

Episode 6 Transcript

Queen Frye

This neighborhood, specifically of specific design, has impacted the health of my family. I was the city helping us make that reconnection so that we can eat better.

Makeda Zulu

Welcome to Rules of Engagement, a show that highlights the projects and partnerships of the University of Minnesota. Robert Jones Urban Research, Outreach and Engagement Center. I'm your host, Makeda Zulu. And in today's episode, we will discuss fast food landscapes, fast food to slow food. This will be a conversation with Queen Frye and Fernando Burga. It's good to have you both here. Can you all share a little bit about who you are?

Queen Frye

Sure. Thanks for having me. This is definitely very exciting to be here and to share in conversation. My name is Queen. And I am an urban farmer, a spoken word artist, an accountant and a distance runner.

Fernando Burga

Wow. I'm going to have to follow up with that description. My name is Fernando Burga. I'm an assistant professor. I am also trying to be a runner although it hurts...

Queen Frye

Okay, okay.

Fernando Burga

...an aspiring cook, a proud Chihuahua owner. And also, a designer and architect by professional training.

Makeda Zulu

Well, I learned something new today. Alright, so I want you all to talk about your work together. Can you describe how you all are working together?

Queen Frye

Yes. I follow up after you, Fernando.

Fernando Burga

Thank you, Queen, for passing the baton. So, this has been a labor of learning, a labor of reflection, and also, finding opportunity as we develop this project. We started in, 2021 with a proposal that looked at how to understand the development of fast food destinations in north Minneapolis, understand the history of public policy and planning policy through the specific question, which was a question that Queen brought forth. The question was, is fast food here because we want it? Or is it here because it was put there? This central question drove the project from its early start. And as the project has developed with Queen's participation and urban growing practice, we have extended the research questions towards new understandings also of slow food, i.e. urban agriculture. So we're looking at the connection between not just fast food destinations and urban growing in North Minneapolis, but also trying to take more of a historical qualitative approach to this, trying to understand the archival histories, the oral histories, as well as the actual experiences that people have in accessing food in their variety of ways.

Queen Frye

And I'll put an extension on that. How I came to that question- is it here because this is how we eat? Or are we eating this because it is here? As a native of north Minneapolis, I grew up over here from I think 1990 all the way through... Oh my goodness, 2002 and beyond, not as a resident but as a community member that worked here in certain shifts. But some of my family still live here, not all of us have moved out and this project is also a personal story of mine. You know, living in north Minneapolis, I could feel this constraint. I could feel the design of the city. But as I was growing up, I couldn't really put language to what it was that I was experiencing, growing up in an urban city. And once I started to really develop that language and participate in community meetings around urban agriculture, and I was listening to what people thought were priorities, I just was like. Are they looking around and seeing what's available in our neighborhood? It's not just about access to fresh foods because as we are growing this food, which is the slow food, we're also in competition with the fast food that's on Broadway Avenue. And as we're having conversations about the demographics here and how they relate to fresh food and how they relate to the land, how they relate to, cooking vegetables, eating vegetables. You know, I'm listening to these stories and as we're journeying forward on one path, I'm like, but we still have hard work, we're still building more restaurants and stuff that's frying more chicken. And what can we really do about that? And so it's like a personal story of mine, of how this neighborhood, specifically its specific design, has impacted the health of my family, everyone's personal health, the way that we think about food, the way that we connect with food, the way that we connect with the earth, and how we have on different levels have tried to reconnect with that. And what does that look like reconnecting within the city, and how has that been trying to reconnect outside of the city, or how is the city helping us make that reconnection so that we can eat better for the health of our lives? We talk about life expectancy gap, and so it's a personal story that I'm processing at the same time that we are going through the research, you know, and then I'm finding real facts in real pieces of news and evidence that is really putting the name to things of how I felt that I couldn't really explain, you know, but then people would say, oh, it's your individual choice, or oh, you can leave and go and buy whatever you want.

But you felt like you just couldn't, it's like really describing how I really felt that way and how my family felt that way. And we're just one family out of many families that live in north Minneapolis.

Makeda Zulu

That's powerful. And I'm thinking about so many things. As you were talking I was thinking about people with cars. So if you have a car, it might be easier to go to a grocery store that has more items that might be more healthy for you. If you don't have a car, you might have to get on the bus. And, for most folks, sometimes it's easier to go, on the south side, to take the bus to the south side. I know the seniors over at Rainbow Terrace found it easier to go to Lake Street just because they had to use the bus to get to Cub that was right in their community because it didn't work that way. How did you two meet? How did you two get together?

Fernando Burga

So we met through a collaboration that involved Appetite for Change. I have been doing work with Appetite for Change on other projects, and they have involved student work as well as other food systems related work. And when the proposal for this project came forth as a call, I engaged folks from Appetite for Change and Queen was part of this conversation. So, this is how we met, through essentially the networks that make up the food advocates and urban growers in north Minneapolis. And by being able to connect, opportunity and capacity around some of these key questions.

Makeda Zulu

Okay. All right. So you met at a meeting?

Queen Frye

Yes.

Fernando Burga

Yeah. We did meet at a meeting. Yeah.

Makeda Zulu

So when I asked people, "how did you meet?" I am usually not asking about where was the place, right, I'm asking about who walked up to who, and what did you think? Because you're still here now.

Fernando Burga

Well, it wasn't just a regular virtual... No, actually, we met at the hoop house. Remember? We were actually introduced by one of Appetite for Change's staff members, Darryl, who my understanding heads urban growth or urban growing effort, and he also does other things. His position, his role may have changed, but I was actually doing interviews for a project with Appetite for Change that considered how social networks influence policy. So I was meeting different urban growers and one

of the people that I met was Queen. So we had a conversation about setting up an interview. Also met Mike that same day. They were kind enough to take their time and energy to come and meet this random stranger who's asking these random questions.

Queen Frye

Now, I remember right.

Fernando Burga

And it was really nice because I remember it was a spring day. I remember that it was cool, but sunny and yeah. And, you know, it's always a little bit awkward when you're asking people to get involved into these academic questions because it's like, what are you doing? Like, who are you? You know, but I think that, both Queen and Mike were curious, which is something that I really enjoy about you. You're curious. She always wants to know more things. It's hunger for knowledge, right? I remember that immediately, just wanting to know why is this guy doing this? This sounds interesting, I want to be part of that. So we kept in touch and we developed a relationship. And then when the call came out, once again, I gathered different people and the relationship really blossomed in that regard.

Queen Frye

And I was excited to know that someone finally heard me. Someone finally heard what I had been speaking about in community meetings, after community meetings, after community means, like really listening to my concerns of my lived experience and what I see with my own eyes in North Minneapolis, and that they cared enough to dedicate their time to wanting to develop that some more. Mike, he's my partner in this, and he comes from Chicago, Illinois, which, the city of Chicago is demographically comparable to north Minneapolis or Minneapolis. It has the same urban scene, probably the same level of crime rates, access to healthy foods, things like that. Everything, health care, education, housing, employment. And so him and I are very outspoken about the things that we lived throughout the 80s, and the 90s. We're very outspoken about that and the impact that mass incarceration has had on our lives. The impact that the war on drugs has had on our lives growing up in the city. A lot of that has been kind of documented in movies, but there's not really a lot of interviews in history, in documents and documentaries and stories about this generation's lived experience through that time. We hear about the generations that have lived through the 60s, which are like my parents, and we hear about the millennials and what they could be going through. But there's this generation where it's like, no one thinks about what happened to their grandparents. Who are they reaching for? Who are they learning from and stuff, to learn how to be parents, are their grandparents even there? I have friends in our generation where they have children with no grandparents because their grandparents either passed away or they're just not in that level of maturity to be a grandparent or they're a young grandparent. And so the impact of growing up and seeing adults having addictions, no one really asks those questions about those people. So we have been very outspoken about the lives that we have lived in these urban settings.

And one of those happens to be in relationship to access to food. You know, there's other things, but one of them is about access to food. And it's one of the many reasons why we started growing. We chose this vantage point of food justice because we look at our neighborhood and we're just understanding how food is related to good health, and when someone is in good health or better health, they can mentally make better decisions. They can really participate in policy. They can really help draw bridges and build healthy relationships with other people. We believe it begins to lower crime, and as I was speaking out about this, like, does anybody see how many ways we're frying chicken on West Broadway? The only person that listened and took action was Fernando. And then that's how we started, really. I was like, oh man, I can't believe he listened to what I was saying. I feel like I've said this a thousand times, but he took the initiative to build a research project around that. And so here we are going through the phases of what research looks like.

Makeda Zulu

Well, research obviously looks like listening. He listened to you. Not necessarily coming in with the question but developing research around your question, which I think is one of the better ways to do research. So how did you all get connected to UROC or what's your relationship with UROC?

Queen Frye

Oh mine's is multifaceted. I've come here for many community events for many different things. This research center has really reached out to me in a way where, I've come from many different things. I've seen many different people here, not just in a celebration way, but we've listened to the school board members so that people can vote. We've been in the room celebrating what's taken place here. I've had community members come in and host events that uplifted other community vendors and entrepreneurs. So I've been in this building in many different ways, and this is just another way that I've been connected and met a lot of people.

Fernando Burga

Yeah, same with me. Same process, I've been part of many meetings and attended events of different sorts. I've been in small meetings, big meetings, university related meetings, meetings that had to do with municipal government and leadership, workshops, trainings. My partner used to have an office here, so I used to come here all the time. I also work closely with another extension staff member, Silvia Alvarez, and we used to work together here and hang out. I've been in similar fashion to Queen, I've been part of the experience of this place for at least since I came to Minnesota in 2015, 2016, where there was a lot of work happening around food advocacy and food justice. I remember some of the initial or maybe not initial, but some of the big meetings that took place around Minnesota Food Charter, took place here. Some big trainings that were going on and workshops that were very complex and took a long time. So, some of my emphasis on food systems was from that time, and I really enjoy coming here because of the energy of the place and its connection to the community. So those are some of the things that drive me to come back.

Makeda Zulu

Well, I'm glad, we love having you here. So where's your project now? Where is fast food to slow food?

Fernando Burga

So we're actually thinking about doing a podcast.

Makeda Zulu

Well, look at that.

Fernando Burga

So this is very prescient because we are ready to start to identify some of the themes and topics and histories we've been collecting and turn it into some type of media. There's different things that will happen over the summer, one of them is that Queen's urban growing operation would start again. So there's opportunity there to continue some of the research that we've started around qualitative interviewing and focus groups to really capture the experience of fast food and slow food and how people navigate these different environments. We are continuing archival analysis and collection of planning policies and public policies that affected the physical environment in north Minneapolis over the 20th century. There is a land use zoning set of critiques, which have traditionally been done with housing in regards to segregation and displacement. But there's also a fast food story around land use in zoning that has to do with how the physical environment changed, focused on car dependency, and not only created new food access destinations, but also dramatically changed the built environment to promote auto dependency rather than walkability or other aspects that allow for healthy living. So there's that. We are also working with Eric King, who is an extension educator, to do some participatory mapping work. So all of these aspects are part of the different questions, the sub questions that move forward the general question of 'is fast food here because we want it or because it was put here?' We're really excited to do that. I think that we are extending into the podcast and to book end this statement because it is something that I know Queen has experience on, if I may say, you had a radio show, you do broadcasting. And there's a lot of potential with that. So we want to tell the story of the research in a way that people can access it, but not just give answers, but actually unveil what is research? And who is invited to the table and what not? And how do you do this in a way that is community engaged, and what are the pitfalls and challenges and opportunities and what does it mean to build trust? What does it mean to be in relationship as you're doing this? How do you match another person's curiosity about the world in order to develop this work? So those are things that I'm really passionate about. And with Queen as a partner there, there's a lot of alignment in doing that.

Queen Frye

And I like being in relationship with people. So I'm very much looking forward to listening to people's stories and documenting the story of north Minneapolis under the lens of fast food, and listen to what people have to say and how we can learn from those stories. So I'm looking forward to that. And hopefully we can interview some people on our radio show that we have. We use a community radio station, called KRSM on Monday nights, we have our show there called Black Love Is. Mike and I, and we're there on Monday nights from 9 to 11. So we just kind of share the variety of our passions and I hope that some of our conversations that we have with this research can start to be shared on the air there.

Fernando Burga

If I may say, this is exactly what I find so full of potential, the disruption of these lines of where knowledge lies and what format knowledge is. And how can we blur the spaces of a broadcast, on Monday nights and the orality of oral histories, the orality of sharing how we think or imagine the research to me that's, that's the potential, that's the hybridity, the new thing that we need to consider in order to make research better and more accessible and more open. That, to me, is what really represents innovation.

Makeda Zulu

Well, it's innovative and then at the same time I think most community members always knew that there was information in the community. The University did find things, but there were things that people already knew, and you go about it a different way. But disseminating that information in a way, especially the fact that you actually, created research around a question from a community member is just so fantastic. But then to get that information back to the community, in ways that the community can use it as it wishes. Journals are very important, because that helps the university, it helps scholars grow and gain recognition, which is important. But we also want knowledge to help our lives today. So when you have a partner like Queen who's going to be on Monday nights- and you say it's called Black Love?

Queen Frye

Black Love Is

Makeda Zulu

Black Love Is, I got excited about that, stop right there, stop right there. But, I will make sure that I listen next Monday. Do you all have a website that talks a little bit about the work Our Roots is doing?

Queen Frye

Yes. I will add a page this weekend, update our website, which is R roots garden. The letter R, R-O-O-T-S-garden.org, so that we can start to have a landing site where people can start to see some introductory information about the research project.

Makeda Zulu

Okay.

Fernando Burga

And you also have an Instagram, right?

Queen Frye

Yes. So our Instagram is our roots garden. Same R-R-O-O-T-S, on Instagram, and that's just me documenting what we're doing on a daily basis, our harvest, our events, how we're growing. And it's freestyle, it's very unscripted. So if people are looking for that regular corporate market type language, they're not gonna find it there. It's gonna sound like me.

Makeda Zulu

And I would say that's beautiful.

Queen Frye

Yes.

Fernando Burga

I don't have a website but I do have an Instagram. It's called city advocacy, just city advocacy. And there I will be posting some images, some graphics. I like to post everything, what I'm reading, what I'm drawing, student work, images from site visits, general stuff. So that can also be a place where people may find information about the project.

Makeda Zulu

Awesome. And what's the name of your class that you teach? Do you have more than one?

Fernando Burga

Right now I'm teaching a civic participation class, and as a matter of fact, one project involves Queen's operation and work. We have several projects and one of them is in north Minneapolis. And really exciting because students are developing a total of 12 posters which document different types of scenarios and methods for community engagement. And this is based on Queen's R Roots Garden operation. And the presentation is actually taking place next week. So, we're going to be sending out invitations.

Makeda Zulu

Fantastic. Sounds exciting. Well, thank you both. Thank you for being here today. You just had a chance to hear more about where you can find both Queen and Fernando on their Instagrams. A

special thanks to Nina Shepard, senior communications director for the office for Public Engagement and UROC. Today's episode was produced by Blackbird Revolt, engineered by Stan Tequila, edited by Jordan Moses. Please make sure to subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts and Spotify to learn more about UROC and our many community partnerships. Visit UROC.umn.edu. That is UROC.UMN.EDU. Thanks for listening.