

arts/place research and also for academy and sector-commissioned partners across the globe and UK, including for national arts networks, cultural institutions and local and central government.

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# TRAUMA INFORMED PLACEMAKING

*Edited by Cara Courage and Anita McKeown*

Designed cover image: Artwork on a remnant of destruction from Supertyphoon Odette, Archie Oculos (2022), *Tulong Pangmatagalan Hindi Pansamantala*, which loosely translates as 'Long-Term and Not Temporary Support.' Image credit: Brian Jay De Lima Ambulo, 2022.

First published 2024  
by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781032443096 (hbk)  
ISBN: 9781032443102 (pbk)  
ISBN: 9781003371533 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003371533

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by Newgen Publishing UK

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# 10

## EQUITABLE FOOD FUTURES

### Activating Community Memory, Story, and Imagination in Rural Mississippi

*Carlton Turner, Mina Para Matlon, Erica Kohl-Arenas and Jean Greene*

#### Grounding in Utica, Mississippi

##### *Carlton Turner*

Utica is a small town which sits at the foot of the Delta, 30 minutes from the Mississippi. Mississippi, an Ojibwe word that means 'Great River'. This river ferried king cotton and unnamed precious human cargo from weigh ins and auction blocks into markets and plantation bondage up and down this country – providing a literal stream of income that would build white generational wealth across the nation and fuel the southern block of confederate political power up through reconstruction and deep into the era of Jim Crow.

During the cotton boom my community of Utica was perfectly situated in a small, yet important, location between the growers and the river. A depot of sorts, where growers could bring their harvest to any of the three cotton gins to be weighed in and paid out. According to the stories, in its day, Utica had a top-of-the-line social scene that included jook joints (the vernacular term for an informal establishment featuring music, dancing, gambling, and drinking, primarily operated by African Americans in the south-eastern US, see Nardone, 2017), cafés, a hotel, a railroad depot and even an opera house. Utica was the site of the first radio station and the first paved road in the state of Mississippi. Utica was a town built on production. It produced agricultural goods, lumber, and most importantly educators.

But industries inevitably change, and when they do decisions about the future of communities like mine are usually made for us, rarely by us. These decisions are usually based on an analysis of the potential to exploit labor, land, and the means of production. A capitalist's dream. The result is our communities are adversely



impacted by decisions they have very little agency in. In 1993, there was a decision at the county school board level to close Utica High School. Located right off main street, this school was part of the core of Utica's downtown area. In 1998, because of NAFTA, the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement, the Bernstein shirt factory closed its doors. This factory, located directly across from the Sunflower grocery store in Utica, employed more than 100 Black women in our community. This loss contributed significantly to the bottom line of the grocery store and further impacted all the businesses on Main Street. In 2014, our remaining high school closed and later that fall so did the grocery store. These events, although individual, are part of a series of events that changed the quality of life for those of us who call Utica home.

### The Utica Institute

#### Jean Greene

The lyrics to a song from 1966 speak to what living was like as a Black person in Jim Crow Mississippi:

*They had a huntin' season on the rabbit.  
If you shoot him, you went to jail.  
But season was always open on me.  
Nobody needed no bail.  
Down in Mississippi.*

*(Down in Mississippi, J. B. Lenoir)*

William Henry Holtzclaw came to Utica, Mississippi, from Alabama in 1902. Holtzclaw, a student of Booker T. Washington and graduate of Tuskegee Institute, followed in his mentor's footsteps and set out to found a school to help and uplift Black people in rural areas of the South. He found, in Utica, a community still reeling from the effects of slavery and reconstruction. Most of the Black people in the area around the town of Utica were living in cramped, single room cabins. These same people did not work their own land. They were either sharecroppers, day farm hands, or domestic workers still firmly under the foot of white landowners. Lawless brutality against these people was the norm. The torture and killing of Black men and women had become public spectacles attended by crowds of white parents and children... farmers and businessmen. *The Jackson Daily News* and the *Clarion-Ledger* would alert white readers so they could plan to attend and witness the horror. An example of one such headline read: 'Prospects Good for a Lynching, and the Indications are that when it Comes it Will be by Wholesale; Five Negro Men and Two Women.'

In Utica, not too many years before Holtzclaw made his arrival, whites had terrorized local Black families in a concerted effort to drive them out of the state.

Black landowners would wake up to posters that read: 'If you have not moved away from here by sundown tomorrow, we will shoot you like rabbits.'

Holtzclaw walked into Utica to put into practice the teachings of Tuskegee Institute and what he learned from his experiences working at Snow Hill Institute. There he established his first version of the Black Belt Improvement Society to help local Black farmers market their crops without resorting to white middlemen. He replicated that organization upon his establishment of the Utica Normal and Industrial Institute. The organization was a limited cooperative, however, because a true cooperative would have antagonized those white merchants who were almost wholly dependent on the Black farmers for their existence. Holtzclaw's Utica version of the Black Belt Improvement Society listed ten degrees to help Black people build themselves up to self-sufficiency. The first-degree members had only to 'have and show a desire to better their condition.' The other degrees were very specific on the requirements. For example, members of the 4th degree had to possess '12 chickens, two pigs, and a cow together with an orderly house.' Members of the 7th degree had to own 40 acres of land. Members of the 10th degree must own at least '1000 acres of land and possess such other qualifications as the central society may require.' Holtzclaw was able to provide a framework, a model to help guide his community toward autonomy.

The Annual Farmer's Conference, patterned after the Tuskegee Farmer's Conferences, was organized to help Black farmers learn practical agricultural techniques thereby raising the standard of their farms. Each of these conferences featured speakers and notable scientists. Dr George Washington Carver was a frequent participant. Individual consultants provided discussions and demonstrations on various topics, including demonstrations relating to planting and soil, farm equipment, livestock, and home economics. Holtzclaw and his faculty worked with local farm families to encourage them to buy and own land, to build multi-room cottages, and to utilize scientific farming techniques to increase yields to become more agriculturally proficient. Holtzclaw was instrumental in not only educating the Black children of the area but providing the parents of those children guidance and inspiration toward becoming economically independent.

Interest in the farmer's conference waned in the late 1960s. This is about the time farm work fell out of favor. Farmers were lured away to work in factories which were opening across the state. Farming became viewed as something not as lucrative as factory/production work. The population shifted from being primarily producers of their food to becoming consumers of food that was shipped into the area. The grocery stores in Utica became the main source of food for the population. This created a situation that became particularly dire when factories left the area leaving grocery stores to close in their wake. The last one, Sunflower, closed in 2014, firmly placing Utica in the middle of a 'food desert.'

The farmer's conference has been renewed over the past four years. The agriculture program now offers classes on the Utica campus which has jump started an interest in sustainable agriculture. There is also a renewed interest in

participation in the Mississippi State Fair. The State Fair featured a day dedicated to the programs of the Utica Campus and the Utica Institute Museum.

The Utica Institute Museum is located on the historic HBCU Utica campus. The campus is the result of the merger of Utica Junior College (formerly the Utica Normal & Industrial Institute) and Hinds Junior College in 1983. The museum has partnered with the Mississippi Center for Cultural Production (Sipp Culture) on the *Oral History Project* which is collecting memories from participants living in and around the town of Utica about the dwindling access to food and what this means for the community.

### Mississippi Center for Cultural Production (Sipp Culture)

#### Carlton Turner

Utica is my home. It's where my children go to school, where my nephews, nieces and little cousins are growing up. Eight generations of my family are buried beneath its fertile soil, and it's a community vastly different from what it was just a generation ago. Deterioration, like progressive transformation, happens gradually over time. The Utica of my youth was a very different place. And a Utica equipped to exist in the future will need to be radically different if our community is to thrive. These types of shifts don't happen all at once, they occur over generations. Change requires intention, time, and radical imagination.

For us, food is the common denominator. It's the thing that everybody does. I grew up in a community where I had a deep and personal relationship with my food. Many people in my community share that experience. So, we use stories connected to food as a framework for accessibility for people to enter and contribute their story to an ongoing conversation about change. They may not feel comfortable if the frame is just art, but when you combine food and story you get a backstage pass to the most prolific of venues for storytelling. The dinner table is the place where I've heard the greatest yarn spinners of my age. Coming from a big family, collard greens, cornbread, fried chicken, and macaroni and cheese become the centerpiece of a visceral and ethereal experience adorned by stories that bring layered emotions, tears, and some of the most gut-wrenching belly laughs you will ever experience. This place where arts and culture bloom and at the same time fade into the performance ritual of everyday life is special. It's not just 'table talk', it's theatrical and emotional, it's personal, it's comedy and drama, it's sometimes tragic, but always educational. My work as an artist is to acknowledge those stories, and the legacy and future of our community that is encoded within them.

Our ability to achieve health and wellness in our community is directly tied to our agency with the land. It is deeply connected to our ability to construct an analysis of the trajectory our community has taken to this current moment. It is grounded in our ability to tell our stories about food and our individual and collective histories

with this land. And we believe that through the telling of those stories we can supplement parts of the social fabric lost over the past couple of generations and begin to construct a new community – one that centers the voice of the people that live here in fostering a place that provides health and wellness for all.

### A Community Dream

The central mission of the Mississippi Center for Cultural Production (MCCP), otherwise known as Sipp Culture, is to reimagine the measurements by which economic prosperity is calculated, and in the process, redefine wealth for our rural community (Figure 10.1). We are taking an intergenerational approach to community cultural and economic development through the lens of cultural and agricultural production, shifting the community's dominant identity from consumer to producer. Creating both a physical and an imagined space for the community to bring its dreams, our work is comprehensive community cultural transformation. That is, the social and economic transformation of our community using arts and agriculture as an intersecting point to engage the community in a conversation about past, present, and future: the building of a collective dream.

Sipp Culture emerged from a need to shift our community from consumers first to being producers first. At the heart of our work is cultural production. It shows up



FIGURE 10.1 Equitable food futures: eat, meet & greet – Community Advisory Group member and youth volunteer delivering meals to the no-touch community dinner. Image credit: SIPP Culture/ E. Gaines.

in the production of stories in media, film, photography, audio stories, it shows up in the production of agriculture, in growing food, and just creating an overall sense of growing as an emerging and dominant community identity. In this process, Utica becomes the backdrop for a renewed community energy embodied in the sense that anywhere we have land or space we can grow something. The work began the moment we offered this idea as a seed to our community to nurture and grow. At that moment, when we asked permission to share our dreams with the community and have those dreams embraced, the people began to share and lay their dreams upon ours. Together our dreams and aspirations became interlaced, and that process, that is the work, that is the community transformation. It is difficult to see the incremental change: but remember, transformation takes time.

Our community is grounded in the aesthetics of Black southern rural culture bearers. Their imprint can be found on every community throughout the south in the forms of architecture, songs, spiritual practices, the movement of bodies, and in the language of freedom. The aesthetic of Sipp Culture is birthed in call and response – tell us what you need, and we’ll work to figure out how to manifest it through whatever means are accessible. The physical space that Sipp Culture curates becomes a physical space to assist in the manifestation of dreams.

We understand the integral connection between the artist voice and community health and the wellness of our rural space. We know the stories told, who gets to tell them, and where they are found, are central to the shaping of policy and ultimately inform the quality of life in our community and those like ours. Our personal, organizational, and community health and wellness are negatively impacted when the only stories representative of our experiences are bound within someone else’s dreams and limited imagination. To that end, Sipp Culture works to develop the imagination and enhance the creativity of our community (near and far) through critical dialogue driven by arts and cultural exchange to shape and reshape public policy and our nation’s collective imagination.

### Collaborative Action Research Catalyzes Memory and Imagination

*Erica Kohl-Arenas and Mina Para Matlon*

One of the methods engaged by Sipp Culture in advancing its work is through collaborative action research. In 2019, Carlton Turner and ourselves, then both with partnering organization Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, were awarded a three-year Interdisciplinary Research Leaders fellowship from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Jean Greene of the Utica Institute Museum of Hinds Community College, Utica, soon joined the team as a fourth partner and chair of the project’s local *Community Advisory Group*. Together the team designed a research project, *Equitable Food Futures* (EFF), to document and activate community agricultural knowledge and assets towards a more sustainable,

equitable, and healthy food culture and economy. The project was framed within the broader context of the creative cultural development practices of Sipp Culture and a long-standing history of social movements for land-based self-determination and Black farming in the US South.

As described above, once an important agricultural hub, the region surrounding Utica, like many similarly situated rural communities across the county, has lost much of its economic and food infrastructure. Despite the departure of local institutions and Utica’s needs around access to affordable and healthy food, there are still significant assets in the community including fertile land and local agricultural knowledge. Using a mixed methods community Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, this study integrates qualitative research methods, including focus groups and oral histories (ongoing), with survey and archival research to unearth, activate, recognize, and share these stories and assets with the Utica community. By undertaking an investigation of Utica’s agricultural and food histories and infrastructure the project aims to contribute to the restoration of community memory, spark imagination about the future, and make visible existing community knowledge around healthy ways of feeding the community, both physically and spiritually. Ultimately, the project aims to show how creative methodologies can catalyze historic and new knowledge in ways that inspire a more expansive imagination of a healthy, locally owned, and equitable food future – using story and data as part of the shift in community perspectives, from consumer to producer of future food economies.

One of the first efforts of *Equitable Food Futures* was to host a series of focus groups. The main goals of the focus groups were to understand people’s histories and experiences with food access and food culture, honor and activate local histories and storytelling, and explore Utica residents’ sense of possibility for their food futures. Part of this area of investigation involved understanding Utica residents’ views regarding the recent closure of the local grocery store and their sense of possibility towards a more expansive approach to food access and food justice over the long haul. Following these goals, we designed focus groups to explore what Utica residents think about past, present, and future ways of accessing and sharing food. We aimed to learn about the rich food and farming history in the community, how people feel about the loss of the local grocery store and other Utica organizations, and what they think is possible in terms of bringing food to the community now and in the future.

Participants were recruited to participate in a focus group based on their knowledge of and experience with the above themes: one group for elders, one for middle-aged residents, and one for younger adult residents. A fourth focus group was hosted in the Spanish-speaking community. To elicit conversation and dialogue we developed a set of questions, with feedback from the *Community Advisory Group*, that prompted dialogue around the past, present, and future food histories, assets, opportunities, and challenges in the region (see Focus Group Questions in Appendix A). After asking a series of questions about people’s experiences with



growing, cooking, sharing, and getting food, we invited participants to imagine the future, using the following prompts:

- Take a piece of paper and a few colored pens (provided here) and draw what a Utica might look like if healthy food was easily accessible to everyone and was a central part of the community. Feel free to draw a picture, make a diagram or a map.
- Write a Letter from the future: write a three-sentence letter to a relative, maybe a future grandchild or even a letter to an ancestor and pretend that you are in that future. In your letter describe the future where healthy food is accessible and a central part of the Utica community. What does it look like? Feel like? Taste like?

While the research team engaged in a qualitative analysis of the themes that emerged from the questions and creative prompts, some of the most significant outcomes included the rich memories evoked, stories told, relationships strengthened, and beautiful future visions shared. The themes that emerged as most critical for participants included: the daunting amount of energy, time and resources expended to access food; a deep sense of pride and commitment to maintain local food culture, traditions, and food sovereignty; a recounting of historical and ongoing structural challenges presented by regional abandonment and dispossession from the means to access, produce, and share food; a culture of cooperation, care, and social relationships centered around creating community support systems; and a shared hope for a future with healthy food for all where families and children feel nourished, supported, and full of opportunities.

The oral history aspect of *Equitable Food Futures* (see Appendix B) engages a similar set of questions to unearth stories of food culture and practice and dreams for the future and is currently an ongoing project in the community. Following our community-driven and participatory principles, the focus groups and oral history interviews were/are conducted and facilitated by local community members, with project development, planning, and training from EFF research team members. Similarly, data and research tools produced by the *Equitable Food Futures* research effort contribute to ongoing research that contributes to the long-haul vision and work of Sipp Culture.

Intended to provide baseline data from which to measure the long-term impact of Sipp Culture's and Utica residents' community development efforts, we developed and administered a survey to document residents' current activities and perspectives regarding food production and consumption. Complementing the qualitative components of the study and Sipp Culture's overarching community organizing work, the survey also assisted in identifying (potential) local agricultural and food resources and infrastructures that could be leveraged to support community efforts to build a local and regional food culture and economy that is sustainable, equitable, and healthy. The survey built on a prior area economic development

survey and further drew from United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) survey instruments.

A random sample of Utica residents was invited to participate in the survey, which was distributed by mail and could also be completed online. Ninety-one residents returned completed surveys, with most participating by mail and many electing for in-person drop offs at Sipp Culture and thereby providing additional opportunities for residents to share feedback with staff and learn more about ongoing work.

With survey analysis ongoing, preliminary findings reflect the project's focus group research suggesting rich existing and unrecognized community assets around agricultural production and high valuation on the importance and need for healthy locally available food. Survey data indicate that approaching half of Utica residents are involved in some form of home agricultural production, a level of household activity that is significantly higher than US national averages (according to a 2022 survey conducted by the National Gardening Association, which found that 35% of US households were engaged in growing or raising food.) Findings further indicated that, even if they are no longer engaged in agricultural activity, most Utica residents possess some form of agricultural knowledge and skills. In addition to knowledge of food production, this community expertise extends to all aspects of the food production cycle, such as how to process and distribute food stuffs. These and similar findings underscore Utica as fertile ground for sowing a healthy food future with the seeds of its wealth of community knowledge.

Lastly, our team is conducting archival research to document how local land use and ownership has shifted over time, and the structural factors driving these shifts. This research is detailing the local and county-level transition from a robust period of Black-owned and operated farmland following the post-Emancipation Proclamation period and in the sharecropping era, to the sharp decrease in – and dispossession of – this land coinciding with the launch of USDA programs favoring wealthy white farm owners in backlash to civil rights movement organizing, and the ongoing transition of land to more fallow farmland over the past several decades. This archival investigation aims to contextualize the project's other research components within a larger history of community resilience and self-determination, and to support Sipp Culture's overarching community cultural development work.

### How the Work is Evolving

#### Carlton Turner

The EFF project positioned Sipp Culture to continue to advance participatory action research in the arts and community wellness space. In 2022, Sipp Culture was selected to participate, as one of nine communities, in the National League of Cities' *One Nation/One Project*. This national project seeks to build a widely participatory community art project that aims to positively impact community

collective wellbeing by bringing together arts organizations, municipalities, and healthcare providers. This collaborative project is between Sipp Culture, the municipality of the Town of Utica, and the Jackson-Hinds Comprehensive Health Center. This project builds on the foundation of the EFF project through the continuation of Community Advisory Group members informing the development of this new research. Data collected through the EFF survey, focus groups, and oral histories is deeply informing the development of our aesthetic approach to *One Nation/One Project*.

### Acknowledgements

The authors are listed in reverse alphabetical order to recognize the contributions of Carlton Turner as co-founder and co-director of Sipp Culture and narrator of the first two sections. The authors contributed equally to the *Equitable Food Futures* project and the content of this chapter.

### Appendices

#### Appendix A. Focus group questions

Following the Welcome, Introductions and Overview:

1. For the first question, introduce yourself and tell us about your favorite food.
2. Now, let's think back on a moment in Utica when you had an especially good experience with growing, buying, cooking, selling, or celebrating food. It can be a long time ago or in the recent past. What did that one moment look and feel like?
3. How would you describe your current effort to get food to cook, eat, or share with family, friends, and/or community members? Can you describe a common week or month?
4. Can you describe a time when you noticed your ability to get food changing? What was going on at that time? What did you have to change?
5. Take a piece of paper and write a line down the middle. On one side write all the positive things, resources, opportunities around food in the Utica area. On the other side, write all the kinds of food resources that you wish Utica had that it currently does not.
6. For this last question you can choose one of three different ways to imagine a thriving food future for the Utica area. Either:
  - a. Take a piece of paper and a few colored pens (provided here) and draw what a Utica might look like if healthy food was easily accessible to everyone and was a central part of the community. Feel free to draw a picture, make a diagram or a map. Or:
  - b. Write a Letter from the future: Write a three-sentence letter to a relative, maybe a future grandchild or even a letter to an ancestor and pretend that

you are in that future. In your letter describe the future where healthy food is accessible and a central part of the Utica community. What does it look like? Feel like? Taste like?

#### Appendix B. Sample of questions from Oral History Guide

##### Introductory

1. Talk about what life was like growing up in/near Utica.
2. How did your family get food (make groceries) when you were growing up?
3. Did your family have a garden or hunt and fish? Can you describe who worked and tended the garden or caught food for the family?

##### Food culture/memory

1. Bring me with you to the land or the places where food was grown, hunted, caught, or cooked and shared. What did it look like, feel like, smell like?
2. What are some of your favorite memories about food in Utica?
3. When you were growing up, what are some of the ways people helped others in the community get food, outside of your own family?

##### Changing times

1. What food traditions in your family have you kept over the years?
2. What has been challenging to keep going?
3. What do you do now to share and celebrate food in your family and in the community?

##### Imagining the future

1. In your dream future, what kinds of foods are available, enjoyed, and shared in the community. What does a thriving food culture look like, feel like, smell like, taste like?

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