

**New Orleans' 'Restaurant Renaissance,' Chef Humanitarians, and the
New Southern Food Movement**

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Abstract: In this paper, we situate New Orleans' post-Katrina "restaurant renaissance" within a context of historical and contemporary racial and gender inequities. This context provides a space for critical consideration of the celebratory narratives popularly attached to the city's most prominent chefs and their roles in "rebuilding" New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Our critique focuses on the practice of chef "celanthropy" (celebrity philanthropy) and the contradictions often underlying that practice. While we situate this critique in New Orleans, our analysis is more broadly applicable to what Lily Kelting has described as the "New Southern Food Movement." This movement relies on contradictory tropes of pastoral utopian pasts and harmonious multicultural futures that elide white male hegemony within the food industry, and southern food's grounding in colonialism and enslavement.

Keywords: New Orleans; celanthropy; chefs; culinary tourism; food justice

Introduction

New Orleans is often, and famously, celebrated as a great place to eat. The city's cuisine and culinary heritage are recognized as a fruitful blending of African, French, Spanish, and Native ingredients that became "creolized" over three centuries of cultural mixing and hybridity. While New Orleans has long embraced its identity as a city whose food is a representation of diversity—an identity in which locals take considerable pride, and which attracts favorable attention from tourists and other outsiders—the post-Katrina recovery period saw a curious "restaurant renaissance" that coincided with a demographic shift in the direction of whiteness and wealth.

In this paper, we focus on the slippages and contradictions underlying New Orleans' (and other Southern U.S. cities') ongoing food justice challenges during what many are describing as a "renaissance" in Southern cuisine (Severson 2015; Ferris 2014). This paper will work to situate the "New Southern Food Movement" (Kelting

2016) within the spatial and social context of New Orleans, where southern food's flourishing must be understood within a broader context of continued racial and economic oppression. We investigate the city and its celebrity chefs' investments in food and cuisine as central to the cultural economy that marketed post-Katrina New Orleans as "open for business" and tourism. We consider also the phenomenon of the city's celebrity chefs and their philanthropic efforts, part of a broader movement of celebrity humanitarian aid work termed "celanthropy" (Bishop and Green 2008). We reference John Besh, the Besh Restaurant Group, and the John Besh Foundation throughout to illustrate key themes and concerns. We analyze the contradictions and complexities of mostly white, male chefs' philanthropic work and self-positioning against a backdrop of the city and region's food access and food justice challenges. We describe the growing phenomenon of chefs engaging with humanitarian aid as both admirable and problematic, and we consider the material manifestations of this work. We critique the white male dominance among professional chefs (in New Orleans and elsewhere), and question more broadly whether and to what extent ambassadors of high-end cuisine can seriously engage with or challenge injustices in the food system. Ultimately, we aim to use New Orleans as a case study to demonstrate both the perils and possibilities of resurgent interest and investment in regional cuisine, celebrity chefs, and their rhetorical engagements with justice and humanitarianism. While we find these tensions and contradictions particularly resonant within the context of the "New Southern Food Movement", we argue that these critiques and considerations are broadly applicable to contemporary food studies, and particularly to engagements with notions of food justice, culinary tourism, the phenomenon of celebrity chefs, and the intersection of those topics.

The New Southern Food Movement

Kelting (2016) describes the “New Southern Food Movement” as the “foodie-fication of a long un-sung regional foodway,” which struggles to navigate various tensions: can (should?) contemporary Southern food draw on nostalgic representations of a utopian past while embracing a vision of the future as inclusive and multicultural (362)? The New Southern Food Movement puts forth a veneration of diversity and difference that may be a response to or a reflection of the changing demographics of the region, which has been described recently as the *Nueveo* New South (Guerrero 2017). According to Guerrero, increasing numbers of Latinx and Asian immigrants and their descendants in the U.S. South are transforming regional understandings of race and place in a region historically characterized by binary (black/white) racial configurations (Winders and Smith 2012, 224). The New Southern Food Movement can be understood as a demonstration of the complex ways in which this demographic reality abuts settler colonialism, enslavement, historic and contemporary racism, and cosmopolitan ideals of equality and diversity in the present.

Ferris (2014) traces the New Southern Food Movement to the 1980s and 1990s, when “the keepers of southern *terroir*”--including farmers, food producers, and especially chefs--drew inspiration from the cuisines of France and California and their emphasis on seasonality and locality. In recent years, for example, Sean Brock has been heralded as a major ambassador of this movement; his Charleston and Nashville restaurants, his proud commitment to utilizing heritage grains and ingredients, as well as his television prominence achieved through hosting the first season of *Mind of a Chef*, have garnered Brock considerable fame and acclaim amongst Southerners and those who retain a somewhat nostalgic notion of “Southern Food.” Brock is, arguably, a prominent emissary of the New Southern Food Movement, despite engaging explicitly

with the past; in fact, a central feature of this movement is its pastoral imagining of Southern pasts in an effort to generate a more tolerant present and visions of an ambitious future (Passidomo 2017). As we discuss later in this paper, the particular manifestation of the New Southern Food Movement in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent levee failure is distinctive; to understand that city's post-Katrina culinary "renaissance," we must situate it within the broader culinary history of New Orleans.

New Orleans' culinary history

In the popular imagination, and, to some extent, in reality, New Orleans' cuisine has always been a product of numerous and varied cultural and ecological influences. Boosters of the city's cuisine point to the same cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism that enabled the flourishing of jazz music and distinctive architectural styles as explanation for the development of Creole cuisine. Tom Fitzmorris, a prominent restaurant critic and radio host in New Orleans since the 1970s, argues in his book *Hungry Town: A Culinary History of New Orleans*: "Throughout its history, New Orleans was always a net exporter of culinary innovation; we largely ignored what was going on in other cities around the country. With good reason. Outside New York, San Francisco, and Chicago, no other American city was in league with New Orleans in its culture of cookery. And not even those cities had so well-developed and old a native flavor as we did" (Fitzmorris 2014, 124). The "native flavor" of which Fitzmorris boasts is a near-proprietary blend of European, African, and Native American preparations that highlight local ingredients, especially seafood and certain fresh produce. The most iconic and classic dishes of the New Orleans culinary canon--gumbo, jambalaya, oysters Rockefeller, red beans and rice, turtle soup, anything with shrimp or crawfish--illustrate the

creolization of European, African, and Caribbean cuisines while emphasizing the importance of proximity to the Mississippi river, the Gulf of Mexico, and the bayous that characterize the landscape around New Orleans.

The terms “Creole” and “Cajun” refer to the foodways (and broader cultural characteristics) of urban and rural Southern Louisiana, respectively. Creole describes the population born to settlers in French colonial Louisiana, particularly in New Orleans, as well as native-born people of African descent, both enslaved and free people of color. Like the people, Creole food is a blend of the various cultures of New Orleans (including Spanish, French, African, Italian, German, Caribbean, and Native American, among others), and is typically considered more cosmopolitan and varied than Cajun cuisine. Cajun refers to descendants of the French-Canadian settlers forcibly removed from the Acadian region by the British in the early 18th century. They settled in the swampy areas of southern Louisiana today known as Acadiana and encompassing four distinct regions: the levees and bayous (Lafourche and Teche), the prairies (Attakapas Native land), swamplands (Atchafalaya Basin), and coastal marshes (New Orleans area and Houma) (Ducote 2013). Cajun cooking continues to draw heavily, in many cases exclusively, from these local landscapes, and has further blended with Creole cuisine to characterize what many believe is “authentic” New Orleans cuisine.

The prominence of indigenous ingredients and dishes in the formulation of a distinctive cuisine is “central to ideas about what is specific about New Orleans” argues University of New Orleans anthropologist David Beriss (2007, 151). Prior to Hurricane Katrina, Beriss explains, New Orleans had a “long-standing food culture, a cuisine, built from local products, that is regularly produced in homes and restaurants and frequently discussed around local tables and in the local media” (*ibid*). This food culture, and the

celebratory rhetoric surrounding it, proudly proclaim that the city's creolized foodways are more broadly representative of the cultural and ethnic heterogeneity that have long characterized New Orleans. And while contemporary New Orleans foodways continue to claim distinctive *terroir* (and *merroir*--the aquatic equivalent of *terroir*)--ingredients conveying the taste of their place of origin--the late geographer Clyde Woods (2017) reminds us that these foodways and the culture that produced them bear legacies often neglected from the dominant celebratory narratives.

At risk of vastly oversimplifying complex historical processes, we need to highlight the importance of colonialism and enslavement for the development of contemporary New Orleans foodways. (We also acknowledge that those processes contributed to the formulation of Southern U.S. foodways more broadly.)

As indigenous agriculture declined under the pressure of European settlement, war and exploitation increased. French settlers enslaved women from defeated nations and forced them to both grow food and endure a lifetime of sexual exploitation.

As European settlement expanded throughout the region "many of the new immigrants avoided agricultural labor in the fetid, humid, and dangerous bayous. To solve the plantation and farm labor shortages, the Company of the Indies directed the African slave trade toward New Orleans in 1719" (Woods 2017, 9). Most of the enslaved Africans who entered the colony between 1717 and 1731 were transported directly from Senegambia, a West African region whose cooking techniques and ingredients (rice, okra, various spices, legumes, and seafoods) took firm hold in the colonies (Carney 2001; Twitty 2017). New Orleans distinctive cuisine, then, is a product not just of local ecologies, but also of legacies of violence, erasure, and enslavement. Those same

legacies contributed to disproportionate exposure to violence and death in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the city in 2005.

The New Southern Food Movement in New Orleans

In the months and years following the storm, a curious thing happened to the city's culinary landscape: it experienced what many referred to as a "renaissance." For many, the restaurant industry became a barometer for broader recovery within the city.

Beriss and Sutton demonstrate the centrality of restaurant rebuilding to the city's recovery efforts: "If eating out was a major part of social life in New Orleans before Katrina, after the disaster, eating in restaurants turned into one of the central ways the city's fabric was to be rewoven" (2007: 2). In 2010, five years after the levee-breach brought unprecedented death and devastation, the *Times-Picayune* restaurant reviewer Brett Anderson rattled off more than twenty food businesses that had emerged from the rubble.

In his column, Anderson argues "the new New Orleans restaurant scene serves as evidence that the city is capable of growth on top of recovery." Such assessments abounded in the local and national media; ten years after the storm, for example, Kim Severson wrote in the *New York Times*, "few would disagree that the New Orleans dining scene has not only come back, but the city is a much better place to eat than it was even before the storm."

Severson's profile, in particular, notes the culinary diversity that emerged and flourished in the decade following the storm; thanks to an influx of Hondurans and El Salvadorans whose labor was largely responsible for rebuilding the city, and to a growing number of Vietnamese who have resided in the eastern part of New Orleans since the 1970s, the city is awash with new dining establishments catering to those and other communities. Generally, though, the sorts of establishments that gain wide acclaim

cater instead to mostly white upscale consumers and tourists, two categories of eaters that have also seen notable growth in the decade since Katrina.

The demographic changes following Hurricane Katrina ushered in a new era of fine dining in the city. This restaurant renaissance is reflected in the many awards bestowed on New Orleans culinary establishments over the past decade and a half. The James Beard Foundation (JBF) is the leading culinary awards foundation in the United States, with the mission to “celebrate, nurture, and honor chefs and other leaders making America’s food culture more delicious, diverse, and sustainable for everyone” (<https://www.jamesbeard.org/about>). Each year, the foundation recognizes and awards chefs and restaurants by region, among other categories of differentiation. In the 13 years since Hurricane Katrina (2006-2019)¹, the award for Best Chef: South (a region encompassing Alabama, Arkansas, Puerto Rico, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi) went to a chef from New Orleans nine times. (In 2013, the award was shared by two New Orleans-based chefs.) Of the ten chefs awarded in those years, 7 were men who appear to be white, 2 were white women, and one was a woman of color; Nina Compton won the award in 2018, when the Foundation drastically altered its awards policies after years of criticism for their lack of racial and gender diversity. In 2018, 11 of the 15 chefs it recognized were women, people of color, or both (Severson 2018). While the James Beard Awards are an imperfect descriptor of an impossible contest, this intentional shift is noteworthy for what it reveals about the contemporary food zeitgeist and its efforts to challenge existing hegemonies.

In 2006, the James Beard Foundation awarded its “Humanitarian of the Year” award to the “New Orleans Restaurant Community,” proclaiming that “their generosity

¹ In 2020, because of the crisis wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the James Beard Foundation suspended its awards to restaurants and chefs. See full announcement and explanation here: <https://www.-jamesbeard.org/blog/why-were-not-announcing-the-remaining-2020-award-winners>

carried the first evidence for many outsiders and for the few remaining locals, that New Orleans is a city worth saving” (quoted in Beriss and Sutton 2007, 3). In the section that follows, we expand on increasingly visible and celebrated generosity exhibited by figures within the New Orleans culinary landscape and its sometimes-contradictory role within the city’s contemporary cultural economy.

Celanthropy, chefs and the New Orleans cultural economy

An interdisciplinary literature focused on celebrity engagement in humanitarianism, aid and development has grown rapidly in the past decade. Research in International Development, International Relations and Media and Communications examines how celebrities increasingly function as humanitarian and development actors at various levels, including as ambassadors for NGOs or specific causes, and as founders/directors of new organizations or campaigns (Brockington 2014; Cooper 2008; Chouliaraki 2006, 2013; Dieter and Kumar 2008; Huliaras and Tzifakis 2010; Kapoor 2012; Richey and Ponte 2011; Tsalik et al 2011; West 2008; Wheeler 2013). Academic literature about celebrity humanitarianism in foodscapes is limited, but chef Jamie Oliver in the U.K. context has received particular attention (Barnes 2014; Dempsey and Gibson 2015; Hollows and Jones 2010; Piper 2013; Smith 2012; Warin 2011).

New Orleans has been the site of robust philanthropic and celebrity humanitarian activity, including Mikhail Gorbachev’s Global Green, Brad Pitt’s Make it Right Foundation, Len Riggio’s (of Barnes and Noble) Project Home Again, and Oprah Winfrey’s Angel Lane in Houston, just to name a few. The proliferation of celebrity engagement has been largely unexamined, and we hope to contribute to understanding this phenomena through the study of foodscape interventions led by famous chefs. Some researchers claim that celebrity humanitarianism in New Orleans is reflective of the

“expanding influence and scope of humanitarian-corporate complexes” of neoliberal disaster management (Johnson 2011, xxxi) within contexts of disaster capitalism. Johnson argues that the response to Katrina is consistent with international trends in which “nation-states retain a vital role in post disaster rescue efforts” but that “the work of relief, clean-up, and reconstruction is largely undertaken by NGOs and for-profit firms” (2011, xxxi).

We believe that celebrity humanitarian activity can be viewed in the context of the larger trends that Burns and Thomas (2015) identify of privatization, a dominance of “non-local” rebuilding entities, and the growth of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the city since the post-Katrina flooding. Clyde Woods (2017b:217) emphasizes the ‘disaster before the disaster’, documenting how lasting legacies of enslavement and racial capitalism had adversely impacted Black, poor and working-class New Orleanians for hundreds of years before Katrina. Following Woods’ scholarship, we see Katrina’s devastation not as a distinct and isolated phenomenon, but instead as part of ongoing and multifaceted *disasters*, akin to Woods’ and Gotham and Greenberg’s (2014) conceptualizations.

Celebrity chefs and foodscape interventions

Celebrity foodscape interventions have been robust, ranging from actor Wendell Pierce’s failed Sterling Farms healthy grocery stores; to comedian Ellen DeGeneres’ surprise give-away of a food truck to a New Orleans entrepreneur on her television show; to Canadian businessman Frank Stronach’s founding of Canadaville, a 900-acre sustainable agricultural community for almost 400 Katrina evacuees in rural Simmesport, Louisiana. However, celebrity chefs and the restaurant industry have been the leaders of foodscape philanthropy. As stated previously, in 2006 the James Beard

Foundation recognized the New Orleans restaurant community as “Humanitarian of the Year,” celebrating the narrative that “Chefs became the heroes of the recovery” (Beriss and Sutton 2007, 2).

As the crisis unfolded in 2005, restaurants and chefs provided free meals to residents and relief workers. In one high-profile effort led by officials, chefs were proposed to be a part of governmental flood relief. Douglas Doan, in the Office of Private Sector of Homeland Security, formalized a supply chain for the area with Walmart and began coordinating local chefs and restaurants to provide 26,000 meals for St Tammany Parish (Cooper and Block 2006,266). Doan said: “Louisiana makes the best food in the world. To be bringing in beanie weenies from Florida or peanut butter sandwiches from Ohio at a greater cost...is an outrage” (Dorell 2005). When Doan’s plan was not approved by other officials, he publicly resigned.

Drago’s, a seafood restaurant in the suburb of Metairie, served “anyone who came to its doors” and distributed 77,000 meals (Fitzmorris 2010,19). A donor to the John Besh Foundation recalled in an interview how important—materially and symbolically—free food distribution was during this time:

Drago’s, little place on Clearview, they just fed people every day at no cost except to themselves. They just fed whoever came, it didn’t make any difference. And a lot of people got by that way—a lot of workers, a lot of people didn’t have food, food trucks came around. So I think it was a moment in time when people were at their best and they reached out and they helped... And I think all of this [celebrity chef philanthropy] was born from that, I really do.

As the Besh Foundation donor quoted above observes, the recent proliferation of celebrity chef philanthropy has origins in the immediate aftermath of the flooding. Chef John Besh, sometimes alongside chef Alon Shaya, cooked outside on propane burners to make red beans and rice for soldiers, relief workers and residents in the nearby areas of

the French Quarter and Warehouse District. Besh told news outlets that “The first batch of red beans and rice I cooked was in a Walmart parking lot on Tchoupitoulas Street. It was the first time I ever fed a person who was truly hungry. Oh, I’ve fed hungry people before, but never people who were so hungry and had everything taken away from them. That changed my life” (Morago 2015). During the tenth anniversary of the flooding in 2015, *The Houston Chronicle* (ibid) reported: “It’s been said Besh-fed New Orleans until it could learn to feed itself again”.

The restaurant community took on other major roles in community rebuilding, such as local philanthropist Randy Fertel’s (of Ruth’s Chris Steakhouse) work with Alice Waters and others to open a chapter of Waters’ garden education program Edible Schoolyard. One high-profile chef effort was the reopening of Willie Mae’s Scotch House in 2007. Argued to have the best fried chicken in the city if not in the country, owner Willie Mae Seaton won the JBF America’s Classic award just a few months before the restaurant flooded during the levee failures. In a campaign led by The Southern Foodways Alliance and chef John Currence, hundreds of volunteers and more than \$200,000 in private donations helped rebuild the restaurant. After three years of work, several JBF-winning chefs assisted in the kitchen and dining room on the night of the restaurant’s re-opening.

Chef foundations: emergence, formalization and professionalization

Post-flooding, chefs showed an outpouring of spontaneous goodwill in disaster relief (such as in the examples above). Over time, chef humanitarian work has changed significantly since that initial period and their philanthropic efforts have formalized and professionalized. Besh’s cooking in a parking lot expanded into an opaque public-private partnership with government agencies to provide food aid during other disasters.

Foundations launched by chefs have proliferated, such as the Link-Stryjewski Foundation, and many that were originally affiliated with the Besh Restaurant Group (BRG), including: The John Besh Foundation; The Shaya-Barnett Foundation; Aarón Sánchez’s Scholarship Fund; and Kelly Fields’ Yes Ma’am Foundation. Emeril Lagasse launched his Foundation before the storm, in 2002, but Lagasse personally won the JBF’s Humanitarian of the Year award in 2013 for the foundation’s work. (After sexual harassment allegations against John Besh and the BRG became public in 2007, there were several significant name changes of these institutions: the Besh Restaurant Group has been rebranded as BRG Hospitality, and the John Besh Foundation became The Made in New Orleans Foundation. See the subsequent section “‘A Culture of Sexual Harassment’ in Restaurants —and the Foundation” for more.)

Chef philanthropic activity in New Orleans is clustered in the sectors of education, health, and labor/employment. Examples follow below. Some labor/employment efforts have focused on farmers and food producers (see explanation of the John Besh Foundation’s Milk Money project below), but in the majority of interventions, workers in the restaurant and hospitality industries are targeted. Workforce readiness and training programs for teenagers and young people are a popular arena of chef-led interventions. The first project chef Alon Shaya’s foundation launched was a culinary arts training program at a local high school. The mission of the Link-Stryjewski Foundation (spearheaded by Donald Link and Stephen Stryjewski) is to “help nourish and educate the youth of New Orleans, allowing them to realize their potential and become active positive members of our community” (<https://linkstryjewski.org/>). In interviews, a leader of a chef foundation expressed exasperation about the similarity of foundations’ mission statements and areas of programming: “Three chefs with foundations [Link,

Lagasse and Besh] doing the same kind of things in New Orleans?!” In response, their foundation intends to expand to locations outside of New Orleans.

Milk Money was a micro-lending initiative for local farmers that the Besh Foundation launched as its first program in 2011. Milk Money provided loans of \$500-\$20,000 USD to farmers in the region “who have a marketable, delicious product, but are unable to afford the steps necessary to increase production and take their goods to local farmers' markets, grocery stores or restaurant kitchens” (Besh Foundation website, 2015). In interviews, farmers who had been recipients of Milk Money loans were largely enthusiastic about the program and experience; however, Milk Money became less and less active and now appears to be closed.

Meanwhile, the Besh Foundation launched a new program, Chefs Move. Through a rigorous application and interview process, Chefs Move selected several young, aspiring chefs of color in New Orleans each year to attend a national culinary school on full scholarship. After completing culinary school, Chefs Move winners were required to return to New Orleans to complete an internship at one of the BRG restaurants. The Aarón Sánchez Scholarship Fund was also originally launched as part of Chefs Move and provided a scholarship for an aspiring Latinx chef. (Sánchez more recently separated his Scholarship Fund from the Besh Foundation with the intention of continuing the scholarship but under a different fiscal sponsor.)

Although the term “foundation” is commonly used by these institutions, most chef philanthropic organizations do not function as private, public or community foundations. “Foundation” is a broad term with no legal definition nationally (some states place their own restrictions), but in the U.S. it has traditionally been used to denote entities that are endowment based. The Internal Revenue Service which authorizes and

oversees the tax-exempt status of 501(c)(3) organizations distinguishes between private foundations and public charities as such:

Generally, organizations that are classified as public charities are those that...have an active program of fundraising and receive contributions from many sources... Private foundations, in contrast, typically have a single major source of funding (usually gifts from one family or corporation rather than funding from many sources) and most have as their primary activity the making of grants to other charitable organizations and to individuals, rather than the direct operation of charitable programs. (IRS, 2018)

Following these criteria, many chef “foundations” function instead as 501(c)(3) charities which seek out grants, fundraise from the public, and run their own programming.

Overall, there is a trend of foundations undertaking less grant-making, and instead starting and running their own programming. The Emeril Lagasse Foundation has been a grant-making private foundation, but they more recently became a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. After years of exploring different ideas, in 2018 the foundation announced its branded “signature program,” Emeril’s Culinary Garden & Teaching Kitchen. With the goal of being implemented in in at least ten elementary schools by 2023, The Lagasse Foundation will build gardens and kitchens, provide curriculum, and assist in hiring staff, but they still won’t oversee day-to-day programming. A foundation leader outlined that their giving structure will have four components going forward: the new signature program; larger community grants which are made predominately in places where Lagasse has restaurants; a small grants program; and sponsorships.

Chef foundations fundraise extensively through events, which are key to both their income generation and operational activities. As one director of a chef’s foundation said: “You *only* raise money through events—all the work I do now is going to pay off on June 5” [the date of their main fundraiser]. Annual local fundraising events in-

clude the Lagasse Foundation's Boudin, Bourbon & Beer Festival and Carnivale du Vin; the Link Stryjewski Foundation's Bal Masque; and (formerly) the Besh Foundation's Fêtes des Chefs. The Lagasse Foundation has been expanding to hold more events nationally, including a Boudin, Bourbon & Beer Festival in Las Vegas, Nevada. Foundations also run numerous smaller fundraising events such as the "Johnny & Friends" pop-up series to benefit the Besh Foundation. The marketing angle for fundraising events usually aims to create urgency and exclusiveness by stressing their exceptional and ephemeral nature ("one night only"; "once in a lifetime opportunity"), regardless of how frequently they may actually occur. Fundraisers serve an important performative function as sites of what Lilie Chouliaraki terms "ceremonial humanitarianism" which "mobilizes the discursive resources of language and image in order to construct the boundaries of political community in ways that may either confirm our existing sense of belonging or extend this sense to encompass the zone of distant suffering" (2013,107).

Charitable engagement within the restaurant industry is not without significant precedent: chefs have long been associated with "doing good" in New Orleans and elsewhere. Chef Susan Spicer and the Edgar "Dooky" Jr. and Leah Chase Family Foundation, among others, were known for their community involvement and charitable work. Pre-Katrina, some of the most common forms of engagement were donating food to fundraising events and giving grants to local non-profits. Importantly, Beriss (2012) argues that African American chefs and their restaurants have been more likely to receive recognition for their charitable and community work, rather than for the quality of their cuisine. The emergence and formalization of new chef foundations post-Katrina (as we outline above) raised the philanthropic and humanitarian profiles of *certain* chefs onto the national stage. These foundations have garnered the majority of accolades and

media attention, eliding other forms of giving, community engagement and justice efforts in foodscapes, some of which we briefly outline in the final section of this paper.

Food, tourism, and the New Orleans cultural economy

We posit that there are several intersecting reasons for the significant philanthropic activity in New Orleans' foodscapes. As discussed above, the city's food culture and culinary traditions are unique in the United States and much-celebrated (Beriss 2012). In the immediate aftermath of the levee failure, arguments for rebuilding New Orleans often hinged on the cultural importance of the city, referencing its food, music and way of life (ibid). Local government and private interests took up this mantle of New Orleans as a culinary superstar and heavily marketed it as a key component of the city's "cultural economy" (Gotham and Greenberg 2014). Plans for serious investment in the cultural economy were already underway before the flooding: in July of 2005, the Department of Culture, Tourism and Recreation published the report "Louisiana: Where Culture Means Business" (Mt. Auburn Associates 2005). The report recommended strategies that would enable rebranding the state as a "cultural hub," and it outlined six areas of cultural economy, one of which was culinary arts. The goals established in the report became all more urgent in the context of rebuilding. Robust investments in the cultural economy positioned the city as a "foodie" travel destination.

Foodscares are also likely targeted due to the material conditions of high rates food insecurity, food apartheid (see Penniman 2018, 4; Reese 2019, 5-7) and diet-related diseases in the city. Both the celebration of New Orleans' cuisine and a concern for the residents struggling to put food on their tables became justifications variously deployed by charitable projects. Investments in the cultural economy, combined with the socio-historical importance of culinary culture in the city, imbued chefs with a com-

elling form of “culinary capital” (Naccarato and Lebesco 2012), which positioned them to become humanitarian leaders in the “new” New Orleans.

Gotham & Greenberg trace the extensive and expensive “retooling of branding infrastructure,” and believe that a focus on cultural redevelopment was key to rebranding the city post-crisis: “Over time, this shifted to a representational strategy that avoided reference to disaster and focused instead on explicitly post-crisis and utopian narratives of cultural diversity and urban sustainability” (2014, 22). The branding strategy of utopian narratives relied upon longstanding ideas of cultural diversity in the city, alongside an effort to push new narratives about “greening” and sustainability, concepts that all test positively with wealthy demographics of consumers, from home-buyers to tourists (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014, 208). Gotham and Greenberg find that the form of cultural diversity promoted was depoliticized and represented safely in terms of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism.

Here we add Kate Derickson’s (2014) engagement with “banal multiculturalism,” which more fully illustrates the contours of “depoliticized” and “safe” multicultural re-branding efforts. Derickson (2014, 895) draws on Mary Thomas’ (2011) work to argue that while there are “robust” forms of multiculturalism, which address and redress oppression, banal multiculturalism is:

...a way of rendering all cultures or forms of social difference equivalent, as though a slate has been wiped clean and historic forms of oppression and marginalization are no longer relevant...banal multiculturalism not only denies the current relevance of past injustices but works to mask or render less visible the way in which neoliberal accumulation regimes both rely on and further entrench racial difference and oppression.

Other scholars have argued that tourism campaigns drew upon “pre-Katrina tropes of racial harmony and tourist-sanctioned performances of blackness” (Thomas 2014, 128)

in which Black culture is celebrated and commodified, packaged safely for tourists' consumption (Camp and Pulido, 2017, 294). Lynnell Thomas (2014, 129) documents how tourism efforts (such as "Katrina disaster" bus tours and advertising campaigns) actively drew attention away from the disparities that were revealed by Katrina because "the reality of systemic racial and class inequality threatens the racial fantasy that propels the city's tourist image".

Fresh, local food—locally grown ingredients featured in traditional recipes—provided an ideal venue to represent cultural diversity, greenness and sustainability. We find that re-branding efforts heavily utilized food, restaurants and chefs, and have continued well into the post-disaster period. In 2013, chefs John Besh and John Folse were featured alongside artists and musicians in full-page advertisements as part of the "This is My Louisiana" campaign led by the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. As another illustrative example, in January 2012, John Besh was the keynote speaker at the final meeting of the New Orleans Childhood Obesity Prevention Forum. Besh's enthusiastic speech sang the praises of local food and urban agriculture, and he claimed that New Orleans had one of the highest concentrations of urban farms in the country. Shortly before this speech, Besh had launched Milk Money, the first initiative of his new John Besh Foundation.

Food sociologist Yuki Kato argues that national public interest in urban agriculture peaked in 2012 (personal communication, 2018). John Besh's excitement about urban agriculture was reflective of this trend in which chefs were seen as essential partners in buying from urban farms and in helping promote local growers (for example, see Somerville 2012). Thus, the marketing phase of utopian narratives aligned with heightened public interest in local and sustainable foods across the United States. As noted

previously, Lily Kelting (2016) argues that a New Southern Food Movement has emerged, in which the South's "diverse, hyper regional, hospitable, and agrarian based" (Stokes & Atkins-Sayre, 2016, 8) food appeals to national and international tourist markets. Scholars have noted that Southern cuisine, characterized by the traits Stokes and Atkins-Sayre describe (diverse, hyper regional) is well-aligned with national food movements calling for more locally-grown and seasonally-appropriate food: "Because Southern foodways are traditionally and strongly aligned with these larger food movement goals, Southern cuisine becomes a unique example of how Americans should be eating" (ibid).

Beriss (2012, 5), however, draws a distinction between the local food movement nationally and in New Orleans:

Since the 1970s, many chefs in American fine dining restaurants have promoted the use of seasonal and local ingredients, a movement that has since expanded into markets and home kitchens around the country. New Orleans is no stranger to this movement. However, when chefs and food activists in New Orleans promote local and seasonal foods, they most often do so by linking those foods to the city's history and people. Being a "locavore" in New Orleans requires a knowledge of the city's identity and history, as well as an understanding of seasons and ingredients.

Advocating for "local food" in New Orleans thus involves not only sustainable agricultural practices, but also—or arguably even primarily—a commitment to the histories and cultures of traditional foods.

Utopian city branding featuring restaurants and chefs was evident even more recently in the marketing for New Orleans' tricentennial in 2018 in which the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation rolled out a massive "One Time, in New Orleans" campaign. The ads for the campaign featured historical moments which framed the city as multicultural and politically progressive, such as "Dooky Chase's Restaurant Fed the

Civil Rights Movement”. A photograph of Freedom Marchers in 1963 sits next to a contemporary portrait of elderly chef Leah Chase (1923-2019) as she carefully measures vanilla. The tourist-viewer is invited to be a part of this history, to come to Dooky Chase Restaurant today and taste what she is making in that giant bowl.

A project at Loyola University has been dedicated to documenting Dooky Chase Restaurant, and the oral histories collected emphasize the context of the restaurant: in the era of Jim Crow and legally-enforced segregation, diners at Dooky Chase were forbidden to patronize the city’s other acclaimed restaurants, which were available to white patrons only. (Loyola University, 2012-15). The tricentennial ad emphasizes that the Freedom Marchers were “peaceful.” It does not note the restaurant’s role in the 1955 Godchaux Sugar Refinery strike, in organizing lunch counter sit-ins, or when a homemade bomb was thrown at the restaurant in 1965. Dooky Chase Restaurant—and Leah Chase—has indeed been key in the struggle for Civil Rights in the city and across the South. What is important here is the way a certain, sanitized version of the restaurant’s history is invoked for tourism marketing, progress presented without struggle.

Gotham and Greenberg argue that the “rebranded landscape has served to frame, reify, and (to a degree) legitimize the controversial, contested and uneven political and spatial interventions of crisis-driven urbanization” (2014, 22). The “unevenness” of rebuilding was most evident in tourist areas: “By 2009, tourists would come to the city, would never leave the French Quarter or Garden District, and would think that things were back to normal. But locals knew better, and many had to pass through or leave from decimated neighborhoods each day as they went to work in the recovered parts of town” (Adams 2013, 120). Residents still trying to recover referred to wealthy areas along St Charles Avenue as the “Isle of Denial” (Adams, 74). Importantly, restaurants

are clustered in these areas and the Central Business District, which targeted by the city for significant investment and redevelopment post-flooding (Gotham and Greenberg 2014).

The post-Katrina period, then, was a time not just for rebuilding and rebranding; it also facilitated the monetary enrichment of some key culinary figures. Kim Severson (2007, online) of the *New York Times* identified the governmental food aid contracts John Besh secured as a life-saving boost to Besh's business enterprises: "In hindsight, it turns out that the smartest move Mr. Besh made was quickly arranging a series of lucrative emergency catering contracts, feeding thousands of law enforcement, government and oil rig workers. The contracts, some of which lasted for a year and a half, made him enough money to bankroll the expansion of his businesses". Besh built his restaurant group by "securing federal contracts to feed workers rebuilding the city and working with his most talented chefs to open new restaurants in hotels that offered inexpensive leases" (Severson 2015).

Besh's businesses indeed expanded rapidly during this time. In April of 2005, several months before the storm, Besh purchased his first restaurant, Restaurant August; by 2018, the Besh Restaurant Group had opened, by one count, at least sixteen restaurants and bars, clustered in the Central Business District.

A local activist who works in community health and alternative food systems directly connected the post-levee-breach economy to the rise of chef philanthropy, saying:

Prior to the levee breach—that's blamed on Katrina—New Orleans' residents, specifically the Black residents, we had developed a series of survival techniques that were allowing us to actually make a living. Despite the fact that most of us were working in the service industry and the pay in the service industry has never afforded you middle class

liberty. So post-Katrina, the philanthropy that happened, it came as a result of business people and restaurateurs realizing, “Oh my goodness! If we don’t do something to get this city back on its feet, our cash cow is done!”

This reflection highlights both the city’s economic dependence on the service sector, comprised primarily of Black or Latinx, low-wage workers, and the understanding that restaurant-led philanthropy is connected, somehow, with these workers and their labor. This understanding of the restaurant industry’s dependence on a racialized, low-wage workforce follows theorizing by geographers such as Clyde Woods (2017) who have argued that containment and enclosure of Black people and workers of color is a key component of wealth creation to benefit the white elite.

“A Culture of Sexual Harassment” in Restaurants —and the Besh Foundation

Chefs have started new non-profit 501c3 organizations that are largely reliant on grants and fundraising from individual donors. There is a notable absence of chefs of color, women, and women of color, both in the local culinary spotlight in general and in leading philanthropic initiatives. Doing good as a celebrity chef in New Orleans currently seems to be constructed as the domain primarily of white men. The Besh Foundation’s Chefs Move program aimed to bring more diverse leadership to the restaurant industry, but there is no explicit focus on gender in this male dominated sector. This is especially critical to reflect upon in light of sexual harassment allegations against John Besh and the Besh Restaurant Group.

In October 2017, Brett Anderson at *The Times-Picayune* published an investigative report detailing allegations against John Besh and a “corporate culture where sexual harassment flourished” throughout the BRG. The sexist and ageist hiring patterns at BRG identified in Anderson’s reporting were also observed during research with the

Besh Foundation. Young, slim women were hired into roles at the shared BRG and Foundation offices which had close interactions with corporate leadership, particularly John Besh or Octavio Mantilla, co-owner of the BRG. A former leader of the Foundation experienced extensive sexual harassment during her tenure, including unwanted touching at work and pressure-laden requests for sex from Besh. When she brought complaints to Emery Whalen, the Foundation's previous Director and BRG's Chief Operating Officer, she was rebuked and told that "keeping Chef happy" (however that might manifest) was a requirement of her job. For one Chefs Move scholarship recipient, on-going sexual harassment during the required year-long internship at a BRG restaurant went unaddressed when reported to Foundation staff. This caused the young employee lasting emotional trauma. These incidents mirror Anderson's findings in which "those who complained of sexual harassment were berated, ostracized, or ignored". Thus, the sexism and violence of the restaurant group's culture was reproduced in the BRG's philanthropic efforts.

It remains to be seen how this history and practices of sexism and gender inequality will be addressed going forward at the Foundation. In 2018 the Besh Foundation rebranded and relaunched as the Made in New Orleans Foundation (MiNO) with a new director. MiNO aims to "address, ameliorate, and eliminate disparities facing hospitality professionals of color" (www.minofoundation.org). Another BRG-affiliated charity, Kelly Fields' Yes Ma'am Foundation, has a mission to "engage, inspire and invest" in women in the hospitality industry in the U.S. South (www.yesmaamfoundation.com). With these explicit focuses on equity and women in the culinary world, will BRG foundations address issues sexual harassment not only within their parent company, but throughout the restaurant industry?

Conclusions and spaces of resistance

Projects by celebrities—and celebrity chefs—have proliferated since Katrina, mirroring global trends in which corporations, celebrities and philanthropists have become increasingly prominent development and humanitarian leaders. Chefs as “celanthropists” have led philanthropy in New Orleans’ foodscapes: local chefs were already synonymous with New Orleans before Katrina, and after the flooding chefs became public figures claiming responsibility and authority to rebuild the city.

New Orleans’ beloved culinary scene has been mobilized in tourism efforts to brand New Orleans’ “cultural economy” as multicultural and diverse, efforts which have relied upon promoting easily-digestible versions of banal multiculturalism (Derikson 2014; Thomas 2011) and depoliticized notions of diversity (Gotham and Greenberg 2014, 209). In the context of uneven redevelopment in the city—of which, we argue, restaurants have been a part—the culinary diversity heralded as a “renaissance” in the kitchens of New Orleans risks eliding the displacement and exclusion of Black and other People of Color communities in the city, who have been central to the city’s “authentic” culinary and cultural identity for centuries.

While the work of prominent, mostly white and male chefs has come to characterize the New Orleans “restaurant renaissance” to many, alternative voices and projects are emerging that highlight and challenge inequities both within and outside the food system. We want to briefly highlight two such critiques to demonstrate the fracturing of New Orleans’ celebratory foodways story. Underlying these food industry-situated critiques is a city of enduring racial and economic inequality; since Katrina, the white population has almost fully recovered, while there are almost 100,000 fewer African

American residents. The median income among African American households is only \$25,806, compared to \$64,377 for white households (CFED 2016).

Saartj

The racial wealth gap in New Orleans prompted the chef and writer Tunde Wey to stage a culinary intervention in an attempt to draw attention to and challenge this inequity.

Wey came to New Orleans from Lagos, Nigeria, by way of Detroit and Los Angeles.

He has gained considerable recognition for a series of projects that use food to interrogate and challenge racial and class inequities. He hosted two touring dinner series, in which he served Nigerian food and facilitated conversation about racism, police brutality, and anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. Wey's 2018 project in New Orleans provocatively highlighted wealth disparities in its pricing scheme.

During a month-long pop-up he called Saartj, after Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman who was brought to Europe in the 19th century and paraded as an attraction due to the shape of her body, Wey served the same lunch to all customers at a fixed price (\$12), but invited customers who identify as white to pay \$30. The pricing structure represents the racial wealth gap in New Orleans, where the average wealth of white households (\$64,377) is 2.5x that of Black households (\$25,806). Wey worked with a sociology graduate student from Tulane to devise an exit survey for customers. Demographically, the diners were almost equally divided by race, with about half being white and the majority of the non-white diners being Black. The vast majority of the diners were between the ages of 25 and 44 and most had incomes of \$40,000 or more. Of the 64 diners, 78 percent of the white customers – including 91 percent of the white women -- chose to pay the \$30. People of color, who were asked if they wanted their

money back after the conclusion of the experiment, typically (81%) said no — many said it should go to someone who needed it more than them (<https://www.saartj.com/>).

When asked why he uses food to critically examine race and class, Wey responded, “Food spaces embody the sort of structural inequalities that exist in the larger community and they also contribute to those inequities as well, so it’s incumbent on folks, on all of us, to address the injustices that we see in all the spaces that they exist...What we do when we ignore inequity is in fact promoting it and reifying these structures, you know? (Bereola 2018)”

Resistance served

In February of 2019 the grassroots food and beverage collective Radical Xchange, directed by Ashtin Berry and Kisira Hill, hosted the inaugural Resistance Served, a two-day symposium in New Orleans. The event “brought together food and beverage professionals and historians to celebrate Black historical achievements and discuss systemic barriers to success in the industry” (Williams 2019). In a *Food and Wine* article published following the event, Berry describes the reason for bringing together people of color working in the food and beverage industry: “We didn’t own our narrative because historically, we didn’t own our bodies. It’s important that we start to reclaim ownership of our narrative and take up space” (quoted in Williams 2019, np). Hill similarly argued, “Black history is American history, and if we’re going to talk about food, beverage, and hospitality, it needs to be grounded in the histories of the people that established that work” (*ibid*, np).

For Radical Xchange and the participants in the inaugural Resistance Served event, grounding the “New Southern Food Movement” in history is visceral. The symposium concluded with a visit to Whitney Plantation in southern Louisiana. Unlike all

other southern plantations turned heritage or tourist sites, Whitney Plantation centers the experiences of the enslaved men, women, and children who toiled there in bondage.

Berry refers to the enslaved domestic laborers at Whitney and other plantations as “basically the first hospitality people” --a radical reframing and reclaiming of the myth and trope of Southern hospitality (see Szczesiul 2019).

The years since Hurricane Katrina have brought considerable demographic and cultural change to New Orleans, but the desire for foods deemed “authentic” is perhaps stronger than ever. Authenticity is fraught, however, and means different things to different people. Visitors and *New* New Orleanians have embraced a wider range of cuisines and eating experiences, leading to a potential fracturing of what constitutes New Orleans foodways. It is nearly as possible to obtain a *banh mi* as a po-boy in present day New Orleans, leading some to fret that “authentic” New Orleans cuisine is under assault. Others celebrate the evolution of a cuisine that embraces tradition while welcoming innovation and expansion--essentially, a further creolization of the “original” Creole cuisine.

An essential component of this evolution is a clear-eyed reckoning of the food industry’s entanglements with institutional racism and sexism. While there will always be debates over the meaning (and value) of “authenticity” in foodways, it is certainly the case that foodways and food culture, especially in New Orleans, reflect broader historical and geographic trends and processes. Contemporary New Orleans foodways are a result of forced and voluntary migrations to this ecologically unique region over the course of several centuries. Embedded within the region’s foodways are tensions and contradictions: gourmet excesses abut food insecurity. A mostly white male hegemony reigns in the city’s kitchens. At one of the city’s most successful post-Katrina restaurant

groups (BRG), sexual harassment and assault has not only been part of the culture of the restaurants, but also the affiliated philanthropic foundation. African American creative and cultural capital remains subject to appropriation (and reclamation); these are just a few examples. And yet, food remains a central source of pride and a subject of debate for New Orleanians--whether it is used to fulfill a craving, connect to a landscape, tell a story, or illuminate injustice.

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