learn from and then implement their own food systems transformation. But there is so much work to do whether it be engaging the wider community, ensuring that these projects succeed, and/or bringing in the financial resources needed to support this work. The most important piece in the development of this Integral Food Systems Theory of Change has been the creation of a framework for transforming the North Minneapolis food system that is useful to the community and created through community engagement. Currently, community organizers and leaders are working on multiple levels, expanding the number of community gardens, training more and more people to tend those gardens; building and launching new businesses (including the award-winning Breaking Bread Café, as well as the youth enterprise Cookie Cart); and advocating for policy change on the city, state, and national level. In Figure 3, there is a photo collage of some of the efforts currently occurring in the Northside. Many of these efforts did not exist when I first conducted my research.

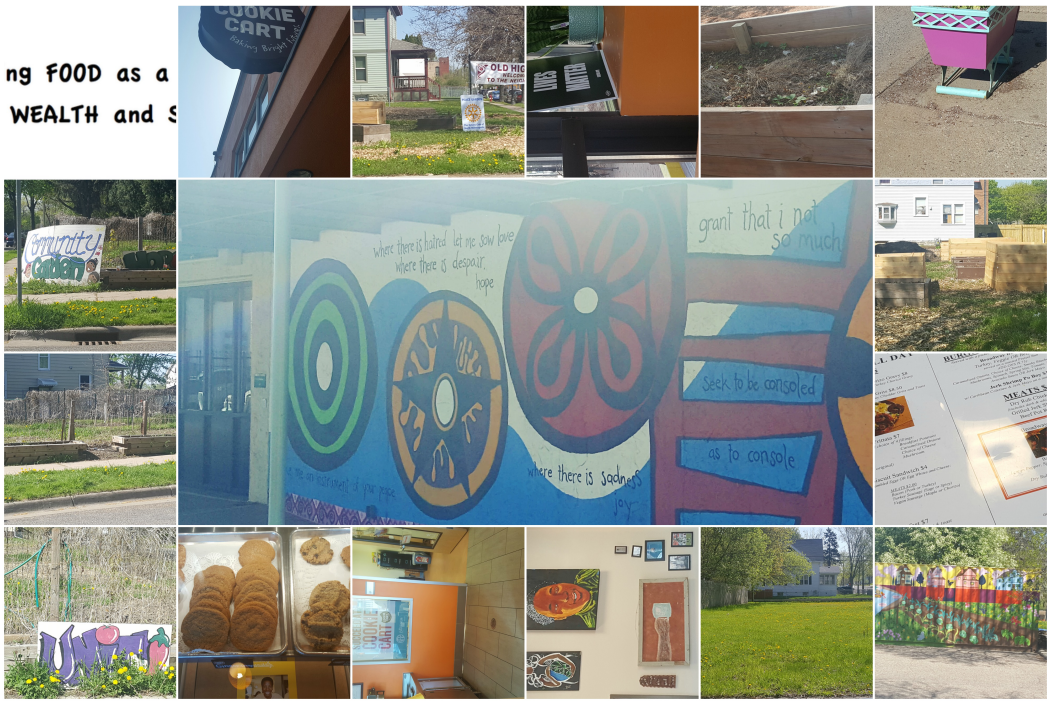

Photo 1: Photos of the North Minneapolis Food Systems Transformation

According to Chaney, in a recent conversation, now is make-it-or break-it time for the Northside, food systems transformation has occurred in the Northside before, always in fits and starts. Organizers and leaders need to move the food systems transformation occurring now beyond just new businesses and more gardens; Chaney believes that in order to make this transformation work, it has to be about changing the ways in which people think about food, not to change the food, but in order to create a community brimming with health and wealth, which is the ultimate goal of so many organizing there.

Many people do not necessarily think about the connections between regenerative agriculture and food justice. I believe that the Northside food systems transformation has the potential to be successful because transformation of the land and the soil is key to the systemic transformation. As a justice-minded scholar studying sustainability, I believe that the Northside offers an incredibly important lesson to us: sustainability (in the case of North Minneapolis, sustainability takes the form of regenerative agriculture) and social justice do not exist separately from each other. In order to create a just society, we need to think about sustainability. In order to build a sustainable society, justice must be key to our thinking. There is much we can learn, as sustainability scholars, from communities like the Northside.

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