Race, Place, and Consumption: the Role of Urban Gardening in the Construction of African American Identity and Community on the West Side of Chicago
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - An underlying assumption of the interpretive research paradigm is that consumer goods have a symbolic dimension inasmuch as they satisfy emotional and social needs of consumers. Goods can be used to express personal taste and status, or smooth the way from one life stage to another. (Douglas/Isherwood, 1976, Belk, 1988, McCracken, 1990, Sherry, 1998). Goods can also symbolize shared meanings and group identification, the way colors, hand signals, and ritual behavior grant a sense of belonging to groups as disparate as sports teams and street gangs. Public spaces, from parks and gardens to public landmarks and artwork play a similar role in the lives of consumers, inasmuch as they strike a chord in the popular unconscious and link the private self to the needs and aspirations of the group. (Belk, 1988, p.153, Sherry, 1998, 111-112). As Belk observes, Ashared consumption sites@ are fertile ground for fostering group identity and the call to social action: ARecognition that a part of one's extended self can be shared, or at least perceived to be shared, with others helps to explain acts of civic responsibility, patriotism and charity.@ (Belk, 1988, p.158)

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

An underlying assumption of the interpretive research paradigm is that consumer goods have a symbolic dimension inasmuch as they satisfy emotional and social needs of consumers. Goods can be used to express personal taste and status, or smooth the way from one life stage to another. (Douglas/Isherwood, 1976, Belk, 1988, McCracken, 1990, Sherry, 1998). Goods can also symbolize shared meanings and group identification, the way colors, hand signals, and ritual behavior grant a sense of belonging to groups as disparate as sports teams and street gangs. Public spaces, from parks and gardens to public landmarks and artwork play a similar role in the lives of consumers, inasmuch as they strike a chord in the popular unconscious and link the private self to the needs and aspirations of the group. (Belk, 1988, p.153, Sherry, 1998, 111-112). As Belk observes, “shared consumption sites” are fertile ground for fostering group identity and the call to social action: “Recognition that a part of one’s extended self can be shared, or at least perceived to be shared, with others helps to explain acts of civic responsibility, patriotism and charity.” (Belk, 1988, p.158).

While Belk points out the importance of public spaces and landmarks for “extending” the self into social spaces, Sherry (1998, 111) focuses on mental operations in the consumer that contribute to the cultural significance of public spaces, the “material vehicles of public life.” Sherry refers to these operations as a form of meaning “emplacement,” whereby the values and attitudes of a social group are inscribed and “solidified” in public spaces, which in turn resonate with meanings of community and solidarity.

Urban gardening is a symbolic activity for constructing/reconstructing southern black culture in the inner city-a kind of cultural commodity that African Americans brought north during the Great Migration after World War II. On the West Side of Chicago, gardening is also a vehicle for creating sustainable inner-city economies that would feed the poor, train jobless youth, and transform areas of urban blight into green space. The slash articulating the relation between cultural construction/reconstruction marks the dialectical relationship between culture remembered and culture constructed, two experiences both opposed and implicated in each other in the moment-to-moment performance of culture. This dialectic also points to the problematic relation of African Americans to their native culture, since links to the African cultures from which they came were disrupted if not destroyed by slavery.

The current study reveals a dynamic, performative dimension of shared consumption sites, inasmuch as community gardens not only inscribe the urban landscape with oases of green space and symbols of social pride; they also trace the intersection of the public and private ambitions of a community and a culture in process. On the West Side of Chicago, gardening is a locus for studying the role of informal social networks such as block clubs, men’s organizations, and extended families in community-formation. It also exposes the workings of an informal economy of reciprocity for providing stability, security, and goods (Stack, 1974, p. 39-40 and Wellman, 1990, p.195). Gardens and “green spaces” are “sacred” on the West Side, inasmuch as they symbolize the rich cultural legacy of residents who left farms in the south to seek jobs in northern cities. Even the gangs respect the community gardens and leave them alone. In one garden, residents cultivate cotton and tobacco as symbolic reminders of their roots in an agrarian slave economy. Furthermore, rather than simply preserve gardening traditions inherited from the southern rural black experience; urban gardeners actively construct black culture in migration. Gardening, in this instance, constitutes a symbolic activity for negotiating the distance between “here” and “there,” past and present, tradition and change, and a potential catalyst for community solidarity in the face of economic distress, racism, and social isolation. The names of the gardens themselves are expressive of a deep spiritual dimension, including words like Peace, Paradise, Faith, and New Life.

Both Belk and Sherry infer a correlation between acceptance of shared consumption sites and personal investment in the community, social stability and sense of belonging. (Belk, 1988,158; Sherry,1998, 111-112). The current study confirmed these correlations insofar as urban gardeners were long time homeowners who went to great lengths to beautify streets and marshal government resources to improve conditions in their neighborhoods. At the same time, however, the correlation between personal investment in the community and support for the Garfield Park Conservatory, an imposing Chicago landmark on the West Side, was not as clear. Local property owners and community activists appeared even less willing than those without property to visit the Conservatory. Conflicting cultural frameworks between the world of the Conservatory and the world of the inner-city neighborhood created “semiotic dissonance” concerning the meaning of gardens and gardening. Semiotic dissonance explains the resistance of local residents to the Conservatory as a guardian of European (horti)culture. Resistance can be mapped in terms of paradigmatic oppositions between European-American and African American, urban and rural, elite and popular, and closed and open cultures.

As migration creates and recreates the boundaries between the dominant culture and its “others” in urban centers throughout the United States, the guardians of dominant culture such as the Conservatory increasingly confront a constituency of ethnic consumers with conflicting needs, wants, and semiotic perspectives. As the current study demonstrated, inner-city blacks are not simply a “people without a past” (Herskovits, 1958, p.299), but form a distinct cultural entity with shared traditions, beliefs, and social practices that root them in their past and shape their future. Ethnographic research constitutes a first step in negotiating differences between the mainstream and margins of American culture by gaining access to consumer behaviors that have been obscured due to social isolation and marginalization.

REFERENCES


McCracken, Grant (1988), Culture and Consumption, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.