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Eating Change: A Critical Autoethnography of Community Gardening and Social Identity

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EATING CHANGE:
A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNITY GARDENING AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

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Community gardening efforts often carry a social purpose, such as building climate resilience, alleviating hunger, or promoting food justice. Meanwhile, the identities and motivations of community gardeners reflect both personal stories and broader social narratives. The involvement of universities in community gardening projects introduces an additional dimension of power and privilege that is underexplored in scholarly literature. This research uses critical autoethnography to explore the relationship of community gardening and social identity. Guided by Chang (2008) and Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013), a systematic, reflexive process of meaning-making was used to compose three autoethnographic accounts. Each autoethnography draws on the author's lived experience in the community food system in the Monadnock Region of New Hampshire between 2010 and 2019 to illustrate aspects of community gardening and social identity in this context. Unique access to data and insights about community food systems is provided by the author's dual and multiple positionality in this context (e.g., as an educator/student, provider/recipient of food assistance, mother/environmentalist). The resulting accounts weave thickly descriptive vignettes with relevant scholarly literature that contextualize and problematize the author's lived experience. A key theme across the narratives is that "people live layered lives . . . making it possible to feel oppression in one area and privilege in others" (Bochner, 2002, p. 6). Intended impacts of this research are expanding critical autoethnographic

methods in food studies and environmental studies, offering cultural critique on the impacts of university engagement in community food systems, and embracing qualities of vulnerability, engagement, and open-endedness in critical social research (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013).

Keywords: community gardening, community food systems, food insecurity, food access, food dignity, food justice, higher education, campus-community engagement, social identity, environmental identity, intersectionality, environmental education, praxis, critical pedagogy, critical autoethnography

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my kids, who planted the seeds and are the sun, soil, and rain that nourish the soul of this garden every day. May you harvest and plant joy always.

Acknowledgments

Deep thanks to my friends, colleagues, and loved ones, whose encouragement and belief in me made this work possible. Pack is all.

To my committee, I am grateful for your guidance, insight, and grace. To Libby, for being with me “bird by bird.” To Joy and Kim, for your insightful and constructive feedback.

Thank you to community gardeners and supporters of community gardens in the Monadnock Region and everywhere.

All the buried seeds crack open in the dark the instant they surrender to a process they can’t see.

—Mark Nepo

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Preface

In the middle of the housing bubble crash of 2009, I found myself suddenly without a partner or the means to provide shelter and food for my children. This convergence of crises also coincided with another surge in food costs, a global event that continues to disproportionately affect women (Botreau & Cohen, 2020; Lele et al., 2021). With the industrial food system tied up in an increasingly volatile fossil fuel economy, and with climate change at our doorstep, the dilemma of keeping my three children safe, warm, and nourished within limited means became exponentially more complicated. The kids (then aged 9, 5, and 5) were too old to receive food assistance through Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and since their father had not yet filed for divorce and was technically still part of our household, they were not eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). My part-time salary as a community college adjunct instructor was a fraction of my monthly student loan payments. And with the market value of our property at an all-time low, the debt on our federally subsidized mortgage for low-to-moderate income households placed the mortgage well underwater.

Teaching positions, even short-term contracts, were few and far between, environmental jobs rarer still. Despite a decade of experience, without a graduate degree, employment was always contingent. Even if I could find full-time positions locally, the cost of after-school care for three kids would not balance. My first move to stave off poverty was to share the cost of housing by moving my son upstairs with his sisters and me and offering the downstairs room to renters. This resulted in inquiries by three different men who quickly raised flags that prompted

me to check with community members. One of them seemed so unable to respect boundaries that a call was made to local police. To this day, I count my blessings that none moved in.

I looked into selling the house, but comparing the market and the debt owed, I would have had to come up with money for closing. I had neither the money nor the cooperation of my estranged husband to sell. So my next move was to rent the entire home to the first family I could find that could offer reasonable assurance of financial stability. I was about to find another home for our little flock of chickens, when a week before the move date, a fox from our neighboring woods took care of every last one. With just about a week before the start of the school year, I moved with my children into a two-bedroom condominium in a small city 40 minutes away. There, I hoped, I could secure a livelihood and a moment of stability to position my family for something better.

Still in a tailspin from the unwanted end of my marriage, the emotional labor of uprooting from my community, managing new routines, commuting to work at three different campuses, trying to prepare meals and provide emotional and physical safety for my kids, took a toll on my well-being. Without health insurance, I prayed each time I left the driveway that no injury or illness would strike. I didn't know if or when the kids and I could return to our home. I didn't know if or when the move would ever pay off in terms of career opportunity or financial security. I didn't know how long my body or mind could keep up the pace. What I did know was that staying still was not an option; I had to hustle every day. Anything beyond meeting basic needs was beyond my ability or control.

I was used to being thrifty, eating at restaurants rarely if ever, cooking with simple ingredients, and letting nothing go to waste were normal food strategies I grew up with. My parents worked hard to make sure there was always food on the table for the six of us, foregoing

luxuries that other families had, like new bikes and movies at the theater. My father did all the repairs on our car, my mother did all our haircuts, and both took second jobs at various times. We lived in a modest neighborhood built for lower-income families a couple miles outside of a former mill town. We got two new outfits every school year and were just as excited about hand-me-downs from school and church community members. I learned to plan food shopping around store sales and cook balanced meals by the age of 11.

Later, I used WIC coupons while I was pregnant and nursing to buy approved foods. I experienced the humiliation of other hurried shoppers waiting behind me as the store clerk struggled to ring up my purchase. If the items didn't match the exact brand, variety, quantity, and volume, the register would reject the sale, and another employee or I would have to retrieve the right items or else go without for that week. I was used to cooking from scratch and stretching recipes when necessary. I once agreed with my ex-husband never to speak of the times, when our son was a baby, we thinned tomato sauce with water and cornstarch to get another meal out of a jar before payday.

Now plunged into a new set of challenges, my food strategies expanded to include lingering at the end of community suppers to help with cleanup so we could take home leftovers; eating peanut butter noodles several nights a week; agreeing to a dinner date simply for the benefit of a meal I didn't have to cook plus leftovers for the kids. Sometimes, though, even the most careful meal planning wasn't enough and I would end up running between jobs and errands with both my stomach and wallet empty. On some of those nights, I shoplifted a frozen meal box or energy bars to get me through teaching labs.

It wasn't until a friend asked me why I didn't apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that it occurred to me that I was in the eligible category. Prior to

this, I had thought food stamps were for people who were unable to work due to disability or homelessness. I remembered the soup kitchen where my junior high school classmates and I served lunch; to our teacher explaining the difference between pity and compassion; to how sad everyone looked, both those of us serving and those being served; to the silent but unmistakable message that it was safer to be on the serving side of that line.

My friend's suggestion was a scratch at the surface at the underlying systemic causes of food insecurity. Prior to becoming a single mother, under-employed, and at the mercy of others' generosity, my worldview (like that of many white, working-class Americans) allowed me to believe anyone could have all they needed to thrive if only they made the right choices. I had assumed that an education and solid work ethic would naturally pay off and that homegrown food was just a seed packet away. Yet, despite my capabilities and good intentions, my children and I were stalled in a cycle of poverty along with many others with less privilege. I would eventually take a deep dive into critical social inquiry about food access. But for the time, I was caught between the practical and philosophical, the immediate reality and an imaginary future. I couldn't afford to think beyond next week's meals.

Introduction

As Cook et al. (2013) describe, food is often highlighted in social research because it can "help to vividly animate tensions between the small and intimate realms of embodiment . . . and the more sweeping terrain of global political economy, sustainability, and the vitality of nature" (p. 343). This research uses my lived experience to understand the "embodiment" of social identity and the "terrain" of community gardening. In this study, I draw on data from my lived experience to bridge the personal and political, individual, and cultural aspects of university-community gardening projects (UCGP). Within this context, I have held multiple,

often overlapping social roles (e.g., low-income mother and environmentalist, educator and student, provider and receiver of food assistance). These juxtapositions illustrate how food is more than a substance that nourishes the body; it is a cultural medium, a connection to the environment, and a way to learn about the systems that sustain us.

This introductory chapter outlines my research purpose, frames my research questions, and describes the knowledge that this study sought to develop. I explain the social relevance of this qualitative scholarly inquiry. I then discuss my overall research approach, providing justification for the methods, scheme, and structure of the writing, and perspective on how this approach supports my research purpose. I provide my current understanding of my researcher identity along with the rationale and significance of this study. Where appropriate throughout this chapter, I provide definitions of key terminology used.

Following this introduction chapter and the methodology chapter, three autoethnographic manuscripts (chapters) are organized around themes that emerged from analysis and interpretation of the data collected. They integrate relevant scholarly literature with narrative vignettes to contextualize and convey the relevance of the findings, such as problematic aspects or emergent questions. This manuscript structure encourages readers from various audiences to engage with the narrative through their own conceptual frames while also inviting them into mine. A discussion and recommendations chapter follows the manuscripts. The next section of this chapter outlines key literature and key terms that informed the research design.

Literature Review

My research intertwines community gardening and social identity through autoethnography. In addition, I used a critical research paradigm to focus on both (a) my lived experience as a cultural phenomenon and (b) my understanding of my culture(s) through the lens

of lived experience. The following section provides an overview of the issues in current scholarly literature, with an emphasis on community food efforts involving higher education institutions. The literature review is divided into key sections and provides a greater understanding of the theoretical framework and context.

Food Security and Food Access

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations defines food security as a condition wherein "all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (World Food Summit, 1996)." According to this definition, a person or group is food secure when they are not living with hunger or with fear of hunger. However, this definition recognizes only the nutritional value of food, not its cultural, environmental, or social value. In contrast, Hamm and Bellows (2003) define *community* food security as "a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice" (37). Because of its emphasis on culture, sustainability, and social justice, the term *community food security* (as defined by Hamm and Bellows, 2003) is more appropriate to this research project than the definition of food security provided by the WHO. Community gardening is an example of community food security efforts which are defined as "working within existing structures to ensure adequate community access to food" (Gaechter & Porter, 2018, p. 150).

The term *food access* recognizes that a lack of food is not the inevitable result of insufficient food supply but of policies that deprive poor people of the means to control the supply (Rosenberg & Cohen, 2018). In *Let Them Eat Kale: The Misplaced Narrative of Food Access*, Rosenberg and Cohen (2018) point out that "merely expanding access to food retail [in

so-called food desserts, for example] has no appreciable effect on shopping patterns, food choices, health, obesity, or diet-related diseases" and explain that continuing such policies merely obscures underlying issues (p. 1092). They examine why "increasing food access persists as a policy goal despite its demonstrated failure to reduce health inequities" and they propose "alternative strategies for reducing economic and health disparities within food systems" (p. 1093). These strategies look beyond the structural and economic elements of consumers' food environments to encompass and prioritize the wellbeing of food producers as well.

Food Justice and Food Dignity

In contrast to food security and food access, which attempt to work within existing structures, food justice is generally concerned with "transformation of the current food system, including but not limited to eliminating [its] disparities and inequities" (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010, p. ix). By addressing race, gender, class, and other inequities within food systems that threaten food security and food access, food justice emphasizes the identities and voices of those disempowered by the dominant food system (Allen et al., 2017; Bowman, 2017; Niewolny & D'Adamo-Damery, 2014; Passidomo, 2013). Over the last several years, there has been an increase in food system scholarship which "focuses explicitly on the ways in which institutional structures and systems . . . can exacerbate broad injustices, including limited food access" (Passidomo, 2013, p. 89). As a concept, food justice frames the problem of food access as one of systemic injustice based on status, particularly of race, gender, and class (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Anguelovski, 2015; Bradley & Herrera, 2015; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Loo, 2014; Passidomo, 2013). Food justice is concerned with "the right of communities everywhere to produce, distribute, access, and eat good food regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, ability, religion, or community" (Community Alliance for Global Justice, 2013). As

a practice, food justice is about "ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly" (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010 p. 6). In this definition, "good food" is defined as "healthful, local, sustainable, culturally appropriate, humane, and produced for the sustenance of people and the planet" (Loo, 2014).

Undergirding the concept of food justice is food dignity, which asserts that "community people have the knowledge and ability to ask the right questions and find the right answers to their own needs" with regard to food (Porter et al., 2014, p. 124). Food dignity is the premise that "building civic and institutional capacity to engage in [sustainable community food systems] for [food security] action will improve the sustainability and equity of our local food systems and economies" (Porter, 2018, p. 38). Food dignity scholars recognize the "long journey from ethical goals to operationalized, lived, and shared values" (Hargraves, 2018, p. 34).

Community Food Systems

Food systems as a whole involve technical means of producing, processing, distributing, preparing, and consuming food and recovering food waste. All food systems are embedded within, and contribute to, larger environmental, economic, and social systems. The dynamics of any food system is somewhat dependent on scale (Allen & Prosperi, 2016; Levkoe et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2023). The concept of *community* food systems is based partly on geographic scale, but more so on the idea that "sustainable food production, processing, distribution and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of a particular place" (Garrett & Feenstra, 1999, p. 1). The concept of place is explored further in one of the autoethnographies produced in this research. For the purposes of this research, community food systems may include local or regional efforts such as farmers' markets,

community-supported agriculture (CSA), community gardens, campus gardens, workplace gardens, gleaning, and similar efforts.

Research supports the social and environmental benefits of community food systems compared to the global industrialized food system in which people are ecologically and politically removed from choices about their food (Barthel et al., 2015; Furness & Gallaher, 2018; Markow et al., 2016; Niewolny & D'Adamo-Damery, 2016; Sumner et al., 2010). These benefits include health and wellness promotion (Armstrong, 2000; Furness & Gallaher, 2018; Guitart et al., 2012; Hou, 2017; Marsh et al., 2018); urban justice (Akom et al., 2016; Anguelovski, 2015); community development and participation (Anderson, 2015; Krasny et al., 2014); environmental learning and action (Gregory, 2015; Nettle, 2016; Niewolny & D'Adamo-Damery, 2014); local climate mitigation (Clarke et al. 2019; Cumbers et al., 2018) and, in education settings, campus-community engagement (Aftandilian & Dart, 2013; Andrée et al., 2016).

Community Gardening

Community gardening is a practice or set of activities that fall into the category of community food systems. Community gardens can be defined in terms of form and function as "land set aside for community members to grow edible or ornamental plants [where] the land may also include active or passive recreation space or other amenities" (Lawson & Drake, 2012, p. 2). Community gardens are collectively managed and maintained, with decision-making shared to some extent among gardeners (Drake & Lawson, 2015, p. 243). Community gardens can also be defined in terms of purpose and participation, as "bottom-up, community-based, collaborative efforts to grow food . . . [that] involve the leadership and active participation of area residents to plan and care for these socio-ecological spaces" (Okvat & Zautra, 2011, p. 374).

This definition emphasizes a social context (i.e., why community gardens exist and for whom). The American Community Gardening Association's (1998) definition of a community garden is any piece of land gardened by a group of people. This definition supports inclusiveness by providing flexibility for community groups to define their own efforts while remaining connected to social movements.

Drake and Lawson (2015) use a broader term, *community gardening efforts*, to recognize the "multitude of actors, in addition to gardeners," who are increasingly engaged in such efforts" (p. 244). Community gardening efforts include leadership, management, and other support outside the garden that contribute to infrastructure, participation, and outcomes within the garden. Community garden efforts can take the form of outreach, teaching, research, service learning, fundraising, and other forms of engagement.

University-Community Gardening Projects

University-community gardening projects (UCGP) share characteristics with other community gardening efforts described above but also directly involve one or more universities (or other kinds of higher education institutions). For the purposes of this research, UCGP are defined as cooperative relationships between one or more universities and local groups centered around community gardening. These relationships may provide internships, service learning, community-based research, capacity building, or other opportunities. UCGP may serve a larger community priority beyond the university's mission (Walter, 2013). Either the university's or community's involvement may include leadership, management, funding, labor, or other forms of engagement. Efforts may be identified by a purpose, mission, or value statement concerning food security, access, justice, or related areas, or serving community members who are hungry or experiencing barriers to "good food."

Coupling the influence and resources of universities with the needs and capacities of communities can be a strategy for improving conditions in community food systems (Andrée et al., 2016; Burns et al., 2016; Krasny et al., 2014, 2014; Whittaker et al., 2017). Scholars have explored how UCGP and similar university-community partnerships support citizen science and environmental stewardship activities that contribute to ecosystem services (Krasny et al., 2014); scholars and practitioners sharing perspectives on challenges and opportunities in innovating food hubs (Levkoe et al., 2018); and community-based participatory research and service learning (Aftandilian & Dart, 2013; Boyd, 2015) among other activities. UCGP research often emphasizes urban contexts, where these efforts are frequently associated with or framed within urban agriculture (Davidson, 2017; Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014; McClintock & Simpson, 2017; Taylor & Lovell, 2014), urban planning (Christensen, 2017; Horst et al., 2017; Jermé & Wakefield, 2013; Whittaker et al., 2017), and/or urban food security (Andrée et al., 2016; Gregory et al. 2016; Guitart et al., 2012). Presumably, UCGP involve, address, or seek to engage with issues of local or regional food systems more broadly. The connection between UCGP and larger community food system efforts may be direct (e.g., education, training, economic development, donation/gleaning) or indirect (e.g., research, evaluation, facilitation, or capacity-building).

However, community food system efforts involving universities are criticized by some groups for failing to address the root causes of food system problems and inequities. Food justice scholars suggest institutions' presence in food projects may instead re-inscribe patterns of imbalance of power in institutional-community relationships (Andrée et al., 2016; Bradley & Herrera, 2015; Levkoe et al., 2016). Even when inadvertent, this re-inscription can perpetuate harm by leaving those with the most need without a place at the table. For example, such projects

are generally initiated and managed by university faculty or staff, rather than directly by community members. Funding for such projects generally is generally administered through the institution as opposed to community groups. Reward systems for academics drive decisions about how credit for programs' success is assigned, and those whose input is represented in program priorities also influence the validity and relevance of research (Gillespie et al., 2003).

Regardless of outcomes, the term *university-community garden projects* (UCGP) suggests two or more social groups (members of universities and members of communities) participating together in community gardening efforts. Having described UCGP as one kind of community gardening effort within the broader realm of community food systems, I next describe the concepts of social groups and social identity. These terms are derived from social identity theory and are relevant to the central research question, which is described in a later section.

Social Identity

Social identity and food are inextricably linked in this research because food "creates for us an external identity that we show to the world" (Coveney, 2014, p. 24). As the external world is composed of interactions between people, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), attempts to make sense of how people navigate the social world through the lens of social groups. Social groups are constructions based on such identities such as gender, familial role, profession, class, ethnicity, or religion. Members of social groups define and carve out social identities from "multiple dimensions, sources of group value, and group identities available to them in real life" (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012, p. 393). Social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from [their] knowledge of [their] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1974, p. 69).

Social identity emerges from the social context in which people see themselves, and drives how people live out and experience the social world. The concept of social identity prioritizes the contextualized 'self' as opposed to the discrete, personal 'self' and has been used to study social phenomena such as conformity and socialization in peer groups (Masland & Lease, 2013; Belmi et al., 2015) and group-based prejudice (Fisher & Sakaluk, 2019; Badea & Sherman, 2019).

Social identity theory "delineates the circumstances under which social identities are likely to become important" (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012, p. 379). According to social identity theory, specific structural characteristics of social groups provide the basis for members to develop strategies to maintain positive social identities (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). Social identity theory predicts that social behavior is driven primarily by people's subjective perception of their own and others' social identity, as opposed to any objective or material differences between people (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012).

Social Identity and Community Gardening

Social identity theory is used to study perceptions of community and inclusivity by community gardeners (Christensen et al., 2019; Kirkpatrick & Davison, 2018) and practices of preserving diversity of culturally significant food crops and traditions in community garden settings (Pearsall et al., 2017). Social scientists have studied community gardeners' motivations for gardening (Ančić et al., 2019; Draper & Freedman, 2010; Okvat & Zautra, 2011), outcomes of community garden participation for personal and communal well-being (D'Abundo et al., 2008; Davies et al., 2014; Lottrup et al., 2013), and community gardening in relation to power/empowerment in food systems (Cramer et al., 2011; Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014; Kuo et al., 2020). However, the literature suggests a gap in understanding how community gardening relates to social identity. Examples of research questions that are not yet reflected in the literature

are: How might people's sense of self and others be influenced by the social context of community gardens? What does it mean to participants to identify as a community gardener? How does one's social identity as a community gardener have to do with practices of growing and sharing food? These questions are significant to the study of UCGP and community food system efforts more broadly becausefood, even before it is eaten, sends a powerful signal about who we are. That is to say, the act of choosing, preparing and organizing food has a role to play in communicating something about us to others" (Coveney, 2014, p. 24).

Having reviewed key literature on issues of community food systems, community gardening, university-community garden partnerships, and social identity, I next describe the rationale and significance of this study.

Rationale and Significance of this Study

Scholarship concerning food security, food access, and food justice in community food efforts that involve higher education institutions has increased over the last ten years, both in academia and in the larger sociocultural context of the United States generally (Broton & Cady, 2020; Darby et al. 2023; Henry, 2017; Hunt et al., 2022; Passidomo, 2013; Vivero-Pol, 2017). This autoethnographic study contributes a unique perspective on community gardening and social identity, based on the lived experience of a cultural member who is identified with multiple social groups within the study setting. The foreshadowed problem of food insecurity and concomitant powerlessness, as a mother in the midst of the global economic and environmental crisis of 2009-2010, was a "seed planted" in this research. Critical moments encountered in the ten-year period that followed that convergence caused me to question how the problem of securing food for a household in socially, economically, and environmentally just ways was embedded in larger socio-political issues of food systems. That path of inquiry led to

becoming engaged in university-community gardening projects and eventually developing a social identity as a community gardener.

In addition to significance as a study of intersectionality, this research offers unique contributions to scholarship because no such critical autoethnographic research on university-community gardening projects has been completed to date. The relationship of community gardening and social identity touches on other relationships of self, community, and culture which are explored in current scholarly literature and lived in the everyday experiences of community gardeners. Additionally, the situation of this research in a rural geographic context in the Northeastern United States is contrasted with studies of university-community food system efforts that are primarily aligned with urban agriculture research. This research offers contributions to both scholarly research and practitioners' experience in community gardening particularly in a higher education context.

Researcher Positionality

Herr and Anderson (2005) state, "our obligation as researchers is to interrogate our multiple positionalities in relation to the question under study (p. 55). The following passage serves three purposes: it conveys my positionality with regard to this research, outlines the dilemma/opportunity of belonging to multiple social groups within the research context, and demonstrates an example of autoethnographic writing style. The context of this research is university-community gardening projects in the Monadnock Region of New Hampshire between 2010 and 2020.

I am an educator, mother, homesteader, nonprofit leader, volunteer, grower, giver, and eater of food. These social roles are all significant to this study in that each is tied in some way to my identity and experience as a community gardener and actor within my local food system.

Having been an embedded member of multiple groups involved in university-involved community gardening efforts over a ten-year period, growing and sharing food in community has developed from an area of academic research and professional exploration to a deeply meaningful personal practice. This multiple positionality makes for a complex relationship with the study context. As a researcher, I relate to community gardens as a physical and social context for exploring theories and practices. Any research in this context is also knit with the identities that I have developed within this community. For example, as an educator, I am interested in the value of community gardens for teaching and learning. As a mother, I believe in gardening so my children know where their food comes from and how to thrive when I am gone. As an environmentalist, I am interested in gardens as a grounding point for larger environmental approaches to food systems. My positionality shifts and develops as I interact with others in the context of this study, and each affords a unique insider/outsider view. Each of my social identities provided different points from which to collect, analyze, and interpret data about my everyday embodied experience in this context. The central task of this autoethnographic research was to notice how each of those identities and relationships showed up in my lived experience.

My ontological stance is critical realism, a sense that social phenomena are observable through indirect means. In critical realism, the task of the researcher is less about discovering any so-called objective truth and more about constructing a meaningful narrative (Cruickshank, 2003). As social phenomena are emergent properties of the group(s) being studied, the researcher's own social narrative is as much a part of the construction as the group's. Therefore, research is inherently political, because it will either "reinforce the status quo by reproducing accepted views about a particular group, or challenge the status quo by offering up a radical narrative that challenges the prevailing image of the group" (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 1). Critical

realism “acknowledges that the world is real, and that knowledge production is fallible and theory-dependent but not theory-determined” (Fryer, 2022, p. 19). Accordingly, “selfhood is to be understood in terms of an ongoing process, whereby selfhood is socially mediated but not socially determined” (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 1).

Epistemologically, my approach is constructionist in that the process of generating knowledge and meaning depends on the interaction between the subject and context of the research. Ellingson and Ellis (2008) describe autoethnography as a social constructionist project in which the researcher’s goal is to “resist the tendency to dichotomize [between self and other, self and culture] and instead explore… connections between seemingly polar opposites” (p. A constructionist stance presumes a social construction of reality based on symbolic (language) interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This presumption enables autoethnographers to “counter accepted claims about ‘the way things are’ or ‘the way things always have been’” (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 449). This capacity of constructionism is significant to knowledge in that it challenges the “conventional standards of scientific inquiry developed during the Enlightenment - to remain dispassionate, control the conditions, convert observations to numerals, search for the answer, and separate truth from practice” (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 450). The challenge is critical to knowledge production because these standards are “rhetorically constructed to privilege the powerful elite and marginalize other voices” (Gergen, 1999, pp. 91-92, as cited in Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 450).

My theoretical perspective aligns with critical theory, which is concerned with the influence of relative power on subjective experience, examining assumptions, and driving change. Critical theory attempts to “explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical

goals for social transformation" (Bohman et al., 2021). I am concerned with how community gardening and other local food efforts might disrupt or reinforce existing social dynamics and how community stakeholders might see themselves in that frame (Guthman 2008; McClintock 2014; Pine and De Souza 2013). Within the critical theoretical approaches, I am interested in emancipatory research, which emphasizes the empowerment of participants through co-production of knowledge (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Mares and Alkon 2011). Specific to food systems, I am interested in alternative strategies that support food dignity, sovereignty, and justice as well as environmental sustainability (Barthel et al. 2015; Bradley & Herrera 2015; Gaechter & Porter 2018; Lyson 2004). As a qualitative researcher, I appreciate the power of visual and narrative presentations to engage diverse voices and illuminate many entry points to knowledge.

In the following section, my positionality with regard to the research is represented as a dialogue between myself and others in the context in which I conducted this research.

> *ME: I want to research community gardening and food systems.*
> *UNIVERSITY: Great! Please describe your researcher identity and position within the research subject.*
> *ME: Well, that depends on who you're asking, and when. I have many.*
> *UNIVERSITY: Such as?*
> *ME: Well, I'm a Doctoral Fellow, with my tuition currently supported by a corporate partner of the university. In exchange for their sponsorship, I direct a multi-site workplace garden project.*
> *CORPORATE PARTNER: We are leading the way and helping our community. Your academic success is important and it reflects on us.*
> *ME: I am grateful for this work and want to advance community gardening in any way I can. That's also why I represent our efforts in my leadership role with a regional farm and community coalition.*
> *COALITION: There is more to it than community gardening. What about supporting farmers in the region?*
> *FOOD SYSTEMS ORGANIZATIONS: Yes, and all the other work beyond the region? All the shiny things!*
> *ME: My research interests encompass all this work, but community gardens are where I feel most dedicated...*

PREVIOUS UNIVERSITY: Don't forget, the idea of pursuing doctoral research came out of your sustainability education work here. How will you carry that forward?
NONPROFIT: Actually, it started before that, when you wrote that grant to establish an educational community garden project in town. Remember, that was more money than you made that year?
ME: If we're going that far back, it started when the father of my three kids had left us with a mortgage on this 1.3 acres and no income, and I realized I'd better learn how to grow food.
FAMILY OF ORIGIN: You've been pushing this green agenda since your son was born and you complained about WIC vouchers not covering your fancy organic peanut butter. Get off your high horse.
FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM: Look, here's some organic foods to get you through the week. You deserve to be treated with as much dignity as anyone else in the food system. How about a Board position?
COMMUNITY: Hey, we have a garden here in town. If local food systems are so important to you, why don't you spend more of your effort at home?
KIDS: Mom, what's for dinner?

Research Context of the Monadnock Region

This section provides background information to situate the process and findings of this study in a temporal, geographic, and social context. The Monadnock Region, in the southwestern corner of New Hampshire, is located just over an hour's drive west of the geographic center of New England in the northeastern United States. It is bordered by the Connecticut River and Vermont to the west, by the Quabbin Region of Massachusetts to the south, and by New Hampshire's Merrimack Valley to the east and Dartmouth-Lake Sunapee Region to the north. Before its colonization by European settlers, the wider region known now as New England was occupied by a number of Indigenous tribes known collectively as Abenaki, meaning "People of the Dawn Land." The Monadnock Region is named after Mount Monadnock, a 400-million-year-old granite dome left standing after deglaciation. Visibly higher than any point within thirty miles, the "mountain that stands alone" (Mansfield, 2006) is reportedly the second most-hiked mountain in the world and a local landmark with which people living in the region identify along with their town or village of residence.

Rural and mostly forested, with many small farms, Cheshire County (pop. 75,000) is the major county of the Monadnock Region; nearly one-third of the county's population is clustered in the city of Keene, NH (pop. 23,000). Small family farms in New Hampshire struggle generally, though attention on issues of food and agriculture in the Monadnock Region have increased in the last decade. Still, the coexistence of hunger and scarcity with a growing "foodie" culture and wealth of educational resources in the Monadnock Region presents questions about how to navigate food and related issues as they present themselves in the community day-to-day. The cultural context of the Monadnock Region offers a layered social, economic, political, and cultural fabric that is both unique to this place and ubiquitous in a North American context. Having offered an overview of the rationale and significance of this study, researcher positionality, and geographic and cultural context of the study setting, I offer the research question.

Research Questions

This research inquired what my lived experience of university-community gardening projects (UCGP) could tell about the relationship of community gardening and social identity. Broken into parts, this relationship involved both the influence of community gardening on social identity, and *vice-versa*, the influence of social identity on community gardening. While my lived experience was the primary source of data for this project, the overarching research question was equally if not more about the cultural context of that relationship - namely, UCGP and to the extent possible, the community food systems of which they are a part. A series of questions opened from this main inquiry about how my lived experiences informed my understanding of sociocultural forces at play. As a cultural meaning-making process, this research used autoethnographic methods within a framework of social identity and critical

theories. This methodology enabled me to explore how community gardening and social identity relate with food security/access, privilege/intersectionality, and environmental identity/praxis.

Overview of Methodology

Due to my positionality with respect to the research purpose and my ongoing engagement as a member of several social groups within the community of study, the methodology best suited for this project was autoethnography. The essential task of autoethnography is "cultural analysis through personal narrative" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p. 17). Cultural analysis in this case centered around the relationship of community gardening and social identity, which I experienced in the context of university-community gardening projects (UCGP). I used autoethnography to systematically collect, analyze, and interpret data from my lived experience in community gardening efforts, primarily those involving universities, over a ten-year period (2010–2019) in the Monadnock Region of southwestern New Hampshire, in the New England region of the United States. Drawing on my lived experience in the research setting, my approach was to contextualize personal experiences (*auto*-) against the wider cultural backdrop (*ethno*-) of university-community gardening projects (and community food system efforts more broadly). The writing (*-graphy*) of the research is intended as an open-ended conversation between 'self' and others.

Autoethnography offers a set of qualitative methods for bridging personal (inward) and cultural (outward) aspects of social phenomena. This bridging process involves the "turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur" (Denzin, 1997, p.

227). The author “incorporates the ‘I’ into research and writing, yet analyzes [themselves] as if studying an ‘other’” (Ellis & Davis, 2008, p. 284).

I used critical and social identity theories in conversation with relevant scholarly literature to guide this process. This critical social research offers a realistic representation of cultural life in a community food system as it seeks to embody autoethnographic research qualities of reflexivity, engagement, vulnerability, and open-endedness (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013).

Autoethnography “capitalizes on the power of story as a way of knowing and teaching, and on writing as a means of inquiry” (Lapadat, 2017 p. 589.) In this research setting where cultural and personal experiences intersected, my relationship with this social phenomenon was inextricable from my academic identity. This overlap meant that attempting to understand my experience through traditional qualitative research methodologies in which researchers are expected to be detached and objective would have been not only impractical but inauthentic. Inquiring my lived experience required “a methodological approach that embraces, rather than reduces the complexity of life-as-experienced” (Vandenbussche et al., 2019).

Autoethnography involves “representation and understanding of . . . experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one’s perception of knowledge” (Boylorn, 2016, p. 490). A key idea in this methodology is that “we move through culture and culture moves through us” (Grant, 2010, p. 113). It is a practice of “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). The products of autoethnographic research are autoethnographic stories, or autoethnographies. Such stories are a vehicle through which experience is shared; they are “artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and

cultural experience" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 1). Autoethnographers use narrative and storytelling to "give meaning to identities, relationships, and experiences, and to create relationships between past and present, researchers and participants, writers and readers, tellers and audiences" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 23).

The choice of autoethnographic approach for this study is aligned with larger scholarly movements to "make research more accessible, practical, and kind" (Adams, 2017, p. xvii). As with other critical and feminist approaches, autoethnographic research works "against sterile social scientific research practices such as the use of pretentious jargon" (Adams, 2017, p. xvii). Instead, autoethnographic methodology strives for authenticity and recognizes that, like the life it studies, authentic research can be 'messy' and uncomfortable (Sharp, 2005; Todd, 2021) In this sense, autoethnographic writing is like community gardening in that both researchers and community gardeners, if they are authentically engaged, must deal with messy realities from time to time. Critical autoethnography digs at issues of power and voice, draws attention to under-represented experiences, embraces vulnerability, and invites readers into cultural dialogue. This work also embodies feminist research values of "affirming women as expert knowers, marginalized by patriarchal power yet exercising agency in often constrained circumstances to further their interests and needs, and those of their dependents" (Jenkins et al., 2019).

Critical Autoethnography

Critical research recognizes and values that there are many ways of knowing and inquiring. This underlying premise encourages awareness of one account being delegitimized or privileged over another. Inquiring lived experience within a critical framework raises the question of "why some experiences are privileged over others" (Boylorn, 2017, p. 490). Critical autoethnography has been developing as a qualitative method for those who are vulnerable in

some way, or who have unique experiences that verge from the mainstream, to contribute to discussions from their unique perspectives (Stahlke Wall, 2016). As novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states, “stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize” (Adichie, 2009). At the same time, “stories, like good compost, can nourish a community and prepare the soil for future developments. . . . These [stories] provide sustenance, legitimation, a common language and frame of reference, and a way to pass on knowledge and experience” (Nettle, 2014, p. 25). Stories that name and question the dominant narrative can lead the way to more sharing of stories about food and hunger and the issues of power and identity they represent. These narratives matter to culture because “stories help to create shared commitments and identity. They place the minutiae of everyday social movement practice [such as gardening and eating] within larger themes and narratives, making meaning and sustaining [participants’] involvement” (Nettle, 2014, p. 25).

Critical theory and critical research are concerned with issues of power and privilege. Critical autoethnography applies the methods of autoethnography within a critical theoretical framework in order to question or critique the author’s lived experience. When conducted within a critical theoretical framework, autoethnography can be a form of resistance to dominant cultural narratives. As the value of critical social research lies in its capacity to effect change within an individual, society, or culture, critical autoethnography is about telling the story of one’s own experience as a counter to accepting a story told about them. As a form of narrativizing, autoethnography supports emancipatory knowledge production when it gives voice to marginalized people or experiences.

This research contributes to theory by developing narratives as a form of cultural work (Adams et al., 2015; Dashper, 2016; Holman Jones, 2016; Stahlke Wall, 2016). Culture is a

creative endeavor made up of individual experiences, decisions, and influences. Cultural work can be defined as "a dynamic process guided by the need sometimes to question formal objectives and goals, as well as established traditions and historical practices" (Stensaker, 2018, p. 277). Nested within the writing process is a recognition that individual experiences are embedded in culture, that the 'self' is a cultural construct, and that larger cultural narratives come alive in everyday events. As a form of both life writing and research, critical autoethnography recognizes that "narrativising . . . is never neutral or innocent because it is interpretational and hence social and political activity with consequences for people's lives" (Sikes, 2015, p. 1). Mulvihill and Swaminathan (2017) argue that by examining assumptions, resisting "reified concepts of human experience," and instead following the "authentic lived experiences of those we are writing about," critical autoethnography can be a form of social action (p. 9). To conduct autoethnographic research within a critical framework is to "imagine and accomplish an inquiry that might produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently" (Holman-Jones, 2005, p. 653).

Methods of Autoethnography

To explore the relationship of community gardening and social identity in the context of university-community gardening projects, an autoethnographic research approach was appropriate. Methods included collecting internal data (personal memory, self-observation, self-reflection, self-analysis) and external data (autoethnographic interviews, textual and nontextual archives). I collected data about my own lived experience (*auto*) and used those data to construct meaning through a cultural perspective (*ethno*), which are shared here through written accounts or narratives (*graphy*). The resulting overall discoveries of this exploration are

presented in three scholarly manuscripts (autoethnographies) which bridge personal and cultural aspects of my lived experiences.

To conduct this inquiry, I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data from my lived experiences in university-community gardening projects (UCGP) in the Monadnock Region over a ten-year period from 2010 to 2020. These data are both objective, (i.e., events, actions, places, and people), and subjective (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and reactions toward them). In addition to self data (i.e., personal memory, self-observation, self-reflection, and self-analysis), I collected external data (i.e., textual and non-textual archives and autoethnographic conversations with community members with whom I had some shared experiences in the research context). I used these data to supplement and/or check my self data and to consider alternative meanings in my analysis and interpretation. Reflexivity supported the processes of constant comparative analysis and interpretation in the writing. These processes became iterative as analysis of one set of data often prompted collection of another set of data. Data and analysis combined in the interpretation stages to produce narrative vignettes. Details of the methods used in this study are described in the Methodology chapter.

Lived Experience

For the purposes of this study, lived experience is "an individual ongoing process known from within" (Dieumegard et al., 2019, p. 2). More than a recount of events, actions, feelings, and thoughts, studies of lived experience involve "people's articulations, formulations, and representations of their own experiences" (Bruner, 1986, p. 7). Central to the study of lived experience is the meaning attributed to the experience by the person who lived it (Frechette et al., 2020). Dieumegard et al. (2019) describe lived experience as a "fundamental unit of analysis" for studying individual activity situated in a "rich material and social environment" (p. 2).

One reason for choosing to research lived experience is to discover "how people live through and respond to those experiences" (Boylorn, 2016, p. 490). Autoethnographers have unique access to lived experience in that "its being experienced makes a special impression that gives it lasting importance" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 53). While the author's situatedness within the data implies that lived experience cannot be 'known' by anyone outside of it, autoethnography engages both the researcher and the reader in the process of making meaning.

To this point, I have offered a background for this study, outlined my research questions and purpose, laid out my research approach by describing autoethnographic methodology and the specific aims of critical autoethnography, specified the rationale and significance of this study, and explained my researcher identity and positionality. In the next section, I describe the overall presentation and key structural elements of the writings I produced.

Dissertation Outline/Structure

This dissertation presents three distinct yet interrelated autoethnographies, formatted for publication as stand-alone manuscripts in peer-reviewed journals. The autoethnographies (presented here as chapters) each explore one or more facets of the relationship of community gardening and social identity, which is the central inquiry of this project. Following the prelude and introduction to each chapter is a set of narratives that interpret my lived experience, and a separate conclusion section. The narratives pair vignettes of lived experience with analysis of relevant scholarly literature in order to contextualize the experience and bridge individual/personal with social/cultural meanings. The use of vignettes and contextualizing literature is described in the methodology chapter. In all, the study consists of this introduction

chapter, a methodology chapter, three autoethnographies, and a discussion and recommendations chapter.

Foreshadowed Problem

Each autoethnography begins with what anthropologists called a "foreshadowed problem" (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007). Although Malinowski's research was based in positivist ideas, the concept is distinguished from a traditional sense of a problem to be 'solved' but rather a way of identifying a topic or area of interest that may arise in the course of cultural life, sometimes by "chance encounter or opportune experience" (Coffey, 2018, p. 18). This choice follows Adams et al. (2015) who explain echo that "autoethnographies begin with the thoughts, feelings, identities, and experiences that make us uncertain—knocking us for sense-making loops—and that make us question, reconsider, and reorder our understandings of ourselves, others, and our worlds'' (p. 47). Reimer (2008) explains that the search for cultural meaning originates with the ethnographer's "personal need to explain a particular phenomenon, [such as] an unanticipated outcome or set of outcomes' (p. 206) or what Adams et al. describe as "experiences that turn us inside-out" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 47). The situation described in the prologue of this introduction chapter, in which I found myself questioning the reasons behind my food insecurity in 2009, is an example of a foreshadowed problem.

Critical Incidents

Critical incidents are a central feature of autoethnographic research (Dashper, 2016; Lee, 2019; Tracy, 2019). They signify "life-changing experiences that transform us or call us to question our lives" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 26). For example, the foreshadowed problem of food insecurity led me to critical incidents that caused me to question the social, political, and cultural aspects of my experience. Critical incidents can be the source of epiphanies, which may

"motivate trauma, confusing us and moving us to sadness and discomfort, and sometimes result in a more satisfying life" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 26). As Carolyn Ellis writes in *The Ethnographic I*, "I write when my world falls apart or the meaning I have constructed for myself is in danger of doing so" (Ellis, 2004, p. 33).

Layered Accounts

Narrative accounts presented in the autoethnographies (chapters) convey the essential meanings I discovered through the processes of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data from my lived experience. These processes, which are conducted through the writing itself, are intentional, iterative, and often concurrent. The resulting layered accounts "juxtapose fragments of experience, memories, introspection, research, theory, and other texts" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 57). They reflect a realistic style of representation. Realism is one of three ethnographic representational forms along a typology offered by Van Maanen (2011) in *Tales of the Field*. Van Maanen's (2011) work was a response to a crisis of representation in autoethnography, or "break down [of] a wall that had hitherto existed between the social sciences and the humanities (Grant, 2010, p. 112).

The realistic narrative form is appropriate for the central task of analytic autoethnography, to "reflect and refract the relationship between personal/ cultural experience and interpretation/ analysis" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 57). The intention in choosing this form is to "merge the mode of representation with the researcher's voice and focus" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 84). Crafting descriptions of cultural events and practices requires studying "real people doing what they do to meet the everyday demands with which they are confronted" (Riemer, 2008, p. 217). In this craft, personal experience is "a way into, and/or a means for, describing and understanding cultural experience" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 57). The writing produces thick

descriptions of cultural life, with as much complexity and nuance as possible. The goal of ethnographic realism is to impart a sense that, as a reader, "you are there because I was there" (Clifford, 1983, p. 118). To impart this sense, I wrote rich descriptions of my experiences, using sensory detail to establish connection and resonance with the reader and build a basis of truth and legitimacy in the narrative. The weaving of descriptive accounts and scholarly analysis in the writing allows the writer and reader to 'zoom' in and out between personal and cultural scales.

The layered accounts in the autoethnographies build on the examples of Zolnikov (2018), Moriarty (2020), Holman-Jones et al. (2013), Kuehne (2013), and others who have used this structure to varying degrees. Each of the accounts bridge my lived experience (gleaned from the data) with larger social/cultural/political contexts as represented in the literature to construct meanings. The manuscripts are organized according to themes that emerged in analysis and interpretation.

The autoethnographies combine personal accounts with contextual, analytical writing about the cultural dimensions of lived experience as construed by relevant scholarly literature. Writing the autoethnography is a process for both constructing meanings and sharing those meanings with others. The narrative format invites the reader into my experience, and through that experience, into larger scholarly and societal conversations about community food systems. Each manuscript offers the reader a "preliminary understanding of the relationship between [the] piece and the researcher's broader agenda" (Riemer, 2008, p. 217). Each piece is made to stand on its own, while reading them together should provide the reader with an overall argument "specific to the setting, or may have theoretical significance that extends beyond this particular case" (Riemer, 2008, p. 217).

Garden Metaphor

Roth (2019) describes the importance of metaphor in pedagogy: “Imagery, especially metaphor, is the language that our minds and bodies speak together” (p. 72). I used the imagery of a community garden to guide my approach in the writing. As I noticed a pattern of using garden metaphors in my everyday interactions with others, I realized that thinking about this project like a garden (and about myself as its gardener) could be helpful for both the writing and reading of the research. This approach follows the example of Claire Nettle, who employs this metaphor in her writing on community gardening as social action (Nettle, 2014). The narratives can be thought of as garden plots with negotiable boundaries. In these autoethnographic ‘gardens,’ I construct knowledge by reflecting on my lived experiences; I make meaning by contextualizing these experiences against a larger backdrop of culture.

Each narrative contains elements that support the growth and development of knowledge, the ‘fruits’ of my scholarly labor. The first of these elements is ‘vines,’ or vignettes. A vignette is “a brief evocative description, account, or episode” (Oxford, 2023). These represent the *auto* in autoethnography. The word ‘vignette’ is derived from Old French diminutive of *vigne,* or vineyard. The vignettes draw from my lived experience (the ‘roots’ of my narrative) in order to convey how cultural issues such as hunger/food insecurity, privilege/intersectionality, and environmental identity connect to my personal story. As the vignettes convey my lived experience, they show how aspects of identity engage and intertwine with the social context. Just as vines are interlaced onto a trellis, the *auto* is intimately woven with the *ethno*. A vignette is also described as “a small illustration or portrait photograph which fades into its background without a definite border” (Oxford, 2023). Social identity theory provides the idea of a self that is not entirely separate from one’s cultural background - a self without a definite border. According

to social identity theory, at least part of my sense of identity is drawn from the social groups with which I identify - the social landscape or 'picture' in which I view myself (Hogg, 2003;Tajfel, 1981). The narrative structure of the vignette then becomes a tool to convey this concept—my narrative, not as a portrayal of my individual life, *per se*, but a piece of a larger cultural picture. While concerned with the *auto*, it implies/implicates a cultural meaning beyond the self.

The second element, the 'trellis' in these gardens, is the theoretical framework that supports the story as I understand it. The word trellis comes from the Latin *trilix,* having three threads. These are the social, cultural, and/or political dynamics that occur "under the surface" of the account. Representing the *ethno* in autoethnography, it supports the cultural interpretation of my lived experience, in that culture touches and shapes the self (and is touched and shaped by the self in turn). The trellis fixes my lived experience against a larger backdrop of culture, both as I have experienced it and as it is represented in other scholarly writing.

I suggest the autoethnography-as-garden metaphor as a writing device that offers a figurative perch between inside (personal) and outside (cultural) perspectives. In the auto of writing, the author/reader is situated inside the experience, looking out. The personal accounts illustrate, illuminate, or ground some aspects of the culture in which they are embedded. In the ethno of writing, the author/reader is outside looking in. The cultural interpretation offers relevant scholarly literature that contextualizes, problematizes, or substantiates the meaning of the lived experience as a cultural phenomenon, belonging to a wider social story or landscape. The vine-and-trellis imagery offers the reader a panorama view of the living, moving

phenomenon being examined, focusing on the time period of this project while the relationship of community gardening and social identity continues to grow and change.

Conclusion

This study explores the relationship of community gardening and social identity through critical autoethnography, a systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and reflecting on data from my lived experience and interpreting cultural meaning from that experience. Using a critical and social identity framework, I construct a set of layered accounts that bridge personal and cultural aspects of this relationship. These narratives are presented in three manuscripts, each offering thickly descriptive vignettes integrated with relevant scholarly analysis to contextualize and invite readers into my experience. Together, the writings demonstrate knowledge I have constructed about how community gardening and social identity relate. This work contributes a unique scholarly perspective on several aspects of this relationship including food access, intersectionality, and environmental identity. This study explores the relationship of community gardening and social identity through a systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and reflecting on data from my lived experience and interpreting meaning from that experience. Using a critical and social identity framework, I construct a set of layered accounts that bridge personal and cultural aspects of this relationship. These narratives are presented in three manuscripts, each offering thickly descriptive vignettes integrated with relevant scholarly analysis to contextualize and invite readers into my experience. Together, the writings demonstrate knowledge I have constructed about the relationship of community gardening and social identity and contribute a unique scholarly perspective on issues of community food systems including food insecurity, intersectionality, and environmental praxis. The three

manuscripts presented in this dissertation are followed by a discussion and recommendations chapter.

I still feel the desperate hope of sparing my children from the cycle of poverty that I saw looming during the transitional year (2009) described in this chapter's preface. I also remember learning in that year that the Chinese word for *crisis* is made of two characters, one for danger and one for opportunity. That bewildering year, without the support and comfort of community, revealed a tangle of problems to solve but it was also a gateway into new experiences of myself and the world. I was grasping at a life that was sustainable and whole, and I believed that food, specifically the economic and planetary systems that provided it, called for a complete system overhaul. But how do people find resilience when resilience is low? After figuring out the kids' bus routes and after-school care, I applied and entered into a graduate degree program in environmental studies. In some ways, it was a risky and counterintuitive move. But considering the alternative was to stay the course and expect things to get better somehow, it seemed worth trying. As it turned out, I received a merit scholarship with my acceptance letter, which I took as an affirmation that this was the right path to take. And indeed, that path would bring me into a number of significant experiences in the years to follow, including this research.

CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Purpose of the Study

This research used autoethnography to explore my lived experience with community gardening university-community gardening projects (UCGP) through a cultural lens. Within this context, I examined the relationship of community gardening and social identity, i.e., the influence each had on the other. The natural setting for this study was community food system efforts involving educational institutions in the Monadnock Region of southwestern New Hampshire between 2010 and 2020. As the grounding environment for my experience, this context represented a sociocultural crossroads, a set of circumstances located in time and place. It was here that I awakened to issues of food access, justice, and dignity in the larger scholarly landscape and how they presented themselves in my lived experience. To navigate the personal and sociocultural layers of this terrain, I used autoethnographic research methods of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to inform the scholarly literature of community food systems. I drew from a variety of data sources to relate my lived experiences with community gardening, as reflected through my actions, thoughts, and behaviors, with the larger social context in which they took place. Each autoethnographic account connects different aspects of UCGP with a larger cultural context in order to "critique the social situatedness of identity" (Denzin, 2006). This chapter describes how I went about this research, including steps taken, tools and techniques implemented, adjustments made, and rationale supported by scholarly literature.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography, a form of qualitative research, is the "study of a culture of which one is a part, integrated with one's relational and inward experiences" (Ellis & Davis, 2008, p. 284).

This definition, which identifies the autoethnographer as an insider in the culture of study, invites both the researcher and reader to explore social identity as a relational experience and meaning-making as an inward experience. The autoethnographer's goal is to "illuminate the social structures around which individual lives and groups of individuals claim agency and voice" (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017, p. 55). In other words, autoethnography situates the individual's beliefs and practices as a cultural insider within a larger theoretical context as a way to make sense of their reality and lived experiences. By doing so, autoethnography contributes to the qualitative research aim of "enlargement of the universe of human discourse" (Geertz, 1973, p. 14).

Autoethnographies are situated in both evidence (*e.g.,* personal, material, or conversational data) and in the culture, politics, and society that produce them (O'Hara, 2018, p. 15). Situating the research in both realms supports the researcher to purposefully ask how their perspective, behaviors, and decisions have been shaped by their sociocultural contexts (Chang et al., 2013, p. 19). This research approach puts the researcher in the role of interpreter, thus making the meaning-making of research political as well as scholarly. In this way, autoethnography enacts what Holman-Jones et al. (2013) call the politics and poetics of representation: "a way of relating to self and culture that shows how we make meaning and construct relationships on the page and in the world" (p. 39).

The researcher's interpretation conveys both *what* the findings mean, suggest, or clarify, along with why the research produced those particular findings as opposed to other possible meanings. The question of *why* is part of the frame that adheres the researcher's interpretation with a theory (Acosta et al., 2015, p. 421). Theoretical adherence demonstrates the researcher's understanding that "theory is not a transparent, culture-free zone . . . lacking any connection to

embodied, lived experience" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 184). Another way of saying this is that AE leads the researcher into "those strange and familiar situations that connect critical biographical experiences (epiphanies) with culture, history and social structure" (Denzin, 2014, p. 131).

Social identity theory (SIT) and critical theory (CT) guided the framework for this study. Social identity theory offers the core premise that an individual's self-concept is based on their membership in social groups, which makes social context "the key determinant of self-definition and behavior" (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012, p. 379). Importantly, social identity theory is not reductionist or deterministic but supports researchers to conceive "interventions that can help improve individual wellbeing, group interactions, and social relations" (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012, p. 393).

This application of social identity theory meshes well in certain ways with critical theory, where research, being intertwined with politics, is valued for its potential to change the lives of researchers, participants, and the institutions and communities where they work and live (Brookfield, 2005). By linking my experiences with my sense of self-in-social-context, social identity theory provides a way to make meaning through examining the ways my personal narrative might be connected with a larger social narrative. By questioning what my experience has to do with issues of power and agency related to class, gender, or other aspects of identity, critical theory guides me to think about patterns in my experience and question how they might be shaped by social traditions and structures, including institutions. Thus the goals of autoethnographic, critical, and social identity research support one another. This project is perhaps ultimately about exploring and expanding the use of critical autoethnography to stir change in the social structures and processes with which I coexist as researcher and participant.

Having explained the goal of this autoethnographic research, I will next delineate the boundaries of the research context and outline O'Hara's (2018) six-step process for conducting analytical autoethnography. I then describe how I integrated Chang's (2008) and Hughes and Pennington's (2016) methods for data collection, analysis, and interpretation into this overall process. In describing each step, I include my considerations for research ethics and quality taken from Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013) and Sikes (2015). I conclude the methods section by describing how my process guided the writing and presentation of findings (three manuscripts, each integrating scholarly personal narratives with relevant literature).

Research Context

Universities involved in community gardening and food system efforts generally in the Monadnock Region include Antioch University New England (AUNE), Keene State College (KSC), and Franklin Pierce University (FPU). These institutions vary in their capacities and approaches to community food systems, but each has been engaged throughout the period of this study, both directly through community and campus gardening and indirectly through service learning, research, grant-writing, and other institutional activities. Partners of these universities in local community food efforts include The Cornucopia Project, a nonprofit organization that provides garden-and farm-based educational programming; Community Garden Connections (CGC), a privately funded partnership of AUNE and neighboring service agencies that co-sponsor community gardens and garden-based education for traditionally underserved client populations; and Monadnock Farm & Community Coalition (MFCC), a coalition of organizations and individuals working to support both farm-based business and food security in the region. Cheshire County Conservation District (CCCD) is the fiscal sponsor of MFCC and also lends the use of District land for CGC students, staff, and volunteers to grow food and

conduct related research and educational programming. Food grown on that land, the Westmoreland Garden Project (WGP), is donated to The Community Kitchen (TCK) for distribution to hungry families and individuals in Keene and surrounding towns. A significant corporate partnership is C&S Wholesale Grocers (C&S), a Keene-based wholesale distributor that offers workplace gardens based on the CGC model and has employed AUNE graduate students to support C&S employees to grow produce for themselves and neighbors in need. Efforts that fall within this range of partnerships include student service learning projects, fellowships, internships, student and faculty research, farm and garden gleaning, campus gardening, and activities centered on issues of hunger, climate change, wellness, and resilience.

The time period is an important contextual element of this study because of life circumstances that informed my experiences relative to CG at that time. Between 2009 and 2019, my professional roles related to university-community gardening efforts included Graduate Intern, Environmental Educator, Community Garden Co-coordinator, Project Manager, Sustainability Coordinator, Adjunct Faculty, and Board Chair. At home and in my community, my roles included mother, environmentalist, home and community gardener, gleaning volunteer, teacher, learner and friend, among others. As a low-income, single parent family, my family and I were also recipients of food assistance such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), pantry boxes at The Community Kitchen, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Granite State Market Match (GSMM), a nutrition incentive program that provides SNAP recipients with matching funds toward purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables. These roles represent aspects of the relationship between my social identity and the social context of university-community gardening efforts in the time and place of the study.

In addition to the geographic boundary, the time period of the study is appropriate for the research question and scope. The beginning of the study timeframe is marked by a convergence of crises that impacted my household food security and catalyzed a transformational shift in my food strategies. These were the global oil crisis, national housing crisis, and departure of my children's father from our household in 2009. The end of the period of study is marked by the year that I began this research.

Process of Autoethnography

Autoethnographers ask questions about identity and experiences, especially as they relate to occupational or leisure activities (Anderson, 2011; Struthers, 2014). In my lived experience and in my sociocultural context, community gardening could be considered both occupation (directing a community garden project as a university employee) and leisure (a voluntary activity from which I derive meaningful experiences). Along with this definition, I carried the concept of culture as "a web of self and others" (Chang, 2008) with me into the research design. Extending the metaphor, my role as autoethnographer could be compared to that of a spider in that my research was about constructing a useful and recognizable pattern (*i.e.*, narratives) from the data by connecting "threads" of my experience to a theoretical framework.

To support this process, I developed a meaning-making framework that applied critical theory and social identity theory within an autoethnographic methodology. This framework guided the reflexive and iterative process of collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and interpreting those data from my lived experiences, which are presented as a set of scholarly personal narratives (SPN). The narratives serve as a bridge between personal and cultural aspects of CG, with two ends: offering my lived experience as a reflection of cultural context and vice-versa, and gleaning new knowledge about cultural context through the lens of my lived experiences.

This double aim made autoethnography an appropriate choice of methodology. The flexibility of the SPN format allowed the writing to "flow" between personal, community, and larger social aspects of CG and thus convey the meanings of my experiences across these scales.

Autoethnography works with the intertwinement of the researcher's individual narratives and the larger cultural narratives they seek to understand; in fact, these relationships are considered an asset rather than an encumbrance. My multiple positionality in the research context provided me with unique access to data as well as the challenge of reflexivity in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data. Conducting research that produced authentic and authoritative findings required a study design that relied on the fact that my research question and positionality were inextricable from my identity in this sociocultural context. Autoethnography offered a process that could accommodate and potentially even enrich relationships within my community, as it invited personal and/or professional vulnerability (Anderson, Goodall, & Trahar, et al., 2019; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016). Additionally, autoethnography was an appropriate methodological choice for complexifying social phenomena, engaging deep reflexivity, and offering flexibility in terms of choices in interpretation or presentation.

I used the methods of autoethnography to examine my lived experience with the relationship of community gardening and social identity. Through this writing I weave personal and cultural aspects of community gardening in the context of university-community food system efforts. The resulting manuscripts hybridize personal narratives with scholarly literature in order to situate my lived experiences in community gardening within the cultural landscape of university-community gardening projects. The goal of this autoethnographic writing (and qualitative research generally) is not to produce generalizable results but to lend greater nuance

and complexity to scholarly understanding in this area. A position that distinguishes autoethnography from other ethnographic traditions in which researchers remain "silent" in the background of their writing, autoethnographic texts are presented in the author's own "voice" which centers the researcher in their inquiry overtly. Though its content is autobiographical, autoethnographic research is "ethnographic in its methodological orientation [and] cultural in its interpretive orientation" (Chang, 2016, p. 46). Methodologically, autoethnography follows ethnographic convention in the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data along with the production of scholarly texts (Chang, 2016, p. 48). The following sections review the research/writing tools used in this study, which included: personal memory and archival material collection, writing exercises for collecting self-analytical and self-reflexive data, and autoethnographic interviews. These are discussed next.

Overall Process

This section describes the six-step process for conducting autoethnography from O'Hara (2018): (a) selecting an approach, (b) ensuring ethical responsibility, (c) deciding theoretical underpinnings, (d) data collection, (e) reflection and analysis, and (f) narrative presentation. I integrated methods from Chang (2008) and advice from Hughes & Pennington (2016) for systematic data collection, analysis, and interpretation into this overall process. Descriptions of each step include considerations for quality and ethical research.

Step 1: Select an Approach

In evaluating the most relevant and appropriate approach for this research focus, I considered aspects of other autoethnographers' approaches reflected in current literature. Researchers generally conduct autoethnography from either an ethnography or action research approach. Autoethnography aligns with action research when it focuses on the researcher's own

practice, which is inseparable from the setting (Herr & Anderson, 2005). This approach focuses on implementing a program or course of action and looking for evidence of change (Acosta et al., 2015; Bunde-Birouste et al., 2019; Hughes & Pennington, 2016). It thereby supports practitioners' "reflexivity, awareness, and agency" by providing an analytical framework that is contextualized by the researcher's culture (their trade, field, or workplace, for example) (Acosta et al., 2015, p. 414). The researcher's self-observation within their own social or cultural world is a matter of necessity (Bunde-Birouste et al., 2019, p. 513). While action research and autoethnography share this aspect of contextualization, action researchers/ practitioners tie the processes of planning, reflection, and evaluation to their efforts or interventions (Hughes & Pennington, 2016). Incorporating autoethnographic methods in action research can engage "community members as co-creators of knowledge" and this can be a way to disrupt the inequitable distribution of power and resources in the research setting (Chang et al., 2013, p. 146).

While I am a practitioner in my subject area, action research was not an ideal approach because I was not implementing any particular course of action as an intentional part of the research process. My process did not involve choosing, predicting, or evaluating actions or behaviors as action cycles would have called for. Instead, the essential task of my research was making sense of my lived experiences, as opposed to extracting knowledge from them that I could use for creating future experiences.

Once an ethnographic approach was chosen, I had a different set of methodological choices regarding autoethnographic technique and style. I chose two "strands" to braid in my approach, analytic and critical autoethnography. I describe these strands next and explain why they were chosen for this study along with how they fit my overall research approach.

Strand 1: Analytic Autoethnography

Autoethnographic researchers generally work within one of two divergent camps, analytical or evocative, although blends of the two styles also exist (Donovan, 2011; Maydell, 2010; Stahlke Wall, 2016). This study takes an analytical approach, while allowing evocative qualities to emerge in the writing. To illustrate the contrast between the two approaches, evocative autoethnographers write to "share in an expressive or emotional way the subjective experience" of the social or cultural phenomenon they have researched. (Bunde-Birouste et al., 2019, p. 514). Their goal is to "change the world by writing from the heart" (Denzin, 2006, p. 422). Evocative autoethnography takes form in descriptive stories or expressive performances that recount the author's subjective experience. Such texts are intended to stand on their own, favoring personal over sociological interpretation.

By basing its value on emotional resonance with the reader, advocates of evocative approaches can challenge the traditions of qualitative research; however, they may also obscure how autoethnography can "fit productively in other traditions of social inquiry" (Anderson, 2006, p. 374). In contrast to evocative styles, analytical autoethnography does not leave the researcher's experience open to interpretation by the reader but instead makes explicit how the researcher's remembered experience(s) might "combine with social science theories to construct interpretations of particular events" (Struthers, 2014). In this way, analytic autoethnographic researchers seek to transcend personal experience in order to make broader claims about the social world, and can offer supporting evidence to strengthen those claims (Anderson, 2006).

Bochner (2002) says, "analytic autoethnography looks like realist ethnography; it has the feel or lack of feel(ing) of realist ethnography" (p. 432). Ellis warns that realist ethnographers

will appropriate, or water down, autoethnography in order to get it published in mainstream research journals. She resists taming autoethnography, arguing that

> autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn't be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing. What are we giving to the people with whom we are intimate, if our higher purpose is to use our joint experiences to produce theoretical abstractions published on the pages of scholarly journals? (p. 433)

My task in delivering this work to both academic and non-academic audiences was to balance the heart-centered and head-centered work, because for each, the other is outside a certain comfort zone to be able to receive me and receive the work. To put it another way, my challenge was to bridge, to translate, and if necessary, transgress the boundaries of academic (head-centered) and community garden (heart-centered) styles.

An analytical approach is chosen for this study because it explicitly ties my lived experiences in CG to a theoretical framework, a goal that is reflected in my central research focus of exploring my lived experience in CG through a cultural lens. An analytical style makes visible the conceptual bridges between personal and sociocultural aspects of lived experience, inviting readers to consider how I have constructed them and how the research contributes to theory. Analytic autoethenography aligns with a realist orientation to lived experience(s), acknowledging that any knowledge generated in this research is constructed by me while also accepting the existence of realities outside of mine (Watts, 2017). With an analytical approach, I can also adapt my research and writing process to other experiences or contexts I might want to explore, or offer it to other researchers who might choose to make meaning of their own experiences in their own contexts.

Anderson and Glass-Coffin's (2013) key features of analytic autoethenography serve as the basis for the analytic strand in this research. This set of principles serves the research by supporting systematic data collection and by establishing criteria membership within my community, the culture of study (Watts, 2017). The key features in this analytic strand are: (a) visibility of self; (b) strong reflexivity; (c) engagement; (d) vulnerability; and (e) open-endedness/rejection of finality/closure (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). The following explains each of these features and how I incorporated them into my research process.

Visibility of self is demonstrated when the researcher distinguishes themselves from others in reference to points in the text (*e.g.,* events, relationships, or narrative turns) to illustrate their analytic insight. Visibility of self is purposeful; it reflects the author's mindfulness that "knowledge production is not self-evident and is charged with power relations" (Winkler, 2018, p. 242). This mindfulness is underpinned by the recognition that autoethnography is not a study of self alone (Chang, 2016, p. 65). Likewise, making others' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors visible (as distinct from one's own) avoids author saturation, a pitfall of autobiographical writing in which research "loses its sociological promise when it devolves into self-absorption" (L. Anderson, 2006, p. 385). I incorporate visibility in this study by practicing mindfulness of the boundaries between myself and my social context in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and by writing the manuscripts in a way that makes clear when my own voice vs. others' is represented.

Strong reflexivity refers to researchers' awareness of their position in the research phenomenon (Davies, 2002). Reflexivity means recognizing the influence that researchers and their settings, including participants, have on one another (Anderson, 2006, p. 382). It is a measure taken by researchers to mitigate personal bias that could pose a threat to the validity or

trustworthiness of findings. Practicing reflexivity in autoethnography is a continual process of self-evaluation that accounts for "the complexities of self, the Other (i.e., experiencing self from another's perspective), and context" (Acosta et al., 2015, p. 426). Reflexive awareness is supported by collaboration and dialogue throughout the research process (Acosta et al., 2015). The interviews I conducted with informants beyond the self were in large part a practice of reflexivity. The interviews are described later in this chapter. The choice to include them was guided by Anderson's (2006) advice to "assiduously pursue other insiders' interpretations, attitudes, and feelings" as well as my own (p. 389). I also practiced reflexivity in navigating choices about data collection (e.g., whose participation to invite) and representation of findings (e.g., events, experiences, and meanings I chose to include in the writing). At these points I critically questioned whether I was privileging one account over another, and if so, what implications such privilege could have for the writing/interpretation, particularly with regard to voice.

Engagement in autoethnographic research correlates with complete member researcher status (Anderson, 2006). Contrasting with the detachment and objectivity espoused by traditional positivist research, engagement with the research subject is the autoethnographer's "medium through which deeper understanding is achieved and communicated" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 75). Engagement is consistent with critical and feminist scholarship which emphasize ethical and relational dimensions of research (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Madison, 2005). As previously mentioned, my complete member researcher status positioned me to conduct this research with engagement as a key feature.

Vulnerability refers to personal or relational hardship to which the researcher may expose themselves through inquiry. While not exclusive to autoethnographic researchers, vulnerability

becomes an intentional aspect of autoethnographic research when "traveling into painful personal terrain" is part of the process of self-revelation (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 75). Vulnerability is an increasingly relevant theme in the study of academic professions (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Best, 2018; Forber-Pratt, 2015; Maydell, 2010; Winkler, 2018), the culture of community food systems work (Bradley & Herrera, 2015; Pine, 2017) and representation of individuals and groups experiencing hunger, climate disruption, and other issues in food systems research (Pine, 2017; Zepeda, 2018; LeBlanc et al., 2014; Lengnick, 2015). I embraced vulnerability in collecting experiential data (e.g., recalling uncomfortable or challenging experiences), autoethnographic interviewing (e.g., allowing the conversation to open into topics not originally intended), self-analysis and self-reflection (e.g., discovering data or patterns unfavorable to my self-perception), and presenting my narratives (i.e., risking others' disapproval, dismissal, or invalidation of my voice or version).

Open-endedness is intentional resistance to "undebatable conclusions" in research (Bochner & Ellis, 2000, p. 744). To embrace open-endedness is to recognize that insights are "captured at one point… in temporal and sociocultural contexts'' and therefore are always in progress and never perfect (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 78; Nash & Bradley, 2011). This means that no autoethnographic work is ever 'complete.' Open-endedness in research hinges on a relational and processual concept of self and society in which each is "mutably written" by the other and where each moment opens "a panoramic . . . future of possibilities" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 79). I offer open-endedness in this dissertation by explicitly recognizing that my observations, reflections, and interpretations, and even the research questions themselves are snapshots of my current understanding of the subject.

Strand 2: Critical Autoethnography

Joining the analytical strand in this project is a critical strand. Critical theory (CT) is concerned with problems of privilege and power as they apply to social phenomena. Critical researchers (and critical theorists generally) inquire about "how those institutions, communities, and individuals in power operate" (Hughes & Pennington, 2016, p. 40). When asking how issues of power and privilege manifest in researchers' own lives or how lived experiences can illuminate such issues, autoethnography can be described as "critical theory in action" (Soyini Madison, 2005, p. 15). An inquiry based in critical theory signifies a researcher questioning "the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender" as well as other aspects of intersectional cultural identities (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 29).

The most overt way that critical theory informed this project is found in the research question itself, which specifically examines aspects of power and privilege in the food system and community partnerships as they pertain to my lived experiences with community gardening. Critical theory guided my choices in data collection, analysis, and interpretation as well, namely by directing me toward methods and strategies that would support perceiving, naming, and sorting through any aspects of privilege or power that appeared in my experience. Data collection procedures such as writing exercises that drew out cultural relationships, or interactive interviews that encouraged dialogue between myself and participants, were useful in this approach. The research question, paired with a critical framework, helped determine relevant studies, concepts, and definitions to draw from the research literature as I engaged in the writing process. For example, I followed Mulvihill and Swaminathan's (2017) recommendation for life writing in critical research to a dialogic concept of self. Underpinned by the idea that time, place, and meaning-making are constructed notions, this notion of "self" lends itself to critical life

writing by opening up different perspectives and deepening interpretation (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017). Critical theory also informed my construction of meaning through the writing exercises for collecting self-memory, self-observation, self-reflection, and self-analysis data. As I went about completing each exercise, I again used the critical approach described by Mulvihill and Swaminathan (2017) as a value system to support inquiring "against the grain" (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017, p. 4). This meant intentionally seeking data that would develop nuance in my writing (i.e., data that would complexify and open possibilities for interpretation rather than simplify or "entomb" them). This intention was especially around questions of identity and intersectionality (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017).

The choice of life writing as a research method was not only practical in terms of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The presentation of the research findings (my constructions of meaning) in my own "voice" was a practice of critical theory scholarship as well. A critical approach to life writing supports my research to "address and redress neoliberal conditions that often render many voices and life experiences to invisibility or misinterpretation" (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017, p. 7).

The analytic and critical autoethnography strands were woven into the overall research process. Further steps were ensuring ethical responsibility, deciding theoretical underpinnings, gathering data, analyzing and reflecting on them, and disseminating the work. These steps are described next.

Step 2: Ensure Ethical Responsibility

The autoethnographer's position as the primary participant in their own research poses a fundamental shift in thinking about the researcher-participant relationship relative to other qualitative research traditions. The methodological idiosyncrasy required me to extend beyond

traditional framings of ethical responsibility to consider risks and benefits for myself as well as others who either contributed data through interviews or could otherwise be represented in my narrative(s). I needed to balance issues of confidentiality with meaningful and authentic representation and consider my relationship to my own data as well as the relationship between myself and other individuals involved in the research. The latter included both interview participants and others not interviewed who could be identified in my narratives. This section describes how I navigated ethical decision-making in this research within emerging ethical guidelines for AE (Andrew, 2017; Boylorn & Orbe, 2016a; Lapadat, 2017; Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017). The relatively recent emergence and ongoing ethical debate around autoethnographic methodology presents a predicament particularly for early career researchers or students who are compelled to produce authentic and original work that can also be readily recognized as valid, reliable, and ethical research by their scholarly peers.

Ethical considerations in autoethnographic research falls primarily into two categories, relational and situational (Adams et al., 2016). Relational ethics concerns the practice of mutual respect between researcher and participant. One gesture of respect I extended in my relationship with participants was to engage them as co-researchers. The intention of our conversations was to support "negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the Other's world" (Madison, 2005, p. 9). Other participants' data (memories, impressions, and reflections) were about their lived experiences but also helped me to examine mine. The interviews opened the way for me to see myself as 'Other' in my research and for participants to see themselves as well.

In recruiting interview participants, I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to invite participants with whom I had shared professional and/or experiences in community food systems

in the Monadnock Region over the ten-year period of the study. These experiences were primarily in the context of university-community garden partnerships but included other contexts as well. The first two participants I invited to conversations were individuals with whom I developed friendships through collaboration and mutual respect. These aspects of our existing relationship provided a sense of trust that was helpful in collecting useful and meaningful data. I followed IRB procedures for informed consent with interview participants.

In self-observation data collection, as with these informal interviews, I informed those participating with me in activities (such as gardening or meetings) of my intention to collect self-observation data in addition to conducting my usual professional or personal role(s). I made sure to explain that although I was collecting data on my experience, my notes might reference their participation, and that I would refrain from collecting any data if they requested. In the self-reflection and self-analysis stage, I used others' data to augment self-data and support the reflexive process of interpreting and developing meaning from the self-data. Data directly identifying participants was not presented in the narratives without participants' explicit written permission.

In writing up the autoethnographic accounts, I recalled that "our stories overlap with other stories [and therefore] telling our own stories will inevitably implicate others, whether we like it or not" (Bradley & Nash, 2011, p. 194). I followed Bradley and Nash's (2011) code of ethics for scholarly personal narrative manuscripts. This code provided a list of guiding questions that I could ask myself to ensure respect for privacy in the research and writing process.

Throughout the analysis and interpretation, I remained aware that ultimately, I was the owner of my stories, as they would be told from my perspective. This meant that I possessed narrative power that was not available to any individuals who might be represented in the

narratives, “even if those people are asked to review and respond or even add to the final product” (Reissmann, 2008, p. 198). Because authoring and eventually publishing this work would mean claiming a degree of academic authority, it was my responsibility to deal with “the epistemological and methodological implications of positionality, experiential knowledge, and narrative voice” (Butz, 2010, p. 3). The critical reflexive process required me to be especially diligent about how I might use or misuse my authority in the writing. I needed to examine the power my authorship could have since “depictions can be personally and even socially damaging to individuals and to their family members, friends and colleagues” (Sikes, 2015, p. 1).

Step 3: Decide Theoretical Underpinnings

Theoretical underpinnings for this study came from critical theory and social identity theory. Based on my review of community gardening research literature in the exploratory phase preceding this study, this choice of pairing was best matched for the research question posed. Overall, the limited existing literature on lived experiences in community gardening and on autoethnographic approaches to community gardening research indicates there is room to “answer unexamined questions about the multiplicity of social identities . . . and explain the contradictory intersections of personal and cultural standpoints" with regard to food and food systems (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016). Critical theory and social identity theory offered a foundation for moving me forward through the critical and reflexive process of making meaning of my lived experiences in the context of university-community gardening projects. This framework guided my data collection, reflection/analysis, and interpretation through writing of the autoethnographic texts.

Social identity theory offered explanatory power regarding the interaction of various aspects of identity in the context of community gardening, both within myself and with other

individuals. It enabled me to consider how certain subjective experiences (donating and receiving gleaned produce, for example) provided a standpoint from which to discern sociocultural intersections that were presented in the context of community gardening. Using critical theory to navigate these intersections allowed for multiple potential meanings to be construed from my experiences, regardless of how I might have described them at the time. I could go "back" to those situations that revealed various social identities at work and write vignettes that enacted particular ones (in this example, a higher education professional and a client of food assistance programs). Writing accounts of such experiences with social identity as a theoretical underpinning supported the practice of reflexive analysis that allowed cultural meanings to emerge.

Critical theory contributed to this research in several ways. First, it offered a foundation to critique propositions and challenge 'common' knowledge. For example, in choosing to write about the internal conflict I experienced when both a provider and receiver of food assistance (in one instance, picking up a fresh food box from the same social service agency that received donations of garden produce from participants in a project I directed) while employed at my university, I tried to problematize and connect such internal conflicts with systemic forces. With critical theory as an underpinning, the writing was about discovering oppressive systems and challenging assumptions of 'normalcy' while also forcing me to be more self-reflexive and educated about my "professional and personal socialization" (Hughes, 2008, p. 127).

Second, critical theory provided a research 'language' to make and critique research claims (Hughes & Pennington, 2016). Exploration of the self in autoethnography is 'messy' in that it defies a strictly linear approach. A critical approach recognizes that people's lives and stories are not linear by nature and questions whether they can or should be researched as such.

Bringing this critical element into the process of reflexivity involved "focusing outward, on social and cultural aspects of the researcher's personal experience, and then turning inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (Hughes & Pennington, 2016, p. 71).

Third, critical theory enabled the work to contribute to established critical social research literature by systematically identifying relationships between constructs. Writing about community gardening as a practice related to food security and access in community food systems, for example, brings an additional 'voice' to the table of food justice issues, as called for by scholars in the field. Hughes & Pennington (2016) discuss autoethnography as a "venue for unveiling and critiquing underrepresentation, marginalization, and oppression" (p. 84). Relating the ways in which my community gardening experiences helped me to see these dynamics in the sociocultural context of university-community gardening projects is a way of enlarging the narrative(s) to include as many members of the community as possible. These include those who, like me, find themselves navigating spaces and borders of privilege while simultaneously questioning how we might change them.

Step 4: Assemble and Gather Data

I collected data using autoethnographic methods outlined by Chang (2008) and Chang et al. (2013). Internal data consisted of personal memory, self-observation, self-reflection, and self-analysis data; these were written as fieldnotes. Fieldnote collection involved query, reflection, observation, and recording of activities as described by Bunde-Briouste et al. (2019). Following Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013), I collected fieldnotes contemporaneously, immediately following participant observation, or after a period of focused immersion and reflection, depending on the situation. I attempted a variety of field note writing strategies to

produce rich data as recommended by Acosta et al. (2015). External data was collected from archival materials and autoethnographic interviews, using selected writing exercises by Chang (2008). I used my personal laptop and institutional account to store, label, organize, and back up the data in digital form. The next sections describe how data were gathered and assembled. Fieldnotes are described first, followed by archival and interview data.

Internal Data Collection.

Personal Memory Data. I selected writing exercises from Chang (2008) to collect detailed data while focusing less on perfect accuracy and more on recalling my experience for the purpose of catalyzing further thoughts in the creation of meaning (Cadieux et al. 2016). Advised by Chang (2008) and Chang et al. (2013), I began each writing exercise with free-flow writing followed by reflection and interpretation later. I conducted five different writing exercises to collect personal memory data, each focused on the time and place boundaries of the research question. These were completed according to the availability of time and space that would allow me to immerse myself in the data set and be most at ease with both the writing subject and process. When possible, I collected personal memory data in the locations where activities and interactions originally occurred, such as the workplace, campus, and community gardens. Placing myself physically in those settings was a strategy to enhance my recall of sensory, cognitive, and emotional details of relevant experiences and especially the social and cultural relationships that surrounded them. This approach accommodated the subjective nature of memory and supported the goal of capturing as much detail as possible for thick description later.

In Writing Exercise 5.1, I selected major events and experiences from my life within the scope of this research and listed them chronologically. I noted dates and brief accounts of each

event or experience. Then, I selected particular items from this timeline that I could identify as having led to "significant cultural self-discovery" (Chang, 2008, p. 74). I wrote about the importance of the events and experiences with respect to their circumstances.

In Writing Exercise 5.2, I recalled activities and events related to the study context in which I participated on an annual, seasonal, weekly, and daily basis. I noted the activity and context of each routine and chose a couple to write about in detail (Chang, 2008, p. 75).

In Writing Exercise 5.5, I listed and briefly described five mentors who significantly impacted my life in the context of community food systems. I selected a couple to write about further and explained how these people have influenced me (Chang, 2008, p. 80).

In Writing Exercise 5.6, I list five artifacts that represent my culture in the time and place of the study. I wrote descriptions of what each artifact represented, and then selected one to write about in further detail regarding its cultural meaning in my life (Chang, 2008, p. 81).

In Writing Exercise 5.8, I selected a significant place that helped me understand myself and my relationship to others. I created a detailed drawing of the place that identified objects, people, and other elements that were important about it. I wrote about the place and its meaning in relation to my research. (Chang, 2008, p. 87)

Self-Observation. I used Chang's (2008) method for collecting self-observation data, which are "thoughts and behaviors at the least-rehearsed and self-regulated moments" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 78). I created a template for notes to capture time, location, and activity including interactions with others based on Chang's (2008) Writing Exercise 6.1. I observed myself in professional roles within my university fellowship and related workplace garden activities, and in personal roles such as tending my home garden and volunteering in local community food systems efforts). I collected self-observation data for an average of one to two hours per week

over the course of a semester, with a focus on details that might indicate relevant patterns developing or changing. I recorded self-observation field notes on paper or on my personal laptop according to the setting. Paper notes were later transcribed onto my laptop, where they were dated, labeled, and organized by date and subject.

Self-Reflection. As with self-observation data, self-reflection data were collected in free-form, journalistic writings about lived experiences. However, this process was about recognizing impacts of activities and events over time as opposed to facts of those items themselves. Self-reflection data emerged from examining self-observation and other data in terms of my research question (Chang et al., 2013, p. 74). I used reflection to connect observation and analysis, or essentially, to assemble pieces of the story that would convey meaning(s) of my lived experiences in-context, which was my research objective. Reflective pieces were not necessarily connected to particular people, places, or activities, but contained qualitative impressions or insights generated by thinking about them. Using Chang's (2008) Exercise 6.4, I collected self-reflection notes for an average of two hours per week over the course of a semester. To enhance the process, when possible, I wrote self-reflections in the physical places where activities and interactions noted in personal memory and self-observation data took place.

External Data Collection.

Self-Analysis. Self-analysis data was collected using predetermined forms that combined writing and chart-making. These are described by Chang (2008) as culture-grams, relational diagrams, and comparison diagrams. These data collection tools helped me to visually and cognitively identify constellations of relationships (such as social and professional networks) in the cultural context of my study. I used them to discern commonalities and differences among

the data, and think about some of those that might indicate relevant cultural phenomena or help to problematize and/or appreciate what I was seeing. In addition to self-reflection data, these analytical writings supported the construction of sociocultural meaning in relation to the research question. I used Chang's (2008) culture-gram template Writing Exercises 6.5 and 6.6 periodically over the course of a semester to document iterations of my cultural membership and identity in relation to the community food system context.

The writing exercises described above served as tools for collecting autoethnographic fieldnotes, or internal data. These included personal memory, self-observation, self-reflection, and self-analysis data. Next, I will describe how I collected external data. External data sources were textual and non-textual artifacts (archival materials) and autoethnographic conversations with others.

Archival Materials. Following Chang et al.'s (2013) argument that including archival data in autoethnographic research supports confidence in the credibility of analysis and interpretation, I included archival materials in my data collection. These data served three purposes: augmenting personal memory data, providing a basis for verifying and checking against recollections, and prompting and enhancing the collection of self-reflection and self-analysis data (Harris, 2018). Archival materials included in data collection were generated prior to the study and for purposes other than the study. I aimed for a mix of materials depicting my engagement in the research context.

Non-textual materials were documented in Writing Exercise 7.2 (Chang, 2008). These included photographs taken by me and by others, conference and workshop materials, and personal items that relate to my home garden, workplace, and community gardens. I selected

materials that represented the relationships I had developed to places, individuals, activities, and practices relevant to the research question.

Textual materials were documented in Writing Exercise 7.3 (Chang, 2008). These included works written by me, including articles, blog entries, documentation of my academic work such as assignments and reports, feedback, and correspondence. I sought exemplar materials that were particularly revealing of my experience relative to the research question or that illustrated the impact or relevance of a particular event, exchange, or moment in the overall context of the study. Textual and non-textual items were cataloged with dates, places, and other identifying information according to the template provided by Chang (2008) and adapted for my use.

Interviews. I incorporated autoethnographic interviews (also known as interactive interviews or autoethnographic conversations) to collect additional external data. Adapted from ethnographic interviews, these were conversations between myself and others, with both conversation partners participating in data collection and reflection. Autoethnographic interviews are informal, interactive interviews, also called autoethnographic conversations. This data collection method is recommended when completing an autoethnographic study in order to gather information unavailable from other fieldwork such as personal memory, self-observation, and other internal data (Chang, 2008). The external data provided by interviews gives "contextual information to confirm, complement, or reject introspectively generated data" (Chang, 2008, p. 104). Adams et al. (2015) suggest that whether interview conversations contradict or conflict with the experience of the interviewer, "the insights we acquire from talking with and listening to others can deepen and complicate our own stories" (p. 55).

The interview stage of the project was designed with the quality of participants' experience of the research in mind as well as the quality of data itself. The interviews were conducted early in the data collection process, independently of other data collection methods, to collect rich data from multiple sources. Guided by Ellis (2016) and Adams et al. (2015), the interviews were conceived and presented to participants as a conversational partnership in which research is conducted *with* rather than *on* individuals in my cultural group(s). As such, each conversation represented my commitment to a long-term collegial partnership with them, acknowledging the nature of the research process which allows and even encourages friendship within the researcher/participant dynamic. This method of enhancing trust was based on the premise that "people tell stories differently in conversation with a friend than they tell to a stranger" (Holman-Jones et al., 2016). This benefit is also intended to support the goal of critical research by expanding possibilities for possibilities to conduct co-research (Holman-Jones et al., 2016).

There were two primary benefits intended by diversifying methods and data sources through interviews. One was the contribution of data toward 'thick description' of the social context (i.e., descriptions that can accommodate multiple or all possible meanings about an occurrence or situation, including/especially those conferred by other members of the cultural group) (Geertz, 1973). The second main benefit was triangulation of data sources to enhance credibility (i.e., reliability and trustworthiness, in my reading of archival, self-observation, self-reflection, and self-analysis data; Chang et al., p. 74). Interview data augmented self-data, enhanced reflexivity, and supported the iterative process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Data collection was collaborative to the extent that autoethnographic interviews were co-led. Otherwise, collaboration was minimal, as I developed the interview questions and conducted the data analysis independently. Although the interview guide provided prompts to focus the conversation, other participants were free to introduce their own questions or contribute any topic or information of their own. The collection of autoethnographic interview data was wound into an independent, iterative process that also included self-data analysis, interpretation, and writing of the autoethnographic report. As I returned periodically to the audio recordings and transcripts of the conversations throughout the process of collecting other data (such as personal memory, archival material, and self-observation), the data offered by the other participants mingled with the data I collected through other methods. In processing these data through self-reflection, self-analysis, and interpretation, I invited their 'voices' to mingle with mine internally, so that the gathering and writing of the narrative had a collective feel, even when others' direct quotes were not used. This approach offered the combined strengths of self-reflexivity (autobiography), others' cultural interpretation (ethnography), and multi-subjectivity (collaboration; Chang et al., 2013).

Additional, secondary benefits of collaborative autoethnography include: (a) collective exploration of researcher subjectivity; (b) power-sharing among researcher-participants; (c) efficiency and enrichment in the research process; (d) deeper learning about self and other; and (e) community-building (Chang et al., 2013, p. 25). Ultimately, the interview process supported the goal of the autoethnographer to "remain flexible and open-minded about the direction of the study" (Garbati & Rothschild, 2016, p. 4).

Sampling: Purposeful sampling is a standard qualitative technique for identifying and selecting participants who can provide the most useful data within limited resources (Patton,

2002). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Through purposeful sampling, I invited individuals with whom I had shared professional and/or personal experiences in community gardening within the study context. These included one current and five former graduate students that I supervised in my doctoral fellowship, two former supervisors (one in an internship and another in a sustainability coordinator role), and one community member at a partner organization. A total of eight interviews were conducted.

Mode/Location: Interviews with participants who lived locally were conducted in-person. A theoretical benefit of in-person interviews in enhanced engagement, focus, and information gathering. Interviews with participants who lived outside of reasonable traveling distance were conducted by telephone. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to support later self-reflection and data analysis (Chang, 2008). The average length of interviews was approximately one hour.

Interview Format: An interview guide offered a uniform set of open-ended questions to focus conversations. This technique balanced standardization with flexibility to capture data that emerged in our conversations. The interviews enabled participants to provide information about the research phenomenon through the lens of their own lived experiences. Without the constraint of structured responses, participants were free to share their observations and ideas in their own words as well as any reflection or interpretation they wished to offer about mine.

Interview Questions: Please describe what you remember of our interactions during our initial involvement in community gardening together. What were our roles and responsibilities? What qualities did we bring to the experience? What did our involvement in community

gardening mean to you then? Please describe how we have changed over the course of our involvement in community gardening together. How have our roles and responsibilities evolved? What qualities have we developed along the way? What does our involvement in community gardening mean to you now?

Step 5: Reflect and Analyze

My central methodological challenge with regard to reflection and analysis was balancing a systematic and intentional approach with the open-ended nature of autoethnographic methodology (Maydell, 2010) and accepting that "there is no consensus as to whether a stage of data analysis and interpretation even exists" (Chang et al., 2013). The task of "making explicit what is normally hidden in the narratives'' (Chang et al., 2013a, p. 99) seemed fairly straightforward, but in practice, the process of "data collection- analysis- interpretation" was iterative, cyclical, and nonlinear (Chang et al., 2013a, p. 100). These characteristics were not necessarily barriers but a reality of autoethnography that I needed to account for in my process. This meant that "creative mixing of multiple approaches'' was required to gain holistic insight (Chang et al., 2013, p. 126). It also meant that regardless of my adherence to whatever methods of reflection and analysis were available, their effectiveness was potentially limited by my ability to manage the time, energy, and patience with uncertainty required of autoethnographers.

Granted both the liberty and responsibility to decide how to interpret the data, I took an essential step of accepting the idea that analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are "always emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 479). This idea correlates with the quality of open-endedness/rejection of finality/closure described by Anderson (2013). This step was essential to preventing decision fatigue due to an overwhelming multitude of

possible interpretations (i.e., fear of not coming up with the ‘correct’ conclusions). I returned to this idea as often as necessary to keep moving forward through the writing process.

Interpretation and analysis worked alongside each other like two hands of the same body. The task of analysis was essentially deciphering the “story” embedded in the overall data set (Bunde-Birouste et al., 2019). Analysis involved “segmenting, coding, classifying, and regrouping” data in order to find and describe themes, essential pieces of the story (Chang et al., 2013a, p. 98). Interpretation involved “holistic examination of meanings of analyzed data within the sociocultural context of the data and through the theoretical and conceptual lens drawn from the literature” (Chang et al., 2013a, p. 98).

Chang et al.’s (2008) system for data analysis was appropriate for analytic autoethnography, so I followed their guidance on data organization and management. This included labeling data by type, time, and source; storing data centrally, systematically, and safely; transcribing audio data; and other logistical considerations (Chang et al., 2013a, pp. 95–98). These tasks were performed concurrently with the three stages of data analysis, outlined by Chang (2008) and Chang et al., (2013): (a) reviewing the data, (b) segmenting, categorizing, and regrouping the data, and (c) finding themes and reconnecting with data. The first stage (reviewing data) entailed reading texts and documents, examining artifacts, viewing photographs, and listening to recordings. I used a macro- and micro-view as recommended by Chang et al. (2013) to take notes to capture initial understandings. For the second and third stages of analysis (segmenting, categorizing, and regrouping data, followed by finding themes and reconnecting with data), I referred to O’Hara’s (2018) recommendation on coding autoethnographic data like any qualitative fieldwork. Segmenting involved listing topics that became apparent in the review of data. I used these topics as initial codes, i.e., words or phrases

to symbolize a summative, salient, or essential attribute for units of data (Saldaña, 2013). This initial coding was followed by an iterative process of categorizing (moving coded data into groups according to topic and labeling them) and then, using the initial notes as an analytic mirror, reviewing the categories and regrouping until a manageable set of categories of topically distinct data emerges. Reducing categories to the essential minimum produced themes. As themes were identified, I thought about what they meant in terms of the research questions, what categories and details belonged to them, and how each piece of data supported, illustrated, added nuance to them (Chang et al., 2013a, p. 107). Throughout the process, I was mindful that not all the data I had collected warranted value or visibility within the ultimate findings (Chang et al., 2013); in other words, I was careful not to 'force' the themes by trying to include every piece of information available.

I experimented with MAXQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), using a small sample of personal memory data, archival materials, self-observation, and interview data. I originally selected this software based on its ability to handle multiple data types and sources, reader-friendly visual representation of data, user-friendly organizational scheme, financial feasibility, recommendation based on successful prior use by a doctoral student conducting narrative inquiry, and availability of online and text-based support. However, I found that hand-coding was more convenient in the field, supported a more intuitive process, and helped me to engage with the data more directly, consistently, and holistically.

The analytical method of "crystallization" is an analog of triangulation in other qualitative research methods for corroborating findings and ensuring trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Crystallization is a technique for discovering and sensing the variety of facets in complex sociocultural phenomena, such as contrasting perceptions about an event

(Bunde-Birouste et al., 2019; Ellingson, 2011; Struthers, 2014). By articulating how different aspects of a subject come together to produce dimensionality, crystallization supported the essential research task of identifying essential features of my lived experience and relationship(s) between them; "in short, how things work" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 16). It provided a way to appreciate and convey the subjective, mutable nature of my lived experience as a production of culture and *vice versa* (Struthers, 2014, p. 84). From there, I began the next step of sharing what I had learned through writing, which is described next. From there, I moved to the next step, which was sharing what I had learned through writing.

Step 6: Disseminate Work with an Appropriately Engaging Format.

Interweaving data collection, analysis, and interpretation ultimately led to the production of "narratively engaging and culturally meaningful autoethnography" (Chang et al. 2013, p. 126). I blended three autoethnographic writing styles for reporting the 'findings' of my research from the typology offered by Chang et al. (2013): confessional-emotive, descriptive-realistic, and analytical-interpretive writing. The confessional-emotive style offered space to "freely interject [my] feelings, emotions, and opinions" into the writing where appropriate (Chang et al., 2013a, p. 125). This form, which appears to a small extent in vignette portions of the manuscripts, was appropriate for conveying the personal significance of certain lived experience so the connection could be drawn between them and the larger sociocultural patterns of which they were a part.

The descriptive-realistic style, used more extensively in the vignettes, supported "objective, detailed, and controlled description of experiences" (Chang et al., 2013a, p. 125). I used this form of writing to build the data set and to create categories and themes in the analysis and interpretation process. This writing also helped to connect personal aspects of my lived experiences (such as the feelings, emotions, and opinions conveyed through confessional-

emotive writing) with cultural, social, and political aspects. The strength of this style is to draw readers into an experience rather than presenting it as a discrete study, which could be distancing or isolating. For this reason, I chose to present my culture in first-person voice as opposed to trying to be an "outside" observer, since "readers of the realist genre are distanced from the ethnographer who writes in the third person, as though the latter was absent from her or his study" (Grant 2010, p. 112).

Analytical-interpretive writing, the format most closely aligned with traditional research reports, was used in the remainder of the writing. This form was most useful in communicating how my findings were "explicitly analyzed and interpreted against a conceptual framework presented from the literature" (Chang et al., 2013a, p. 125).

Within these writing styles, I experimented with metaphor, described by Muncey (2010) as "structures that guide our hidden assumptions" (Muncey, 2010, p. 61). I used the metaphor of the garden to capture data, construct the narrative, engage the reader, and evoke a sense of realism. Use of metaphor is suggested by Bunde-Birouste et al. (2019) for conveying the 'story' hidden in the data. I incorporated readings of literary works based on the metaphor of the garden in my process of collecting and sorting self-reflection data.

Following O'Hara (2018), I read a number of published autoethnographic works to compare my narratives with those of others in the field, intending to understand how other authors make meaning of their experiences, present their work, and contribute to knowledge. These readings also provided options for style and structure to consider in my own presentation. While reading, I considered Pollock's (2007) description of performative writing as using the "performative I" in writing as a "messy, at times improvisational, way of resisting the dangers of sterile third person writing on the one hand and self-indulgent first person writing on the other''

(Tomson, 2011, p. 23). Exemples are Zolnikov's (2018) *Autoethnographies on the Environment and Human Health,* Boylorn's (2017) *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience,* and Moriarty's (2015) *Autoethnographies from the Neoliberal Academy: Rewilding, Writing and Resistance in Higher Education*.

The six steps outlined above—selecting an approach, ensuring ethical responsibility, deciding theoretical underpinnings, assembling and gathering data, reflection and analysis, and dissemination of the work—comprise my overall process for this research project. Each of these steps is informed by, and contributes to, the overall methodology of critical autoethnography. Having described my methodology and methods in full, I next introduce the first of the three autoethnographies (chapters).

CHAPTER III: "YOU CAN'T EACH CHANGE": COMMUNITY GARDENS, SINGLE MOTHERHOOD, AND RESISTANCE TO THE NARRATIVE OF FOOD INSECURITY

Abstract

Food insecurity (or lack of food security) is an increasing focus for university-community gardening projects (Datta, 2016; Fox, 2017; Guitart et al., 2012; Nettle, 2016). This autoethnographic research explores food insecurity as a mediating factor in the development of the author's social identity as a community gardener. The title statement, "you can't eat change," captures the dilemma of practicality over idealism that is illustrated in the author's lived experience. On a cultural level, it represents a larger set of tensions within the modern industrial food system, in which nourishing food and environments are inaccessible for those with low incomes. This inquiry uses autoethnographic methods, drawing from archival, personal memory, reflection, analysis, and interactive interview data, to construct a cultural account of lived experience with the social problem of food insecurity. This narrative describes how the author navigated critical incidents within a community system and reflects on the challenge of cultivating a livable future. This autoethnography sets the stage for the author's later involvement in community gardening as a means of responding to her situation and eventual development of social identity as a community gardener. Analysis of relevant scholarly literature is woven with narrative vignettes to contextualize the author's lived experience through a cultural lens.

Keywords: food insecurity, food access, food dignity, motherhood, community gardening

Prelude: Wednesday Community Supper

It's 2008. Food prices are spiking because oil prices are spiking, because of some power struggle among the corporate warlords, and now our weekly tradition of community supper is a point of strife. Wednesday night supper in Peterborough is for the whole community, including those of us on the outskirts, a twenty-minute drive to the church (thirteen miles, for non-New Englanders). Our nine-year-old Chrysler minivan gets

maybe sixteen miles per gallon. At over four dollars per gallon and climbing, a round trip is pushing this outing beyond economic sense. Add three kids (two in car seats and one famous for bathroom emergencies), twenty pounds of travel gear, and cold, driving rain, and the thought of leaving the house seems like nonsense. Cheaper to stay home, says their father. Boil some boxed pasta or heat up frozen store-brand pizza again.

What he doesn't understand is that Wednesday supper is more than a meal. It's the one mess in the week I don't have to clean up. It's the warm company of other humans. And it's a free meal, no questions asked, all you can eat. Scented puffs of steam waft from the serving window as batches of pasta are hoisted from their pots and poured into enormous round serving bowls. Golden spaghetti, lightly dressed with oil, ladled with your choice of veggie or meat sauce. Parmesan cheese, sliced garlic bread, crispy tossed salad, apple cider (cold in the summer, hot in the winter). Ice water in clear plastic pitchers; hot water for coffee or tea. Desserts; sometimes boxed cookies, sometimes orange wedges, sometimes lemon or spice sheet cake with sugar glaze. Cooked and served by the dozen or so long-time, gray and silver members of the volunteer supper crew.

Heavy wood and metal folding tables squeezed in rows between columns in the lower level of the church, draped with vinyl green-checkered tablecloths and set with vases of flowers, sometimes dried, sometimes fresh, sometimes paper. Worn white china dishes clink against metal utensils amidst the chatter of chairs across floors and the banter of folks in line. Residents of the brain injury rehab center and their caregivers, alongside local artists, farmers, young families like ours. On special nights, there's a box of fresh veggies from someone's garden to take home: tomatoes, some slightly cracked, or zucchini, too overgrown for slicing but fine for grating and freezing.

It's not just calories, it's community. It's the change of scene and the chance to catch up on others' lives, to belong to a bigger life. I insist we go. Damn the minivan.

Introduction

This autoethnographic account is one of three writings exploring the relationship of community gardening and social identity. Drawing on my lived experience, I interpret a series of critical incidents that led me to recognize the vulnerability of my household and community to food insecurity and the possibilities of community gardening as a means of mitigating that vulnerability. I use this exploration to illustrate how my personal narrative reflects a larger cultural narrative about food insecurity as a form of powerlessness. Constructing this narrative is an attempt to understand my social identity as a community gardener and how that identity formed in the context of struggling to provide food for my children and myself in ways that are nourishing, safe, dignified, and sustainable.

Methodology and Methods

This qualitative research was carried out through autoethnography, a research methodology that seeks to systematically analyze personal experience (*auto*-) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*-) through descriptive writing (*-graphy*) (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). Like other forms of ethnography, autoethnographies are cultural accounts based on a concept of the self as a carrier of culture (Chang, 2008). In this methodology, "authors use their own experience in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions" (Holt 2003, p. 19). Those interactions include events, actions, and thoughts, and feelings documented over the course of inquiry. Inquiring one's own lived experience involves "representation and understanding of [one's] experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge" (Boylorn, 2016, p. 490). The meaning-making process comes in bridging the objective facts of what happened and the subjective sense the author makes of them. This process involves "focusing both outwards on social and cultural aspects of the experience and inwards, exposing a vulnerable self that transcends the socio-cultural" (Coghlan & Filo, 2013, p. 124). The vulnerable self represented in this autoethnographic is focused on securing good food.

To craft this autoethnography, I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data from my lived experiences within the cultural context of university-community gardening efforts in the Monadnock Region between 2010-2019. These data are both objective (events, places, and people) and subjective (thoughts, feelings, and reactions toward them). In addition to self data (which included textual and nontextual archives, personal memory, self-observation, self-reflection, and self-analysis), I collected interactive interview data with members of my culture with whom I had existing relationships derived from the research context. I worked with

the data in a reflexive process of analysis and interpretation resulting in this writing. These processes became iterative as analysis of one kind of data prompted collection of another kind of data, which combined in the interpretation stages to produce narrative vignettes. Having introduced the context, aims, and methodology for this research, I present several vignettes that comprise my autoethnographic account.

Stealing Tomatoes

By 2009, it was becoming clearer to me and others in my community that climate change threatened nearly every aspect of our lives, from transportation and energy to public health and biodiversity. One hopeful source of security, literally outside my door, was the ability to grow food for myself and my family. One of the benefits of land ownership, our garden had provided a buffer against industrial food costs which, being tied to increasingly volatile oil markets, had been rising for months on end. It was a source of security and comfort that I was able to access until the end of that summer, when the father of my children left our young family. Without my consent, I became a single mother of three.

It was an especially unfortunate time to be without a partner. Gainful employment and affordable childcare were both few and far between, and the crashing housing bubble had sent the value of our home, our one asset, plummeting. Our son was about to enter fifth grade; our daughters would be in kindergarten. I would not have child support for at least another year. Five years earlier, with assistance from a down payment matching program and a subsidized rural housing loan, we had found a house on a hillside that we could afford, in a small town in the forested southwest corner of New Hampshire. We needed a new home because the year before that, we had fled, our kids in our arms, from a fire in our rented apartment, in the middle of a

winter night. After hopping between friends' houses for almost a year, we were finally ready to buy our first house, where we would raise our kids.

When their father left, I had to recalculate. Food was one cost where there was some help available locally, but I'd experienced enough commodity foods to know they would not sustain our well-being. My parents invited us to live with them back in my hometown, but that wouldn't have prevented defaulting on the loan, and my hometown was not a place I ever wanted to raise my kids. I figured, if I could keep the chickens, raise enough vegetables in the garden to supplement the pantry staples, and I might just be able to make it work. But with time, energy, and financial resources drained, self-sufficiency was going to be impossible in the short term. And I needed to make decisions quickly. With no child support or steady employment in sight, I had enough for about two months of mortgage and utility payments. After that, I could not stay in my home without incurring default on the mortgage and damage to my only other financial asset, my good credit.

I didn't want to leave our home, our garden, our chickens, or our community. But I was overeducated and under-employed, carrying a ridiculous amount of student loan debt, and now in a mental tailspin. The task of meeting our essential needs was daunting even on good days, and bad days brought the paralysis of a full-blown panic attack. Our vulnerability was palpable, and conditions were ripe for a catalyzing experience. I sold, gifted, and donated two-thirds of our belongings, and began saying goodbye to our beloved home, vegetable gardens, and small rural community. Two weeks before the start of the school year, we moved from our rural village home to an apartment in the capital city,

Sunday coffee hour at the church became a way to fill one meal slot each week. Between fruit, cheese, pretzels, and hummus, it was usually enough to qualify as a light brunch. It was

delicate work, though. The trick was to encourage the kids to take as many turns at the snack table as they could without being obvious. A busy crowd provided cover; fewer people made us too visible. Offering to help with cleanup was a way to "keep leftovers from going to waste" and pack some away for the next day's breakfast.

I'd never been in a community garden before someone introduced me to the one in the front of the church property. It seemed like a combination of a gardening club and a charitable project, neither of which felt accessible to me, although I wasn't sure why. There were hand-drawn signs identifying plots by families' names and a slightly larger sign for "community." People talked about gardening there as a way to meet folks, provide a community service, get outdoors, and take home some vegetables. I loved all those things, but I still didn't think it was a place for me. Someone encouraged me to harvest some nearly-overripe tomatoes that were about to fall off the vine. They insisted they'd go to waste if I didn't pick them. Yet I was sheepish about taking anything that was meant for someone else, not realizing I was the "someone else" the garden was intended to benefit. My pulse was hot. I was afraid I'd get caught. I had a ready story about looking for my son's lost frisbee, in case anyone asked what I was doing there.

"Acceptable" Foods

The preceding vignette is about the experience of feeling like an outsider in a community food system. The self-consciousness, worry, and shame I experienced were part of coming to terms with my situation of food insecurity and the realization of our reliance on the generosity of others to secure fresh, local food. The USDA defines food insecurity as "the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food" (FAO 2002). Of the four elements covered in this definition—reliability, quantity, affordability, and nutrition—affordability was foremost in my everyday thoughts and actions during that vulnerable time.

"Indeed, the idea that food insecurity results from inadequate economic resources is built into the very questions used to measure the concept [of food insecurity]" (Wright et al., 2019, p. 5). I knew that I couldn't afford the kind of food I wanted for myself and my children. I wasn't after anything exotic, just fresh, organic, local if possible. I knew it was good for our health, responsibly produced, and environmentally sustainable. I knew there were resources available in my community for vulnerable people to access food. What I hadn't come to terms with was the fact that I was one of those vulnerable people. The USDA definition used in policies to address food insecurity was inadequate because it was missing a critical fifth element: hunger is social.

Anderson (1990) suggests the definition of food insecurity as 'limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways." In contrast, food security would be "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life and includes . . . the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (e.g., without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, and other coping strategies)" (Anderson, 1990, p. 1560). The questions underlying my unease in the church's community garden had yet to be discovered. Were we *really* food insecure? If so, was it because of my insistence on *good* food (i.e., food that didn't risk my children's health, degrade the planet, or exacerbate social harm)? Or was I just too proud, too picky, too privileged in my thinking to "acquire acceptable foods"? How were "acceptable foods" defined . . . and by whom?

A Safe Place to Eat

The following vignette is about territory I encountered while navigating a part of the charitable food system. I didn't think I'd end up at a soup kitchen. I don't suppose most people do. But it would be months before I would receive any child support. So, short of putting

groceries on a credit card that I knew I wouldn't be able to pay (which would damage my credit and make things even harder when the car inevitably needed to be replaced), it seemed the thing to do. Plus, I was exhausted. The scales had tipped in favor of making sure the kids were fed regardless of the source, rather than clinging to the idea that we could make it on our own. I had even accepted a man's offer to take me and the kids out for dinner at a Chinese restaurant, not because I shared his interest in a relationship but because it was at least one hot meal, plus leftovers. Of course I did not tell my family or friends I was going to the soup kitchen. I even told the kids that this was our new city's version of community supper, just like the ones in our hometown. No that they would have cared, but my oldest was old enough that he might mention it without realizing, and then we would all be a target for concerned parties.

I had already downsized from a house in the country to an apartment in the city, just so I could work. When you're paying more for childcare than you're making at three jobs *even with* childcare assistance, food is the thing you can still get help with. I knew adjunct teaching and coordinating the lab at a community college would not be financially sustainable long-term, but I was betting the piecemeal work would lead to something more stable. In the meantime, even with my degree and skills, there simply were no full-time higher education positions to be found within commuting distance. I believed that gardening could be a pathway to good food and community, and yet the community gardens at the campuses were not enough to sustain my needs for either of these.

A soup kitchen was real food, not the commodity and WIC foods I remember getting when my son was a baby. Not having to prepare meals also meant I could keep on top of classwork, preparing for teaching, and grading my students' classwork. I also missed the company of others at community suppers in our hometown. I was not only poor in money, but

also in time, community, and spirit. But I didn't look poor. I had my work clothes on; I looked like someone with a job, not someone who needed to be at the soup kitchen. I didn't want the "really" needy people there to think I was taking advantage; many of them were obviously struggling more than I was. It was an in-between place, not entirely destitute, but certainly not out of the woods. So I changed into jeans and boots before we went.

It was Thursday. We parked a couple of blocks away to avoid paying for a meter. There was a man talking to himself on the way in. The sidewalk was icy and the night was cold. A woman in front of me was coughing and coughing. The windows were steamed from the kitchen and the bodies inside. There was hot, oven roasted chicken. Seasoned steamed veggies and warm bread and butter. I felt guilty, like someone was going to call me out and tell me this was only for the homeless people. We ate and left without making conversation with anyone.

The next week, it was a little less scary but still awkward. I talked with another couple of diners who told me their story. They were working but their medicine wasn't covered by insurance and it cost as much as rent. I missed home.

The following vignette describes the third visit.

Different town. Different supper.

The man in the apron finally emerges from behind the counter, glancing around the cramped dining room, winding back through the soup line, which never dwindles.

"We've been keeping an eye on your kids," he says, gesturing toward the other volunteers.

I start to apologize for the one playing swords with silverware, the two hiding behind chairs.

"No, no," he says, "they're fine. But you need to know . . . if you're going to keep coming for supper, there's a couple of guests who are known . . . they're not safe around kids."

Cold confusion. Followed by stinging dismay, then hot anger at our vulnerability. Another hope for feeding my children, gone.

Although I never learned the name of the man who intervened that evening, I remember his demeanor well. He made eye contact as soon as I stepped in. He spoke into another worker's

ear and then left his station in the kitchen to come talk to me in line. He stood close, like you do when you have to tell a lady in public that they have a stain on their skirt. I thought I was in trouble for taking a meal that wasn't meant for me. Instead, he explained, if I had noticed the staff keeping their eyes on me and the kids, it was because of pedophiles in the soup line. The staff weren't sure if they should mention it the first time, but if we were going to keep coming here, I should be informed and maybe reconsider. I went through so many emotions in the time it took to get the kids back into their coats and out to the car. Fear. Protectiveness. Embarrassment. Shame for putting my kids into this situation. Frustration that the problem-solving was never-ending and only seemed to get harder with each day. Gratitude for the staff. Outrage that pedophiles were allowed, that they existed. Anger at my ex-husband for leaving us to fend for ourselves. Also confusion at whether I even had a right to be angry, since I technically could have made a different choice. Resignation that it didn't matter whether or not the anger was justified because I couldn't afford to waste time on it; I needed to figure out the next week's meals.

Gaslighting the Hungry

> *Am I the problem? Am I selfish and unreasonable? Do I have an overdeveloped sense of entitlement? They say beggars can't be choosers. Healthy food is for those who can afford it. There are too many mouths to feed, they say, for me to get bent out of shape about the lack of options for organic, local, or fair-trade. In this culture where my children and I are defined by my low income, we are apparently worthy only of lower quality substitutes. Pasteurized process cheese food product: contains at least 51% cheese. Individually packaged pastries: Non-organic peanut butter: full of residual pesticides and carcinogenic aflatoxin. 200% of daily recommended sugar and so saturated with preservatives that I will perish before they do. That's not food, it's fodder. It's filling stomachs while steadily killing us and the planet we share. I don't identify with this culture that degrades food, degrades people, degrades the environment for profit. This culture reduces food from a living, life-giving, sacred gift of the earth to a market commodity, produced and controlled by corporations. Who and what is this food system actually made for? And why do I have to be rich to change it?*

Buck-McFayden (2015) states, “a family does not need to be at the extreme end to experience occasional issues with securing food. Food insecurity does not necessarily mean hunger any more than poverty implies homelessness” (p. 4). Wright et al. adds, “culturally based preferences for foodstuffs that nearby grocery stores and food outlets don’t carry” are legitimate factors that cause people to be insecure (2019, p. 5). Critical scholars also point out the social myth, “naturalized in mainstream discourse and opinion,” that charity alone will solve the problem (Buck-McFayden, 2015, p. 4). Charitable food efforts are an essential resource upon which many people rely, but they are products of the same industrial food system that created the very groups these efforts are trying to serve. Buck-McFayden (2015) asks, “How often do we [in a position to help] ask *why* there are so many hungry people or how such an enormous problem can seem so remote and invisible?” (p.4). She adds that “in order to understand the dynamics that sustain and foster inequality in the ability of people to eat, we need to move beyond a superficial portrait of food insecurity” that is based on richer people’s pity or perceived shortcomings of the poor’’ (Buck-McFayden, 2015, p.4).

> *Call me crazy, but I think fresh, local, soul-nourishing food that’s raised and shared in harmony with people and the planet is a human right. And yes, I want everyone to have it. And yes, I understand that desire flies in the face of bootstrap capitalist, individualist, good-enough-for-my-pappy culture. It’s not thrift and ingenuity I have a problem with. But have we stopped to look at why food that is healthy, responsible, and just is inaccessible to so many? Sure, I could sacrifice my values for a paycheck large enough to keep my family from going hungry. But that doesn’t solve the long-term problem of food injustice and doesn’t even begin to address the cultural and environmental damage that commodification of food has wrought. I could grow more of my own food. There are millions of reasons why everyone should start growing their own food right this second. But not everyone can. Lack of land, lack of time, lack of community and resources are real, structural reasons why that’s not an option for many folks. We’re not going to garden our way out of these problems . . . or are we? The right to good food and the means to sustain it has to be built into the entire system. There’s a Yankee saying, “use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without” . . . Why are we wasting this chance? It’s time to dig in, do the deep work. Turn this concrete into soil and make room for something life-giving.*

Conspiring at the Cafeteria

While living in the city, I had part-time jobs at multiple community college campuses. The logistics of work and childcare alone were staggering. Community suppers that we used to attend in our hometown were now almost an hour each way. Even if I could afford the gas, I couldn't balance the time. Every trip increased the chances of needing a repair that would leave me without transportation and unable to work. The one meal per week at the soup kitchen was no longer a safe option, and I hadn't yet learned that SNAP wasn't just for people living with disabilities or homelessness. The woman who handled billing at the childcare center told me I should be getting state benefits and encouraged me to apply. In the meantime, I was also trying to be environmentally conscious, and there was food being wasted at the end of every day at the cafeteria on campus. So I figured I'd ask a food service employee if they'd consider letting me have the unserved food off the line. The worst they could say is no.

The first person I asked didn't know how to answer me. They referred me to the manager, who would be in the next day. I came back when the manager was working and proposed the environmental angle, so if the thought of feeding a beggar was unacceptable, they could think of it in terms of the contractor's goal to reduce waste. The manager was respectful. They empathized. They told me they recognized that this was probably a difficult thing for me to ask. They also said this was a difficult position for them to be in, because although they'd like to help me and reduce waste, the food safety procedures and corporate policies were unyielding. They were afraid of getting fired. But after some thought, they said I could come once a week, at a specific time. I'd have a ten-minute window. I'd need to bring my own containers. In case it was a night they weren't working, there would be one other person working the line who would know who I was and what to do. They even asked if I had any food allergies.

I was nervous about leaving the kids in the car at dusk in the parking lot, a two-minute walk from the building. The first evening, there was steamed corn, which I took to make chowder. Another time there was pasta, but I declined because pasta was something I could already afford; I was looking for protein, healthy fats, nutrient-dense foods that weren't in my budget. At first I said no to the meat sauce and taco filling, but in order to broaden our options, I more or less gave up on being vegetarian. One night I was given an entire pork loin. It must have been eight or ten pounds. I made a stir fry and a chili and froze the rest. I wanted to thank the manager when I left that job. I went in on my last day, but they weren't there, and I didn't want to leave a note that would implicate them.

In *Women Redefining the Experience of Food Insecurity: Life Off the Edge of the Table,* Janet Page-Reeves (2014) describes how the dinner table, as a symbol of everyday food experience, is "profoundly influenced by processes, activities and power relationships that perhaps appear only indirectly related to the food itself" (Page-Reeves, 2014, p. 4). She refers to these phenomena and the people experiencing them as "off the edge of the table" (Page-Reeves, 2014, p. 4). Every time I visited the campus cafeteria to take food for my kids, I wondered what I had done wrong to end up "off the edge." Even though I knew all that food would have gone to waste otherwise, even though my taking it never caused actual harm to anyone, and even though a diet of ramen and boxed surplus cheese would have been worse, I lived in constant fear of being judged as an imposter, an offender, a loser, and a bad mother.

However, "those problems which many women once considered to be their fault … have come to be seen . . . as problems which are structural and therefore political" (Mills, 1997, p. 79). Understanding the individual experiences of women as socio-culturally and politically contextual is represented in the feminist slogan, "the personal is the political" (Mills, 1997). As a mother

and environmentalist concerned for my children's long-term wellbeing, I wanted to provide them with not only nourishment but an appreciation of good food, the knowledge of how to grow it for themselves, and through eating, the experience of building and belonging in a community.

Hiding Hunger

I knew that if I had asked my family for help, they would have come through. Several reasons prevented me from doing this. First, I didn't want to be a burden on others. I knew that my needing help would alarm them with concern for my ability to provide for the youngest members of our family. Second, it was too big a risk socially to reveal our struggle with securing food. My family or friends might have insisted that we move in with them, back in my hometown, or else call social services and get my kids taken away. That particular fear may not have come true, but it was a real possibility in my mind. Both of these fears stemmed from the social stigma of hunger. "Stigma is a sharp, poisonous undercurrent that runs rampant in the lives of the hungry and food insecure in the United States and yet one that is concealed and underestimated (De Souza, 2019, p. 3).

I could have gone to a food pantry instead, where there was anonymity to protect me from being judged or pitied, but I genuinely thought such places were for people who were homeless or disabled. I had an apartment, a job, a vehicle, and my physical health, so it didn't occur to me that I might be entitled to that sort of help. Second, even if it had, there wasn't enough time between work and day care pick-up to run over to the food pantry. If there had been evening hours, it would have meant leaving them alone or taking them with me, neither of which felt safe or practical. The mental and emotional labor required to navigate the logistics of acquiring food while working, parenting, grieving, acclimating to a new place, and trying to find friends who could offer trust and understanding, was all a stretch beyond my capacity.

I knew it was physically possible to survive on ramen noodles, peanut butter, and dented cans of veggies, of course. I was not too proud to eat this way. But I was aware of the harm posed by industrial food additives, pesticides, and highly processed ingredients, especially for young children. I was especially wary of persistent organic pollutants in foods like conventional dairy and peanuts. As a mother and an environmentalist, I could not find this way of eating "acceptable." If only I had been able to keep my garden at home, I could have grown our own good food that would not only fulfill our nutritional needs but benefit our planet and community. Good food seemed out of reach except for those who already had the benefit of an adequate income. What was it about the American food system that kept good food out of reach for me and so many others? It was making me sour.

"You Can't Eat Change"

For most of my life, I never doubted the story that commodifying and industrializing agriculture would create a more plentiful, fair, and efficient food supply. Yet the cracks were starting to show as alternative food movements called those problematic assumptions into question and brought attention to the failings of the global food system. What I was experiencing was both personal and cultural. The following is an abridged conversation between myself and several community members on social media. This was a couple of years into my doctoral program, and it started with my post about a dilemma in seeking a service learning position related to food justice.

> *ME: I'm looking at this year-long position in community food systems that pays $18K/year. Going by the 30% of income rule, the monthly rent I could afford is about $385, about half the cost of a studio apartment. Subsidized apartments aren't taking new applicants because waitlists are full for three years. Am I expecting too much? Am I a fool for following a calling that will benefit people and the environment instead of 'working for the man'?*
> *COMMUNITY MEMBER 1: Jess, I think you are a wonderful person but you make impractical choices that will never offer a financial return on investment. I am unclear as*

to how having a doctorate will benefit anyone if it can't support you, never mind your family. Consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs. You believe strongly about what you do and I respect that, but to choose something that will only make you poor and forever indebted doesn't make sense to me.
COMMUNITY MEMBER 2 (responding to COMMUNITY MEMBER 1): Wealth disparity, throughout history, has been the inspiration of revolution. Those who would support the status quo only further the cause of the selfish and greedy to the detriment of society. While you might think you are making 'wise' choices, what you are doing is commiting your children to a world of increased unrest and violence as society tries to balance. If we do not support social change ushered through service to humankind we will continue to social destruction ushered by selfishness and greed.
ME: What does it say about our society that people must choose between financial stability and following their call to work for social good? Why must these be mutually exclusive? People are reaping obscene profits by ravaging the planet and riding on the backs of slaves, while mothers, teachers, healers, service workers, people who grow the world's food are living in poverty. That's hypocritical and disgusting. I have a hard time when the poor are blamed for making stupid decisions when the deck is stacked.
COMMUNITY MEMBER 3: Money IS what success is measured by because without it you can't eat or keep a roof over your head. In the era we live in you have to take a job that can pay the bills. You can do what you love as a hobby. It's a matter of doing what you have to, before doing what you want to.
ME: Growing food, educating, and building community are not hobbies. I am doing what I can to make a better world for my kids, not by improving my income, but by improving food systems so they can provide greater equity, wholeness, and health. The status quo isn't sustainable.
COMMUNITY MEMBER 3: That's great in theory, but you can't eat change. Wholeness that might' happen someday isn't going to put a roof over your heads. Sadly, you can't make the world a better place by being homeless and starving to death. To survive, income is first, dreams are second… Again, sad.

Hold My Beet: Gardening as Story, Story as Resistance

I wanted to dismiss the community member's argument that "you can't eat change," although I understood where they were coming from. Wright et al. (2019) speak to their point about long-term vision vs. short-term needs: "the world obviously depends upon industrial-scale farming and international systems of transportation to feed its population—that will remain true for centuries. . . . In the short term, the cause [of food security] is hopeless. And the problem with the long term, of course, is that one in seven American households is food-insecure *now"* (Wright et al., 2019, pp. 19–20). I wanted to make my community members believe, as I did, in a

story of something better beyond the current industrial food system. As I thought about defending that vision, though, I knew they had given me something important to consider: "Ironically, community food security does not address the food security issue. It is about cultural change, not about feeding today's population. It is a utopian vision, not a concrete plan to reduce food insecurity on a scale of years or decades (Wright et al., 2019, pp. 19–20).

Over the time period that followed, my academic and professional work shifted from teaching life science classes at the community colleges to educating and facilitating sustainability and food system projects. Before these critical incidents, I had no imperative to reflect and recognize how intimately the everyday personal struggles of food access and food dignity were connected to larger issues of culture and political economy. Yet as individual and global circumstances converged and crashed into my personal life, challenging my underlying beliefs about food security and resilience, I found that I could no longer afford to ignore them. The problem of getting enough healthy food week after week was the tip of the iceberg. I ultimately decided I had to understand the underlying dynamics of food systems as a whole so that I could find a way for my children to not have to repeat the hardship themselves. That imperative precipitated the decision to enter a graduate program in environmental education, and that is where my path toward becoming a community gardener began in earnest.

Conclusion

This research is about exploring how my social identity as a community gardener both informs and is informed by the context of my community and culture. It digs into the relationship between my identity, the identity of a community as it is enacted in the practice of gardening, and the wider cultural aspects of community food systems at work in the garden. It is about understanding the cultural dynamics of these systems through the lens of my own experience and

offering a way for readers to see themselves within those systems as well. Readers are invited to critically examine the implications of living with food insecurity on social identity and community gardening and to find resonance with their own personal narratives within the larger cultural context of food systems.

When I encountered hunger in 2010, I struggled to understand why, as an educated, determined, and creative person, my efforts toward a self-sustaining life seemed so futile. There was a dissonance between my experience and my ideas about how the world worked that I could not reconcile with my existing story. Though I had a beginner's awareness of outside social, political, and economic forces at work in my culture, I sensed that most of it was outside my control. I needed to understand what factors might be within my capacity to change. To survive in body and spirit, I needed a story that would help me to see the meaningful actions that could support life. The life I envisioned was not only for myself but for the community and culture in which I yearned to belong.

Claire Nettle (2014) describes the power of stories as a tool for changing the future:

> Stories, like good compost, can nourish a community and prepare the soil for future developments. . . . These provide sustenance, legitimation, a common language and frame of reference, and a way to pass on knowledge and experience. Stories help to create shared commitments and identity. They place the minutiae of everyday social movement practice within larger themes and narratives, making meaning and sustaining involvement (Nettle, 2014, p. 25).

The term *food access* recognizes that not everyone has the same food choices available to them and that being able to access food that meet one's cultural, environmental, and economic needs is a sort of privilege. Our industrial food system wasn't built for everyone. It is a myth, based on privilege, that eating well is a matter of making the "right" choices. One of the teachings of environmental education is that not only is simply informing people on the environmental impacts of behaviors not enough to promote environmentally "responsible"

behaviors, in fact it can reinforce issues of environmental privilege. People in Flint, Michigan, know they shouldn't drink contaminated water, but short of uprooting and starting new lives elsewhere, which is beyond the capacity of most people in underprivileged groups, most have no choice but to use bottled water, despite the environmental cost.

This critical research hints at a counter to the notion that "you can't eat change." The dominant narrative about the industrial food system says that it delivers efficiency, even though our dominant systems are incredibly wasteful. It says that it offers convenience, but that is an illusion because we are shielded from seeing the people and ways of life that are destroyed in the process of commodifying food. It leaves out the labor, the land, the water, and the energy it takes to deliver single-serving processed packaged meals to our doors. This dominant narrative is so pervasive that we don't consider narratives that might have been, or still could be.

Food is more than an assemblage of chemical substances the human body needs to survive. Food has personal, historical, social, and cultural meanings. Food is an expression of who we are and what we value. Therefore, systems that create more food choices for some and fewer food choices for others are not only inequitable, they are oppressive, because they limit the expression of identity. My story is part of the dominant narrative in many ways. By shining a light on it, questioning it, I'm writing a different story, living it as I go. What is the narrative I'm trying to change? The narrative that the dominant global industrial food system is unstoppable. I have to believe it's not.

The critical offering of this research is (a) recognizing that we are part of a cultural narrative, (b) questioning who is served and who is harmed by that narrative, and (c) suggesting that as carriers of culture, (Chang, 2008; Custer, 2013; Levkoe et al., 2019), we are capable of changing the culture of community food systems by changing ourselves. "You can't eat change"

is a narrative embedded in the current condition of food systems which locks us into a narrow view of reality and limits our potential to carry out a new one. The counter-story in this research suggests that we as individuals and we as a culture are more than that narrative. What if the reason we don't have more folks becoming community gardeners and farmers is because folks don't have a way to "see" themselves there? What if there were more stories like mine in circulation, to help that vision become more accessible? What if we could, in fact, eat change? What would it taste like? Would it satisfy us? Make us hungry for more?

In my attempts to secure food for myself and my children without revealing our situation, I put myself and others in uncomfortable and potentially risky situations, and this is because of the cultural shame about food insecurity that I had internalized. Compared to other places where I had sought good food within my means, the community gardens seemed like safe, inviting places to access not just *enough* food but *good* food, the kind that nourishes one's social, personal, and ecological needs. It is my hope that sharing my story might encourage others to share, and listen, and that this can help to heal the shame perpetuated by the dominant social narrative about hunger. I hope sharing my voice helps broaden the field for others' voices who have been marginalized. It is also my hope this paper contributes to a narrative of hope that we *can eat change.* It is possible to envision a food system where people don't have to choose between eating and living in alignment with their environmental values and where they do not suffer materially, socially, or personally from dehumanizing food policies. In time, it may be possible for people to eat freely without negative value judgments assigned for eating, say, artisanal, organic, vegan, fair-trade, non-GMO, dolphin-safe, cruelty-free granola for hippies. Maybe we can just call it granola.

CHAPTER IV: THE IVORY TOWER AND THE GARDEN SHED: NAVIGATING PRIVILEGE AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY GARDEN PROJECTS

Abstract

A growing body of community food systems research focuses on the dilemma of providing food security and food access for vulnerable community members while also addressing issues of power and privilege among organizations involved (Bradley et al., 2018; De Souza, 2019; Gaechter & Porter, 2018; Hargraves, 2018). University-community gardening projects (UCGPs) are a type of community food system effort and provide an appropriate context for exploring the experiences of community gardeners with different kinds of power and privilege based on social identity. This critical autoethnography examines the relationship of community gardening and social identity. The author uses her lived experience to make sense of the larger cultural tensions of UCGPs as she navigates everyday situations of belonging to more than one social group within them. The research deals with intersectionality in the author's overlapping and sometimes conflicting identities in this context (i.e., provider and recipient of food assistance, educator and student, researcher and subject). It examines how that context is negotiated through code-switching between academic, corporate, and poverty settings. It inquires what those behaviors indicate about the culture in which they take place and suggests they are connected to "the burden of stigma that people who are raced, classed, and gendered face at the intersections of these identities in their attempts to manage hunger and food insecurity" (De Souza, 2019, p. 3). Autoethnographic vignettes bridge firsthand accounts with critical analysis of relevant scholarly literature to contextualize, problematize, and construct meaning of lived experiences.

Keywords: privilege, stigma, intersectionality, community food systems, community-based research, service learning, higher education

Prelude: Boots and Baskets

It's 7:00 am and I need to leave the house. From April to November, I can count on at least one change of attire in the workday, which could bring anything from a slide presentation in the conference room at our university partner's corporate offices to shoveling compost onto the garden beds, to setting up a luncheon for our community's low-income residents. My Prius is my pass as an environmental educator and it is also my farm truck. A typical load includes a laptop, a camera, a folder of workshop surveys, a stack of banana boxes for delivering vegetables from the garden to the food pantry, a basket for my co-op groceries, a crock of soup for campus soup day, and, by late afternoon, three kids who will be hungry after school. Changing my shoes, changing codes, changing versions of myself.

I can get away with farm boots on campus; students in the environmental studies program are known as tree-hugging, smelly hippies. But I cannot track mud into the office of the senior director of community involvement. The Danskos are in good repair, blend in with the other professionals, and don't give me away as a poor student. No one will know or care that I got them for free at the campus recycle room. But it's going to be wet gardening day, so I'll need other footwear for the Board meeting tonight. I might be overthinking things. Tall brown leather boots with only a slight heel; they go with everything and won't stick in the ground when it's damp. They are coming apart at the seam, though, and I don't have time to repair them. Better pack extra socks.

Introduction

I became a community gardener over the course of ten years of participating and leading garden projects in campus, workplace, and community settings. Becoming a community gardener was a process of planting both literal seeds to grow food for myself and others and figurative seeds to grow knowledge about community food systems. This critical autoethnographic research explores my lived experiences with community gardening and social identity in the context of university-community gardening projects (UCGPs) and how those experiences reflect larger issues of cultural difference and open questions about institutional privilege, intersectionality, and equity in community food systems (Andrée et al., 2016; Levkoe et al., 2018; Pine & De Souza, 2013). This research examines how experiencing community food systems from multiple angles of identity was useful to understanding those systems as a whole.

In the sections that follow, I describe key events along that journey and what they have to do with the relationship of community gardening and social identity. The narratives present interpretive vignettes of my lived experiences, drawn from personal memory, self-observation, self-analysis, self-reflection, textual and nontextual archival data, and autoethnographic interviews. The vignettes are woven with analysis and interpretations of scholarly literature to frame and contextualize the narrative.

How to Look Like a Community Gardener

The prelude of this chapter, a vignette about a day in the life of a community garden scholar, reflects the reality that "each of us as researchers occupies multiple positions that intersect and may bring us into conflicting allegiances or alliances within our research sites" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 44). To provide some context for this episode, I was a doctoral student with a fellowship position that involved directing a workplace gardening project between

2015 and 2019. The project was formed through a partnership between my graduate school and a large corporation in the same small city as part of a larger regional initiative to increase local food security and climate resilience through community gardening. Unbeknownst to the employee gardeners, their employer, and the university staff (or to most, at least), was that even while I was leading the project, I was among the same social group within the community that their efforts were meant to serve: low-income, food insecure residents struggling to access fresh, ecologically and socially sustainable food.

Previous to taking this role, I was a sustainability educator at another university in the region. While employed there full-time, I was able to feed myself and my children fairly well, although navigating the modern American food system as a single mother frequently involves impossible tradeoffs between factors like nutrition, affordability, seasonality, convenience, waste, and carbon footprint. However, once I committed to full-time doctoral studies, my fellowship stipend—which I was quite fortunate to have earned—placed my household within a thousand dollars of the poverty line. I was fortunate to have the intellectual, physical, and lingual capacities to navigate the annual applications for housing and energy assistance, Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and federal free school meals for my kids to make ends meet. I often wondered how people without these advantages made it through the year. Yet, with fellowship funding not guaranteed from one year to the next and often not decided until well after I had enrolled each fall, and the acute food insecurity I faced during my Master's program still a very fresh memory, I would not rest easy. Community hunger, food access, and related issues of environmental justice were more than academic interests for me. They were entwined in my everyday experience. They were my reasons for gardening, cooking, and advocating for local food, even (or especially) when the economics didn't work out.

From the time my first child was born in 2000 through the first year of my fellowship (2015), food insecurity in the United States had risen from 10.5 percent to 12.5 percent of households (USDA). It is a well-documented injustice that "poor households, single parents, and communities of color are disproportionately affected" by food insecurity and that food injustice drives and exacerbates health disparities, "thus violating the basic human rights of individuals" (De Souza, 2019, p. 3). While I (along with 93% of the population of the Monadnock Region) identify as white and cannot claim to have experienced food inequity based on race, I have, for the majority of my adult life, been a single parent of a poor household. I also fall into other, less visible social categories that experience disadvantage based on ethnic, spiritual, and sexual identity. Primarily, though, it is my identity as a low-income, single mother that is most relevant to being food insecure. For that reason, this is the social identity centered in this autoethnography, which examines my lived experiences with university-community gardening efforts.

On a personal, day-to-day level I was trying to decide what shoes to wear and what to pack in my baskets each morning. On a cultural level I was trying to navigate between the different organizational and institutional cultures that were interacting within my community food system. I didn't have a name for it at the time, but I was engaging in a sort of socioeconomic class code switching. Code-switching refers to modifying one's appearance or presentation as a way to adapt to a social context and be more acceptable and legitimate to a social group. It is a strategy to "avoid validating negative stereotypes about [one's own] group or calling unwanted attention to [oneself] (Cooks-Campbell, n.d.). In the context of queer and trans people of color (QTPOC), code switching is described as "constant, background labor that is often invisible to heterosexual, cis folk" (Holden, 2019). Translated to my identity as a poor,

single mother, code switching was part of the constant, background labor, often invisible to people with more wealth or household support, to hide my vulnerability to food insecurity. Sometimes, though, it was my identity as an academic that I wanted to hide. If someone volunteering at the line for food at the pantry recognized me from my work with the university or our corporate partner, how could I keep my presence there from looking poorly on the organization? These questions reflect the difficulty I encountered at times in navigating the dynamics of social identity and privilege in my community food system. They reflect the idea that "the postmodern/postcolonial conception of a self and society is one of a multiplicity of identities of cultural displacement, and of shifting axes of power" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2).

This autoethnography examines issues of intersectionality and privilege in regard to university-community gardening projects. Questions that inform this autoethnography are: How does identifying with multiple social groups influence my perception of power and privilege in university-community garden efforts, and how does it complicate the experience of local food access? To what extent did gardening in the context of a university-community partnership reinforce, reinscribe, or reiterate the existing power structures? In what ways did gardening resist or help to unravel those structures? Could I at least say that my lived experience made these structures visible? What supporting data could my lived experience offer that would help to make sense of these issues?

Seeds Germinate Underground

> *Reflection:* Ex umbris ad lucidem: *a university motto which translates as "from the darkness into the light." In the metaphor darkness is ignorance, while light is wisdom. But this is wrong. The seed, which stores the memory, the instruction, the knowledge and sense to grow, germinates under the dark cover of soil. The roots draw up the water and nutrients from below, where there is no light. The light eventually provides energy for growth, but if the grower is not rooted in the earth, it cannot survive. The whole institution of education denies the very origin of literally all life—the muddy, dirty dark.*

Prior to becoming a doctoral fellow and directing the workplace garden project, I was a sustainability educator at another university in the region. As part of a first-year exploratory course on composition and campus culture, I facilitated campus conversations about food and the environment. The students and I learned that many faculty, staff, and administrators were unaware of how issues of food insecurity and food justice affected undergraduates. My position gave me the ability to organize students to build a food garden and to make it an educational feature of the campus; yet did not, itself, lend the capacity to make growing food an enduring part of the campus culture.

Administrative leaders there had talked about defining the "DNA" of the university; there was a sentiment among faculty that the institution, like higher education itself, had lost its soul. I wondered why I had been invited to the room. Did they see sustainability the way I did, as a grounding philosophy, vital to all our interests? Or was it an extracurricular activity, a crowd-pleasing buzzword that would draw tuition payers into their priority programs, a marketing strategy? Were they genuinely interested in advancing sustainability, and would they provide a space for the sustainability council to advance it? I think it was obvious to everyone that I wanted to make a difference at a deep level, and I think sometimes that might have been threatening, in part because the university activities that brought in the most income—namely, athletics—were the same activities that caused the greatest negative environmental impact.

I had worked with the communication faculty and students to develop a sustainability communications series, but wondered how far it would carry. I worked with the freshman seminar faculty to plan and implement a collaborative educational series with class discussions, surveys, compositions, and presentations on campus and at national and regional conferences. But I wondered what change was effected long-term. I presented on my trip to an international

academic sustainability conference in Iquitos, Peru in 2014, sharing photos of the environmental and social justice issues that we talked about and read about in class as distanced observers, issues that the people of Iquitos live, breathe, and eat every day. About four people came to the presentation, while the bleachers at the athletic fields across the drive filled up for the afternoon game.

I talked with a colleague about our time working together on the university sustainability council, and about knowing that when I left the position I would be leaving the campus garden behind, and hoping people would pick up where I left off. She reminded me that "you can't just plant the seeds and walk away." She was right. Famed gardener and author Liberty Hyde Bailey also said, "a garden requires patient labor and attention. Plants do not grow merely to satisfy ambitions or to fulfill good intentions. They thrive because someone expended effort on them." Tending the garden was a lot of work, but when I thought of all it represented, it was worth it. The garden was a "living laboratory" for demonstrating practices of sustainability. It was a space for students, faculty, and staff to gather that wasn't a classroom or dining hall but where conversations could be sparked about campus culture. It was full of opportunities for community service activities, celebrations, research projects, and yes, growing food. It was a visible symbol of the university's commitment to climate action, social justice, and an "education that matters." Not everyone placed the same symbolic value on the project, though; it wasn't a truly integrated part of the campus culture.

Reflecting on the conversation later, I realized that to sustain the effort, it wasn't enough to plant gardens; we needed to grow gardeners. It was difficult to find people willing to take ownership of the garden when they didn't see an identity for themselves in the garden already. Becoming a gardener wasn't an overnight process. It took time, patience, and guidance from

others. The physical skills of growing a garden were one thing; there were videos and workshops and classes on how to build compost, trellis tomatoes, and pinch basil. In the meantime, understanding oneself to be a gardener was an internal process, hidden, often, even to the person becoming the gardener. Jubas and Seidel (2016) inquire, "How do we see and experience both visibility and invisibility of our knowledge, our selves, and our work?" (p. 62). Just as many of the external skills of gardening often required people to grow at the edges of their comfort zones, the process under the surface could be uncomfortable, especially in an institutional culture where gardening was still a fringe experiment, and especially without a guide.

I reflect later:

> *And then there are the hidden places, the ones we can't contend with because of the limits of our perception. We might sense "something" beneath our feet but not be able to access it. There are always things ready under the soil, waiting for the moment the light touches them. A friend I interviewed reminds me of this when we are talking about our work. I am the gardener but also the garden. The garden isn't such a separate thing from me. I plant myself there. I imagine I am a seed. I remember that I need good soil, water, and light. As the gardener of my story (which is my plot in a greater garden of culture), it is my responsibility to know what I am capable of (and what I am not), what I need to do (and what I do not). I can flourish in the right environment. I tend the work as I am the work.*

Intersectionality vs. Invisibility

In 2016, the second year of my doctoral program, the College and University Food Bank Alliance, National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness, Student Government Resource Center, and Student Public Interest Research Groups published a joint report on student hunger based on a survey of students at thirty-four community colleges and four-year colleges in twelve states. They found that 26 percent of students experienced low food security and an additional 22 percent of students experienced very low food insecurity (Dubick, 2016, p. 15). The study compared rates of food insecurity across groups based on race, ethnicity, and parental education (with higher rates reported among groups traditionally marginalized in higher

education), but it did not specifically address students' own parental status, even though single parents are among the 74 percent of students considered nontraditional (Dubick, 2016, p. 9).

During the year of the report on campus hunger, a small food pantry for students was started near the student lounge, and community soup days became a semi-regular tradition. Similar efforts were happening at other colleges as awareness of students' food insecurity was starting to become a focus of campus conversations. Most often, the pantry had dry goods such as canned or dried soups; fruit cups, granola bars, graham crackers, *etc.* Perhaps because the campus was slightly more culturally diverse and/or curious than the surrounding community, there were sometimes items from the "ethnic" aisle of stores such as quinoa, dried seaweed, or exotic spices. I always looked forward to soup day because it made visibility safe. Eating soup with others felt like loving and being loved. The pantry and soup days were visible expressions of care that our campus started to address student hunger, even while "food insecurity among students is [still] considered faceless, has no standard image, and is often silent" (Henry, 2017, p. 6). Housed in a common eating and gathering area, these meals brought visibility to the problem that "amidst the clanging of industrial, entrepreneurial, and political interests, there is a complete erasure of those at the bottom of the food system—people living with hunger and food insecurity" (De Souza, 2019, p. 50). I wondered who else took from the pantry, and who else dropped items off.

Now, research is being conducted to understand how sudents' identities affect their utilization of free resources (Tanner et al., 2023). Participatory action research is being used to engage students as co-researchers to address campus food insecurity (Brand, 2023). Students are moving the conversation beyond food access to food sovereignty (Darby et al., 2023) and transforming the food system (Evans, 2023). The conversations are expanding to include the

particular ways food insecurity affects women as well as staff and faculty (Osiecki et al., 2022). Models for addressing campus food insecurity are popping up all over, like seed swaps in the spring.

Campus Gardens

The campus garden was situated between the back of the gas station and the parking lot of the university, and yet it had the feel of a welcoming, green, informal courtyard. It was a place to nibble peas while working on a group project, a place to learn how asparagus grows while getting to know students from other parts of the country, a place to weed and reflect. One summer, I brought buckets and buckets of strawberries and chives from my home garden because they had gotten out of hand. The next summer, I brought hundreds of tomato seedlings that had volunteered from the compost because I couldn't stand any going to waste.

The campus garden was framed as both a food access and climate action project. In our work with community groups, advisory members and graduate students supporting the garden efforts always said that community gardening is "one part garden and three parts community." I wondered to what extent the constructed and perceived boundaries of the campus left out some groups it was intended to serve. There was clearly an intention on the university's part to be as responsive to community needs as possible. Yet, very few community members who weren't students or faculty came to the educational workshops offered in the garden. Those who did come would express thanks to the students and faculty for opening up 'their' garden and expertise to the community. The gratitude was sincere, but also indicated an insider/outsider dynamic. There was always more work to be done toward a truly inclusive institutional culture and imparting *sense* of shared ownership if not *actual* shared ownership of the space and the knowledge exchanged there. Yet in practice, this framework never fully appeared; instead, I

observed that the campus garden was widely perceived as a space for students. It was a laboratory for our learning; but it was not quite food justice because it maintained its neat edges.

Community gardening contained the strongest assets of our community as well as the most tender vulnerabilities. As a graduate student I had the benefit of a modest stipend for helpting to coordinate food garden projects that benefitted community members from underserved groups. I was receiving the benefits of training as an environmental educator and learning skills of growing food, which would benefit me and my kids, and I was developing professional networks which would hopefully serve my future career. I was in a position to make a meaningful difference in the local food system, which felt very personally rewarding. Yet I also felt self-conscious in conversation with community members that participated in our workshops. I didn't want to come off like a condescending academic. I often wondered whether our providing community gardens was perceived as charity or solidarity. I wondered what our community partners would do with the gardens if the university's involvement were to lessen. I struggled with how we could build a sense of trust and reliance long-term when students kept appearing and disappearing from the community every year or two.

The Community's Gardens

I remember the first community garden I worked in. It was a lovely green area with perhaps a dozen raised beds in a low-income apartment neighborhood. I had never seen so much kale in one place and had never seen raised beds that high. They were built to be accessible for people in wheelchairs, and they were beautiful. The grounds and surroundings did not look like the idea of low-income housing that I remembered from the town where I grew up, with broken toys and junk cars discarded along the road along with people's sense of pride. Some community members were obviously very familiar with the plants and tools and had a lot of enthusiasm for

sharing the garden with the students. Other community members were never present, because they never came outside. Still others would walk past, say hello, perhaps stay a while, but shy away from planting or pruning, half-joking that the plants would die if they touched them. The garden was tucked back a little from the road, protected, and there was no sign to indicate who or what was growing there, but it had a communal feel.

I remember wondering, Who actually claims ownership of the garden? What does this garden mean to the people who garden here, or to the larger community? As a garden coordinator what is my role or value here? In 2010, to support my graduate degree, I took a work-study position with a student-led organization within my graduate school that was formed as part of the city's climate action plan. Though community gardening was its explicit purpose, and many of our activities did, in fact, involve people in community gardening, the organization's underlying intention was to fortify local food systems through partnerships between the graduate school and agencies serving vulnerable populations locally. Our work involved facilitating garden-based learning in community settings such as recreation centers, schools, and low-income neighborhoods. Most projects consisted of a few raised beds that were accessible for people with varying physical abilities. Getting to know the people who were growing food in the region offered the chance to experience food systems not only as ecological and economic systems but as social systems as well.

Whereas my initial interest was food security and climate change, these projects added the dimension of social interdependence and resilience. In terms of programs that we delivered in the community, gardening was only partially about growing food. Behind that surface was the intention of creating spaces and sharing skills of social and ecological resilience. We were leading and teaching about the value of gardening in addressing climate change, hunger, and

social justice, while getting paid to learn. As I applied myself to learning about theories of environmental education and earning the credential of environmental educator, I was quite literally digging into the issues through the practice of community gardening.

While course readings and class discussions dealt with topics like traditional ecological knowledge, learning styles, and cultural competency, the practical matters related to growing food to sustain well-being were very real for me and for others on the ground. The gardens addressed a small portion of the community's household food security needs through occasional handfuls of fresh vegetables for gardeners. Their larger purpose was to be an extension of the university campus. The gardens were a sort of open laboratory for graduate students to experiment with community leadership and develop their skills as environmental educators. I didn't know to what extent the community members we worked with were aware of this benefit for us, or to what extent it mattered to them, but I wondered if they felt that we were doing charitable work on their behalf, or if they considered us members of their community. In reality, it was probably a bit of both, but that wasn't something I felt comfortable asking them directly. And although it was interesting and enjoyable work it was still, at the time, essentially a means of getting myself through graduate school. I did not yet have a strong sense of belonging in those community gardens, and didn't identify strongly as a community gardener, even though I was being identified as a community gardener by my peers in social and professional circles. Still, even when I was urged to take some extra peas or zucchini home, I felt uneasy about it, almost fraudulent, in the sense that I didn't consider them mine to take. I think the uneasiness came from a mindset that community gardening was, in fact, charitable work.

Food justice scholarship is a response to prior work on local food and alternative food movements which "drew on white imaginaries of an idyllic communal past, promoted

consumer-oriented, market-driven change, and left yawning silences in the areas of gendered work, migrant labor, and racial inequality" (Slocum & Cadieux, 2015). It provokes questions about fairness in the sharing of risks and benefits across the entire food system, including growing, distributing, accessing, and eating (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010). The "race- and class-conscious analysis" of food justice scholarship "expands that of the food movement to include not only ecological sustainability but also social justice" (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011, p. 6). By framing food insecurity as an issue of social inequality, the food justice movement recognizes that alleviating food insecurity requires more than personal responsibility and individual empowerment. Otherwise, community gardening and similar efforts to provide food for vulnerable populations are about food justice in name only, because they are too narrow to be helpful to those who could benefit. Campus-based efforts, for example, may be less effective or even misguided if they are "neglectful of the structural causes of food insecurity and hunger" that such projects are proposed to fix (Holt-Gimenez & Patel, 2009; Passidomo, 2013).

Workplace Gardens

Returning to graduate studies again in 2014 as a doctoral fellow and director of a workplace garden project, I found another layer of meaning in community gardening. My doctoral coursework was supported through a fellowship that was created in a partnership of my university, a small, private institution with a mission of social and environmental justice, and a large wholesale grocery distributor, both based in the Monadnock Region. That work engaged employees and their families in organic gardening and related educational, wellness, leadership, and charitable activities at their workplaces. In that and other capacities, I rooted an identity as a community gardener, someone who cultivates both food and community through the intentional act of gardening.

During my doctoral studies, I directed a workplace garden program that engaged employees in growing food for others in the community who experienced barriers to food access. People I worked with often mentioned the ways that community gardening was meeting needs inside and outside their work, such as ameliorating isolation and stress, promoting healthy environments, and the satisfaction of doing something tangible to address local hunger. At the same time that I was teaching about growing and sharing food as a social and cultural practice, I was being drawn to the significance of food as a means by which people identified themselves and one another. Presumably unbeknown to the university or employee gardeners, I was sometimes also the "other," eligible to receive the produce grown in such programs due to my low-income status. I noticed how access (or lack of access) to fresh food was a signifier of one's place in a community. I saw how community gardening both bridged and highlighted social differences. I began to see connections between community gardening and social issues everywhere I went. I wondered what this web of relationships meant for me.

A large, locally-based corporation was our community partner and they were supporting my fellowship. The employees who grew the food in the gardens needed guidance, encouragement, and leadership, and as the fellow, I could provide that. I wanted to do work that would serve the community, but to me that meant primarily the beneficiaries of the garden produce. The employee gardeners were already seemingly in a better social position, with full-time salaries, health benefits, access to childcare, and so forth. Their lives were stressful, but so were the lives of food pantry clients. The workplace garden project represented a meeting place between cultures. It bridged between academic and corporate ways of doing things, and it bridged between people living comfortably and people living in poverty.

Even as others referred to me as a leader in sustainable food systems, I was often struggling to sustain myself. In some ways, I was in social categories that were privileged: I was a member of an academic institution, a property owner, a speaker of the dominant language, and not living with a disability. In other ways, I was at a social disadvantage: a single parent, reliant on food assistance, economically at risk of homelessness, having challenges with mental health, and in other ways belonging to marginalized social groups. The situation of being both in a position to help others and needing help from others made me self-conscious. I became aware and uncomfortable with the dichotomy between giver and recipient.

Autoethnography is used by researchers to "question the binary conventions of a self/society split, as well as the boundary between the objective and the subjective" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). I am questioning the binary conventions that distinguish the community from the gardener and suggesting that the community and the gardener may be two visible manifestations of the same phenomenon of community gardening. I am beginning to understand them as embedded parts of a living and reciprocal relationship. I am using the community garden itself as the literal and metaphoric space in which to explore this dynamic.

I was now gaining experience in community gardening, and my work and everyday life now presented me with new opportunities to look at my position within a larger culture and reconstruct my theories of what growing food was all about. Critical theory is "defined by the problems of privilege, power, and economics… questions how those institutions, communities, and individuals in power operate" (Hughes & Pennington, 2016, p. 40). As critical theory deals with issues of power/privilege, it asks who benefits from the system, and why; it makes visible the assumptions, so they can be questioned. Critical research considers whose perspectives/voices are left out or oppressed; it supposes there is a larger social/cultural context

for everything that happens, including how we see (or don't see) ourselves. Community gardening became a way of knowing myself and my community. I was beginning (and am still) growing into an identity as a community gardener.

Serving Community Food Systems

Working with campus and community gardens led to co-programming with a nascent coalition of organizations in the region that wanted to address larger challenges related to sustainable farming and eating. I was asked to join the coalition and soon had a leadership role. One of the projects of the food access working group was to gather community input to inform actions like advocating for food policies or seeking funding for projects that addressed community food security.

I would be looking for data I could quantify, such as percentages of people in a given population who were food insecure or lacked access to outdoor growing spaces, in order to determine an appropriate scale for a community garden program. Someone in the conversation would bring in a story of an individual, family, or even a whole town that has been experiencing food insecurity; they were offering experiential data that could not be quantified but was so much more real and compelling than their demographic or statistical significance. Or I would hear a local farmer speak about their experience of trying to bring good food to people while hanging on to their land, their health, and their time, and how the economics of local food were stacked against them. I was drawn to this experiential evidence, to the human and ecological significance. But I also realized I didn't know what to do with anecdotal data because they were "just" stories. In those quotation marks. As though stories weren't legitimate data.

But a person's experience is not less valid just because there isn't a large statistical sampling. It's an injustice to dismiss the story of someone's experience. I wondered why I had

previously devalued this kind of qualitative data about people's lives. I think it was because I didn't realize that I even have a story to tell. I wondered how many others in my community never thought of their stories being unique and valuable and worth telling. This was a critical question, of who is left out of the story, and how that harms or benefits the work.

These inside/outside experiences were most striking to me in the physical and cultural spaces of community gardens, particularly those involving universities, where I navigated social identity the most. This context provided me with a unique position from which to observe, practice, and reflect on community food system issues like food security, food dignity, and food justice from multiple angles at once. I wondered about issues of power and risk in these relationships. As Herr & Anderson (2017) state, "in making explicit the tensions we experience as researchers in our varying roles and statuses, we have the possibility of crafting uniquely complex understandings of the research question" (p. 55). Community gardens became spaces where different aspects of my social identity interacted internally within myself and externally with my community.

The importance of understanding the story of our culture was starting to become apparent at coalition meetings. Whether it was for improving local food access or navigating the social dynamics of workplace gardening, inevitably, in trying to understand what we needed to do, we first needed to ask what we were doing well, and what could we do better. When we were reflective, this process brought us back to the question of what was the *nature* of the problem. The answer to that question forms the basis for answering the next question, which is our collective capacity to solve it. To approach this question wisely, we have to dig deeply, and it takes time and trust. Often, we try to approach a cultural problem with a technical solution.

Sustainability efforts are less successful when they fail to take into account the history, culture, and identity of people and places.

Food Insecurity, Stigma, and Privilege

Social research strongly suggests that food insecurity is not a natural consequence of individual failure or weakness but a preventable condition resulting from systemic injustice that is driven by powerful sociopolitical influences (Brown & Brewster, 2015). Yet, there remains pervasive social stigma and shame associated with food insecurity and receiving food assistance. Individuals who are stigmatized when characteristics or traits are attributed to them that convey a devalued social identity (Goffman, 2009). Goffman (2009) described stigma as deeply discrediting. This common social narrative about food insecurity keeps people locked out of access to good food, not for lack of its availability but due to the internalized shame ascribed to needing help from others. In a 2017 study of food insecure Americans who chose to go hungry rather than seek relief from food pantries, nearly all participants "hid their hunger from colleagues, friends, relatives, and even the people they lived with" (Zepeda, 2018, p. 243).

Who does stigma serve? De Souza (2019) argues that "stigmatizing narratives about those who are hungry and food insecure—that is, poor people, women, and racial minorities—serve to uphold and legitimize the unjust food system." She uses the term *neoliberal stigma* to refer to "a particular kind of Western and American narrative that focuses on individualism, hard work, and personal responsibility as defining attributes of human dignity and citizenship" (p. 3). She explains that the problem of stigma does not lie with people who 'fail' to embody this narrative, but that "when people do not live up to these parameters, for reasons out of their control, they are marked as irresponsible, unworthy, and 'bad citizens,' creating the 'Us and Them' phenomenon" (De Souza, 2019, p. 3).

Reflection: Whoever is telling the story about the food system and the people in it, matters to the story. I remember being in coalition meetings with a group of collaborators, talking about ways to help people in our community experiencing food insecurity, knowing I AM one of those people. I remember the discomfort, even knowing I'm with people who want to do their best, people who are generous and aware and maybe even have experience with food insecurity themselves. I remember wondering what other experiences were in the room with me, what other memories and feelings, biases and blind spots. Did I trust the situation enough to be vulnerable and share my experience? I remember a sense of injustice that arises whenever people who aren't struggling with an issue talk about that issue with detachment, like it's not literally a hungry child in their face. I remember being struck at how food insecurity so strongly signifies a person's social position that other aspects of social identity are shadowed. Society privileges those who have secured the means to access healthy quality food, but privilege is not authority. To have authority, to be authoritative, is to be the author of one's self, one's own narrative, one's own experience. That's what the coalition was trying to do by gathering community voices of hunger. But it was so hard, bringing those voices to the table.

De Souza (2019) says the injustice of the food system is not only that people go hungry but that the unjust food system system is fixed in place through neoliberal stigma. She points out that assumptions about hunger, which are not grounded in facts but are socially constructed, cause real harm in that "in time and with repetition, they become real in people's minds… sedimented in policy and therefore impact people in material ways" (De Souza, 2019, p. 44). De Souza suggests looking at the "political economy of stigma… at the point of intersection of culture, power, and difference" so that stigmatization can be understood "not as isolated phenomena, or expressions of individual or cultural attitudes, but as central to the constitution of the social order" (De Souza, 2019, p. 51).

Garden Grids and Messy Edges

Formal, pristine gardens irk me. Images of precisely trimmed edges, classical architecture, courtyards, fountains, straight rows, perfection. Whose idea is it to have a garden like that? They are meant to invoke a sense of grandeur, fitting of royalty, like cathedrals. In a garden like that, you're out of place if you're not wearing a top hat or carrying a parasol or whatever is Victorian. They are meant to symbolize culture, but I find them ironically devoid of culture because they are so ordered and staid (sedate, respectable, unadventurous - Oxford dictionary). They are inaccessible. You can't touch them, you can't run around in them. Everything is controlled, predictable, uniform,

> *sterile. Not like nature at all. Not like a community. Not like me. Gardens like that do not exist where real people live. As much time and energy and money goes into maintaining them, what is their real worth to anyone but a certain kind of person? Do they feed anyone? Do they provide anything other than to satisfy the garden owner's vanity? I can't love a garden that leaves the body to starve. The rest of us can't afford to spend all that labor on a pastime, an artistic statement. Our gardens are worth something more. Our gardens are worth our labor, our bodies, our time, because they are for our livelihood, our families, our community. If gardens are expressions of who we are and what we're about—if gardens are culture—then what kind of culture should we be working toward?*

The gardens at corporate offices, about a mile from downtown, are raised beds in regular rows and columns. The grid of rectangles resembles a spreadsheet. In fact, the site coordinators use spreadsheets to map the plots and track which plots belong to which employees. The grid formation also mirrors the cubicle farms inside the office buildings where the corporate employees conduct their assigned work, and the warehouses where the order pickers and inspectors move about at 90-degree angles throughout the work day.

The gardens at the second office building are 10'x10', 10'x20', or 20'x20' plots sectioned off within a 100'x100' square. The whole garden is surrounded by tall wood posts and wire fencing, and the plots are sectioned off with stakes and string. The garden is just off the road, at the edge of a lovely field that is viewable by the company owners and their guests. Two nice sheds are tucked up against the trees and the compost bins are tucked beyond them, visible from the garden but not the houses or road. As long as compost is thought of as garbage, it will continue to be hidden and unpracticed.

The gardens at the northern warehouse across are also sectioned off plots within a rectangle. After a couple of failed seasons trying to grow in raised beds shaded by huge pine trees, the workers moved the gardens to a narrow section of turf between the chain link fence bordering the one parking lot and the chain link fence enclosing the covered walkway from the other parking lot to the office section of the warehouse. It was technically a fire lane, so the

workers knew that if emergency vehicles needed to respond to a building fire or flood, their garden would be gone, but they took the risk and planned accordingly. They would fight the tenacious weeds of Vermont's lower Connecticut River Valley, do without a permanent shed, and keep their garden in the ground. They build trellises to support the tomato vines against the wind tunnel. They saw the potential in this homely patch and turned it into something quite alive and homemade.

The community gardens a few miles north of campus were organic and welcoming. Patchy fields of brassicas intermixed with onions, a very handmade-looking tomato trellis, a triangle of blueberry shrubs, places to sit. A short walk down to the Connecticut River, this was a completely different flow from the workplace gardens. Moving between the growing areas was a kind of dance, with curves and surprises around the corners, and it felt wonderful to garden barefoot. Fruit trees provided shelter for birds and shade on hot summer days. Hugelkultur beds were stacked with cascading squashes.

Experiencing the contrast between the styles of gardens, and the kinds of interactions between people and groups that each style encouraged, helped me to see that community gardening was a way to express environmental identity. The different styles of the gardens correlated with different ways information was shared in them, and about them. The corporate garden spaces had no natural meeting spaces; they were obviously designed for productivity, efficiency, and manageability just like their corresponding indoor spaces. They did not actively suppress creativity, but they didn't invite it, either. And one garden plot could be easily substituted for another just as easily as an employee could be fired and another hired to take their place. The student gardens were at a former teaching site for county gardening programs, and before that, a former prison site. The intention of healing and community building was visible in

the structures and layout of each area. They were a physical representation of community intention.

> *Academia prefers a kempt garden. Institutions maintain knowledge traditions in gated structures like buildings, departments, journals, subscriptions. They are the gates and fences and 4'x8' beds that contain and direct intellectual growth, teaching conventions of writing and thinking which are orderly and therefore legitimate. No weeds in a proper garden of knowledge. Enjoy the foliage but ignore the roots and the soil that clings to them. If community-based research were a plant in the garden of research traditions it would be those weird cucurbits in the practicum garden at the former prison site, the bastard offspring of cross-pollinated squashes and cucumbers growing haphazardly without IRB approval inconveniently sprawling outside the planned rows.*

Food justice scholars call out food system work that stops short at issues of access and inclusion without examining the "interlocking structures of oppression, such as capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism" (Kepkiewicz et al., 2015, p. 99). Kepkiewicz et al. (2015) argues that ignoring the power and influence of institutions effectively underwrites neoliberalization and produces half-measures. For example, urban agriculture projects have been presented as "filling the void left by the 'rolling back' of the social safety net" (McClintock, 2014, p. 148). As community groups are already operating in impoverished conditions, their capacity is limited while institutional and governmental entities maintain privilege. Cumbers (2018) describes how community gardeners in degraded urban areas are particularly susceptible to exploitation as economic conditions create lower land values and pressure on public service infrastructure. He points to how regenerating neighborhoods "effectively and unwittingly advances the interests of the private development agenda in preparing places for . . . gentrification" and how that effect is harmful to communities when "exchange value trumps social need and use value" (p. 135). By this argument, while a community garden or other community food project may enhance access to healthy food for some, it is a workaround and is

not enough to advance food justice as it does not change the economic and social conditions that impeded access to begin with.

Scholars concerned with food justice argue that their struggle is not only about adequate food but about agency, power, and voice with regard to how food is produced, distributed, consumed, and recognized as a right of community and culture (Horst et al. 2017). Stoecker et al. (2009) discuss the "unheard voices" in university service-learning courses. They problematize the exploitation of poor communities as free sources of student education, critique the charity model of service-learning as reinforcing images of community members' helplessness, and describe how differences in organizational cultures of universities and partners exacerbate communication barriers and detract from both student learning and community benefit.

Conclusions

Prior to entering doctoral studies, as a sustainability educator, I came to understand others' experiences with food through facilitating dialogue with campus and community members and establishing the university's first campus garden. As a board member with a nonprofit coalition of farm and community organizations centered around our local food system, I considered how issues of power affected community members' participation in local food system efforts. Through these different angles of participation, I developed appreciation for the complexity of that work. Volunteering, working, and serving with community gardening, farming and gleaning programs gave me a cultural experience of the landscape of the Monadnock Region that I may not have encountered otherwise. Within the larger community food system, I was both a board member for a coalition working on issues of local food and farms and a recipient of food assistance. I was an educator and a student, a professional and a mother, a beginning homesteader with environmental values, a leader and a friend. Each social

identity carried its own responses to conversations, motivations for being involved, and interpretations about what it meant to be a community gardener. Each social identity showed me and guided me through a particular dimension of experience within my own community food system and within my own culture.

Passidomo (2013) calls for scholarship which "focuses explicitly on the ways in which institutional structures and systems . . . can exacerbate broad injustices, including limited food access" (p. 89). Beginning with the ways food insecurity and food access have shaped my involvement in university-community gardening efforts (and vice-versa), this exploration of community gardening and social identity reveals a narrative that is both personal and political. Its hope is to illustrate some of the tensions and opportunities concerning power and privilege in community food systems efforts involving higher education institutions. It is about questioning the capacity of higher education to deliver on its promises, realizing its limitations, and waking up to my assumptions. As a sustainability educator, I agree with Escrigas (2016) that "we need a new conception of human progress that recognizes the interdependence of the economic, social, political, and environmental spheres . . . [and that] this requires rethinking the mission and practice of higher education, from curricula to research, as well as how higher education institutions interact with society, from the local to the global level" (p. 1). Higher education leaders should consider "how power imbalances can be addressed when mainstream institutions —with their expert cultures, academic priorities and neoliberal economics and incentive structures—partner with social movement organizations and actors" (Anderson, Binimelis, et al., 2019, p. 523). In other words, thinking like traditional academics will only get us so far. Lived experience can be a bridge between theory and practice.

A commitment to critical education is key for the future of food and agriculture and social transformation. Indeed, critical learning may be a prerequisite for deepening the transformative vision and praxis of social movements. For example, as the momentum for agroecology as an alternative paradigm for food and farming grows, so have the risks of co-optation and re-alignment with productivist, neoliberal and corporate-controlled farming (Anderson, Binimelis, et al., 2019). Critical education is, more than ever, necessary to understand how to stay rooted in a transformative perspective for food, agriculture, and human values. An education for critical consciousness can also help create linkages and solidarities between different social movements by fostering new dialogues that reach across boundaries in meaningful ways. Such an educational process may indeed be required to create synergies across movements struggling for food sovereignty, environmental justice, feminisms, climate justice, degrowth, or racial justice—for example. (Anderson, Binimelis, et al., 2019, p. 521).

This research uses my status as an insider/outsider of several social groups involved with CGU (e.g., donor and recipient, educator and student) to look at the ways these groups interact, and reflects on what those interactions might say about the challenges/opportunities for CGU as cultural work. It was interesting and sometimes challenging to be in the position of evaluating, leading, educating, and presenting efforts to grow food in gardens for others, when "others" included myself. At various points I found myself engaged in gardening as an act *with, for,* and *of* community. Exploring this positionality through the lenses of social identity and critical theory reveals an ecology of relationship with food, community, and culture that is complex, dynamic, and ongoing. I make meaning of the experiences of frustration with the limitations of HE institutions to confront privilege in food systems, empower those whom it intends to serve, and provide all community members with meaningful opportunities to enact cultural change. I

have come to see myself and other community gardeners as both social actors and subjects of social forces within and beyond the walls of our cultures.

At the beginning of the study timeframe (2009), community gardening was an experiment to try to gain some control over my food destiny; a strategy to eat in an environmentally and socially conscious way without going hungry. I was attached to the outcome. I thought of myself as a vulnerable but resourceful person who was fighting food insecurity, environmental destruction, and social isolation in one shot by growing my own food. But community gardening was still an activity, a strategy, a means to an end. I didn't think of myself as a community gardener, or even a gardener, or even someone who *could* garden, in part because I *wasn't* gardening and didn't have (or didn't know I could have) access to a garden. By the end of the study timeframe (2019), I thought of myself as a community member *and* a gardener and therefore a community gardener. People were calling me that and I also felt it, sensed it, knew myself to be that. Community gardening was no longer simply a means to an end, it *was* the end, the harvest, the meaning.

The explanations I present are works-in-progress and therefore incomplete. They are a result of a reflexive process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data from my lived experience from the light of my local sociocultural context and the wider context of community food systems. The result is a woven construction of personal narrative and a larger social narrative (reflected in scholarly literature on pertinent community food system issues). The hope for this work is that it contributes knowledge to community gardening scholarship in a way that imparts it with greater complexity, reflexivity, and relevance to the everyday experience of food systems, and that it demonstrates a way to create cultural meaning that others can adapt to their own contexts.

CHAPTER V: WRITING WITH A SHOVEL: GARDENS AS COMPOSITIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL IDENTITY

Abstract

This autoethnography explores the ongoing, reciprocal relationship of community gardening and environmental identity through a series of garden metaphors. The research explores the author's identity as a community gardener as a form of knowledge that emerged through community gardening. The use of metaphor is intended to bridge personal and cultural meanings of community gardening. The research weaves narrative, reflection, and relevant scholarly literature to contextualize the author's lived experience. A core idea within the narrative is that just as a gardener grows a garden, the garden grows the gardener.

Keywords: community gardening, environmental identity, environmental education, environmental praxis, place

Introduction

The commitment of critical autoethnography is to "becoming and embodying the change I seek in myself and in the world" (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 235). This research uses the meaning-making tool of metaphor to convey what I have learned about environmental identity through community gardening. By presenting my lived experience as a community gardener through a series of autoethnographic accounts, this research intends to "imagine and accomplish an inquiry that might produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently" (Lather, & St. Pierre, 2013, p. 653). As Ellis (2016) described in an interview, narratives of lived experience are about "bringing a qualitative perspective to your work but then presenting it in a literary way so that it is readable and evocative for people who might not be in the academy." In addition to exploring environmental identity and its relationship with community gardening, this

research is a form of experimentation with the ways knowledge is grown, distributed, and accessed.

This account shares what I have come to understand about the relationship of community gardening and environmental identity as it developed in the cultural context of the Monadnock Region, where I have lived for just about 20 years and worked professionally in teaching, sustainability, and food systems for most of the last ten years. To some extent, the cultural meaning I have attributed to my personal practice of community gardening is about trying to live and grow in alignment with my environmental values. Trying to sustain myself, my family, and my world in ways that are true to my environmental self, as my sense of self is inextricable from a sense of connection with the living systems of this earth.: Community gardening has been a "seedbed" for understanding environmental identity. A metaphor is useful to communicate how culture is infused in my everyday experience, influencing how I think, engage with the world, and even who I know myself to be.

Environmental Identity

For the purposes of this research, environmental identity is defined as:

> a sense of connection to some part of the nonhuman natural environment, based on history, emotional attachment, and/or similarity, that affects the way in which we perceive and act toward the world; a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are. (Clayton, 2003, p. 45–46)

Environmental identity is associated with community gardening in a number of studies related to pro-environmental behavior, health and wellness, environmental education, and social action. (Hawkins et al., 2013; Kiesling & Manning, 2010).

Environmental Praxis

Praxis is "knowledge derived from and expressed chiefly in practical or productive activity, as opposed to theoretical or conceptual knowledge" (American Psychological

Association, 2022). Freire (1985) argued that meaningful engagement with the world does not stop with study for its own sake but is concomitant with responsibility to act to create a more just world. To me, this means bringing an idea, something that exists in the darkness of the mind, out into the physical world, into the light. The relationship represented in the term praxis is like the relationship presented in the germination of seeds, the bearing of fruit, the harvesting of potatoes. It is like May Sarton says, “without darkness nothing comes to birth, and without light nothing flowers.”

Walter (2013) theorizes community gardens as pedagogical sites in the food movement, building upon social movement learning in adult education to emphasize the capacity of community gardens to foster learning about food, self, place, and ecology. “In community gardens, individuals might learn not only about farming, food and culture, but also about science, ecology and environmental sustainability” (p. 529). Hou et al. (2017) found community gardening offered benefits for ecological knowledge including farming, food security, and urban sustainability practices (p. 24–25, 163–164).

Anderson and Cook (1999) identify a common feature of movements around community food security is an emphasis on locally grown food, community gardens, sustainable agriculture and similar solutions to replace factory farming and carbon-intensive distribution systems. As a graduate student, researcher, and educator within the institution of higher education, I spent a lot of time feeling frustrated that we don’t practice enough what we preach. I likely spent a thousand times more breaths on writing, evaluating, surveying, planning, and coordinating than I did on implementing, getting my hands dirty. A sustainability plan is only a document. It’s meaningless without action. I felt like the words I put on the PowerPoint presentations at conferences and the emails and newsletters and articles were just public relations. The real stuff was in the ground.

Metaphor

Metaphors are devices for communicating meaning, relating the constructed reality of a phenomenon or idea. Metaphor is a bridge for conveying the meaning from the inner to outer world. Metaphor is a literary device for communicating the essence of a place, feeling, or experience in a way that is not possible in literal terms. Claire Nettle (2014) uses the garden as a metaphor for the structure of her book on community gardening as social action. Jubas and Seidel (2016) use knitting as metaphor for work in their autoethnographic research on visibility and invisibility in the culture of higher education institutions. Gardeners and people in the realm of community food systems work are always using metaphors, intentionally or unintentionally. Cultivating community, fertile ground, working at the grassroots level, building the soil, planting the seeds, weeding out, etc. Often we get into a pattern of using these metaphors without realizing it. I've often shrugged this off as a silly thing that happens when gardeners hang out with each other too long. But these metaphors are conveying something very important that I've lived and want to share about.

Ellis (2004) says that to understand one's own story is "to go into the woods without a compass" and take time to "wander round a bit" (p. 120). As a symbol of the environment overall, the garden served to educate me as an environmental educator. It represented the whole land and people of the Monadnock Region, the cultural landscape and how I got to know it through community gardening. Community gardening was the journey from scarcity to resilience. It was the pathway on which I took so many misguided steps and got lost along the way as I tried to understand the forces behind my situation and how to access and afford food that is environmentally and culturally acceptable. The more I lean into the challenges, the more the line blurs between what I'm thinking and doing about them. Reading a story about starting a

farm; turning my compost piles. Transcribing an interview segment about mentorship; guiding my students' learning online. Collaborating on a proposed local food infrastructure project; picking up school meals from the doorstep. Writing is what stitches together past and present, thought and action; the process of writing starts to seem nearly synonymous with the process of becoming.

It was within the social context of community gardens that the 'seed' of social identity was planted. After my master's program, this experience would lead to managing a leadership transition for a local food cooperative, joining the board of a coalition of local farm and food organizations, and taking some of my newly gained gardening skills home. In 2012, I became a sustainability coordinator and educator at another university, and I coordinated the building of its first campus garden. Now employed full-time, my immediate needs for food and job security were met, and my curiosity shifted to how community gardens could support campus sustainability goals. I thought of the capacity that my position afforded to highlight the garden as an entry to larger climate change efforts, a strategic location to foster student and faculty engagement, a collaborative space to create service-learning opportunities, and a 'grounding' point to bring sustainability out of the abstract world of academia to the practical world of student and community life. I found many colleagues and students there whose interests resonated with these ideas. There was more to explore under the surface. As I continued down the garden path, deeper questions emerged, like rocks in the New England soil.

Borders and Belonging

I remember early in my experience of gardening, a mentor telling me that gardening isn't all about supporting life, that it's imparting death, too; that gardeners kill things all the time, not just by accident but intentionally, ripping up so-called weeds, innocent plants that happen to be

in the wrong place and time; destroying natural habitats in order to grow food. This idea is challenging my notion that gardening is harmonizing with nature; pointing out that gardens do not occur naturally, that they are a human creation. It's true; so much of gardening has to do with forcing the conditions for plants that are edible to humans (e.g., by changing the soil, by giving certain plants a competitive advantage by destroying whatever else might like to eat it or take up space and nutrients instead, taking down trees so plants get sun, diverting water, etc.). Gardening requires creating and maintaining strong boundaries by protecting access, eliminating invasives.

"Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007, p. 14). Community is like this: creating the conditions for the kind of community we want to grow. Inviting some in, keeping others out. Building the soil, building connections, building systems of communication and cooperation. Protecting the community from perceived threats. The garden is a metaphor for community.

Permeable Boundaries

An interface of ecology and society, the gardener working in concert with natural and cultural tendencies to bring order out of chaos: to define what is a crop and what is a weed; what is worth paying attention to, what to control, what to encourage, what to let go. Each time I enter my garden, I see what needs to be done first, then what can be done, with a set of principles in mind, steering me toward the vision of the best garden it can be; the object is not a perfect end product because in the northeast when we garden we know there is a frost date and a cycle and everything is in some phase of change.

> *A fence contains a garden the way a body contains lived experience. A gate provides a way into a garden the way a metaphor lends a way into the meaning of the experience.*

Theoretical/conceptual frameworks connect the soil – the culture, the context – with the seeds—the individual lived experiences—they are intimately connected and inform one another.

These frameworks are tools to attempt to explain the interaction of self/society, individual/collective, to whatever extent this has ever been possible.

The interaction is reciprocal and cyclical; just as the roots both draw in and exude substances, culture is naturally infused in lived experiences, and lived experiences permeate culture.

With the rootlets of theory and concept, there is meaningful exchange and growth. The roots push gently but earnestly, into the dark beneath the light, the mystery within the material.

The truth that manifests what is witnessed but can only really be known through what is lived.

The root cells that compose, decompose, and recompose the fuzzy boundary.

The subtle exchange that is simultaneously unique and universal.

The microcosm that exists in each invisible but inevitable point between cycles of growth and decay, discovery and forgetting, taking in and sharing out.

The reality of the experience and the collective imagination in which it takes place.

Freire (1985) described praxis as a combination of "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 52). According to Zuber-Skerritt (2001), praxis represents the "interdependence and integration—not separation—of theory and practice, research and development, thought and action" (p. 15). As I accumulated experiences in this context, I began to sense that who I was, and who I was becoming, was connected with the people, places, and patterns around me. I wanted to understand that connection—how it worked, what factors influenced it, what larger implications it might have for my own and others' continuing work in university-community gardening efforts specifically and community food systems generally.

Autoethnography concerns questions of "identity and selfhood, of voice and authenticity, and of cultural displacement and exile" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 3). Questions began to emerge in my mind as I became community gardener - questions I didn't have the space or framework to contend with at the time. Who was I (or, more specifically, what aspects of my identity were in play) when I was directing a community garden project as opposed to when I was doing the

gardening, or for that matter, when I was in the food line receiving a take-home box of vegetables grown in a community garden? At any given moment, how would I define my role in the food system of my community? How would others in my community define it? How might it converge with other roles I filled in that system, or how might those roles be at odds? How do people who work together within or across organizations navigate conversations when one is serving and the other is receiving the benefit of that service? What about when I am both? What might be revealed? What would go unsaid?

How is it that community gardening comes to encapsulate and signify these issues—the bounty and beauty, the pests and weeds? Why do community gardens invoke a sense of purpose that seems more resonant and compelling than other spaces in which I could have conducted this inquiry? What is it about gardening that sets it apart from other community practices, or about a garden that makes it unique among the places that constitute community food systems? Why does it all seem to converge here?

In the Field

Really where the research takes place, what the field is that you enter in order to collect data is the space in between the garden and your mind. It's a blend of the two. Your mind in the context. The reflection and the space that is produced by conjoining those two things. That's the field. I'm going into the garden, going into my mind. Going into the garden of my mind; my mind's version of the garden. Going into the concept of the garden that is created in my mind, and the part of my mind that is shaped by the garden. The field is both inner and outer, it is both personal and contextual, it is more than the garden and more than the mind. It is physical and intangible. It is like Alfred Austin said, "Show me your garden and I shall tell you what you are."

Cooperation

Gardens don't occur naturally in nature; they are a product of creative partnership between nature and people. Gardeners are people who work with the earth—the soil, rain and sun, seeds, nutrients, and cycles—to grow plants in a purposeful, if not always predictable way. Gardens combine attributes found in both ecological and human systems—competition and cooperation, growth and decay. But regardless of the gardener's intention—to beautify a place, express an idea, preserve a tradition, or merely survive—a garden, by definition, is a phenomenon found only at the interface of human and ecological systems. Neither people nor nature produce a garden on their own. Thus, there's no garden without a gardener, and likewise, no gardener without a garden. In fact, one could say that as much as the gardener creates the garden, the garden also creates the gardener. I took what I found to be true at the individual scale and started to wonder how much it applied at the scale of community. Does the community create the garden, or does the garden create the community? It is both. This research explores how each is true.

Because "our lived experiences contribute to the growing social narratives at work in society" (Allen, 2015, p. 33). What culture, identity, and gardening have in common is that they are all ongoing, living, creative processes.

Roots: Sense of Place

For the purposes of this research, *place* refers to a space to which people have historical, political, or personal attachments, or, in its simplest terms, a "meaningful location" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 132). Place is "not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 135). Extending this concept, a sense of place refers to the "subjective and emotional attachment people have to place" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 2).

I began to understand the community garden as a place, community gardening as a practice of place, community gardeners as place-makers. The theoretical concept of place "allows us to contextualize . . . food in these interrelated local and global processes" (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2018, p. 14). Place is much more than a location on a map. You can give someone GPS coordinates, but not the sense. You can give them directions, but not make them know the experience. "Gardening, scholars say, is the first sign of commitment to a community. When people plant corn they are saying, let's stay here. And by their connection to the land, they are connected to one another" (Raver, 1992).

I didn't become a community gardener with the intention of understanding my identity. However, in this research I found that as I continued with community gardening over time, it became a practice. "To practice is to experience it, to feel it, to sense it, to understand it and to immerse yourself in its richness, by doing it regularly, for yourself" (Beard, 2010, p. 79). And with practice, I found that my sense of identity as a member of the Monadnock Region was deepening. As I noticed this pattern against the larger backdrop of the research question, which is about how community gardening and social identity work together, I found that, along with my sense of connection to this place, my sense of appreciation for the people, stories, and landscape of the Monadnock Region was also growing. Nardella (2022) offers that "identity that is place-based can offer a framework for building a deeper understanding of a region" (Nardella, 2022) Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco (2018) add that place is "a central element in shaping and therefore understanding foodways. Place is no longer just a container where food-related human and nonhuman interactions occur; it is constitutive of and shaped by these ordinary acts" (p. 16).

Seeds: Sense of Trust

A gardener can't believe in their garden if they can't believe in themselves. A community gardener can't believe in community gardening if they can't believe in their community. Gardening is an act of trust. A gardener has to have a lot of trust and a lot of faith. There's just a huge amount of risk that a gardener or farmer takes on. Looking through the seed catalog planting seeds, investing all that time and energy and it's your livelihood. And it can be paralyzing, the fear that things are not going to be perfect. You might not come out ahead. Does that mean you give up? Give up farming, give up growing food, give up gardening? No. You do it for all the good reasons. You do it to feed people. You do it to feed yourself. You do it commune with the earth. You do it to find meaning and make the most of life and yeah, giving up is definitely an option, but if you give up your garden, who's going to garden it? And if a farmer gives up, who's going to farm the land? What's going to happen to the land? It's going to get bulldozed and filled with houses or taken up by big chemical agricultural companies and poisoned. There's a responsibility to that land. There's a dedication to it, a commitment to it. A devotion to it. Just like there's a devotion to any other relationship, your partner, your kid, your elders. The metaphor of the gardener and the garden, growing each other up, it's the same thing with writing. You have to have trust in the process. You don't necessarily know what that finished work is going to look like and that's terrifying, there's no instructions and there's no model of what it's supposed to look like at the end. There's guidance, there are scholars who are generous enough to share their knowledge of their process and there's guidance anywhere you look, if you're willing to look and ask, but in the end you just have to get in there and do it.

> *I always do my best thinking when I'm weeding. Clearing out the clutter, making room for the good stuff, creating space, delineating space. To be a successful gardener requires a bit of trust, a big leap of faith, and controlling what you can but also being willing to accept it is a mutual process between the garden and the gardener and that the*

> *garden has its own ways and the gardener is going to be limited by what the garden is going to do that year and has to be adaptable and not give up because things don't go as planned, things don't go as quickly or as fruitfully as planned. You're not going to last very long as a gardener if every time you set foot into the garden you think, the pepper plants are taking way too long, why did I even bother planting peppers if they're going to take this long, hurry up, plants, grow! You can't make the plants hurry up. You can nurture them, you can provide good soil, you can clear the weeds away from them, you can make sure they get water and you can pray for sunshine, just the right amounts, but you have to trust that the plant knows what it's doing. Inside that little seed is the information and the energy for that plant to do what it needs to do. And if your garden gets overrun with weeds, you can't very well say, ugh, this garden is terrible and I'm a terrible gardener. Instead, learn what the garden needs, and do what you can do, and move on. But going around hating and judging what the garden looks like every day is really not a good way to go about gardening.*

By 2018, I was food secure. But I continued to volunteer at the community harvest garden because community gardening had become about more than meeting my household food security needs.

In 2009, I was a sprout. I'd just started to set down roots. My core, my stem, was not that strong. I had found soil, the seed was planted, I could see the sun, but I was new. Green. Vulnerable. I was dazed and disoriented by being left alone to fend - by my partner, yes, but also by a faceless political economy that was not built for tender little plants like me. The old trees would be fine, the ones planted here decades ago who had long since taken up space and established thick, woody trunks and root systems that connected to other thick, woody trunks. The political economy where wealth was stored in banks. The Indigenous saying about "only when the last fish has been caught, you will learn that you can't eat money. That system had not only left me behind, it was never really there for me in the first place. It provided an illusion for me to feel like I could make it in the world but it wasn't real. It's not like we were ever wealthy, but once the income was gone, the curtain drew back . . . the premise that if you just work hard enough, you can earn a good living, a good life. But when the work isn't there. . . . I looked around and saw that I did not have what it took to survive in this place I was starting to know as

home. So I asked myself what I could do. But my self didn't have that many answers, because my self had not developed that much. I could see the potential in the land, but growing food is a partnership between the land and the keeper, and I was barely a gardener, much less a farmer. I was the weak link in the partnership. I didn't set out to forge a new identity for myself, but I knew I had to develop some skills, I didn't even have the word resilience or sustainability developed in my survival vocabulary but I had to move, I couldn't stay still. So I set out in the direction that seemed to make sense in that moment.

Autoethnography "blurs the categorical distinctions between self and culture, as culture is expressed through self and vice versa. We move through culture and culture moves through us." (Grant, 2010, p. 113). The community garden is where this has happened for me and where this relationship can be observed in social research. "Since self is considered a carrier of a culture, intimately connected to others in society, the self's behaviors—verbal and nonverbal—should be interpreted in their cultural context" (Chang, 2008, p. 125). Community gardeners become carriers of culture through the act of gardening together. The community aspect is important. Elizabeth Lawrence said, "Gardening, reading about gardening, and writing about gardening are all one; no one can garden alone."

Before circumstances left me with no choice but to leave my home and rearrange my life, my worldview was constructed around an assumption shared by many in my culture, that ecological, social, and political systems would provide everything needed to thrive. I thought I lived in a world where hard work generally pays off, abuses of power are the exception to the norm, and people are more or less free to live according to their values. My epiphanies showed me the cracks in my thinking, but I did not yet have the contextual understanding to locate the capacity for change. It would take close to ten years to accumulate the experience and wisdom to

formulate my quandary into a research question. To know what I was capable of, I had to know who "I" was. The inquiry stems from a desire to know myself as a member of a community and culture grappling with how to feed people reliably, fairly, and well.

Archaeological scholars, including Mead, Barthes, and Levi-Strauss, describe foodways as "reflecting attitudes linked to cultural norms, protocols, and taboos that extend beyond the realm of food." (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2018, p. 16). They showed food is much more than sustenance, at a time when food was viewed as trivial in the academe. Community gardening is a foodway that, in my lived experience, joins cultures: academic, nonprofit, corporate; rich/poor socioeconomic classes; local/global. Identifying as a community gardener has informed the ways I interact with my community and culture beyond the garden borders.

Conclusion

Community gardening has enabled me to witness, experience, and contemplate the larger social phenomenon of community food systems. Specifically, community gardening has been an expression of environmental identity. Examining my lived experience through the lens of praxis has helped to see that "human nature is expressed through intentional, reflective, meaningful activity situated within dynamic historical and cultural contexts that shape and set limits on that activity" (Glass, 2001, p.16). Both research and gardening are ways of understanding relationships with culture, ecosystems, and self. To know what was in my capacity to change within the culture of food and community food systems, I had to know who "I" was. Community gardening became a way of cultivating that knowledge.

Metaphor is the meaning-making tool of this research. Experimentation with metaphor embraces sowing/seeds, cultivating/soil, and harvesting/nourishment. Metaphor provides the seed of inquiry; the soil, which is culture; the roots, reaching in to extract the necessary

components for growth; the shoot, reaching up and leafing out to collect the energy for building what was invisible into a cohesive picture; and the harvest, for sharing. And the metaphor of a garden implies a boundary, yet as the writer/gardener, I continually need to think about what falls inside and outside of my collection of meaning. There's the fence, there's the soil, there's planting seeds, there's things coming to fruition, there's pollination.

Trying to grow, eat, and share good food

Trying to sustain myself, my family, my world

In community with nature, to nurture, cultivate a culture

When relating with the earth becomes relating with self

Gardening, a conversation between self and place

Narrative, a conversation between scholar and field

Identity, a conversation between individual and collective

Community gardening, a place for conversation

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I describe the knowledge I developed about the relationship of community gardening and social identity according to themes in the content of the three narratives as well as themes in the overall process of developing this knowledge. This research offers implications for the fields of environmental and food studies, such as where they touch on awareness of power and privilege as a subject/researcher. I revisit the criteria that guided this research and reflect on the study in light of revealing the self (*auto*); exploring culture/society (*ethno*); storycraft (*graphy*); ethics; and social justice and transformation (Schroeder, 2017). I offer recommendations for other scholars considering autoethnography as a process for revealing personal, social, and cultural dimensions of community gardening and understanding how stories of self and others are connected in the 'garden' of critical scholarship. This form of research complements and expands on more conventional forms of food systems knowledge by embracing qualities of vulnerability, authenticity, reflexivity. This chapter is intended as an invitation for readers to join me in envisioning opportunities to expand and enrich scholarly conversations around community and community-based food systems by exploring and sharing their own personal narratives as a cultural phenomenon.

Research Question and Emergent Themes

The question at the center of this study was to explore the relationship of community gardening and social identity. I explored this phenomenon through the lens of my lived experience over a ten-year period of university-community gardening projects. I used critical autoethnographic methodology to construct meaning of this experience, incorporating personal memory, self-reflection, self-analysis, archival, and interview data. The study was motivated by

both a deepening personal sense and an expanding realm of scholarly literature suggesting that narratives of community gardens (and community gardeners) are significant, prescient, and under-explored in community food systems research.

Each of the three manuscripts produced in this research focuses on one or more facets of the relationship between community gardening and social identity. Each weaves data, analysis, and interpretation of my lived experience in a narrative format, bringing together *self* (auto) and *culture* (ethno) through writing (*graphy*). I wrote three manuscripts based on the major themes I identified in the data. Manuscript 1 ("'You Can't Eat Change': Community Gardening, Motherhood, and Resistance to a Narrative of Food Insecurity") illuminates the complexity of navigating social identity with regard to class and gender as I encountered issues of food insecurity, food access, and food dignity that catalyzed the beginning of my journey as a community gardener. Manuscript 2 ("The Ivory Tower and the Garden Shed: Navigating Privilege and Intersectionality in Community Food Partnerships") digs deeper into issues of power and privilege that I became aware of through my various positions in CGU and how they shape everyday experiences for myself and others within that cultural context. Manuscript 3 ("Writing with a Shovel: Community Gardening as Environmental Praxis") explores the environmental aspect of social identity and presents community gardening as a seedbed of metaphors, a literal and figurative place for growth, where community gardening is a practice of cultural change.

I used what Ellis (2004) described as critical incidents to frame my autoethnographic process. Examples of critical incidents in this research include realizing the limitations of campus gardening to effect lasting cultural change in an institutional community; navigating the social stigma associated with food assistance programs; and being confronted by a community

member about my idealistic and privileged views about growing food. These are explored in greater depth in the autoethnographic manuscripts, where they are presented in layered accounts.

Overview of Manuscripts/Chapters

Here I provide a guide to the three autoethnographies, or chapters, produced through this research so that readers have a way to see how the pieces connect to one another and to my overall research goal of exploring the relationship of community gardening and social identity. Each autoethnography explains its aim, offers layered accounts, and offers the cultural significance of the findings while acknowledging that interpretations are inherently incomplete. The selection of narratives is based on themes that emerged in the research process. They are presented in a sequence that builds from a particular experience and expands outward from the personal into the cultural. The chapters provide ordered accounts of what happened, that I then I build upon, using a reflexive writing process and analysis of relevant scholarly research to produce interpretive constructions of my lived experience which incorporate factual elements as I understand them along with contextual elements that give them nuance, weight, tension. The interpretations blend pertinent 'raw' data (dates, places, selves/others present, actions, dialogue) collected from personal memory, self-observation, archives, and interviews) and 'processed' data gleaned through self-reflection and self-analysis.

Manuscript 1: "You Can't Eat Change": Community Gardening, Single Motherhood, and Resistance to the Narrative of Food Insecurity

The overarching story of this first autoethnography is that food insecurity played significantly in the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that shaped my lived experience with community gardening as well as my sense of social identity. It explores the theme of food insecurity in my lived experience as it relates to both community gardening and social identity,

considering hunger as an aspect of my relationship with community, culture, and gardening. In this piece I reflect on how the practice of community gardening and my identity as a community gardener originated as a response to insecurity about sustainable food and livelihood. I present my analysis and interpretation of these data along with the cultural perspective I developed about the context of that experience. In order to show how my experience as a community gardener relates to a bigger picture of culture, I present a series of critical incidents that caused me to recognize my vulnerability to household and community food security and inquire its causes within the context of UCGP. The narrative touches on experiences of dissonance, fear, and powerlessness in those moments and how my identity as a community gardener developed as a response to these. The phrase "you can't eat change" refers to a community member's comment challenging my idealistic view that healthy food and foodways should be accessible and fair.

Manuscript 2 : The Ivory Tower, The Garden Shed: Navigating Privilege and Identity in University-Community Garden Partnerships

The second autoethnography builds from the experience of food insecurity and food access into issues of power and privilege in community food systems efforts involving universities. Passidomo (2013) calls for scholarship which "focuses explicitly on the ways in which institutional structures and systems . . . can exacerbate broad injustices, including limited food access" (p. 89). This piece reflects on experiences of tension and conflict with regard to class and social identity in UCGP, contextualizing those experiences within the culture of the various organizations involved in the region, and exploring the theme of intersectionality. It describes the compounding effect of evaluating, leading, educating, and speaking on behalf of efforts to grow food in gardens for "others" when "others" included myself. Looking at my lived experiences with community gardening through the lens of social identity reveals complexity in

the relationships of food, community, and culture. At various points in my lived experience, I found myself gardening *within* and *without* community, gardening *for* community, and gardening *as* community. This writing uses my status as an insider/outsider of several social groups involved with UCGP in my community (e.g., donor and recipient, educator and student) to look at the ways these groups interact, and reflects on what those interactions might say about the challenges/opportunities for UCGP as cultural work. I make meaning of the experiences of frustration and disillusionment with the limitations of HE institutions to confront privilege in food systems, empower those it intends to serve, and enact authentic cultural change.

Manuscript 3: Writing with a Shovel: Gardens as Compositions of Environmental Identity

The third autoethnography explores the idea that as a gardener grows a garden, the garden 'grows' the gardener. This piece uses the ideas of growth, place, boundaries, and other garden metaphors as a literary device to make meaning of my lived experiences in UCGP. I explore the development of my identity as a community gardener through the lens of praxis, described by Freire (1970) as a combination of "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 52). According to Zuber-Skerritt (2001), praxis represents the "interdependence and integration—not separation—of theory and practice, research and development, thought and action" (p. 15). The narrative presented in this manuscript explores my identity as a community gardener as knowledge that emerged through the praxis of community gardening. It is about the ongoing process of knowing myself as a gardener in the social, political, and environmental context of my community. It reflects on developing a sense of belonging in community gardens while hopefully helping to cultivate that sense of others. It frames the community garden as a literal and figurative place where community members engage in cultural practice and change. Environmental identity is an important thread in the narrative, which looks at how my

engagement in UCGP was/is a metaphor for my relationship with the earth and environmental practice.

To craft a cultural interpretation of everyday life as a multi-positional community gardener, I have applied autoethnographic fieldwork methods within a critical theoretical framework to explore the relationship between community gardening and social identity. The manuscripts collectively present the multiple dimensions of this social phenomenon which I have come to know through lived experience. They represent a scholarly narrative that illustrates how cultural issues of food access and food justice can be experienced in UCGP by contextualizing personal accounts with relevant literature and analysis. Critical autoethnography is a process of cultural making-meaning, critiquing social narratives and imagining alternatives. Readers are invited to draw their own meanings from the data and see themselves in a larger narrative along with the author.

The three autoethnographic manuscripts/chapters are organized around themes that emerged from analysis and interpretation of the data collected. They integrate relevant scholarly literature with narrative vignettes to contextualize and convey the relevance of the findings, such as problematic aspects or emergent questions. The manuscript structure encourages readers from various audiences to engage with the narrative through their own conceptual frames while also inviting them into mine. A Discussion and Recommendations chapter follows the manuscripts.

Themes in the Findings

This research examined cultural narratives regarding community gardens and community food system efforts more broadly. In considering these narratives, readers may discover questions of their own regarding the larger cultural context of community gardens and gardeners. These might include: Who are we, and who do we become, in the act of community gardening?

What social identities do we bring into the garden with us, and what social identities might the garden introduce or impart? What is it about community gardens as spaces, and community gardening as a practice, that lends a way to knowing ourselves and each other as individuals and as members of a culture? By learning through writing, and sharing what I have learned, I invite readers to engage with me in exploring the life of a community, or at least the life of one of its members.

Community Gardens as Bridges and Community Gardeners as Bridge Builders

Community gardening connects the personal "garden" to the social "ecosystem." Just as our individual experiences are a reflection of culture, one person's personal narrative is inextricable from the culture in which it is embedded. I have come to see community gardeners as bridges between the garden and the wider community. Each of us brings in our social identities, and each carries something from the garden out with us into the social world. The fruits and vegetables of our labor there are inextricable from the memories, relationships, and meanings that come with them. Community gardening may not be a political act for every community gardener as it has been for me; it may not be as much about education, or resilience, or food justice. But even when it is not conscious or intentional, I believe community gardening, and writing about community gardening, are both cultural work. The writing and the gardening are bridging between individual and collective, personal and political, and also between past and present, and present and future.

Neat Borders vs. Messy Edges

An overall theme in the three manuscripts is that social identity and community gardening both offer "permeable boundaries." The set narratives produced by this research carries themes of unresolved conflicts, open questions, and loose threads. If the aim of life

research is to be true to life, it would follow that its findings, like life itself, are inherently and necessarily imperfect, especially around the edges. As an alternative to research traditions that attempt to 'pin down' knowledge, "autoethnographers seek to create works that encourage an enlightened reading and are more democratic and inclusive, promoting civil and spiritual freedom and resistance to dominant oppressive structures that are sometimes seen as synonymous with traditional academic work" (Moriarty, 2020, p. 3).

Using the garden metaphor, I suggest that a permaculture view of (so-called) weeds as good plants in inconvenient places is appropriate. As permaculture writer Jonathon Engels (2016) argues, "despite their reputation as nutrient thieves and their tendency to crowd out weaker vegetation, weeds are actually good for the soil in the long run." Permaculture is to autoethnography what monoculture is to other research methods that aim to generalize, extrapolate, replicate. "Neat categories fall apart when life writers reflect on the complexity of the lives they seek to represent and, instead of a chronological voice, what emerges is pluralistic, gloriously messy, multivoiced, and enhanced by the frames of critical theory." (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017, p. 4). Whether grappling with societal stigma about household food insecurity or holding space for different and opposing motivations of community gardeners, it is often the "messy" places, the border places, that often carry the most potential for growth and can use the most care.

Gardening, Culture, and Identity Are Ongoing Processes

I have embraced resistance to closure in this research, keeping the meanings open-ended. (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017). The way I have written these accounts, at this point in time, might be different if written before the pandemic, or after establishing my next garden, or following experience and reflection at any point in time. This quality of critical autoethnography

reflects a concept of self and society that is "relational and processual, mutably written in a moment that opens onto a panoramic . . . future of possibilities" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2016, p. 79). Therefore the findings of this research are open-ended, like a garden with paths extending beyond its walls, or a cookbook with empty pages for personal recipes—for others to explore their own positions, draw their own meanings.

Community gardens exist as long as there are community gardeners, just like stories exist as long as there are storytellers. As long as I am gardening as/in community, I am contributing to and becoming part of that community's culture, just as with writing. My thinking was that by learning to see the interplay of culture and identity in community gardening in my narratives, I can enrich, challenge, and change my lived experience in the course of living it.

Relational Ethics

This research was/is about how I make sense of my lived experience as a cultural phenomenon, including my socioeconomic circumstances, my social connections, my hopes for my family and myself, *etc.* It was/is also a learning experience in *how* I make sense of my cultural life. There were many decision points in writing in this methodology concerning how to evoke a sense of place and time and the complex lives embedded within in ways that were true, authentic, and real, yet also kind and just. I sought guidance from the dictates of methods in navigating these decisions but found that they were more informed, and complicated, by relational ethics. "The ethnographer has a professional and moral obligation to get the 'facts' as accurately as possible. This is not even debatable. But all facts are necessarily selected and interpreted from the moment we decide to count one thing and ignore another, or attend this ritual but not another, so that anthropological understanding is necessarily partial" (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 23).

Grant et al (2010) describe how "autoethnographers engage in laborious, honest, and nuanced self-reflection—often referred to as reflexivity—in an attempt to explore and interrogate sociocultural forces and discursive practices that inform personal experience and the research process" (p. 5). This specific use of reflexivity represents a contrast between autoethnographic and traditional social scientific studies in the sense that "terms such as 'objectivity,' 'researcher neutrality,' and 'stable meaning' are eschewed in favor of understanding the researcher's careful and thoughtful interpretation of lived experience and the research process" (Grant et al., 2010).

Grant (2010) explains that by "translating private troubles into public issues," we can make sociological sense of our lives, and that by doing so, individuals can "observe themselves in their fractured ways of being and the impact that this has on their wider relationships'' (p. 115). Grant (2010) further explains that "the challenge emerging from the perspective of relational ethics . . . is for autoethnographers to live the person that is storied. The point is to work towards a better world and (re)story oneself accordingly" (p. 115). Goodall (2017) refines this idea in his foreword to Boylorn's autoethnography, *Sweetwater* (Boylorn, 2017), arguing that relational ethics ought to guide autoethnographers to realize that when writing "about real people living real lives," our ethical obligation to others is not limited to "revealing the truth of our experiences with them in the past but . . . extends to the present and future." He encourages researchers to ask: "How might those lives be affected today by what we choose to say? How might our relationship to those we write about be altered in the future? Would members of our community . . . welcome us back if they had the opportunity to read what we said about them and their lives?" (p. 9). Goodall's argument echoes Ellis (2016) who reminds us, "you have to live in the world . . . and you have to be able to hopefully take the role of the Other, and be reflexive about yourself and who you are and your motives" (Douglas, 2016). She suggests that reflexive

practices “have the potential to help us to be fuller, more thoughtful people who end up having tools to understand other people, to work with other people” (interview).

With this understanding of relational ethics, I ask myself: Who is this research really for? If I am a reflexive and relationally ethical researcher, I need to acknowledge when my work mostly benefits me and not my community. I have tried to fashion this project in a way that benefits other members of the community and promotes cultural change toward a more just and thriving community food system, but I also have to acknowledge that such an aim is likely outside the scope of this work.

> “the experience of reading a scholarship-infused and compelling story moves us emotionally and intellectually, so much so that we are transported to a new level of consciousness” (p. xiv).
>
> “self-reflexive awareness of our place in a community as well as of the implicit power imbalance that grants to the writer a narrative authority to define persons, places, and things that, even if ‘true’ in an empirical sense, may be interpreted differently by those whom we write about. This particular ‘best practice’ does not mean that we avoid writing about ‘the hard stuff,’ but it does mean we must own the story as well as the relational result.” (p. xiv)

Grief and Meaning-Making

A theme that may not be explicitly described but might be perceived by readers of the autoethnographies is grief. My relationship with community gardening changed over the time period of the study from one of loss, to breaking down/breaking open, through awakening to the unjust and unsustainable industrial food complex, to one of rebuilding, reconnection, and resilience. Along the way, I was discovering my social identity as a community gardener. The initial imperative of gardening was to feed my family; yet realistically, I was never going to meet all my family’s needs for good food by gardening. But community gardening was about more than the food it might produce. It was a means of feeding our spirits, connecting with

community, and creating systems that would continue to sustain us economically, socially, and ecologically in the future.

Writing about the experiences that led me to community gardening, especially the hunger and powerlessness that followed the events of 2009-2010, was a way of processing the grief and despair about food systems. Kessler's (2019) work on meaning as the sixth stage of grief seeking or being drawn to community gardening projects as a reaction to loss of my home garden and the ideal of a community/social identity. The combined events of 2009 had left me without adequate support to feed and shelter my three young children or pay the mortgage on our home and land. In that pivotal time, I knew I needed to secure a meaningful livelihood. I did not know how the imperative to nourish myself and my family would come to involve leaving our home, compromising my own and others' safety for the sake of a hot meal, navigating paperwork and finding economic (in)justice in food systems, fighting despair, rekindling connections to my land and community, learning to garden, or any of the other experiences from which I now draw data and meaning. Even toward the end of the study timeframe (winter 2019, when I decided to start a CSA garden the following spring), I was still exploring how it all seemed to come together in community gardening.

Limitations

Generalizability vs Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe transferability as the qualitative response to generalizability. Social science research often involves encounters with highly contextualized settings. The contextualization of places, events, people, and actions is a key feature of the research. At the same time, the author of the research cannot anticipate all of the possible contexts that a reader may have in mind. Therefore, trying to generalize the findings of a study

by de-contextualizing them is not useful. Instead, transferability is suggested as a more appropriate evaluative measure of a study because it shows how the findings could be applicable in other contexts.

For example, in the context of my community food system, I encountered challenges in aligning my actions and behaviors with my environmental and social values. I attempted to counter these challenges by creating more choices in my environment. Another person in a different community food system and different set of circumstances might encounter a similar kind of challenge and perhaps try a similar strategy. Another example in these accounts is the theme of discovering my ignorance about some aspect of privilege in food systems generally and community gardens specifically, and how some of that ignorance was tied to social identity. A reader might reflect on their own experience of discovering their own ignorance about an issue of privilege, perhaps having to do with gender, language, or physical ability. My experiences, though unique, are relatable. To support transferability, I used thick, rich descriptions of the study context, providing details for readers to make palpable, meaningful associations with the data and assess how/how much of the research can apply to their context of interest (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stahl & King, 2020).

Analytical vs Evocative Autoethnography

An aim for this research was to employ an analytic approach to autoethnography as opposed to an evocative approach. I designed the study and chose my methods with this aim in mind. Prioritizing analytic autoethnography may have a limitation of the study in the sense that evocative autoethnography was arguably more appropriate for capturing and interpreting certain data. Autoethnographers strive to “draw people into evocative texts rather than making them feel distanced from what they read” (Grant, 2010, p. 4). Moriarty (2015) says the point of

autoethnography is to "tell a story that celebrates the messy, the personal and the lived, instead of valuing dominant, dry, objective narratives that are synonymous with male, hierarchical academic work" (p. 5). Allowing room for an evocative style to emerge in the process of writing the autoethnography may have opened up a richer set of data, but it also offers a different set of considerations and limitations. Winterson (2012) says there are two kinds of writing: "the one you write and the one that writes you. The one that writes you is dangerous. You go where you don't want to go. You look where you don't want to look" (p. 54).

Ellis and Bochner (2006) describe the tension between analytic and evocative forms of autoethnography. Ellis says of analytic autoethnography,

> When I read Leon [Anderson]'s article, I become a detached spectator. I become only a head, cut off from my body and emotions. There's no personal story to engage me. Knowledge and theory become disembodied words on the page and I lose connection. I want to linger in the world of experience, you know, feel it, taste it, sense it, live in it; but Leon wants to use the world of experience primarily as a vehicle for exercising his head (p. 431).

To which Bochner (2006) adds:

> The work we've been doing has a different aim than the work of the analytical ethnographers. We think of ethnography as a journey; they think of it as a destination. They want to master, explain, and grasp. Those may be interesting word games, but we don't think they're necessarily important. Caring and empathizing is for us what abstracting and controlling is for them (p. 431).

Engagement

Autoethnography is a qualitative inquiry into a culture or subculture to which the writer relates. Autoethnographic research "provides one of the clearest ways not only to analyze a subculture or aspect of society but also to investigate one's involvement in that community" (Tombro, 2016). Analyzing others' positions as well as one's own position in a culture, and how this positioning affects thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors, involves interviews with self and others, field observation, analysis of textual and non-textual materials, and engaging in self-

reflection. “Previous involvement in or attachment to the [culture or] subculture gives students a vested interest in the project, a sense of authority, and a position from which to analyze” (Tombro, 2016).

As Margaret Atwood said, “in the spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt.” The irony of autoethnographic research is that in order to make meaning of one’s lived experience in a systematic, methodical way—that is, in order to do the data collection, analysis, and interpretation through autoethnographic writing—the author must intentionally, repeatedly remove themself from the very activities that held such meaning that they were worth writing about in the first place. For me, it was the gardening itself—the planting, digging, trellising, harvesting, composting, engaging with the earth and my community for the purposes of growing good food and transforming the food system—where I found flow and fulfillment. It was literally the most fruitful part of the experience, the immediate, vital, critical work, literally at my feet, that called to me. I made time for the research and writing, but when the time came to sit down with it, my mind and body resisted the intellectual work because compared with the tangible reward of community gardening, it felt hollow and indulgent, which resulted in a tendency to put off the cognitive tasks of reflection and analysis for the more gratifying physical work of gardening. Climate change was still at the doorstep, along with its pals, food insecurity and injustice. On one hand, my engagement with the topic was an asset to the scholarship in that it grounded me (again, literally) in the work; I could draw all kinds of rich data from my embodied experience with it. On the other hand, engagement was an encumbrance to scholarly productivity, because my hands longed for the wheelbarrow, not the laptop.

Reflexivity and Rigor

Life experiences and personal characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class and professional status draw us to our research questions, inform what we ask in interviews, focus what we pay attention to, and shape what we do not consider during the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). For example, my lived experience of food insecurity and related issues of community food systems is inextricable from my identity and position as a low-income, cisgendered female, single parent. It is because of these social identities that I have firsthand knowledge of local, state and federal programs and specifically their limitations with regard to improving food access. The question of researcher positionality asks who I am in relation to my subject, setting, and participants. As the primary participant in autoethnographic research is the researcher themselves, this question requires self-reflexivity. Reflexivity was key to the study because "...having open and reflexive lines of inquiry to guide initial observation, listening and questioning will lead to a purposeful and meaningful project" (Coffey, 2018, p. 18). Although reflexivity is variably defined, it is often described as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researchers' positionality (Berger, 2015). An example of practicing reflexivity in the autoethnographic writing process is the representation of researcher positionality as a dialogue between myself and other members of the research context in the Introduction chapter.

Reflexivity is a key feature of rigor in qualitative research (Berger, 2013). In contrast with reflection, which occurs after the fact, reflexivity is an 'in-the-moment' and ongoing self-scrutiny (Finlay, 2016). Importantly, the researcher is "having an ongoing conversation about the experience while simultaneously living in the moment" (Hertz, 1997, p. viii). Reflexivity compels us to confront the choices we make regarding the research question, the people we

involve in the research process, and the multiple identities that we bring and create in the research setting (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Charmaz et al., 2003). The ideal for reflexivity is that this self-appraisal be actively acknowledged and openly recognizable in the research process and product (Pillow, 2003).

Social identity (SI) theory attempts to explain how individual and group identities inform one another. Social identity supposes there is a larger social/cultural context for how we see (or don't see) ourselves and asks how this shapes our perceptions, behaviors, and interactions with others. SI theory recognizes that identity is dynamic and layered, and thus exploring lived experience through this lens means diving into terrain that is complex and complicated.

Social identity theory has been used in research related to community gardening in higher education contexts: The social benefits of community gardening have been studied within and outside of educational contexts over the last ten years (Aftandilian & Dart, 2013; Barthel et al., 2015; Cumbers et al., 2018; Furness & Gallaher, 2018; Guitart et al., 2012; Krasny et al., 2014; Porter, 2018). Chan et al. (2016) found that community gardening supports participants to "develop a sense of belonging and connection with personal cultural identity, local environment, and social community," and is thus associated with a sense of empowerment, especially for those with lack of access to healthy and culturally appropriate foods (p. 848).

My identity as a community gardener is one social identity, but it is also a sort of basket of other social identities which I carry in and out of the community garden: environmental educator, researcher, aspiring homesteader, low-income, and mother. In the garden, at the co-op, at the food pantry, in the corporate or warehouse gardens, or on campus, I was acting and interacting among several subcultures and they all came together in community gardening.

Just as the dominant food system separates us from the sources and meanings of our food, it can be argued that the dominant culture separates us from our stories, our voices, our selves. Using autoethnography to explore my culture, my relationship with it, and in what ways community gardening has shaped that relationship (or vice-versa)... is a way I hope to bring people into the story of their food systems, to invite them to hear the voice of their communities, to find a way back to themselves.

Implications

Holman-Jones et al. (2013) conceptualize autoethnography as the "use of personal experience and personal writing to (a) purposefully comment on/critique cultural practices; (b) make contributions to existing research; (c) embrace vulnerability with purpose; and (d) create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response (pp. 22–25).

I can see possibilities for the meanings explored in these writings will not only benefit my life but also deepen a scholarly dialogue of community food system efforts involving higher education institutions more broadly. It deals with issues of power and privilege, hunger, and environmental justice from a multi-positional perspective. In addition to appreciating the relationship of community gardening and social identity in my individual experience, I invite readers to consider the significance of that relationship in a larger cultural context. In other words, I propose that my coming to identify as a community gardener is also a story about the community that has influenced my social identity to the larger field of study as well as to the and to the culture in which we all move and act. Community conversations are richer when more guests are invited to the table, and this writing offers a unique voice to an ongoing scholarly conversation.

Open-Endedness/Rejection of Finality/Closure

Grant (2010) offers that "the real question of autobiographical ethnography is not who am I, but where do I belong at this moment in time?" (p. 113). Viktor Frankl (1992), in *Man's Search for Meaning*, said, "the meaning of life differs . . . from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment" (p. 107). This research might have been titled, "Never Finished: The Iterative Nature of Gardens, Community, and Identity," because as each piece of the overall narrative developed, so did my understanding of its meaning. Holman-Jones says this is because "theory is a 'collaborator' with story, an evocative and embodied relation and reflexive participant in the poiesis—or creation—of knowing, being, and acting" (p. 231). This description of the theory/narrative dynamic was reflected in the research process that produced the 'findings' chapters or autoethnographies. I agree with Holman-Jones (2016) that as a critical theory project, "this knowing, being, and acting is less about creating stable, coherent, finished, and identifiable knowledges and more focused on engaging with the world as shifting, partial, unfinished, and animated by feeling and imagination" (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 231). For the research process to "conclude," I needed to be mindful that the objective was not to 'pin down' anyone, absolute truth, since truth, like life, is a continuum of experience, full of change, learning, growth and decay. This mindfulness also meant resisting the internalized oppression of perfectionism that is perpetuated by the pursuit of 'objective' knowledge.

"The processes of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are neither terminal nor mechanical. They are always emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 479). Researching life in a way that tries to make it neat and presentable to others is a conundrum. Autoethnography doesn't shy away from the mess. Like life itself, life research has

no “real” edges, only the ones that we construct to make life projects feasible. It was necessary to balance the need for an authentically messy, ongoing process and the need for defined edges that confined the process to a practical timeline.

Power and Privilege

Environmental activist Chico Mendes said that “environmentalism without class struggle is just gardening.” This research explored tensions and/or negotiations with institutionalized power, and how I negotiated and explored social identity(ies) while navigating the doctoral program. Understanding differences between people and groups in the context of food systems is relevant to social change in part because “failure to confront difference undermines progressive change efforts” (Slocum, 2006, p. 327).

> *Reflection - May 23, 2019: Oppression isn’t just when people are trying to make their voice heard; it’s when people don’t even recognize that they even have a voice or that it’s worth sharing. (Paolo Friere talked about this.) To dismiss one’s own knowledge and experience as immaterial or without value is to subscribe to the narrative that others’ authority matters more than one’s own - in memories, connections, wounds, healing, unanswered questions, lines on our faces and the dirt under our nails. To find one’s voice is to stake a claim. It is to take the risk of ownership and to be vulnerable and also to tap into a power and freedom that no one else can ever possess. And because we are connected, one person claiming their voice can knit together with others, build community, create cultural change.*

The processes of self-observation and self-reflection were challenging because they required me to tend to the emotional aspects of my experience long enough to understand them deeply, articulate them, contextualize them, and present them to the world. This process felt self-indulgent at times. I believe there are two reasons for this. First is the culture of academia, which like many neoliberal institutions, often pushes productivity at the cost of personal energy. This problematic aspect of academic culture is critiqued as stifling self-expression by autoethnographers and other researchers (Moriarty, 2015, 2020; Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017). (As an example of the neoliberalization of academia, as part of the literature review for

this dissertation, I tried to read "How the University Became Neoliberal" (Seal, 2018) but was blocked by a paywall on *The Chronicle of Higher Education.*) The second reason this process often felt self-indulgent was because of the awareness that while I was spending time reflecting, people in my community were struggling with more immediate, material needs concerning food, health, and community.

Community Gardening as Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy views teaching as "an inherently political act, rejects the neutrality of knowledge, and insists that issues of social justice and democracy itself are not distinct from acts of teaching and learning" (Giroux 2007). Community gardens are sites of teaching and learning (Sumner, 2013; Walter, 2013; Wortham-Galvin et al., 2017). Scholars have connected community gardening with social movements (Anderson, Binimelis, et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2018; Nettle, 2014; Sbicca, 2012). Applied to community food system projects, critical pedagogy implies "a commitment to critical education is key for the future of food and agriculture and social transformation. Indeed, critical learning may be a prerequisite for deepening the transformative vision and praxis of social movements" (Anderson, Binimelis, et al., 2019, p. 521).

These paradigms contrast with positivist and post-positivist research paradigms which strive for objectivity and replicability. This research follows Richardson (2000) and Grant (2010), in attempting to be "both 'scientific' and 'literary': scientific 'in the sense of being true to a world known through the empirical senses and literary in the sense of expressing what one has learned through evocative, creative writing and form' (Grant, 2010, p. 115).

My position at the center of this research is essential to its value not only as a personal meaning-making process but also as a bridge between individual and cultural aspects of the lived

experience. “By focusing on the self and the researcher’s own story, self-narration can be a powerful way of beginning to break down some of the hierarchies inherent in traditional researcher/ participant relationships, and offering readers a means of evaluating writers as ‘situated actors’, as ‘active participants in the process of meaning creation’ (Hertz, 1997, p. viii)” (Dashper, 2016, pp. 214–215). I needed to understand what *was* in my capacity to change, and identify meaningful actions that could support the lifeway I envisioned, not only for myself but for my community and my world. As Robin Wall Kimmerer asks in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants:* “Isn’t this the purpose of education, to learn the nature of your own gifts and how to use them for good in the world?”

Storytelling

Grant (2010) says the challenge of autoethnography is to “live the person that is storied. The point is to work towards a better world and (re)story oneself accordingly” (p. 115). Community gardening initially emerged as a way to fulfill some of my household’s immediate food needs, but eventually it became a means of creating a sense of purpose and identity as an active participant in a local food culture that was struggling to be sustainable. The foreshadowed problem of food insecurity catalyzed my decision to explore community gardening and eventually its relationship with social identity. As critical research focuses on the underlying causes of injustice and inequity, accounts of lived experience can help both the author and reader understand what can be done to change such narratives.

“Stories are our way into understanding—to theorizing, and thus to knowing and working to change—our culture and ourselves. Stories also awaken us to the existence and experience of others—especially those others who are different from us. In this way, stories are windows—and

doors—to understanding, and the more complex, nuanced, and multiple our stories become, the greater our understandings become" (Block, 2018, p. 230).

As Holman-Jones (2016) describes, "theory tells a story—in non-ordinary language—of how things are and helps us discover the possibilities in how things might be. Butler tells us that the intersection of theory and everyday language is crucial to telling and re-imagining not only what we can say, but also who we can be" (p. 228-229). Part of this process is resistance to certain academic traditions. I am presenting the research "in a literary way so that it is readable and evocative for people who might not be in the academy" (Ellis 2016 interview). "The autoethnographer is a boundary-crosser, and the role can be characterized as that of a dual identity. . . . The notion of autoethnography foregrounds the multiple nature of selfhood and opens up new ways of writing about social life." (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 3).

"For autoethnographers, theory and story share a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship. Theory asks about and explains the nuances of an experience and the happenings of a culture; story is the mechanism that illustrates and embodies these nuances and happenings" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 89). "Doing critical autoethnography engages us in processes of becoming and because of this, shows us ways of embodying change" (Block, 2018, p. 229).

> What if the reason we don't have more folks becoming community gardeners and farmers and food council members and food policy advocates and all the other titles we can't think of right now is because folks don't 'see' themselves in that picture? What if they don't see themselves in that picture because they've never seen others like themselves in that picture? What if they can't even imagine there *is* a picture, because they haven't had to, been invited to, or felt a reason to? Or maybe like me, they have wanted to, but were too concerned with just having enough to consider *why* they don't have enough. What if there were more stories, not just academic voices but hungry voices (and by the way, there are many voices that are both academic and hungry!) voices of folks who are more than their portrayals, more than the grainy chalk outlines of them, more than the stories told about them.

Mulvihill and Swaminathan (2017) describe the importance of storytelling in critical research: “Storytelling matters . . . to our individual and collective beings as we engage our imagination about past, present, and future human experiences” (p. 1). Writer Chimamanda Adichi also says, “stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.” De Souza (2019) expands on these arguments as they apply to food access specifically by pointing out the role of storytelling in shaping culture. She explains that “communication is central to the production of stigma, and thus stigma is about *discursive privilege*—the power to tell a story about who the Other is and who ‘We’ are. Stigma is about the power to create narratives of similarity and difference, narratives of Us and Them, and use these stories to legitimize oppression” (De Souza, 2019, p. 3). To create something different, we must first be able to imagine it first. This is the essential task of critical autoethnography. “Several stories are possible if only we are aware of and set aside our own habitual ways of thinking. Life writing . . . requires us to read so that we take into account truth, narrative and representation, and issues of power.” (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017, p. 1).

Storytelling is a valuable set of practices that provides meaningful results for environmental and food studies. Until really engaging in this research and digging into the stories that the data tell, I didn’t recognize the value of storytelling in academic research. I appreciated stories as illustrations of events, places, and characters, but I equated stories with fiction, fantasy, and entertainment. My idea of ‘serious’ research was based in positivist and post-positivist thinking where cold objectivity, replicability, and perfection, and Truth were the ideals. I didn’t realize how my training as a scientist had limited my worldview and diminished or denied other forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. My thinking before engaging in this

research was colonial and anti-feminist. What could autoethnography look like in a food systems context? How could community gardeners' narratives contribute to this emerging methodology?

"People ascribe meaning to their lives, and move their lives forward, by storying and restorying their experiences. Life arguably has to be lived as a story, for it is in the story that orientations, meanings and questions of identity are reinvented and worked through" (Grant, 2010, 113).

Recommendations for Future Scholarship and Research

Experiment with Autoethnography in Community Food Systems

Embedding some collaboration into the overall research approach supported the goal of this autoethnography to "look inward—into our identities, thoughts, feelings, and experiences—and outward, into our relationships, communities, and cultures" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 46). I suggest that researchers of community food systems in any academic tradition experiment with autoethnographic research as a way to understand themselves as researchers, their positionality with respect to their research, and the cultural context in which their research is embedded. This can be done with writing exercises for autoethnography or collective autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Chang et al., 2013b). Based on the limitations of this research, I would encourage two or more people in a university-community gardening project to engage in autoethnographic research either as a shared exercise or on their own. A goal for such explorations might be to discover the various dimensions of 'truth' of who we are in relation to one another. Exploring one's own stories of food and gardening as community members would add nuance and dimension to data collection, analysis, and interpretation, which can influence conversations about policy, outreach, and development. Autoethnographic research offers the potential to more fully appreciate and account for the complexity of community food systems and the identities of

people and groups that interact in them. Researchers are encouraged to embrace qualities of analytic autoethnography outlined by Anderson (2013): (a) visibility of self; (b) strong reflexivity; (c) engagement; (d) vulnerability; and (e) open-endedness/rejection of finality/closure.

Explore Social Identity of Community Gardeners

Where there are gardens, there are gardeners. Where there are gardeners, there are identities. Within the identity of community gardener is any number of other identities, each carrying motivations, attitudes, beliefs, and stories. These aspects are bound to meet one another in a community garden setting, and it is interesting to see how these aspects interact in community gardening efforts. I recommend that researchers and practitioners in community gardens and community food systems explore their own social identities and reflect on how aspects of their identity influence the ways they engage in their work and vice-versa. Everyone has lived experiences with food systems. Food systems researchers in particular are likely to have experiences in their backgrounds that have drawn or compelled them in some way to understand and/or change food systems and their social role(s) in that context. For those working in the context of higher education, this exercise can help to understand and address problematic aspects of institutional culture (Jubas & Seidel, 2016; Moriarty, 2020). Intersectionality theory offers a way of investigating how gender joins other identity factors to influence how women experience oppression. It is grounded in the idea that “people live layered lives and often experience overlap, making it possible to feel oppression in one area and privilege in others” (Bochner, 2002, p. 6).

Approach Data Collection and Analysis as a Conversation

Moriarty (2015) argues that autoethnography should be "inclusive and it should value personal stories and the people who are generous enough to share them" (p. 3). As it aligns with feminist, critical, and constructivist research, autoethnography tends to center on the inherent truth of a person, group or culture as opposed to any universal "Truth." Holman-Jones (2016) explains:

> The "critical" in critical autoethnography reminds us that theory is not a body of knowledge—a given, static and autonomous set of ideas, objects, or practices. Instead, theorizing is an ongoing, movement-driven process that links the concrete and abstract, thinking and acting, aesthetics and criticism in what performance studies scholar Della Pollock describes as 'living bodies of thought.' (p. 229)

There is no standard order of operations for data collection in autoethnographic research. I can speculate about the difference it might have made to conduct the interviews first and then collect personal memory data, or vice versa. For some interviews, I collected interview data first, and I think that was valuable because our conversations spurred personal memory data that I might not have accessed otherwise. And if I had done the personal memory data collection first, I might have carried bias into the interview by steering the conversation toward certain memories that weren't as relevant to the other person. On the other hand, processing personal memory data before the interviews might have encouraged deeper exploration of certain events or topics with my interviews. If I had to do this over again, I think I would collect and analyze the personal memory data collection first, perhaps iteratively with rounds of textual and nontextual data collection, and then write my interview guide based on the themes generated by a first round of data analysis. Alternatively, I could have conducted interviews first, with the interviews then guiding further data collection. Again, there is little to no established agreement within the autoethnographic research committee on the ideal order of data collection based on data types.

This emphasis on dialogue and difference is in tension with methodologies that focus solely on empirical quantitative analysis and with traditional cultural research that uses quantitative methods (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p. 12). Boylorn and Orbe (2016) argue that such methodologies are problematic in (re)producing cultural stereotypes. They suggest that critical autoethnography can address this problem when it is used to "'give voice' to previously silenced and marginalized experiences, answer unexamined questions about the multiplicity of social identities, instigate discussions about and across difference, and explain the contradictory intersections of personal and cultural standpoints" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p. 13). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) argue that "writing for and about the community in which one has… some degree of insider status [should be] centered on the ongoing dialectical personal-political relationship of self and other" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 184).

Envision Collaborative Autoethnography in Community Garden Projects

Adding to the two major strands of analytical and critical autoethnography, a minor collaborative strand was originally intended for this project. In its fullest version, collaborative autoethnography involves researchers working to collect, analyze, and interpret their autobiographical data in community with one another. Their goal is to create a "meaningful and shared understanding of a sociocultural phenomenon" (Chang et al., 2013 p. 23). The strength of collaboration is based in the "unique synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 24).

While not a fully collaborative project, I sought a collaborative element for two reasons in addition to those listed by Chang et al. (2013). One reason was to add value and richness to the research by incorporating data from others beyond myself. These data were also important for supplementing gaps in my own memory and reflection, corroborating, checking, or adding

nuance to my analysis and interpretation of the facts of events and circumstances. The second reason for a collaborative strand had to do with a goal of this research to produce (to the extent possible) truthful narratives that represented the life of my community in which others were part. Though the meanings constructed from the data are my own, the nature of autoethnographic research is to bridge the personal and collective, self and culture (Anderson, Goodall, & Trahar, 2019; Bradley & Nash, 2011; Weir & Clarke, 2018).

Theoretically, collaborative autoethnography works with the critical and analytic strands in several ways. Inviting others' participation in the research involves pursuing scholarship and creating community as hand-in-hand processes (Chang et al., 2013). Framing the autoethnographic interviews as informal conversations between colleagues or friends provided a negotiable process in which participants could "criticize a question, correct it, point out that it is sensitive, or answer in any way they want to" (Agar, 1980, p. 90). Collaborative and critical strands reinforced one another through the exploration of researcher subjectivity, power-sharing among participants, and community building. Collaborative and analytical strands work together to enrich the research process and encourage deeper learning about self and others (Chang et al., 2013). This step would add to the diversity of voices and perspectives within the larger scholarly dialogue about community food systems, such as university-community partnerships, local food access, or social and environmental justice. It is important to create space for new questions to emerge by inviting different voices to the table—both literally, in the physical places where food is shared, and figuratively, in the virtual places where scholarly conversations are generated.

Envision Autoethnographic Research as a Community Garden

The story of one community gardener/member is part of a larger story of a whole community. Social identity theory says that our identities (who we think we are in terms of the

social groups we belong to or don't belong to) are formed in part by our interactions with others. Likewise, our stories are a product of how we are incorporated into or disincorporated from the stories of others. Autoethnography recognizes a concept of self and culture described by Chang (2008) as continual work in progress. Autoethnographies, like other forms of narrative research, are important to social inquiry because "our lived experiences contribute to the growing social narratives at work in society" (Allen, 2015, p. 33). By sharing my story, I am inviting readers to reflect on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors they experience as members and producers of a culture. I am providing an example of how we might use storytelling as a bridge between individual and cultural aspects of lived experience, to make sense of the data and share the meaning of those experiences with others.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Explore the Personal Stories of Community Gardeners

Community garden spaces and community gardening practices are centered in this study because they are a primary means through which I have explored community food systems. In helping people to join, stay, and receive the benefits of community garden efforts involving universities, it can be helpful to understand what community gardening means personally to the people involved. These are the reasons that people will continue to labor, experiment, and advocate for community gardening even when it does not satisfy their immediate needs. Questions that can help to understand the meaning for participants are: why people become community gardeners; why they stay even when sometimes struggling against challenge; and what happens when someone leaves a community garden behind. For example, throughout the study period, I was motivated by a belief that "a well planned and coordinated community garden has the potential to help improve the personal and relational wellness of participants

while promoting community food security that may lead to collective wellness" (D'Abundo et al., 2008, p. 93).

Explore Issues of Power and Privilege in University-Community Gardening Projects

Issues of food insecurity, food access, food sovereignty, and food justice continue to be more urgent and widespread among university students (Broton & Cady, 2020; Darby et al., 2023; Henry, 2017). All faculty, not only those engaged in community gardening, food systems, and sustainability projects, need greater sensitivity to that reality. Accessing good food means different things to different people. All members of university-community gardening projects (and community food systems generally) often have more capacity for change than they realize. When members see themselves more as individuals than as members of a community, this can be disempowering. When community members see themselves as actors in a set of social and ecological relationships and understand that there is a cultural context of their lived experiences, they can recognize that each member is a creative force of culture.

The word "charity" should be replaced with "community" in every instance, in every context. It would upend the dualistic model of giver and recipient with a more nuanced, complicated, and sometimes uncomfortable reality that we are all in a position to help and we are all in a position to be helped. We are all both vulnerable and resilient. We are always a breath away from acting on one or another side of giving/receiving. The dichotomy between giver and recipient is an oversimplified and limiting concept. The divide between group identities is a social construct and is not as benign as most people think. It is a narrative worth questioning. Critically rethinking it could help social groups within community food systems to see themselves and each other more appreciatively.

Many people living in disadvantaged social positions have been told, implicitly or explicitly, that alternatives to the global industrial food system are not viable. Unchecked, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, or a self-reinforcing feedback loop. Recognizing our cultural selves and working with others creates the potential for more just food systems where we can "have our change and eat it, too."

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore the relationship between community gardening and social identity as it occurs in my lived experience. To do this, I used methods of autoethnography (Chang, 2008) including writing exercises and interactive interviews to collect, analyze, and interpret data from my lived experience and construct meaning from them in a way that could relate my personal experiences to my cultural context. I used the personal to understand the political and vice-versa. This research examines a community gardening journey that took me from an urgent situation where growing food was a practical means of nourishing myself and my family to an emergent practice where growing food is integral to my social identity, sense of community belonging, and praxis of change. It was both an inward study of personal experience through the lens of culture and an outward study of culture through the lens of personal experience. Like Grant (2010), I have "tried to convey my identity as a fractured and distributed self aiming for some coherence, within the cultural borderlands" of community food system efforts involving universities (p. 115).

The cultural context of my research was university-community gardening projects in the Monadnock Region of New Hampshire during 2010-2020. This context provided a "sit spot" for the study (to borrow a phrase from an environmental education lesson). The temporal, geographic, and social dimensions of this context are important because it was there that a global

oil crisis, regional housing crisis, and personal/family crisis collided in my life and presented the invitation into learning how to grow food and community. A set of autoethnographic manuscripts centers on three aspects of the relationship of community gardening and social identity that I came to understand by taking that invitation.

This reflective piece is an impressionist representation of the research process as I attempted to capture the qualities of analytical autoethnography described by Anderson & Glass-Coffin (2013):

> Not to simplify but complexify. To shine a light through a prism of experience. Each study a facet of identity where my inner and outer selves interface.
>
> Not to separate but integrate. Develop a way into seeing, perceiving, understanding, owning, not just myself but what I'm part of. Not only my experience as I've lived it but my experience as a reflection of greater dynamics at play in my social-ecological context.
>
> An iteration of a shared story. An arrangement in a pattern.
>
> To articulate, to piece together, to make more whole, to make meaning. One thing in relation to another, like the articulation of bones in a joint. Each in its place, its place being defined by its relation to its other, its movements and actions made possible by this relationship.
>
> To articulate is to recognize the pieces coming together, how, by doing so, they define each other, creating balance and tension.
>
> The garden and the gardener, the question and the asker, the story and the teller.
>
> Not to reduce but to clarify. To coax out the formless, floating ions and crystallize them; emergent, non-random, tangible precipitate.
>
> Not static but vibrating, conducting. Current, which is currency, which collects, is richness, is form, a body of work.
>
> Not to "complete" or conclude but to bring to fruition.
>
> To display and to savor accumulated knowledge, coursing through the xylem.
>
> Taking the risk of budding and flowering and being picked off and devoured, all for the sake of growth and regeneration.
>
> To know this is but one stage in a natural history of people trying to understand who they are, where they come from, why they matter.

By exploring the ways community gardening has influenced my social identity and vice-versa, I have developed an awareness that community gardening is not only a social action (Nettle, 2014), but also an expression of social identity. Community gardening has helped me to see how issues of food systems such as food dignity and food justice show up in my own and

others' lived cultural experiences. As a member of the community and landscape of "the mountain that stands alone," my experiences are nested in the experiences of the people and places of the Monadnock Region. Conducting this research, reflecting and creating cultural meaning of my experiences in the context of community food systems, has deepened my sense of social, environmental, and regional identity. Living in one place that is many places, walking many roads at once, some that keep circling back on each other and some that only exist for a time. Community gardens are places where my hunger as an individual is experienced and known in a larger cultural context. My hunger belongs to a collective hunger for nourishing, sustainable foodways.

This dissertation is an intentional exploration of a journey that began over ten years ago, during which time I have accumulated memories, relationships, reflections, and documentation that I now draw on as data. Using autoethnography's reflexive processes of analysis and interpretation, my inquiry revolves around discovering, in my lived experience, a complex relationship between community gardening and larger food system issues such as food security, food dignity, and food sovereignty at work in my social context. When I first stood in a community garden, I used to ask, "Whose garden is this? What am I doing here?" Underneath those questions were deeper ones that opened up as I continued to garden in the community over the years that followed: Who are we, and who do we become, in the act of community gardening? What do we bring with us, and what do we take away? What is it about a garden that shows us who we are as a people in a community and members of a culture?

Identity is a conversation between social concepts of self created by family, community, institution, culture. There is back and forth, push and pull, sometimes conflict, sometimes confluence, where knowledge grows. "Events in the past are interpreted from our current

position" (Ellis, 2004, p. 118). This means that "any autoethnography reflects the author's thoughts, emotions, desires, and aspirations as understood at the time of writing, and this may be different to how the author would have constructed that story three years ago, or three years from now" (Dashper, 2016, p. 215). The relationship of identity and culture is a conversation, as is the relationship of researcher and subject, writer and page, gardener and soil. In the meantime, "if my tale evokes questions, identification, reflection or reflexivity, or noticeable emotions among readers, I will have gone some way to fulfill my perceived ethical responsibilities. I must remain hopeful." (Grant, 2010, p. 115)

I set out on my community gardening journey to test the limits of food gardening as a social and environmental endeavor and its capacity to change my situation. I needed to see how much food I could grow within scarce means; what kind of relationships I could build between myself, the land, and the economic system in which we are embedded; and how deeply I could engage my community in the process. I want to nudge my culture from one of being forced to choose between a meaningful life and a life that keeps food on the table to one where those things are one and the same. I needed to write a different story than the one I was living, in which personal and political circumstances had put me in a position where there was no way to nourish my family that was both aligned with my values and within my means. That story was titled, "you can't eat change," the words of a community member who discouraged my idealism as a scholar-gardener. While I knew that I may not ever be able to disprove it, I needed to at least try. So I dug in. And now, every time I pull up a beet from my garden, every time I share a bundle of kale with my neighbors, every time I bite into a tomato I grew, it tastes so sweet.

Epilogue

In 2020, Tom Rivett-Carnac, a climate change policy expert, described the moment of global response to the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to understand our power to collectively address global climate change. He said, “as long as you feel like what you’re doing has meaning and purpose, you’ll take action even if you can’t control the outcome” (Zomodori, 2020, interview). By the time I wrote up this research, I had moved myself and my children back into our home, repaired and expanded my gardens, secured another flock of chickens, and enjoined five families to buy shares of a garden CSA. The kids and I all had jobs. We had access to good food, a secure home, community, and what Peter Block calls the structure of belonging (Block, 2018). Yet, I still feel a sort of phantom hunger, not in terms of physical sensation or scarcity, but as an echo of the personal and collective experience of hunger. I now define hunger as a disconnection from nourishing foodways, a loss of the means to eat in the way eating is meant to be: physically, culturally, and ecologically healing. This hunger has stayed with me in the form of knowledge that at any time, circumstances could change and we could lose it all again—our food, our planet, our community, our selves. Hunger is a memory I taste in every garden, every harvest, every meal. I cannot claim, at the end of this research, that community gardening will ever provide all or even most of our needs for food, community, or a healthy environment for everyone. But to borrow a bit of inspiration from Gandhi, this research suggests it is possible for a person to *eat the change you’d like to see in the world.*

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