

A garden's place in critical food systems education

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Abstract

For several years, hundreds of students have been tour guests and interns at a community garden, the Beach Flats Garden, run by Mexican and Salvadorian farmers in Santa Cruz, California. This paper reflects upon engagement between the gardeners and local educational institutions and opportunities through three major themes: connection between practices of solidarity, urgency of action, and pedagogy; possibilities in engaging with the frameworks of critical food system pedagogy alongside the lessons of autonomy and activist ethnography; and the importance of teaching the history of agroecology and more broadly of social research in connection with resistance to capitalist-colonial domination. The article discusses what place the garden holds in expanding and deepening the scope of food system education through providing examples

of noncapitalist exchanges and practices, a space of resistance to gentrification in a highly competitive land market, and decolonial foodways that emphasize gardeners' traditional agroecological knowledge.

Keywords

Urban Gardens, Agroecology, Critical Food System Education, Activist Ethnography, Gentrification

Introduction

From the October 2, 2015, *Santa Cruz Sentinel*: “Unlike many of the quiet, laid-back mornings at the Beach Flats Community Garden, the vernal Raymond Street lot was buzzing with young people Friday. Coming in three waves throughout the morning, the approximately 170 Branciforte Middle School seventh-graders saw their textbook lessons come to life, right in the home neighborhood of many” (York, 2015, para. 1–2). This was one of many school trips I helped organize that fall with Beach Flats gardeners Don Emilio and Don

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Federico, leading tours and patiently answering questions from students from all over Santa Cruz.

During the summer of 2015, news spread that the Santa Cruz Seaside Company, the Beach Flats Garden landowners, would end their agreement with the city of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department, thus forcing out about 25 families who for two and a half decades had developed the lush foodscape of corn, beans, nopales, fruit trees and much more. Brian, a youth from the neighborhood, expressed concern about the proposed change: “It’s wrong to put something else here. That’s practically some people’s homes, and place to get food, so they won’t go to the store and waste that much” (York, 2015, para. 10).

Brian’s reaction was typical of many of the young people who visited the garden that fall. Shortly after the middle schooler visit, a small after-school program from the local elementary school brought their students to tour, interview gardener Don Emilio, and take photographs in the garden. Through this photovoice project, students developed comic strip–style persuasive letters that focused on themes of gardeners deserving to stay on the land, the contributions the gardeners make to the community, and how the decision about the future of the garden should not simply be in the company’s hands. After another set of field trips and dozens of letters from students to the city council and the Seaside Company, we suddenly had teachers backing out of requests to come visit. We heard through a parent that the teachers had received notice from the school districts that the visits needed to stop, that the issue was too politically charged. We still do not know how that decision was made, but it was clear that these visits were having an impact.

Over the last seven years of engagement with the Beach Flats Community Garden, I have partnered in many educational projects with the gardeners and other community partners. Many of these projects continue to this day as we contemplate and refine their orientations. In this reflective essay, I will consider three areas of the opportunities and limitations of these endeavors with the objective of sharing what lessons we have gathered. The first is the connection between practices of solidarity, urgency of action, and pedagogy. The

second area focuses on the possibilities in engaging with the frameworks of critical food system pedagogy alongside the lessons of *autonomia* (indigenous autonomy) and activist ethnography. The third is the importance of teaching the history of agroecology and, more broadly, social research in connection with resistance to capitalist-colonial domination. This reflective essay is intended to continue the conversation many food system educators and advocates have initiated on the purposes and potentialities of garden-based education. In particular, I build on the concept of critical food system education (CFSE) presented by Meek and Tarlau (2015, 2016). This paper draws on lessons and critical reflections about broader conceptual framings which connect liberatory change with the everyday work of gardening and preservation of the Beach Flats Community Garden. This work of bridging the theoretical and the embodied is, as many scholars have noted, just as relevant in the practices of garden education as in the reflections of educators themselves on those practices.

Gardens, Education, and Political Subjectivities

Gardens have long held a place in U.S. educational institutions and teaching. As early as the late 1800s, school gardening became a popular avenue to promote agrarian ethics, entrepreneurial skills and work ethic, and opportunities for developing connections to nature (Burt, 2016; Lawson, 2005). Although gardens were frequently initiated through the work of women’s clubs, mother’s associations, and horticultural clubs, school garden advocates advanced the idea that gardens should hold a permanent place in public education (Burt, 2016). University extension offices became advocates for urban gardening as an integral feature of public schooling. In 1911 the University of California developed a project in which 200 students were allocated plots in a one-acre site on the Berkeley campus and worked individually to produce and sell vegetables and flowers (Lawson, 2005). Communal plots were used to demonstrate agricultural technologies and best practices, as well as to support team building activities. This combination of individual and communal gardening became a common strategy both to encourage individual

ownership and an agrarian work ethic while engaging students in collective learning (Lawson, 2005).

Pudup (2008) and others have noted that this emphasis on the cultivation of particular political subjectivities through gardening continues to this day. Urban school gardening projects frequently focus on developing entrepreneurial opportunities or alternative agriculture-focused consumer subjects (Melcarek, 2009; Pudup, 2008). School garden projects that emphasize personal responsibility and the use of market tools for social change can intentionally or inadvertently promote neoliberal subjectivities. Thus, it becomes necessary to reflect on what kinds of relationships to land politics are possible through garden education projects and, from this standpoint, what forms of anti-neoliberal political subjectivities can be cultivated.

Method

Writing this article is part of my process of reflection, which has given me the time to sit with students and collaborators, including gardener Don Emilio, and discuss their reflections and mine on our work together, sometimes asking uncomfortable questions. The reflections in this essay have been developed collectively. They are not mine alone, and although I do not claim to represent the views or words of my collaborators, it is through their insights and years of conversation and joint analysis with gardeners and student volunteers that I came to write this essay. Activist ethnographers write about collective reflexivity practices such as action debriefs, informal conversations, trainings, and events and games with reflection conversations and shared meals. Collective reflexivity emphasizes how members of research communities produce collective meaning (Davies, 1999, Hardy et al., 2001, Maton, 2003). Feminist scholar Rachel Wasserfall (1999) has taken this further, to suggest that accountability provides a more active engagement with praxis than reflexivity, shifting the questions towards always being responsible to self and the broader community.

I began working with the Beach Flats Community Garden in 2011 after returning to the U.S. from working in urban gardens in Mexico. I worked as a gardener with my toddler in tow, continuing to learn about Mexican and now Salvado-

rian, indigenous and campesino foodways and agroecologies until the pressures of graduate school and parenting led me to give up my plot in 2012. In 2015, ecological researchers working in the garden reached out to me about the threatened closure of the space. A subsequent visit to the garden led to gardeners requesting support in talking to city officials and advocating for the garden's protection. My subsequent work with the gardeners included supporting and coordinating coalition-based advocacy, doing oral history interviews with nine of the gardeners, conducting neighborhood opinion surveys, and long hours spent with gardeners in their plots, the garden common area, and their homes discussing everything from strategy to everyday life. Working with the coalition and students, I have also asked collaborators to sit and reflect with me on our work, how we might understand particular challenges and dynamics, and what might be changed moving forward.

This paper reflects upon engagement with the Beach Flats gardeners over the last seven years in facilitating relationships with local educational institutions. Specifically, I have worked in three primary fronts: at the request of Emilio in particular, I have brought school field trips to the Garden for tours and educational events; I have supervised over a dozen undergraduate interns who have worked as activist-advocates, curriculum developers for community youth days, and research assistants in the garden; and I have partnered with graduate students to conduct oral histories and collect archive material in partnership with our local Museum of Art and History as part of a project to bring living history and community empowerment into the work of the institution.

A key partner in all of this work has been "Don Emilio," Emilio Martinez Casteñeda, a long-time gardener who first became involved a year or so after the garden was started. Emilio grew up in rural Durango, Mexico, and farming was his education from an early age. He frequently tells students he can not read or write, but he knows the milpa, which are cropping systems primarily focused around corn, beans, and sometimes squash and other vegetables that were developed by Indigenous farmers over millennia, formed a cornerstone of many Mesoamerican Indigenous and campesino

cultures, and are still planted today. Emilio explains he knows how to grow the food we eat. He has become an important educator and spokesperson for the garden, presenting at schools and events across the city. He explains how he spends every day in the garden tending to the plants who are part of his family, saying, “they need to be tended to like my children so they can grow in a healthy way.”

Practices of Solidarity and Learning

As my introductory vignette indicates, much of the focus of my work with the gardeners has engaged their struggle and our community’s struggle to maintain access to this land for the gardeners. The educational links that we have created tie together the themes of agroecology, the gardeners’ farming histories in Mexico and El Salvador, and the politics of immigration, race, gentrification, and land rights. During the fall, winter and spring of 2015–16, I was part of and sometimes a significant figure in forming a coalition of gardeners, food justice advocates, and community activists who waged an effort to save the garden. We met in the garden and held bilingual meetings on a weekly and sometimes more frequent basis, where new folks were always welcome. The strategy of the coalition and its governance, which included the relationship between it and attempts at a gardener-only committee, were areas of debate, much of which was worked out through the mere fact of who showed up at any given meeting. As a part of the effort, many of us actively built or strengthened relationships with the neighbors of the garden in the predominantly Latino neighborhood, which involved community organizing as well as negotiation with community officials.

An issue that came up in side conversations but never directly in the garden meetings was the racial composition of the coalition—there was a concern that many involved, like me, were from outside the neighborhood and were white. Several of us who were white and from outside the neighborhood had previous relationships with the gardeners and garden, but not everyone did. This has continued to be an area of tension, which I hope to continue to explore with those who want to talk about it. Many of the interns and student organizer

volunteers were from out of town; several were from the L.A. area and were Latinx. One Latina intern told me that she knew my race was a concern for some students and coalition members involved. It is complicated to see a white, Ph.D.-educated woman facilitating and guiding relationships with the garden and gardeners. She indicated that for her it was important to see an approach from coalition members such as myself that emphasized asking questions about how gardeners want to lead, what they want from supporters, and then developing deep conversation about ways to work together to achieve joint goals. For her, seeing this approach was key to teaching other students and youth how to engage with the garden. She emphasized that the internships should serve for folks to use their social position as students with access to at least some university resources to create and amplify forums for gardeners to share their knowledge and histories. Santa Cruz is the home of the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems and thus of decades of training and education focused on models of non-industrial agriculture from the perspective of the sustainable food movement. The question of who gets to be a teacher in this movement is important. The garden provides learners an opportunity to hear from and interact with gardeners as teachers as they cultivate the garden using both traditional and newly learned sustainable techniques, demonstrating indigenous and campesino agroecologies. Interns helped connect outside audiences with the gardeners as teachers by bringing a local youth club into relationship with the garden, connecting many classes at the university to the space, soliciting press attention, and in other ways.

In my reflective conversation with this former intern, she also expressed she had learned much from the style and format of the garden organizing meetings. She expressed that she thought, the gardeners and other coalition members were teaching by example processes of social struggle that prioritized decision-making by those most impacted—the gardeners and neighbors—in the struggle to maintain tenure security over land in this gentrifying Californian context. Specifically, she noted that she observed an emphasis on gardener voice and leadership within meetings, focusing on facilitation

practices of asking gardeners to offer their ideas for action and asking for their response to coalition members ideas. She indicated that it was confusing to come in to the garden meetings and see myself or other coalition members facilitating. This was clearly not just an example of a community self-organizing and fighting for the preservation of their garden. It was a group of gardeners and neighbors working with a coalition of outside community members with different backgrounds, organizing orientations, and goals. Participating in the meetings, provided her an opportunity to reflect on solidarity and how non-gardeners could play an active role in advocating for the garden while emphasizing (or not) asking questions about how gardeners want to lead and what they want from supporters. The garden meetings, created a space to negotiate out how deep conversations or practices would unfold outlining ways to work together to achieve joint goals. Two practices of note include that meetings were largely held in Spanish, sometimes with translation for non-Spanish-speaking coalition members, and that meetings happened frequently, which limited decision-making outside the gatherings of gardeners.

When I have asked gardeners about the complexities of having both nonwhite and white, non-neighborhood residents involved in the coalition, the response was resoundingly that they want solidarity and support from the whole community. The gardeners did not seem to want to take the conversation further, at least with me, demonstrating potentially a limit of what conversation I can have at this moment in our relationships given my social position. One gardener commented that the coalition members and students' experiences in their communities, whether a predominantly white community or a Latinx community, can sometimes be very different from a recent immigrant's experience. It was clear many coalition members had an outlook on city politics that assumed greater access to power and influence than the assumptions sometimes shared by gardeners. From early in the process of trying to save the garden I heard comments along the lines of "why would city officials listen to us, we are poor immigrants who they don't even acknowledge." Some gardeners highlighted the marginalization and precarity they felt

about their ability to access the ear and favor of local decision-makers. For the group of gardeners overall, the mood at meetings frequently fluctuated between this sense of marginalization and a potent anger that the city officials were not providing for the needs of community members but rather the needs of one of the most powerful companies in town. Several very active garden leaders emphasized the need for more solidarity and action within the broader Latino community and within Beach Flats specifically in order to make the city see how they were neglecting this responsibility.

Rodríguez (2017) explores how white academics may frequently write about issues of marginalization and resistance, while personally not knowing the experiences that limit and challenge POC scholars' access and security in academic positions (2017). She critiques a current notion of solidarity that sees allyship as within the academy:

The hallways in the institution where I currently work embodies this faux-solidarity in posters about conferences, colloquiums, and trips in the Global South or about the Global South that cost an arm and a leg. As long as you have money to pay for your airfare, hotel, meals and transportation, you too could add two lines in the CV and speak about the new social movement and their radical strategies to dismantle the system. You too can participate in academic dialogues about poverty and labor rights as you pass by an undocumented cleaner who will make your bed while you go to the main conference room to talk about her struggles. (2017, para. 14)

A main critique Rodríguez makes is that "today, anything and everything is allowed if a postcolonial/decolonizing seal of approval accompanies it, even if it is devoid of any political urgency" (2017, para. 13). She challenges us: "we can't keep criticizing the neoliberal system while continuing to retain superficial visions of solidarity without striving for a more in-depth understanding," (2017, para. 13). I continue to ask myself and others involved in this work, what do we see as constituting superficial versions of solidarity? A crucial intervention I understand from Rodríguez is

the need for urgency in taking political action outside academic spaces. In the case of the work with the gardeners, I see this as both the urgency of an immediate struggle, as there was a timeline for eviction, *and* an urgency to address the deeper issues within the community. Continued commitment from the Coalition to Save the Garden has brought about new solidarity efforts, including rapid response solidarity during immigration raids and the development of a movement for housing justice in the city. These more organizing-oriented efforts are not always a primary focus of the educational efforts described before, but always keep our education work with the garden grounded in the broader needs of communities involved with the garden. Similar to the effort to maintain tenure access for food growing, gardeners and allies worked in the housing and immigration rights efforts to articulate their rights to space, dignity, and decision-making power.

For student visitors to the garden, we also encourage a visit to a recently repainted community mural just down the block from the garden, as a lesson in connection between the garden and questions of gentrification. Community members painted the original murals in 1992. Young community artist Victor Cervantes, with help from many community residents, directed the effort. In 2013 the City decided that restoration of the largest of the three murals was too expensive and hired an artist to paint a new mural. Subsequently, City staff came and painted over the old mural, literally whitewashing it. Community residents asked what was happening, objected, and finally stood in the way of the painters. After intense community backlash and a lawsuit against the City, Cervantes and the community were offered a formal apology and US\$30,000. Not long after this decision, in late summer 2015, vandals painted over the remaining two smaller murals, several Spanish language signs, and a work of art depicting an indigenous farmer in the Beach Flats Garden. The main sign near the entrance of the neighborhood was vandalized, with “Flats” taken out of “Beach Flats Community.” The vandals were not found, but the clear racism in these attacks upset many inside and outside the neighborhood. While participating in the repainting of one of the murals, a representation of the Virgin

Guadalupe, I encountered another side to the issue. A middle-aged white appearing woman who had bought a house in the neighborhood several years before came and demanded we stop repainting, claiming the mural was offensive to her because of its religious content and not being in keeping with the new direction the community should go in, presumably one which encouraged development, investment, and displacement of the low-income, Latino residents. Gardeners and Coalition members have worried that the downsizing of the garden is the beginning of an intensified process of gentrification.

In 2016, Santa Cruz was named the nation’s seventh most competitive housing market. An extensive local housing survey noted high levels of housing burden and eviction (McKay & Greenberg, 2017). A few gardeners say that they have had to move out of Beach Flats because of rising rents. In meetings with City officials in the garden, Beach Flats residents have brought up their concerns about the availability of affordable housing. These conversations were part of what led to a housing justice campaign to try to obtain just cause eviction and rent control in the city, protecting tenants from excessive rent hikes and evictions for no reason. Today, conversations about the garden are almost always accompanied with discussion of gentrification, skyrocketing rents, and the future of the Beach Flats community. The urgency of solidarity with the struggle for the garden’s land tenure security opened a constellation of intersecting issues with which many local community members are now more active. Urgency, I suggest, is a critical lesson from the garden education work. While academic and professional constraints may lead food system educators and advocates to stay narrowly focused on particular framings or themes, ultimately this will limit how solidarity can be enacted. If we only focused on agriculture and the tenure security of the garden, then it could easily be imagined that a garden would continue to be there but without the Beach Flats residents. To engage with the urgency of less shallow forms of solidarity will mean blurring the professionalized boundaries of our projects and commitments in order to see the roots of racism and capitalist exploitation that connect food

system struggles with other struggles of everyday contemporary life.

Critical Food Systems Education and a Garden's Place

Meek and Tarlau (2015, 2016) synthesize approaches that “build on a long history of social movements incorporating education into their larger struggle against classism, racism, and sexism” to present the critical food systems education (CFSE) framework (2015, p. 134). CFSE is grounded in critical pedagogy, which sees education as an intrinsically political project that can either “facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Freire, 2002, in Meek & Tarlau, 2015, p. 34). I agree with the authors that CFSE is a necessary intervention to continue to make in food system education. Through engaging students in local tours at the garden, Emilio, myself, and sometimes other collaborators attempt to follow the “dialectical process of analyzing the reality of the local food system, linking this local reality to national and international structures that have coproduced this local reality, and helping students come up with creative solutions to transform these realities: Freire’s famous concept of praxis” (Meek & Tarlau, 2015, p. 134). Students on these tours have frequently been the most vocal and creative in thinking about alternative politics of land that emphasize the gardeners’ rights to continue to cultivate. This perspective emphasized in the garden tours may provide a counter example to the model of garden-based learning educators that Meek and Tarlau discuss in their work. Pudup and many others have questioned how school gardens and other garden education projects can produce subjectivities that problematically envision food system democracy through voting with your fork—or consumption politics—and promote depoliticized, white-dominated agrarian ideologies. However, through our work with the Beach Flats Community Garden we seek with students to draw out another set of histories, knowledges, and

struggles of the gardeners, challenging them to think through the connections of agroecological food production, displacement, and the struggles for land justice for this community of Latino farmers and residents.

Our work draws on the important contributions of activist scholars like Peña et al. (2017), who introduce a decolonial approach to critical food studies that “envisions the recovery and resurgence of Indigenous knowledge, belief, and practice as these are related to food, foodways and cuisines,” (2017, p. xvii). They state that “decoloniality explores hidden alternative histories of relationships between plants, animals, soil, water, and humans,” (2017, p. xvii). The knowledges and practices entangled with these histories can be seen as embodied in what the authors call *decolonial comida*, or deep foods and foodways as social relations that are connected to “a normative infrastructure constitutive of ways of being in the world predating white settler societies by thousands of years” (2017, p. xx). Through engaging with deep foods and foodways, opportunities for healing and transformation are opened. These are openings of escape from the subjugated space of the dominant neoliberal capitalist agri-food system. However, “these escapes are not universal, and major challenges are posed by the decimation and erasure of heritage cuisines,” (2017, p. xx). Yet, as in the work of Holloway (2010) on cracks within capitalism and of many food scholars in critical geography who have emphasized the interstitial spaces of alternative food systems, their use of *decolonial comidas* emphasizes the potentialities of practices of resistance to the colonial-capitalist food system through connecting micro-actions in gardens to international food movements.

In addition to the commitment to popular education and the use of education as a tool in liberation, CFSE draws from three other areas: the lessons from food justice struggles in understanding race and class in the food system, the political nature of agroecology as a project in contestation to the industrial agribusiness model (Meek & Tarlau, 2016), and the importance of food systems educators thinking about their work in relationship to the development of the international food sovereignty movement which unites many groups and

peoples fighting for more just food systems (Meek & Tarlau, 2016).

Much of the work of Peña (2017) concurs with this formulation. However, one key difference is his critique of the framework of food sovereignty as proposed in the La Via Campesina declarations emphasizing *autonomia*. Indigenous *autonomia* for Peña can reorient food movements toward a political project grounded in understanding the “nuanced coupling of ecological systems with Indigenous models of human rights, property, and the individual” (2017, p. xxii). Peña argues that this critique reorients food movements away from some of the limitations of “‘dominionist’ and ‘exceptionalist’ subject positions that limit and perhaps even rule out the possibility of a politics of *coevalness* [emphasis in original] among humans, other organisms, and ecosystems” (2017, p. 5). Peña refocuses attention on the actually existing spaces of autonomy and the formal and informal networks of mutual aid and cooperative labor in Indigenous ancestral and diaspora-adopted territories. This is a practical *autonomia*, a place-based autonomy that supports culturally grounded practices of self-governance, maintenance of agroecological knowledges, and connection between broader political aims and the acts of saving seeds, cooking traditional meals, or managing soil health. These can draw from indigenous conceptions of property that are relational and frequently embrace “earth-care” obligations. For example, in this analysis the urban diasporic communities’ use of gardens becomes spaces resisting state and capitalist dominance of foodways—gardens create everyday ways to enact “earth-care” largely outside industrial and capitalist food systems. This contributes to what Peña describes as practical autonomy:

We see multiple signs of emerging alternatives to anthropocentrism and the rejection of the acquiescence to a neoliberal global order who’s biopolitics seek the commodification of everything related to food and foodways. ... At the heart of these alternatives are organizational forms involving cooperativism inspired by Indigenous general assemblies and a consensus approach to participatory democracy. (2017, p. 24)

In our work with education in the garden, we focused clearly on these emerging alternatives and lessons in the forms of cooperativisms at play. Interns learn about and participated in the meetings of gardeners that were held sometimes multiple times a week to make decisions and discuss strategy and action for how to try to save the garden from development. Students visitors discuss the difference between a garden where each person has an individual plot and this garden, where many spaces are tended collectively and gardeners share in both labor and produce with each other and broader community. They plant bean seeds, pull weeds, make tortillas and cornhusk dolls, and physically connect to work of the milpa. They learn about the nonmonetized means of food distribution, how neighbors can come as ask for *epazote*, *boja santa*, and corn husks for their soups or tamales, and how the garden is a space for birthday parties, movie nights, community healing clinics, and free food distribution days every other week. Visitors see this and learn the history of the Seaside Company wanting to convert the garden into a space for storage, and the broader issues of conversion of land into space for commercial development in the neighborhood. This provides a concrete example of juxtaposing expressions of *autonomia* and the use of space for community good, with a different set of priorities: what may be considered a more profitable use of the land. The lesson goes beyond the claim that another world is possible, to show how in practical everyday ways multiple worlds exist through actions of commoning. I find this action essential for the development of liberatory food systems education and radical education, and for research more broadly. Food system educators, while acknowledging the limits of gardens, can recognize these places as important sites of teaching practical autonomy through the *decolonial comida* perspective.

This work is supported by the approach and commitments of my department, Anthropology and Social Change, at the California Institute of Integral Studies. As a graduate program, our faculty and students focus on militant, activist and social change-oriented ethnography. We pull together three threads of recent work in ethnography: activist research as described by Charles Hale, Shannon

Speed, and their colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin; public anthropology and the call for “barefoot” or “militant” anthropology within this subfield from scholars such as Nancey Scheper Hughes and Laura Nader; and recent work on militant ethnography and movement-engaged scholarship by authors such as Jeff Juris and Chris Dixon. These approaches, without going deeply into their distinguishing elements, emphasize a role for anthropologists that challenges them to engage as a participant, ally, and multisided subject engaged with and part of the community of struggle. This may mean engaging more deeply with the concept of anthropologist as witness, which for Lynn Stephen (2002) means “trying to be an attentive listener, recognizing the situatedness of one’s intellectual work, and affirming one’s own connections to the ideas, processes, and people one is studying” (p. 22). I think that we can look at the last point in more detail—what does it mean to affirm our connections to the ideas, processes and people we are studying? For Juris, Dixon and others, this means locating our motivation in and demonstrating a commitment to political solidarity with research collaborators, at the same time that we consistently work to incorporate concern for how the outputs or products of research benefit and represent our collaborators and collaborations, as well as, when appropriate, invite wider audiences to participate in these collaborations.

These three approaches pull from diverse threads of engaged research, including Latin American collaborative ethnographic projects such as participatory action research (PAR), liberation anthropology, and decolonial anthropology (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991), as well as worker’s inquiry research in Italy in the 1970s and earlier Marxist interventions (Wright, 2002). The three approaches promote an ethos of emancipation through the research process that blurs distinctions between the researcher and the researched and the roles of investigator and activist. In so doing, the research process itself contains within it a commitment to hope, the politics of possibility, and an emphasis on drawing out the alternative histories, narratives, and practices that have co-existed alongside systems of exploitation and domination. As a teacher and researcher, I ask how as an inherent

responsibility of my work I can show how communities have developed and struggled for concrete alternatives. This brings me back to the question of solidarity. For Peña, practical autonomy is linked to solidarity: “The autonomy perspectives in this chapter are guided by awareness that our movements do not seek permission from the state or corporate acquiescence in order for us to act in solidarity. Relational accountability/solidarity is really praxis not theory; it is a method of resistance. We must act everywhere possible in a radical manner by refusing to submit to sovereign power as we rebuild local deep-food systems for ourselves based on relational knowledge of our place-based cultures and convivial economies” (Peña, 2017, p. 26). Through our actions as food system educators, we can open space to see the worlds of possibility that have existed and continue to be built through the practical autonomy of communities in resistance through cooperative survival strategies.

Agroecology as Social Movement

In addition to the histories of participatory and movement-focused research described above, I want to present how our discussions and the teaching of agricultural practices—the agroecology of the garden—draw out the history as well.

Agroecology, for Gliessman (2016) and many others, is not just a science that applies ecology to agriculture. It is understanding the complex interplay between science, practices, and social movements that shape sustainability in food systems. Rosset and Martinez-Torres (2012) have written about contestation over the term and attempts to co-opt the terminology in order to put it to capitalist use in the dominant industrial model of agriculture.

Gliessman (2016) notes that one of the first uses of the term agroecology was in response to the indiscriminate use of external inputs—fertilizers, pesticides, and other technological innovations. In 1930, Basil Bensin, a Russian agronomist, called attention to the need for respecting and engaging farmer knowledge, citing the disappointment of farmers who had been caught up in advertising without knowing if the seeds, machinery, etc. were actually appropriate for their local conditions. Gliessman quotes Bensin arguing for the “need to

regulate the purchase of fertilizers, machines and seeds so as to reduce the risk to the farmer” (Gliessman, 2016, p. 24), which can be interpreted as calling for some forms of resistance to pressure from corporations, a need that has only grown greater as the industrial model of agriculture more and more dominates our food system. Following the lead of Mexican scholars such as Efraim Herbabdez Xolocotzi and Alba Gonzales Jacome, Gliessman traces the roots of agroecological resistance to experiences of the green revolution in Mexico. In particular, he highlights three roots.

First, in 1976–1977 ethnobotanist Hernandez Xolocotzi documented the immense agrobiodiversity in the fields of Mexican farmers and the practices and crops developed in the fields through thousands of years of coevolutionary processes. He argued that the green revolution ignored the ecological, socioeconomic, and technological axis of agroecology and emphasized practices aimed at increasing yields to respond to market pressures and the dominant development thinking of the time. The socioeconomic axis was reduced to a purely economic one, and an entire culture of agriculture was being lost. In 1976 he called for a national seminar titled “Analysis of Agroecosystems of Mexico.”

Second, agrobiología was developing at this time, with ecologist and botanist Arturo Gomez-Pompa as its chief proponent. He established the National Institute for Research on Biotic Resources (INIREB) in Xalapa, Veracruz, where researchers have developed alternatives to industrial farming grounded in biological and ecological knowledge linked with the traditional knowledge of local farmers. Gliessman says, “This effort was a form of resistance to the large-scale removal of tropical forests to install large internationally funded development projects using Green Revolution technology” (2016, p. 27).

The third root is the work of students and teachers at the Colegio Superior de Agricultura Tropical (CSAT) in Tabasco. The school was started in 1974 and was affiliated with the Chontalpa Development Plan, the first phase of which involved clearing 90,000 hectares of tropical forest and wetlands and displacing residents in order to establish large monoculture production. Students

arriving to study ecology pushed for studying ecology in relation to agriculture, in connection to their lives. Ecology morphed into agroecology. In studying the monoculture project, researchers determined it to be unsustainable both ecologically and in social, economic, and cultural dimensions. The injustices that the development project imposed were too many (Barkin & Zavala, 1978). The teachers began looking to the margins, to traditional Mayan farmers, to understand alternatives to the dominant model.

The three moments represent roots of agroecology which originated as resistance to green revolution development projects, looking to small farmers to develop alternatives to the dominant model. The seeds were planted for the growth of agroecology as an anti-capitalist science and movement. Since then many agroecological researchers, teachers, and promoters have emphasized methodologies that connect with commitments with agricultural alternatives, including participatory action research (PAR) (Méndez et al., 2016), methods of communication and learning such as campesino a campesino networks (Holt-Giménez, 2006), movement-run learning institutions like La Via Campesina’s Paulo Freire Latin American University Institute of Agroecology (IALA-PF), a peasant-run school (McCune et al., 2014), and approaches such as *diálogos de saberes* of La Via Campesina, where connective space is created for dialog between different knowledges, experiences, and ways of both knowing and practicing (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012).

The political history of agroecology is woven throughout our work with the garden in several ways. Our oral histories with the gardeners show that displacement has played a large role in the agroecological formation of the gardeners, and the practices they use to resist current forms of displacement and injustice. My colleagues and I have engaged with the Beach Flats Garden as a case study to theorize an “agroecologies of displacement” (Glowa et al., 2018), arguing that farmers are increasingly less singularly place-based through forced displacement, and that displacement and dispossession shapes agricultural practices—and social practices, broadly—in farming communities. We follow Kerssen and Brent (2017) and others in

calling for bringing a historically focused analysis of displacement, dispossession, and the dynamics of land ownership under capitalist systems to our understanding of the articulations of food movements, in particular political and transformative agroecologies. This analysis points to a form of praxis that emphasizes teaching and acting within a historical lineage of history that interweaves the social and ecological, and forces us to ask as food system educators how to teach our students that food and agriculture are never apolitical.

Caminando Preguntamos

In fall 2017, we were able to conduct our first larger class field trips again at the garden; after two years, the ban on visits apparently has passed. Over one hundred 2nd–5th graders came to visit over two days. As we began the visits, the first questions were about the struggle to save the garden: Why did they (the company) want the land? Will they try again? Can we see the part they took? The students lined up to step up onto a chair and peer over the newly constructed fence separating off the third of the garden that was lost. I explained that only another year and a half of the lease is left and the future of the garden is unknown. The students filed back down the narrow pathway to continue learning about the work that has continued on the two-thirds that has been saved. Attention shifted to the bright orange flowers dotted across the garden. A student asked, “What are those for, can you eat them?” A shy student in the back raised her hand to answer. “No, those are the day of the dead flowers, *cempasuchitl*.” Emilio explained how they grow these flowers for community members to use on their altars at home. Through these types of experiences, I hope that we create room for inspiration, beauty, and the seeds of visions for a fundamentally different kind of economy and society, while at the same time we question more broadly: How do we make this happen together? What are the roles and mechanisms of solidarity we may need moving forward?

Much of the work of the gardeners and garden coalition focused on the effort to maintain tenure security and access to the land. The educational projects tied to the garden similarly have emphasized land rights and property dynamics as crucial

to understanding the potential and the challenges facing liberatory food projects. These dynamics have been explored in relationship to agroecological practices, farming histories, patterns of immigration, and politics of race and displacement. Agroecology, as it has been taught in the garden, is deeply tied to the social dynamics of farmer movements and the impacts of capitalist world food systems. The necessity and urgency of solidarity with struggle for the garden’s land tenure security opened to a constellation of intersecting issues around housing, immigration, and gentrification, with which many community members are now more active. While the constraints of academic educational efforts can sometimes lead food system educators and advocates to remain more narrowly focused on singular issues or framings, that ultimately is a disservice to our students. It limits both how students understand the interconnections of food, ecological, and social issues and how solidarity can be enacted. One could imagine that if a coalition were to focus only on the continued existence of the garden as a space for agroecological cultivation that the garden could survive, but the current Mexican and Salvadorian Beach Flats residents would no longer tend it due to gentrification and displacement. Through this case, we see how food systems educators can emphasize drawing the connections between agroecology and broader social questions around gentrification, discrimination, and housing justice.


In the Garden, residents and non-residents alike can reflect together on how land use decisions are made and what role each person, whether a gardener, a visiting student, or an educator, might play in land use futures. Gardeners make explicit requests to supporting tenure security of the garden and visitors have the opportunity to think about how they will respond to that request. In that moment of relationship, learning goes beyond individuals receiving information and the learner actively sees acting in solidarity as part of their learning. In so doing, the micro-actions of writing a letter or contributing to public comments at a city council meeting connect to broader action for food sovereignty. For educators who may connect with communities in struggle, either through field trips, as guest speakers, or through being having projects

based in a community in struggle, I believe this case can help us reflect on how we build on the connection between local action and more global goals, with an emphasis on the enacting of solidarity in which learners participate.

In addition to contributing to critical food system praxis through demonstrating the complexity of what could be considered relevant to food systems and agroecology and asking students and educators to engage with the urgency of solidarity action, this case also helps to open a post-capitalist lens to the everyday actions of the gardeners, for which Peña's framework of practical autonomy is apt. He describes the place-based food work of Mexican and Mesoamerican diaspora communities that ground practices of self-governance and cooperativism. In the garden, we see how nonmonetary exchanges, networks of support through labor and food, and orientations toward communal or shared land tending are observed by students and thus provide teaching examples of practical autonomies. Through these cooperativisms at play we see post-capitalist everyday practices, what I believe to be a necessary component for critical food systems education. While it is important to acknowledge the limits and contradictions of garden-based learning, as educators we can do more to highlight these sites of practical autonomy through a decolonial comida perspective. And this can contribute to realizing Peña's assessment of solidarity as action, praxis based in the relationality of how self-governance and participatory democracy are practiced and

actively chosen without permission or guidance from state or corporate authority. As food system educators, we have a great opportunity and responsibility to ask students what worlds of possibility they see that have and continue to be nurtured by communities in resistance, and how as potential collaborators they wish to act in solidarity with the cultivation of these worlds.

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