A New Face in the Neighborhood: 
Exploring the Race and Positionality of Leaders in the 
Alternative Food Movement

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Abstract

In my Educational Studies and Sociology/Anthropology thesis, I investigate the ways in which the race and positionality of leaders and advocates in the alternative food movement influences how the movement is conceptualized and run. I do so specifically through exploring urban community gardening efforts, which exist largely in African American and Latino communities and are run predominately by white women. I argue that although current alternative food practices in community gardens address issues of food insecurity, they often do so in a way that reproduces current systems of dependency, despite these programs goals of engaging and empowering residents of all ages. The race and positionality of community garden leaders and educators are often unacknowledged factors in alternative food practices, but I assert that they are central to understanding why community gardening programs do not yet resonate as strongly in their communities as organizations intend them to. I also explore a variety of factors that can contribute to more effectively empowering community residents as collaborators in alternative food practices.
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Introduction

As I walked around the classroom at Christopher Columbus Elementary School, trying to take in the contents and organization of the room, I heard a familiar voice. “Hey Taryn! I know you from the garden!” Lamar\(^1\), a student in Ms. Andrews’ second grade classroom in Chester, PA, was beaming, standing over his desk, waving at me to come over. As I walked over to say hello, he turned to his classmates around him and excitedly began to tell them about how he knew me.

This meeting took place in the fall of 2011, during my school placement for my Urban Education class at Swarthmore College. Lamar and I had met two years prior in the community garden in the Ruth L. Bennett Homes (a public housing development run by the Chester Housing Authority) in Chester, where his family used to live. The Bennett Homes Community Garden was a project initiated in 2009 by a group of Swarthmore students who wanted to address environmental and food injustice issues in Chester. The Chester Housing Authority (CHA) and a few Bennett residents played a role in the development of the project (see Chapter 3 for a complete history).

Currently, the garden is run mainly by Swarthmore Environmental Justice (EJ) students, with the help of youth who live in the Bennett Homes. One of the garden’s main goals is to act as a local, fresh food source. Chester is considered a food desert by USDA standards, meaning the area is devoid of fresh, nutritious, and affordable foods and the resources by which to obtain them; the city of Chester has not had a grocery store in over a decade. The garden is also a gathering place for youth who live in the Bennett to come and work and participate in a variety of educational and arts and craft activities led by EJ members. EJ organizes open gardening hours at least once a week, during which anyone

\(^1\) Lamar and Ms. Andrews are pseudonyms.
who lives in the Bennett is encouraged to come to the garden. The space is also open to all community members whenever they want, though adults from the neighborhood rarely use it.

For the years he lived in the Bennett, Lamar was an integral part of this group. He was energetic, charismatic, and always willing to help out. He also seemed to be engaged in learning about why he was doing what he was doing in the garden. One afternoon, when we were planting flowers in one of the beds, he would not stop asking questions about why the planting process had to be done in such a specific order - dig a hole, mix in compost with the soil, plant a seedling, add some water, and cover it back up without compressing the dirt too much. This endless questioning opened up a space for us to talk about what seeds need in order to grow and how we can best care for them. Lamar appeared to be genuinely curious in the garden, wanting to learn all about what was going on around him.

When I spent time with him in Ms. Andrews’ second grade classroom, however, this curiosity seemed to be absent. Lamar often sat in the back of the room, being punished for not having followed directions or for goofing off when he was supposed to be completing his math worksheet. Of course, it is important to note that the contexts of the garden and a school are not comparable environments; they have different purposes, goals, expectations, and resources. Nevertheless, this comparison drove me to think about the real and impactful ways learning can happen in the context of a garden.

I initially started this project with the intention of researching how different urban gardening programs organize their youth programs and, more generally, how learning can happen within the space of a community garden. However, as I began to read through the growing body of literature discussing the potential of learning in a garden, reach out to
urban community gardens who run youth education programs, and reflect on how EJ attempts to incorporate education into the Bennett Garden, I became more and more focused not on what is being taught in community garden programs, but who is doing the teaching. Beyond just educational efforts, who are the predominant leaders of community gardening programs and how do they shape the work being done?

Since I got involved with EJ and the Bennett Garden in the spring of 2010, I have always felt unsettled about my position as a white Swarthmore student going into the predominately African American neighborhood of the Bennett to run a community garden. There seems to be a major power imbalance between EJ and Bennett residents; why are we, a group of Swarthmore students, running this garden? Why aren’t more adult residents involved? Is the garden really as empowering for the community as EJ envisions it to be?

With more research, I realized this situation of an outside group coming in to facilitate a community garden for purposes of education and food access was not unique to EJ and the Bennett. The majority of garden leaders and educators, and more generally environmental and food justice advocates, are young white people, often females, who are not from the neighborhoods in which they work, which are predominately African American and Latino (Slocum 2007, Guthman 2008, Yakini 2010).

My primary research question, then, is: What are the implications of having individuals or groups originally positioned as outsiders to the community be the predominant leaders of community gardens and other spaces of alternative food practice? How does whiteness inflect these spaces? I will also explore why it is important to focus on youth education in community gardens, rather than devote all efforts solely to food
access and consider how these youth education efforts fit into the larger environmental and food justice efforts.

I believe strongly in the values and benefits of community gardens for youth education and community building, but I want to challenge the notion that they do unquestionable good. There is a major difference in who mostly is leading these programs and whom they are intended to serve. I argue that although current alternative food practices in community gardens do address issues of food insecurity, they often do so in a way that reproduces current systems of dependency. The race and positionality of garden leaders does influence the programs they are running, and thus needs to be acknowledged.

**Connecting Environmental Justice, Alternative Food, and Gardens**

To address these questions, I will be focusing specifically on urban community gardens similar to the Bennett Garden. Community gardening efforts, though, are not isolated. They are a part of alternative food practices, which are part of a larger environmental justice movement.

Environmental justice is a movement that seeks to abolish environmental harms for all people (EJNET 1991). The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as follows:

Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. EPA has this goal for all communities and persons across this Nation. It will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.

(US EPA 2013)
The movement is a response to environmental racism, which is “the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color,” though a multitude of oppressed groups can be affected by environmental racism (EJNET 1991).

The environmental justice movement recognizes that the traditional environmental movement, focused on the preservation or conservation of natural spaces, is a historically white movement. Not only does it typically not include voices other than those of white activists, but it also focuses on changes that benefit mostly white, middle class people (for example, preserving large areas of land in national parks). Thus, within the environmental justice movement, “environment” is defined more broadly than it is for traditional environmental activists: “the environment is where we live, where we work, where we play, and where we learn” (Cole and Foster 2001:16).

Environmental justice efforts work to fight against systems of oppression that have historically limited the voices and masked the needs of people of color; it has in part grown out of the civil rights movement:

Civil rights activists brought three things to the Environmental Justice Movement: a history of, and experience with, direct action, which led to similar exercises of grassroots power by the Environmental Justice Movement; a perspective that recognized that the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards was not random or the result of “neutral” decisions but a product of the same social and economic structure which had produced de jure and de facto segregation and other racial oppression; and the experience of empowerment through political action. (Cole and Foster 2001:21)

Not only, then, does the environmental justice movement work to reverse the trend of distributing toxic waste facilities predominately to communities of color, but also to clean up the environmental hazards already existing in these communities and gain fair representation in the environmental decision-making process. Cole and Foster continue, “The movement for environmental justice is also about creating clean jobs, building a
sustainable economy, guaranteeing safe and affordable housing, and achieving racial and social justice” (2001:17).

One way of working towards this racial and social justice is through ensuring that all communities have reliable and fair access to healthy, culturally appropriate foods. Food insecurity, when people do not have this reliable access, is a manifestation of environmental injustice. Grocery store chains sometimes practice redlining in low-income areas, where they refuse to invest because it is considered too risky (Wallace 2011). These food insecure areas are defined as food deserts and are often threatened by other environmental issues, such as pollution. Alternative food practices, thus, are an element of the environmental justice movement; this connection will become clearer through the context of Chester in Chapter 3.

Alternative food practices are “those that advocate more ecologically sound and socially just farming methods, food marketing and distribution, and healthier food options across the US” (Slocum 2007:522). They are alternative to the commercialized, large-scale system of food production that creates most of our country’s food, driven by the “sense that there is a more just way of producing, distributing, and eating food” (2007:523). Traditionally, participants of alternative food practices, such as customers of farmer’s markets and locally owned natural food stores, have been economically and socially middle or upper class.

Community gardens are one site of alternative food practice, and often an attempt to shift alternative food to a larger variety of social and economic groups. Community gardens exist in multiple forms. One model is when an area of land is broken up into smaller plots, which are run by groups, families, or individuals. Another is when a plot of
land is collectively managed and maintained by a group of people, like the Bennett Garden; this is the form I will be focusing on (Desmond et al. 2002).

Methodology

I used two main research methods to approach my questions. I did participant observation at the Bennett Homes Community Garden. I also conducted two sets of semi-structured interviews- one set with six former Swarthmore EJ members and another set with six community garden leaders and/or educators across the Northeast.

Participant Observation in the Bennett Garden

I became involved in the Bennett Garden in the spring of 2010, one year after they broke ground. I was a member of EJ, the small student group designing and running the garden project. Over these three years, I have been to the garden at least one afternoon per week, usually over the weekend, during the academic year. I work with other EJ members to plant and maintain the garden and distribute produce around the neighborhood. We work mostly with youth from the Bennett (generally ages 2-13), though we are developing relationships with some adult residents, mostly those who are interested in receiving certain produce from the garden.

In the summer of 2012, I lived in Swarthmore and worked at the Bennett Garden with another EJ member, Rachel. We organized and ran a summer camp for about twenty kids from the neighborhood, expanding on the educational, craft, and gardening activities we do during the normal school year weekend workdays. Rachel and I ran camp for six hours a day, three days a week, and also had three days of open gardening hours each week (for anyone in the community to come out, though usually it was kids from camp who stuck around). During the two months we offered camp, Rachel and I designed
lesson plans developed around plant growth and food systems. Camp was fairly informal, though, so these lessons weren’t always used.

This time in the garden over the past three years and the more concentrated time in the summer of 2012 has enabled me to become relatively familiar with the Bennett Homes community. Though I don’t know many of the adult residents, I have gotten to know a number of the kids who work in the garden. Going to the garden with other EJ members has provided a space in which we can collectively reflect on our roles as Swarthmore students, as outsiders, going into the Bennett Homes to facilitate youth education and community building in the garden.

Interviews: Garden Leaders and Former Swarthmore EJ Members

I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews so I could be flexible in the questions I asked, reacting to the environment and responses of interviewees. I tried to do as many interviews as possible in person, but often had to use Skype or the telephone due to travel restraints.

Garden Leaders

To gain a better understanding of how other community gardening programs are organized, I reached out to directors and leaders of programs in Philadelphia, Washington DC, and Baltimore. I interviewed six garden leaders and/or educators: Molly at Real Food Farm in Baltimore, Elizabeth at Common Good City Farm in DC, Anna at the Washington Youth Garden in DC, Tiffany at the Farm at Walker Jones in DC, Jamie at Teens 4 Good in Philadelphia, and Raina at Mill Creek Farm in Philadelphia. Each of these farms run youth programs, ranging from after-school programs for neighborhood

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2 I limited my search to these cities due to their proximity to Swarthmore. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to travel to most sites, since the majority of my interviews took place between November and January, when the garden were no longer active.
youth to structured school field trips to summer internships for teenagers. I asked them about the youth programs they offer and how they see the garden interacting with the surrounding community (See Appendix A for interview questions).

Former Swarthmore EJ Members

I reached out to all of the founding EJ members via email and got in contact with seven of them. I asked them to recall their memories of how EJ was established as a Swarthmore student group and what the initial steps and goals were for the Bennett Garden (see Appendix B for interview questions). To gain additional information about the garden’s history, I conducted a content analysis of the blog maintained by EJ (The Chester Garden Project 2013).

Use of Data

I recorded and transcribed all interviews. I then open-coded the interviews, looking for common themes in the goals and missions of the programs, their histories, youth and adult program offerings, perception of community response to and involvement in the garden, and leader positionality (personal background, interest in farming and/or teaching, relationship with the communities in which they work).

Organization of Thesis

I address my research questions predominately through exploring the history and current leadership of the Bennett Garden, as that is the program and Chester is the context with which I am most familiar. I found that the patterns that emerged from my interviews with the six other garden leaders mapped fairly well onto the story of the Bennett.

In Chapter 2, I will briefly tell the history of community gardens in the United States, exploring the recent shift many programs have taken from focusing on food
provision to including youth education programs. I will also review the ways in which youth education and community building can happen within the context of garden. In Chapter 3, I tell the story of The Bennett Homes Community Garden, contextualizing it within the city of Chester, PA. I will outline EJ’s initial and current goals for the Bennett Garden, comparing these with the goals, missions, and histories of the six other garden programs I looked at.

Chapter 4 will explore who is running these gardening programs, examining the implications of their positionality as outsiders to the communities in which they work. How does it impact who participates in gardening programs? In Chapter 5, I look specifically to the role of race in shaping how garden programs are organized and, in general, how alternative food practices are conceptualized. In what ways does whiteness inflect these practices? In Chapter 6 I consider the potential of positive collaboration between garden leaders and residents of the communities they serve, looking specifically to the role and potentials of youth education efforts in community gardens and how it compliments and strengthens efforts for improved food access. In conclusion, I reiterate the important and pervasive role that race plays in defining the goals, effectiveness, and sustainability of alternative food practices, urging advocates to make it a larger part of the conversation.
Chapter 2
Community Gardens: History and Potentials

I very much feel with the sciences that the whole field of science was invented to explain the observable world around us, and the way that it’s taught now is just so incredibly removed from that. A garden is such an easy way to reestablish that connection and reality of science and of inquiry and of observation and of developing empathy and interconnectedness and relationships with things and people around. I mean, it’s all illustrated in a garden!

(Interview 2/1a)

Community gardens have been a part of US landscape for a long time. They have gone through many cycles of popularity, but always with a focus on food production, community building, and participant empowerment. The most recent movement for community gardens, beginning around 2000, has spread rapidly and with force, responding to environmental and food injustices blighting many urban neighborhoods and seeking to provide spaces for youth education outside of the traditional school classroom.

Though there has been an interest in incorporating education into community gardens for many years, this interest has been very strong in the current community gardening movement. As the opening quote reveals, gardens can be rich places for meaningful and contextualized learning. In this chapter, I will briefly review the history of community gardens in the US. I will focus on their current positions and uses in urban neighborhoods, looking at their position within the environmental justice movement. I conclude the chapter by further exploring the benefits and potentials of community gardens as spaces for learning and community building.
A Brief History of Community Gardens in the US

Community gardens have historically been used as alternative spaces for food production, neighborhood beautification, and education. Most of the literature on the history of these spaces does not explicitly say who was running these gardening programs, in terms of the race and positionality of leaders. It is clear, though, that community gardens have and continue to be predominately focused on serving lower income communities, often of color. Based on the history of the movement, it can be assumed that the movement has historically been, as it is today, driven largely by the visions and values of white middle and upper class individuals and groups, working in mainly African American and Latino communities (Lawson 2004, Slocum 2007).

Fluxes in the Presence of Community Gardens

The community garden movement in the United States was inspired largely by England, which had a much older and more well developed movement. As England’s population increased in cities, poorer residents sometimes had limited access to resources such as food. Land for agriculture was scarce due to the Industrial Revolution, so “an ethic of self-help and philanthropy developed, leading to the division of community areas for gardens to grow food” (Hanna and Oh 2000:209). As urban populations continued to increase, gardens spread across England; the Parliament also began to focus on gardens as part of their governmental programming (2000).

This community gardening movement gained momentum in the United States in the 1890s. Adding to Europe’s use of gardens as sites of alternative food production, advocates of community gardens in the US focused on their potential to respond to urban congestion, environmental and neighborhood degradation, economic instability, and unemployment (Draper and Freedman 2010). Due to their multifaceted potentials, “at
various times, federal agencies, municipalities, gardening clubs, civic groups, and charitable organizations helped to promote and implement the programs” (Lawson 2004:154). Each of these constituencies engaged in community gardens as a way to do something for their communities of target.

In an effort to give residents more agency in the development of community gardens in their neighborhoods and push against this sense of merely providing for, “during the 1893-1897 depression, Detroit’s progressive mayor, Hazen Pingree, proposed gardening as an alternative to charity for unemployed laborers and their families” (Lawson 2004:154). Under the program Pingree developed, families received small plots of land, seeds, written instructions, and the support of a supervisor. They used the produce to feed their families, and they were allowed to sell any surplus. The program was so successful that “skeptics became supporters and [it] was expanded over the next two years to eventually become mandatory for families receiving assistance from the city’s poor commission” (154). Other major cities across the nation adopted similar “garden-based poverty relief programs” (154).

During the same time frame, educators began to consider gardens as viable and important spaces for learning. The National School Garden Movement began in 1891 when the first school garden was established in Boston. The introduction of gardens to schools was embedded in a larger educational movement towards more observational and hands-on learning opportunities for students. They enabled teachers to emphasize lessons on cooperation and teamwork, as all students had to work together to efficiently grow produce (Lawson 2004).

This National School Garden Movement strengthened during World War I, during which there was a national effort to supplement the domestic food supply as well as to
incorporate agricultural education and food production into schools. In 1914, the US Bureau of Education established a Division of Home and School Gardening, through which they developed the US School Garden Army. This program reached out to millions of students and thousands of teachers, providing them with curricular materials and volunteer support to develop, maintain, and utilize gardens as an element of in-school education (Desmond et al. 2002).

Beyond their use as educational spaces, gardens were a means of income for schools, as they used student labor to cultivate thousands of acres of previously unused land in order to contribute to the domestic food supply. These contributions were encouraged also for all groups of American citizens: “War garden propaganda was directed at all income groups, while the act of gardening was portrayed as a democratizing experience that would put laborer and manager on equal ground” (Lawson 2004:158). Involvement with gardening was portrayed as a patriotic experience for all.

Still, the movement was driven by the sense that majority leaders were trying to shape those who participated in the gardening programs: “Gardening was considered good for all children, but it was particularly appealing as a way to teach appropriate social behavior to immigrants, delinquents, and the infirm” (Lawson 2004:155). So, even though involvement in gardens was perceived to have benefits for all, the ways in which the gardens were structured was very much shaped by the visions and values of the groups and individuals running them.

With the end of World War I, governmental and other agencies ceased to fund community gardens. School gardens also began to disappear as funding organizations moved to focus on new postwar efforts (Lawson 2004). Interests were renewed, though, in the 1940s with the onset of World War II. Community gardens were still valued for
their contributions to national food production, and they were also intended to be spaces for recreation and to raise community morale (Blair 2009). Though technological advancements in agriculture meant community gardens weren’t the most efficient means of food production, national leaders still supported them for the multitude of other benefits they brought to citizens, “namely, healthier diet, exercise, recreation, distraction from worry about loved ones in battle, and civic beautification” (Lawson 2004:161).

These community gardens were termed victory gardens, in order to connect citizens to the war that was happening overseas. Their involvement in the gardens not only helped to reduce the pressure on the national food supply, but also enabled citizens to feel empowered by their contributions to their nation. Once the war was over, though, society began to shift from this engagement with agriculture and switched focus to technology (Blair 2009).

This pattern switched directions yet again in the 1970s, when community gardens returned to the forefront of society. The revival of these spaces was partially a response to the rise in food prices and increasing environmental concern in the US. Additionally, interests in recreation, education, and neighborhood beautification motivated resident involvement with community gardens. A main focus of the movement was also addressing the neighborhood degradation that had especially hit hard in urban areas. Organizers and residents viewed community gardens as a channel for focusing on community building by strengthening social connections and improving infrastructure in blighted neighborhoods. They were used as a tool to bring people together to work for a common goal, meanwhile building relationships among neighborhood residents and their environment (Blair 2009).
Community Gardens Today: Where are they Concentrated?

The current focus on community gardens has continued to grow from the movement of the 1970s. It expands on the value and importance of local food production in response to both high food costs and environmental deterioration. This strain of the community gardening movement is also embedded into the larger environmental justice and alternative food movements. People are establishing gardens with the intention of reconnecting individuals to their environment, communities, and natural foods, hoping to empower change in the social and environmental landscapes of urban areas (Draper and Freedman 2010).

But again we turn to the question of who exactly is creating these gardens, and whom are they intended to serve? Currently, community gardens are concentrated predominately in lower income urban communities of color and are being developed and run largely by white middle and upper class people who are not initially positioned from within the communities in which they are working (Slocum 2007, Guthman 2008, Cole and Foster 2001). Why are community gardens, as an element of the environmental justice movement, centered in urban communities of color? Why are these communities most affected by environmental injustices?

There is much debate within the literature on the ways in which race and income levels influence “the presence of polluting facilities or the concentration of toxicity of pollution to which residents are exposed” (Downey 1998:767). Cole and Foster confirm the existence of environmental racism:

A 1992 study by the National Law Journal confirmed what environmental justice activists have known for years, that people of color are not protected as vigorously by enforcement of environmental laws as whites. The National Law Journal study found that “[t]here is a racial divide in the way the US government cleans up toxic waste sites and punished polluters. White communities see faster
action, better results and stiffer penalties than communities where blacks, Hispanics and other minorities live. This unequal protection often occurs whether the community is wealthy or poor. (2001:57)

Through researchers may disagree on whether race or class is a more accurate determinant of environmental inequity (Cole and Foster 2001, Downey 1998), it will become clear through the story of Chester’s history in Chapter 3 that both are influential factors in the distribution of environmental hazards.

Under these conditions, urban youth of color are more predisposed to environmental hazards, such as air and noise pollution, than are their white suburban counterparts. Furthermore, “prior research suggests that minority and low-income youth are less likely than White and higher-income youth to have adequate access to and positive experiences in green spaces and nature” (Strife and Downey 2009:111). Children across the nation, regardless of location, are already spending less time outside. Their schedules are becoming much more centered around structured programs rather than free play, and the significant increases in technology have led children to devote more of their free time to playing video games and watching television. Furthermore, parental concerns about crime and safety often prevent children from spending more time outside (Cauchon 2005). This increase in time spent indoors is compounded for urban youth, who may not live in safe and clean environments in which they are able to play, even if they wanted to.

A number of studies report on the positive influences contact with nature has on children. Studies have shown that children who spend more time outdoors have higher levels of concentration, improved academic performance, decreased levels of stress, and a lower chance of obesity (American Institutes for Research 2005). Furthermore, green spaces are positive places for socialization of children and adults, helping to build community by providing a space for productive interaction and collaboration. Frequent
exposure to nature also increases positive attitudes about the environment, promoting environmental stewardship among youth (Strife and Downey 2009).

Due to all of these positive benefits of nature exposure, Strife and Downey urge researchers to expand their work on environmental injustices to include looking at how urban youth are able or not to access green spaces, arguing that these spaces are central for youth development. They explain, “Although proximity to nature and exposure to green spaces may seem negligible compared with unequal pollution exposure and disparate proximity to toxic hazards, recent findings indicate that limited exposure to nature and green space may have serious physical and psychological health ramifications” (Strife and Downey 2009:100). These ramifications compound the health risks to which urban residents are exposed to in high-pollution areas.

This desire to reconnect children to nature is a main factor leading people to develop and be involved in urban community gardening projects. Recalling his initial visions for the Bennett Homes Community Garden, one former EJ member explained:

Personally, I had envisioned the garden becoming a place which would supply the Bennett Homes with delicious, fresh, and nutritious food while providing a safe educational space where youth could expand their realm of possibilities through reconnecting with natural cycles in contrast to a detached, urban environment. (Interview 2/1b)

Molly from Real Food Farm echoed this sentiment, “I think outdoor spaces in urban environments are really important because these kids often don’t think of themselves as living in nature, so exposing them to the fact that nature’s all around is great” (Interview 12/5). Especially in cities, organizers look to gardens to create safe and welcoming spaces for community gathering.

However, alternative food spaces and green spaces need to be culturally relevant and welcoming in order to resonate and empower community members. Strife and
Downey report on a study (Hong and Anderson 2006) that supports this assertion. The study identified cultural barriers as the main reason Latino families didn’t attend the nature center near them. The nature center staff didn’t speak Spanish and there was “the perception that nature centers are places for ‘white people with money’ (2009:111). Strife and Downey continue:

These findings are consistent with those of other studies that have shown that limited exposure to green spaces among low-income and minority youth may result from a lack of cultural diversity among environmental education participants, staff, and programs that make minority and low-income youth and families feel unwelcome. (2009:111)

These findings strongly resonate with the fact that the majority of environmental efforts and most alternative food practices are shaped and run by white actors (Guthman 2008, Slocum 2007). In Chapter 5 I will explore in more depth the ways in which the race and positionality of garden leaders and alterative food advocates influences the work they are trying to do. I argue that in order to fulfill the goals of the environmental justice movement, there needs to be a shift in the ways in which alternative food practices are conceptualized and enacted. First, though, I would like to give an overview of the positive potentials of community gardens. How do organizers and educators envision gardens to be beneficial spaces for the youth and community members who are involved?

**The Potentials of a Community Garden**

Organizers of and educators at community gardens consider the spaces to be rich with benefits for those who participate. I will address in Chapter 3 the specific goals and purposes of the Bennett Homes Community Garden along with the six other programs. Here, though, I would like to give a summary of the potentials gardens hold for youth
(and adult) education and community building as they are understood by advocates for community gardens.

*Educational Programs in Community Gardens*

As the history of community gardens in the US made clear, gardens have always served as a way of involving individuals with the production of their food. Recently, there has been an intentional shift to focusing on educational programs in gardens and involving youth, rather than using them just for food production. This is not new - the National School Garden Movement is proof that educational potential has been tied to gardens for many years – but rather it is a renewed and continually growing interest in youth education in community gardens (Blair 2009, Lieberman 1998, Draper and Freedman 2010).

All of the community garden programs I reached out to for this project had some form of youth educational programming. Real Food Farm, for instance, runs an after-school farm club for middle school students, a high school internship program, farm lab (an outdoor environmental education experience where teachers bring their classes to the farm), and hosts field trips. Mill Creek Farm, Teens 4 Good (T4G), and Common Good City Farm (CGCF) also have high school internship programs. Additionally, CGCF hosts school visits as well as an afterschool program for neighborhood youth. Currently, Swarthmore EJ has informal educational programming for children who live in the Bennett Homes and we’re looking into developing a high school summer internship program.

When I asked why she thought there is a movement for incorporating youth education programs, Anna, from the Washington Youth Garden in DC, explained:
I think that the increased focus on education-based gardens is a positive development and a realistic assessment of what is needed within the ‘food movement’ and what can reasonably be accomplished with a small piece of land. While intensive farming practices make it possible to grow a lot of food on a little land, there are limitations to the impact of simple food production.

(Follow-up interview 3/5)

Incorporating education into community gardening, then, seems like a natural step in strengthening alternative food efforts. So, what can this education look like? What potentials are there for learning in the space of a community garden?

A Tangible Context for Learning

When asked why they thought gardens were powerful places for learning, most of the garden leaders I interviewed replied with something along the lines of, “I think when kids are learning without them realizing that they’re learning, that’s the most effective way” (Interview 10/11). Furthermore, many emphasized the importance of “finding ways to connect the subject with [the students’] lived experiences and really valuing the experience and background that they’re bringing to it” (Interview 12/5). Effective learning is contextualized and relevant: “You have to put things, like, how can I use this in my daily life?” (Interview 11/18).

These leaders thus view learning as a process of immersion- of living, being, doing, and sharing- that results in the understanding of ideas, facts, and concepts as well as in shifts in attitudes, values, and beliefs. It encompasses sociocultural dimensions through which students of any age connect with their communities and gain the skills of critical thinking and collaboration, as well as the ability to apply them to different situations (Falk and Dierking 2002).

Gardens are ideal sites for enabling this kind of learning. Due to their hands-on nature, gardens can empower students as agents in their learning, rather than recipients as
they are often viewed in traditional school settings (Eshach 2007). For example, youth have access to science through their observations, actions, talk, and sustained involvement in a variety of activities located in and around the garden. Beyond knowing science, they are doing science and understanding it to be a complete process that happens within a practical and applicable context (Rahm 2002). In a garden, “instead of a subject belonging to a particular study called ‘botany,’ it will then belong to life, and it will find, moreover, its natural correlation with the facts of soil, animal life, and human relations” (Dewey 1916:235).

The learning that can happen in a garden setting is not limited to scientific and environmental topics. The resources and opportunities present in gardens create a wide range of opportunities for student-driven learning, from academic subjects to nutrition to vocational and life skills (Desmond et al. 2002). I will take a closer look at youth education throughout the rest of this paper, revealing that truly, “it’s all illustrated in a garden” (Interview 2/1a).

Building Communities

Beyond empowerment through their academic potentials, community gardens can facilitate community building efforts. Community building is focused on developing relationships between different groups of people, usually who live in the same geographic location and/or have some form of a common interest (Schukose 2000). Community gardens can support these efforts in a number of ways.

First, the processes of collective learning outlined above are an effective means of uniting people. Brown and Campione present the concept of “reciprocal teaching,” in which every member of a group plays an important role in developing and driving the process of learning. No single person possesses the “fountain of knowledge” to dispense
to others, but instead, the learning that happens honors the strengths and knowledge everyone brings, thus empowering everyone involved as agents in their own learning as well as the learning of those around them (Brown and Campione 1994).

Furthermore, community gardens can be sites of promoting neighborhood beautification; they are often developed on previously abandoned or misused city lots (Ozer 2007). Aside from beautification, this can create a reason for different groups to interact. Gardens can be multi-generational and multi-cultural spaces, enabling all community members to share their skills and resources (Ozer 2007, Parajuli 2006). The collective actions of enhancing a community space can increase participant’s sense of pride in and connection to their social and physical surroundings (Lieberman 1998).

There has been a significant amount of research exploring and supporting what positive contributions community gardens may make in education and community building efforts. There is, however, very little said about who is facilitating these gardening programs. What does it mean for mostly young, white women to be going into predominately African American and Latino communities to work within the alternative food movement? How does it influence the work being done and who participates in the programs?

To begin to answer these questions, the next chapter will look at the story of development for the Bennett Homes Community Garden alongside those of the six other gardening programs. Where are these gardens located? Who was involved in starting these programs? What are their goals and missions?
Chapter 3
Foundations of Community Gardening Programs: Goals and Beginnings

“A large part of our mission is just to be a source of fresh produce for people living in this neighborhood who wouldn’t otherwise have access to fruits and vegetables. And then the second part of our mission is to educate people about how to grow food and about the benefits of eating a more balanced diet.”

(Interview 12/18)

The initial steps and goals of community gardening programs are important to consider when it comes to looking at who is running and participating in the programs. Whose interests are being promoted? Who is really benefitting from the programs? In this chapter, I will tell the story of establishment and evolution of the Bennett Homes Community Garden, contextualizing it within Chester’s history. I discuss the factors that have led to the environmental racism currently plaguing the city along with the environmental justice efforts that have historically and are currently taking place. In telling the story of the Bennett Homes Community Garden, I focus especially on the role of Swarthmore EJ members, who were initially and still are positioned as outsiders to the Bennett Homes. I will discuss the steps they took to develop the garden and how the project’s goals have evolved over the four years since its establishment.

I will then turn to the histories and goals of the six other gardening programs, highlighting the commonalities across all of their stories as well as addressing the distinctions among them. This chapter will set us up to look at who exactly is running these community gardening programs, what beliefs and assumptions they bring to the alternative food movement, and how this leadership influences who participates in community gardening programs (Chapters 4 and 5).
The Story of the Bennett Homes Community Garden

In the fall of 2008, a small group of Swarthmore students decided they wanted to take more action in addressing environmental issues beyond Swarthmore’s campus. Individuals in the group had previously been members of Earthlust, a Swarthmore student group focused on making environmentally sustainable changes at the College from a policy standpoint (such as developing campaigns to change energy sources for the College). This group wanted to invest in addressing broader themes of justice concerning race, class, and capitalism as they relate to environmental issues, so they formed another student group named Environmental Justice (EJ) (Interview 2/1b).

The ultimate focus of EJ became the development and oversight of a community garden in Chester, PA, a city right next to Swarthmore and a long-time site for social justice work of Swarthmore students (Meng 2012). The garden is located in the Ruth L. Bennett Homes, a public housing unit overseen by the Chester Housing Authority (CHA). The Bennett Homes Community Garden has grown significantly since 2009. I got involved with EJ and the garden as a freshman at Swarthmore, in the spring of 2010. The following story of the garden’s inception and development has been gathered through interviews with Swarthmore students involved with its beginnings, as well as from my personal experiences there over the past four years.

A major limitation to this story is that the voices of the Bennett Homes community members involved are not represented, and the entire telling is through my lens of understanding, as an outsider to the Bennett. Though I have developed relationships with some residents over the past four years, I have connected primarily with the kids who come out to the garden. I am unable to speak directly to the benefits the garden may have on the residents, only to the benefits I perceive them to experience.
Furthermore, the recollections of past EJ members sometimes didn’t match up exactly with one another; they had different involvements in what happened and memories of how it happened, which is telling in itself as it demonstrates their different levels of engagement. I’m hoping, however, that this story accurately represents the garden’s history from the perspective of the various Swarthmore students who have been and are currently involved with it and sets up a conversation of how these beginning steps have shaped how the garden is currently run.

*Chester, PA*

The city of Chester has an extremely interesting and complex history. I only understand and can touch on the surface of the complicated social, economic, political, and infrastructural history, developments, and issues that Chester faces. Through a brief telling of Chester’s story, I will set the context for discussing the environmental injustices threatening the city, as well as the role both Chester residents and Swarthmore students play in addressing these issues.

*Chester’s Past and Present*

Founded in 1644, Chester is the oldest city in Pennsylvania. It is located along the Delaware River waterfront, roughly equidistant from Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware. Chester became a booming industrial town in the early 1900s, as factories were attracted to the city’s prime location along the waterfront and close proximity to major railroad lines, making the import of raw materials and export of finished products very efficient. There was a huge demand for skilled and unskilled workers in the factories for ship building, oil refining, automobile production, and paper manufacturing, to name a few (Petras 1991).
Demand for such industrial goods increased during World Wars I and II, establishing Chester as a regional economic powerhouse. The city was flourishing, with a reportedly strong sense of community and cohesion, entertainment and recreation options, and strong social, political, and religious organizations. This, and the increased demand for wartime labor, attracted and recruited workers from surrounding states, including many African American workers from the South and immigrants from Eastern Europe (Petras 1991).

A drastic shift came about once World War II ended and industrial demands ceased. Factories, no longer family-owned as they had been in the early 1900s, began to relocate to other states, or overseas, seeking cheaper labor. Between 1950 and 1980, 32% of jobs in Chester were lost. Paralleling this shift was the flight of middle and upper class people, both white and African American. In the same time period of 1950-1980, the African American population in the city grew from 20% to 65% (Petras 1991).

This trend has continued into the present. Currently, African American residents make up 74.7% of Chester. Simultaneous to this racial shift, Chester’s overall population has dropped to half of its 1960 numbers (from about 65,000 people in 1960 to 33,972 people in 2010) (US Census Bureau 2010). The once booming industrial town is now a city defined by labels of decay, depression, and injustice. In 1986, the Department of Housing and Urban Development called Chester, “the most economically depressed city of its size in the entire United States,” based on per capita ratio of deteriorated housing stock (Petras 1991:11). In 2010, it was reported that 32.3% of residents were below poverty level (US Census Bureau 2010). What has made matters worse is a corrupt and unresponsive local government (the Republican Machine), driven by politicians more...
focused on making money for themselves than on the welfare of Chester residents (Petras 1991).

The city is plagued by extremely high unemployment and underemployment, frequent crime, and extremely high poverty rates. There has been a sharp decline in the quality of the school system over the years; based on test scores for the 2011-2012 school year, Chester Upland School District was ranked 496 of 497 school districts in Pennsylvania (Pittsburg Business Times 2012). Chester’s schools are overwhelmed by high truancy rates, limited resources, underskilled teachers, and low test scores (Petras 1991).

In 2012, Chester’s Chief Financial Recovery Officer Joseph Watkins prepared a financial and academic recovery plan for the Chester Upland School District. This plan came as a response to the district’s poor performance record and financial struggles as well as the fact that the district was losing hundreds of students to charter schools, further affecting the financial situation of public schools (Kopp 2012). The plan proposed a variety of steps intended to address two main issues: “achieving financial stability so the district can maximize its revenues and live within its means; and improving academic performance so that state standards can be met and parents feel they do not need to send their children to other schools” (How Can it Work 2012). The Chester Upland School Board, though, rejected the plan, leaving the district in as equally a tenuous place as it was before (Kopp 2012).

Environmental Justice in Chester

Charles Lee, chairperson of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee to the Environmental Protection Agency, has declared Chester to be “the worst case of environmental racism he’s ever seen” (Ewall 1999). Chester has one of the
largest collections of waste facilities in the country, home to hazardous sewage treatment plants, incinerators, chemical waste companies, and petroleum refineries, most of which are located very near to residential houses (Ewall 1999). This inundation of waste treatment facilities began in the late 1980s. Foster reports, “As many studies document, commercial waste facilities are disproportionately located in poor communities of color” (1998:787), which is very true of Chester. African Americans make up just 20.2% of Delaware County’s population, yet they represent 74.7% of Chester’s population (US Census Bureau 2010). Chester is the place where waste goes to be burned and disposed.

In 1988, for example, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) granted a permit to Westinghouse Resource Recovery Facility (currently named Covanta), now the largest trash incinerator in Pennsylvania, and the seventh largest in the country. Permitted to burn over 2,000 tons of trash each day, the facility receives 100% of the waste from Delaware County, as well as from sites in New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and even as far away as Ohio. Covanta is located in what once was a quiet residential neighborhood, but now has noise and pollution from dozens and dozens of trucks that bring trash to the site each day. In addition to disrupting the safety and peace of the community, the presence of the incinerator poses major health risks. Despite required air treatment measures, the facility emits many pollutants. There have been reports of increased cases of respiratory issues and cancer since 1988, though no direct claims of causality can be made (Foster 1998).

The DEP has granted permits to similarly threatening facilities, such as Abbonisio Recycling (a demolition debris recycling company), Thermal Pure Systems (an infectious medical waste treatment facility), and Soil Remediation Systems (a contaminated soil burning plant). These newer facilities join ones that had been in Chester for decades
before, including a sewage waste treatment facility, Sunoco Oil, Scott Paper, and Witco Chemicals, to name a few. The DEP grants permits to waste facilities despite resident objections and without their input (though there have been more recent cases of successful resident resistance, discussed below). Furthermore, the DEP does little to assess the cumulative impacts of the facilities in Chester; each permit is considered in a vacuum (Foster 1998).

This toxic assault on Chester has happened for a number of reasons. As I briefly mentioned, the city’s government is run by a Republican political machine. In 1917, John McClure was elected as mayor of Chester; serving until his death in 1965. During his time in office he crafted a large network of political allies. This network pilfered funds from the city, maintaining resident support through a patronage system, essentially bribing residents with things such as jobs or food. Even after McClure’s death, heavy corruption of the government persists (McLarnon 2003).

This network of politicians benefitting from public funds in Chester is unsympathetic to community needs and requests, even when it came to basic protections such as environmental and human health. Foster writes, “Peter Kostmayer, former head of the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) Mid-Atlantic Region, recalled hearing from a DEP official that ‘there were political figures and their allies that had financial investments in Chester’ and supported Chester as a home to the waste industry” (1998:784). The government controls all decision-making, primarily with their personal financial interests in mind; allowing waste facilities to establish in Chester was very profitable for government actors (Foster 1998).

Furthermore, these companies have abused the pressing needs of Chester residents, forcing them into the corner of the “jobs-for-environment tradeoff” (Foster
1998:820). Foster further explains, “the facilities were following the time-honored practice of businesses hoping to move into financially ailing communities and offering financial incentives and increased employment opportunities” (1998:820). Chester residents were forced to choose between new job opportunities and the threat of longer-term environmental and health risks. Realistically, though, they weren’t given much choice, nor did the companies inform residents of the extent of the dangers of having these treatment facilities so close to their homes (Foster 1998).

In actuality, the facilities promises of new jobs for residents were hollow and limited; their presence in Chester did little to improve the economic situations of residents. The plants really only served to worsen the quality of the neighborhoods and health. Peter Kostmayer explains, “The presence of facilities molds the aesthetics and the economy. Other businesses are reluctant to locate where there are so many waste treatment plants” (Foster 1998:786). Not only were the plants directly making harmful changes in Chester, but they also served to prevent potential positive forces from coming in.

These facilities and government actors were acting out environmental racism with the assumption that Chester residents were ignorant about and without agency to respond to the worsening environmental, economic, and health situations in which they were finding themselves. However, despite the gloomy labels and overwhelmingly negative statistics about Chester, there are currently and have been since the early 1990s community-driven efforts for environmental justice.

In 1992, a group of residents got together and formed Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL). The group has a history of fighting back against the opening of new waste treatment plants in the city, with a list of successes. CRCQL
members educated themselves and other residents about the dangers of what was happening to their city, and about how they could fight back. For example, in 1992 they held a protest at the Covanta incinerator (then still named Westinghouse), blocking trucks from passing into the facility. Ultimately, the protest resulted in an agreement to build a different road for trucks to enter the facility, one that didn’t cut directly through their neighborhood. Although this was a small victory, it proved that residents were committed to fighting for their rights, and that they were on the path to making positive change (Foster 1998).

Unfortunately, in many cases, the political constraints of the corrupt government and the marginalized treatment of residents limited their voices and prevented their actions from having positive effects. For example, despite their going to court to fight the establishment of another waste facility, Thermal Pure, the facility was granted a permit through a series of questionable political actions (among other things, the judge was the brother of one of the men in RR&Z, the corporation behind most of the plants in Chester, and pushing for Thermal Pure) (Foster 1998).

CRCQL sought ways to strengthen their efforts. Foster writes, “The loss of many of its non-African-American members, the legal loss to Thermal Pure, and the intimidation tactics used against CRCQL members slowly took their toll” (1998:823). Members decided on the importance of building a coalition, in hopes of also combating the racism that was limiting their group’s actions. In 1995, CRCQL held a retreat at Swarthmore College to inform and educate students of the environmental justice issues and efforts happening in Chester. From this retreat, the Campus Coalition Concerning Chester (C4) was created; this group of different colleges and Chester residents worked together from 1996-1999 in efforts to address environmental justice issues in Chester
What does it mean, though, that Chester residents had to turn to an outside, majority white and financially stable group in order to continue to fight for their rights?

The connection with Swarthmore College strengthened in 2007 when the Delaware County Alliance for Environmental Justice (DELCO Alliance) was formed. This group marked the reorganization of community-led environmental justice efforts as Chester was confronted with new industrial threats. Swarthmore students supported the Alliance by attending meetings and offering resources to help (Interview 2/1).

Unfortunately, the Alliance has not been active in recent years and thus it is unclear how much community-driven environmental justice work is happening in Chester currently. In the following section, I will talk more about Swarthmore’s role in addressing environmental justice issues in Chester.

**Swarthmore: Finding a Role in the Environmental Justice Movement**

The small group of Swarthmore students who formed the group Environmental Justice sought to respond to these vast environmental inequities in Chester. This section will place EJ’s efforts within the larger trend of Swarthmore social activism work in Chester, as well as explore the goals and missions of the group and explain how they arrived at the idea of helping to create a community garden.

**Swarthmore Volunteerism in Chester**

There is no record of the first time Swarthmore College contributed financial and human resources to Chester, but the relationship between the College and the city is thought to have begun around the 1960s (Meng 2012). As I explained in the previous section, the city of Chester is confronted by a multitude of political, economic, educational, and environmental issues, and a general lack of resources to address these issues. Swarthmore College, a mere five miles down the road, boasts a commitment to
“social responsibility,” priding the student body’s involvement in social activist and social justice efforts. The College’s website explains, “Since its founding in 1864, Swarthmore College has given students the knowledge, insight, skills, and experience to become leaders for the common good” (Swarthmore College 2013). From this perspective, Chester would seem to be the perfect site for acting on Swarthmore’s values.

Over the years, both Chester and Swarthmore College communities have emphasized the importance of Swarthmore volunteers in Chester, working to address gaps left unfilled by the city’s government. The College has a number of Community Based Learning classes that do projects in Chester. The very encounter with Lamar in his 2nd grade class at Christopher Columbus Elementary School that got me thinking on this project came out of an observation I was doing for an education class at Swarthmore. The Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility (the Lang Center) supports a variety of grants and programs to engage Swarthmore students in Chester. The Bennett Homes Community Garden is a project that is financially supported through the Lang Center. Through all of this, there is very much a discourse of “Chester needs you to do the things the government can’t or won’t” and “Chester is a great place to try things out” (Meng 2013).

Angela Meng, a 2012 Swarthmore graduate, wrote her thesis on this relationship of volunteerism between Swarthmore and Chester: The Student-Volunteer: The Making of a Swarthmore Subject: An Ethnographic Study of Swarthmore College, Chester, and the Volunteerism that Connects to Two. Ultimately, Meng argued that while Swarthmore volunteerism in Chester empowers Swarthmore students and maintains the College’s image as a socially responsible and active institution as well as meets some expressed needs of Chester residents left unfulfilled by the city’s government, the structure of the
volunteerism system prevents sustainable, long-term impact of the College on the Chester community.

Meng argues that there has been a shift in the way that Swarthmore is involved in Chester. Earlier on in the relationship, the College sought to respond to an expressed need, looking for and responding to service or resource gaps in Chester. Existing organizations in Chester would reach out to Swarthmore asking for a student or group of students to help their efforts (Meng 2012).

More recently, however, with the availability of financial support from the Lang Center, students have been initiating their own projects; designing programs that fall in line with their own interests and looking to Chester as a place to test it out. This trend maps onto James Ferguson’s analysis of the discourse of development (1994). Ferguson explains that development projects are driven by the interests of a group with many resources and skills, who seek to find a good “target for intervention” (1994:73) on which to launch their interests and enact their project. These targets are most often individuals or groups that have fewer resources (the Chester community) or an expressed need, as seen from the perspective of the more dominant group (members of the Swarthmore College community) (1994). Most often this happens with the best intentions – a desire to help do something good and useful for the community, but through the lens of the dominant group’s own passions.

This can lead to a disconnect between Chester’s situation and what Swarthmore students are going in to do. Through interviews with people who have received grants from the Lang Center to pursue their own projects, Meng reports that generally these projects are relatively unsustainable because they are attached to individual students. People are at Swarthmore only for four years, so unless their project gets carried on by
another Swarthmore student or strongly embedded into the Chester community, it is unlikely to continue\(^3\) (Meng 2012).

While Swarthmore’s contributions to Chester have been widespread and impactful to some degree, they fail to make the deep, structural changes most Swarthmore students would like to see take place. Furthermore, they bring up the imbalance of power associated with development projects, in that Swarthmore students have the ability to leave the situation when things become too difficult or other priorities take place, but Chester residents may still be living with the problem the students intended to address (Meng 2012). As we will see next, these concerns, among others, were salient in Environmental Justice’s initial meetings about how they could play a role in addressing environmental justice issues in Chester.

Fitting into the EJ Movement, and Fulfilling Personal Interests

The group of Swarthmore students who formed Environmental Justice was small, about ten members. Most were already involved in environmental efforts on Swarthmore’s campus through Earthlust; some had been involved in the establishment of a student-run garden on campus through The Good Food Project. They all came into EJ with an interest in environmental justice and an understanding that Chester was a city overwhelmed by injustices. One original member, Evan, noted how eclectic the group was, all coming from different social circles beyond their common environmental investments; they formed a strong and efficient team (Interview 2/8).

Soon after organizing themselves, some members of EJ, along with other environmental activists, traveled to Powershift, a conference for college students invested

\(^3\) Many grants through the Lang Center do require representation from across grade levels in an effort to ameliorate this issue of student turnover, though even so, the problem persists.
in environmental activism. The weekend-long event was intended to bring together students from schools across the country to share with one another what they were doing on their campuses and what their goals were, and to hear from other environmental activists. When EJ went in the fall of 2008, they heard keynote presentations by Van Jones and Majora Carter. Van Jones, an environmental and civil rights activist, spoke about green jobs, jobs that in some way contribute positively to the environment. Majora Carter discussed a community greening project she started in her home of the South Bronx in New York (Interview 2/1a).

With these ideas and inspirations in mind, the group of EJ members came back to campus excited and ready to spearhead a new project. They turned to Chester, as a city blighted by immense environmental injustices. Reflecting on the process of developing project ideas, Ladulé, a 2009 Swarthmore graduate, explained, “This decision immediately put us in the problematic situation of attempting to organize within in a community to which we did not belong. We absolutely wished to avoid imposing our ideas, values, and assistance upon anyone in some sort of (neo)colonial relationship” (Interview 2/1b). Throughout all of the group’s initial conversations about what their role within the wider environmental justice movement should be, they were constantly reflective of their roles as Swarthmore students.

In an attempt to prevent their positionality from undermining the development of an effective project, EJ came up with guidelines for whatever work they ended up pursuing. They agreed that all work should be done through contact with community members. As much as possible, EJ should act as a tool for residents, helping to provide resources they might not otherwise have access to, but giving residents the power to decide where and how these resources should be used. The group decided it “would be
best to support and strengthen current community environmental activism in Chester— in whatever capacity they needed us— rather than start our own initiative” (Interview 2/1b).

EJ members thus broke up tasks to research different organizations already acting in Chester, and reaching out to as many people as possible. Students attended DELCO Alliance for Environmental Justice meetings, the group that had been formed two years prior between environmental justice activists in Chester and Swarthmore students and staff. They spent the fall of 2008 and winter of 2009 observing the efforts already happening in Chester and learning about what people wanted to happen in the environmental justice movement (Interview 2/1b).

During this time, they met Tina Johnson, a Chester resident who founded and manages the Chester Food Cooperative, the city’s community-owned grocery store. The Co-op buys produce and other grocery items in bulk, often from local sources, and resells them to cooperative members at accessible prices. These members take part in maintaining and running the store, each putting in a few hours a month as “member-owners” (Wallace 2011).

This community-run store is the only grocery store in Chester.⁴ In addition to being inundated by toxic waste treatment facilities in past twenty-five years, Chester residents have extremely limited access to fresh and healthy foods. The city’s only grocery store shut down over ten years ago (Ewall 1999); supermarket chains have redlined the district because it poses too large of a financial risk for them to invest in the city (Wallace 2011).

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⁴ A Fair and Square supermarket is planned to open up through Philabundance in the spring of 2013 (Philabundance 2013).
All of these factors contribute to Chester’s status as a food desert, devoid of nutritious and affordable foods, and the resources by which to obtain them. For most residents, the nearest supermarket is too far and too expensive to get to (Ewall 1999). Chester is a food insecure city. One strain of the environmental justice is fighting for food security, which can be defined as existing “when people have access to affordable, nutritious, culturally appropriate and personally acceptable food without the need to resort to emergency food or other coping strategies” (Slocum 2006:328).

EJ members decided they wanted to pursue a project to address the Chester’s food insecurity. Their inspiration from Majora Carter’s stories of her community gardening projects in South Bronx and their own interests in gardening, led them to see if residents would welcome a community garden in Chester. They talked with the contacts they had developed over the past few months to see if there was any interest. EJ ended up establishing a relationship with the Chester Housing Authority, who was willing to donate a large plot of land, storage space, and water access in the Ruth L. Bennett Homes, one of the public housing developments overseen by the CHA, for a community garden (Interview 1/23).

This seemed like the perfect project to pursue- it matched the interests of the Swarthmore students, and seemed to meet a need communicated from the CHA. Kavita, another founding member, explained:

We felt really good it wasn’t coming from us, that we were responding to an expressed desire and need and approached them with kind of a proposal saying we’ll help, we’ll be resources, we’ll bring knowledge and work with the knowledge in the community, and we’ll bring a skill set of raising resources and the connections that can acquire those resources. (Interview 2/1a)
The CHA organized a meeting with EJ and the Bennett Homes Resident’s Council to talk about ideas for the garden. The Resident’s Council seemed excited by the idea; everyone agreed the Bennett Homes was the best option for a garden site (Interview 2/1a).

Throughout the entire process, EJ was conscious of the strengths, biases, and limitations they brought to the process of enacting a community project in Chester. They continually had conversations with the Bennett Homes Resident’s Council and Miss Louise, who was vice president of the Council, lived in the housing unit right next to the garden, and would ultimately work with EJ in the garden nearly every week. They all participated in discussions about how the garden should be organized to best benefit the community. Furthermore, they were very intentional about reaching out to residents. Ladulé expressed, “The last thing we wanted to do was be outsiders driving a project that, in actuality, had little interest within the community” (Interview 2/1b). Though the idea of a garden was driven in part by their own interests, they strove to ensure it also met community needs and interests.

A Portrait: Organization and Goals of the Bennett Garden

EJ broke ground in the spring of 2009, with the help of Miss Louise, some of her grandkids, and a few other young children from the neighborhood. Using a donated rototiller, they carved out five beds in the ground in their corner lot in the Bennett and planted their first round of donated seedlings. During this first season, they struggled from not having enough water (there was no place to hook up a hose, so Miss Louise carried over pots full of water from her house) to being inundated by water (the garden lot is surrounded by hills and is prone to flooding). The harvest was small that year, but excitement was high among the few who were involved and the CHA and Resident’s Council continued to express support for the garden (The Chester Garden Project 2013).
The garden was driven by the visions of EJ members, with input from the Resident’s Council, especially Miss Louise. One founding member sent along notes from an EJ meeting during the early stages of the garden, in which they established the goals they had for the project. Through the garden they wanted to promote nutrition, community building (by developing a green space, ideally for intergenerational bonding), youth development (through constructive after-school and summer activities), and environmental awareness. EJ also wanted the garden to improve food access for the Bennett. They considered the garden as a way of working towards food and environmental justice in Chester (Interview 2/1b).

Perhaps most prominent of all the goals was that of facilitating the empowerment of residents through the garden, encouraging a sense of ownership of the project. EJ imagined themselves initiating the development of this garden and then stepping back to let it be run by the community. A founding EJ member reflects, “Originally it was just going to be a garden run by the residents and we were going to help oversee that” (Interview 2/1c). They saw themselves as able to bring together different groups, find funding, and do the initial organizing for the project, which would ultimately be self-sustaining, run by community members (Bernath-Plaisted 2008).

Furthermore, they imagined this project would be a jumping off point for starting up gardens at other sites in Chester, pursuing the group’s goals on a more widespread level. Reflecting on this, one member said this thinking was driven by “this absurd idea that organically if we just planted a few seeds, it would blow people’s minds and they would start doing this in every housing project in Chester and we would solve the local food crisis” (Interview 2/1c).
Four years later, though, the Bennett Garden is still EJ’s only project, and the group is the primary leader of the garden. Despite repeated attempts at reaching to adult residents and older youth to become involved in the garden, children are the predominant participants. In Chapters 4 and 5, I will analyze potential reasons for the lack of neighborhood ownership in the Bennett Garden.

Despite the unfulfillment of this ultimate vision for the garden, a lot has happened with the garden over the past four years. Driven by those initial goals, the Bennett Garden has significantly expanded both physically and programmatically. The first time I went to the garden in spring of 2010 was when we started to build raised beds to prevent a recreation of the first season of flooded beds. CRA was also able to secure water access for the garden from a nearby fire hydrant. In addition to improved gardening space, there is an educational and gathering area- a set of picnic tables beneath a shade structure. A recent addition is two forty-foot recycled shipping containers, which will soon be retrofitted into a classroom and kitchen space for group gatherings and to prepare produce for distribution (The Chester Garden Project 2013).

In the height of the summer, the once empty corner lot in the Bennett is full of crawling tomato plants, watermelons, berries, peppers, sweet potatoes, trees, flowers, and a host of other plants. Working and playing with and among these vegetables, EJ is accompanied by a group of children, between the ages of two and thirteen. There is fairly frequent turnover of residents in the Bennett, but the garden has attracted a relatively stable group of kids. As was mentioned in the goals, though, EJ intended for the garden to be a more multigenerational space, but, again, there are currently no adults who regularly come out the garden (The Chester Garden Project 2013).
The group’s current goals for the garden are reflective of those originally set forth four years ago. First, the garden is meant to provide a learning space, specifically for children, but also for all residents. EJ has been trying to incorporate informal lessons into gardening days with the kids, which happen one day every weekend during the school year, talking about topics such as plant growth cycles, worms and composting, food systems, nutrition, and cooking. In the summer of 2012, we organized a summer camp three days a week, in addition to open community gardening hours, where we more formally and explicitly attempted to incorporate garden-based learning.

Secondly, the garden is meant to be a community gathering space, hopefully with the ability to encourage intergenerational interactions. Though not many adults are involved, it is a popular place for children to come. It is located right next to the neighborhood basketball court, and so it seems to act as an extension of their backyards.

The final major goal of the garden is to act a source of fresh produce for the neighborhood. Currently, anyone who comes out to work in the garden is free to take home whatever produce their families will cook and eat. EJ members and kids from the neighborhood walk around the neighborhood to knock on doors and distribute the remaining produce. There as been increased reception to this produce in recent years; we now know the preferences of many residents and are planning out planting based on what vegetables are popular. Currently, EJ is working to recruit teenagers to help design and lead a mobile market program with the aim of more efficiently distributing produce around the Bennett.

In the following section, I will generally discuss the histories and goals of other community gardening programs, taking a look at what patterns emerge from their different stories.
**Common in History and Goals: A General Look at Community Gardening Programs**

Though they involve different neighborhoods and actors, the other gardening programs I explored share fundamentally similar stories of development, as well as goals, as that of the Bennett Homes Garden. Since I only know about these programs from their websites and a single conversation with their leaders or educators, I can’t speak to their complex contexts, histories, and means of achieving their goals in the same depth as with the Bennett Garden. In this section, then, I will outline as best as I can the patterns that arise in the general initial steps and in the goals and missions of these programs.\(^5\)

*Initial Steps*

Similar to Swarthmore going to the Bennett, many gardening programs are established by people who are initially positioned as outsiders to the communities in which they are working. Generally, they are well-intentioned people who want to do good and productive work and are genuinely committed to and believe in the value of alternative food practices and community building through gardens. Molly from Real Food Farm explains how she has always been interested in the environment and took an environmental education class during her undergraduate studies that turned her on to sharing that passion with students. She further explained:

> I also got really interested in urban planning and, through that, community gardening, because community gardening is a really awesome way to bring people in a neighborhood together, and it’s something that maybe enhances the environment, and it enhances community cohesion.  

(Interview 11/14)

She, like many other leaders, wants to support positive changes in urban neighborhoods.

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\(^5\) I would also like to acknowledge that this was a small sample size of programs and therefore is not fully representative of all programs. Still, I think that patterns that exist across them are significant.
The intentions of garden leaders are also strongly tied to nutrition and food access. Tiffany was a volunteer at a community garden in DC, working there in her free time on the weekends. She grew up at a farming boarding school, so she was always exposed to growing food, raising animals, and composting. When she moved to DC, she was shocked to see the kinds of high-processed junk food people were eating. She reflected her thought process upon seeing this:

At first I was like, oh my god, why are these parents letting their kids eat that?! And then I was like, wait, you know, maybe it’s not the parents, maybe there are other forces in play, and that led me to research more about, you know, food deserts, and neighborhoods where fresh and affordable food is not accessible, and so really starting to learn that, and after learning about that, I really wanted to kind of take my upbringing, you know, why can’t it be applied to cities?

(Interview 10/11)

Most community gardens are established with the intention to improve access to fresh and healthy foods for nearby residents.

Common Good City Farm (CGCF) was initially started by “two women [who] noticed there was an unused lot next to Bread for the City, which is a food pantry here in DC, and so they approached Bread for the City about starting a little community garden there and got their permission for it, so then it was called 7th Street Garden, because it was on 7th Street” (Interview 12/18). When Bread for the City expanded, 7th Street Garden lost its plot of land; the city offered the two founding women a new, larger location, to which they moved and changed their name to CGCF. Elizabeth, the youth coordinator, explains, “We’re located right in the heart of the city right across from a public housing development. And the neighborhood we’re in is considered a food desert, so the closest grocery store is over a mile away” (Interview 12/18).

Similarly, Real Food Farm (RFF) in Baltimore emerged from efforts of a group with interests in improving food access; “Initially, the idea for the farm came from a
group of advocates in Baltimore who wanted to start a demonstration urban farm— one that could demonstrate growing practices that would be effective in Baltimore’s climate and relevant to Baltimore’s food needs” (Follow-up interview 2/20). RFF is currently overseen by CivicWorks, a non-profit organization that works to strengthen Baltimore communities by engaging in community improvement, education, workforce development, and green programs. Unlike CGCF, RFF is slightly isolated from residential neighborhoods due to its location in a park, but the nearest neighborhood is considered a food desert by USDA standards (Interview 12/5).

Teens 4 Good (T4G) also was established by individuals who were not from the neighborhoods in which they work. The organization was created by two white women, Jamie, who I interviewed, and the Executive Director of the Federation of Neighborhood Centers. In designing what T4G would look like, Jamie recalls that they “had the vision of cleaning and greening a forgotten space and worked to make that vision possible” (Follow-up interview 2/19). With this idea in mind, they reached out to the Philadelphia Department of Recreation, who gave them access to land at 8th and Poplar, also a neighborhood considered to be a food desert and which they maintain as their original and most-well developed site. T4G has since expanded to four additional sites.

Patterns Across Program Goals and Missions

As Elizabeth explained in the opening quote of this chapter, many community gardening programs strive not only to provide fresh fruits and vegetables for the surrounding neighborhoods, but also to educate residents about gardening and nutrition. The goals and missions expressed by the programs I interviewed can be placed into three general categories.
First, as has already been made clear, there is an emphasis at all gardens on improving food access and providing educational opportunities. This happens not only through food growth in community gardens, but also encompasses other alternative food practices such as promoting affordable pricing at farmer’s markets and offering a variety of nutrition programs. Molly explained a mission that is generalizable to all six programs, “Our primary goals at RFF is addressing food access in our neighborhood… and we’re trying to address familiarity through our educational programming, which happens either on the farm or with our mobile market” (Interview 11/14).

Beyond looking at the impact these programs can have on their immediate communities, many also hope to contribute to the development of the agricultural sectors in their areas. Elizabeth from CGCF said, “The overall vision is to serve as a replicable model for other communities to show what a community supported urban food system can look like and how it can work” (Interview 12/18). It is the hope that residents and whole communities will be empowered to play a role in where and how they get their food. I will discuss in Chapter 6 why it is important for efforts of food access and education to happen concurrently.

Out of this combination of food access and education, then, comes the second major goal of community gardening programs: to support the development of future food advocates among the youth (and maybe adults) who participate. Most gardens have some form of formal or informal education programs, such as after-school youth programs or summer teen internships, that work towards this growth. I will further explore the specific ways in which this development of new advocates and leaders can happen also in Chapter 6.
Finally, programs aim to promote environmental stewardship, both in attitudes and behaviors, in those who participate. RFF, for example, strives to protect the environment and improve Baltimore’s watershed by using environmentally friendly growing methods and supporting locally grown food (Interview 12/5). Community gardens are a means of building a healthy environment and beautifying neighborhoods (Interview 11/19).

Implicit in the goals of all of these programs, and explicit in many, is the intention of empowering community members who participate in community gardens, or any element of the alternative food and environmental justice movements. Beyond just providing neighborhoods with food, garden leaders want to spread an understanding of how the food system works, why it is important to eat healthily, and how residents can act as agents of change within the food system.

*Solidarity Among Leaders*

Given that their goals and missions are so similar, there is a sense of solidarity among leaders and advocates of community gardening programs; they understand their efforts to be a part of a larger movement towards food and environmental justice. Leaders and advocates are beginning to form networks among different programs and organizations. Jamie, from Philadelphia, explains, “Some of the major players in urban agriculture are starting to get together and do stuff together, and they all share all of their resources” (Interview 11/18). For example, there is a Farmer’s Alliance in Philadelphia, a group of urban farmers and advocates who meet monthly to share struggles, successes, and resources. Additionally, there is an online community of urban farmers (Philadelphia Urban Farm Network) through which people share articles, questions, advice, and resources.
These alliances are ultimately meant to make urban agriculture efforts as strong as possible. Elizabeth from CGCF expands on this idea:

I mean the urban farming scene in DC is pretty small, so there’s definitely a lot of collaboration that happens, um you know from just sharing resources to sharing ideas to just kind of, it’s a nice overall support network, and I know that this winter I’ve been talking with people who work at other urban or community gardens and we were just talking about how we can support each other more, because everyone, you know, obviously has the same goals. (Interview 12/18)

From the perspectives of the people who are leading and educating in community gardens, there is a sense of being part of a strong alternative foods movement. Their own interests in gardening and local foods are what driven them to want to help people who don’t have reliable access to fresh, healthy food. How, though, are residents involved in these programs? Does the fact that the majority of these gardens are driven by people initially positioned as outsiders to their communities of work impact the relevancy or sustainability of the programs? How does the positionality of garden leaders influence the work they do and the community gardens they oversee? What role does race play in all of this? I will explore these questions, among others, in the two following chapters.
A central tenet of the alternative food movement is that its practices, whether community gardening, shopping at a farmer’s market, or being a member of a community co-op, will empower those who participate. This vision was evidenced through the goals and missions the Bennett Garden and of various other community gardening programs discussed in Chapter 3. Unfortunately, the extent of this community involvement and empowerment is not as high in practice as garden leaders envision it to be.

In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which who is running community gardening programs influences who gets involved in these programs. Most garden leaders are initially positioned as outsiders to the communities in which they work, often further differentiated by their race. I argue that there are obstacles to the relevancy and sustainability of gardening programs that don’t grow directly out of the community; it is still possible for them to be productive, but more difficult than if community residents were the initial driving force behind the garden. Furthermore, they run the risk of addressing issues of food security in a way that reinforces systems of dependency and perpetuates the charity approach of providing handouts to certain communities of need.

**Resident Involvement in Gardens**

Although most garden programs have similar missions, they are all organized in a unique way. They exist in different neighborhoods, with different individuals, exhibiting a variety of needs, interests, knowledge, and skills. As a result, they have divergent ways of running and organizing their programs.
The majority are explicitly focused on youth programming, through hosting school or summer field trips, after-school programming, or after-school and summer youth internships. These are diverse in their degree of formality, ranging from casual neighborhood open gardening hours for youth to come to garden-based lessons for school field trips that match up with state learning standards to multi-month youth internships through which teenagers receive training and stipends.

Programs for adults are often more informal, such as community volunteer days, to which anyone can come out to help in the garden. Some gardens have work exchange programs, in which workers trade hours of time in the garden for produce. On the more formal side, gardens might also offer adult workshops on a variety of topics ranging from plant growth cycles to starting your own garden to cooking, nutrition, and exercise.

When it comes to the goal of engaging and empowering the adult community members who live in the neighborhood right around the garden, though it seems like many programs struggle. My conversations with some garden leaders shed some light on why this might be, alluding to the obstacles put forth by their position as people coming in from outside of the community, likely with different interests and priorities than those they are working to serve.

Elizabeth is the Youth Coordinator at Common Good City Farm (CGCF) in Washington, DC. Upon recalling the story of the garden’s development, driven by the vision of two women, who wanted to reform an abandoned lot in DC, Elizabeth explains, “I know that there were some problems [initially] and a lot of people in the community maybe felt a little bit like they hadn’t been consulted about what they wanted the space to become before Common Good came and moved in” (Interview 12/18). CGCF has a program called Green Tomorrows, through which adult participants can either partake in
hands-on learning on the farm (focused on planting, harvesting, composting, etc.) and/or take a series of workshops (covering horticulture, nutrition, food preparation, etc.). Yet, encouraging community participation is currently one of the organization’s main goals, suggesting the rates aren’t as high as they would like them to be (Interview 12/18).

Elizabeth continues on to talk about how the relationships she has with the community lie with the youth who come to the farm: “I don’t live that close to the farm either and I would say definitely the majority of my relationships are with young people who come out to the farm and not with their families” (Interview 12/18). The farm is an important place for these youth, but there remains the question of why other community members aren’t getting involved as well, despite present opportunities inviting them to the farm.

Teens 4 Good (T4G) of Philadelphia faces a similar problem. The organization oversees five gardens throughout the city, each in varying stages of establishment. I visited Jamie, the organization’s director, at their garden at 8th and Poplar, their oldest site located in a diverse, mixed-income neighborhood. Jamie and a colleague, both white women, founded T4G in 2005, starting with the 8th and Poplar farm site. Jamie recalls, “We reached out to the community, however, they were not very receptive to the idea of a garden. We continue to reach out to all of the communities we work in, although buy-in process has been slow” (Interview 11/18). Like CGCF, a main T4G goal is to increase community involvement.

It seems likely that the lack of involvement is rooted in the fact that the garden was imposed on the neighborhood - though with good intentions - rather than developed in collaboration with or from within the community. Jamie speculates, “When we first started this there was a lot of skepticism because I think these communities see a lot of
this kind of stuff come and go” (Interview 11/18). That speculation is still present today: “We’ve been here now going on our 8th or 9th year and the community is still very hesitant, although they know that when the gates are open- if Aviva’s [the farm manager] here or if I’m here- they’re welcome to come in, but they’d still rather stay on the other side of the fence” (Interview 11/18). T4G hosts a variety of community events, with food, music, and activities, in an attempt to attract more participants, though Jamie reports that few residents attend.

Unfortunately, as is evident in the sparse descriptions of these programs, I don’t know enough about the neighborhoods in which they are situated or how community members participate to make any claims about why they have lower than desired community involvement. My only sources of information were from the perspective of garden leaders and the program websites. I speculate, though, that the fact that these gardens are projects implemented largely by outside organizations in these neighborhoods and the fact that the majority of garden leaders and educators at these programs are white women both play a limiting role. In order to more deeply analyze the impact garden leaders and the process of garden development have on who participates in the garden, I will look to the Bennett Homes Community Farm, with which I am much more familiar after four years of working there.

**A Hand to Help: Swarthmore EJ in the Bennett**

When EJ first began to develop their vision for the garden in the Bennett, they agreed that, though they would play an important piece in the initial steps, they didn’t necessarily want to have a sustained role in running the garden. One EJ member wrote, “The group decided that their role should be a temporary one, bringing together different
parties, finding funding and doing initial organizing. The goal was to facilitate the creation of a garden that could be independent in a limited period of time” (Bernath-Plaisted 2008). This section will discuss the attempts original EJ members took to try to make this happen, highlighting where their positionality as outsiders to Chester (not focusing as heavily on race, as some but not all original EJ members were white) challenged their good intentions and created obstacles for the fulfillment of their vision.

As was made clear in the story of development of the Bennett Homes Garden, the original Swarthmore EJ members spent a lot of time talking about the role of the group as outsiders going into to do work in Chester. One member reflected, “We felt like Chester was a really important place to work and that our goal with the garden was to create access to food but also to respect and honor the skills and knowledge and abilities of residents, of the folks that we were working with” (Interview 2/1a). Recollections of the groups’ conversations show a commitment to figuring out ways to work for environmental justice without perpetuating oppressive relationships (EJ history 2009) (see Chapter 3).

I am analyzing the Bennett Garden’s story of development, then, not to suggest that the original EJ members should have done a better job collaborating with Chester residents, and definitely not to insinuate that they shouldn’t have pursued the garden at all. It is clear through their thoughtful reflections on the garden that EJ members deeply considered the implications of their positions as Swarthmore students working in Chester; they sought to mitigate the negative impacts of their positionality as much as possible. I am curious, though, as to why, despite their reflections of positionality and genuine desire to involve and empower residents, the responsibility of planning and maintaining the garden still lies entirely in the hands of Swarthmore EJ members. Would this still be the
case if their steps of establishment had been different? Are there steps that EJ can take now to encourage more community involvement and to work towards developing a more diverse set of garden leaders?

Attempts and Limitations of Collaboration

In addition to envisioning a short-lived active involvement in the garden, EJ members imagined developing a multi-generational project within the garden, in which not only did people of all ages come out to work in and enjoy the space, but they did so together. They recognized that this would be very hard to do because they might have trouble getting adult residents involved; the following expands on these anticipated- and realized- troubles (Interview 2/1a).

As I outlined in Chapter 3, the group made a number of efforts to reach out to and work in the interests of Chester residents, careful not to just impose their own interests and ideas on the community. The idea for a garden came out of suggestion made by the Chester Housing Authority, who offered up the site of the Bennett Homes. The Resident’s Council at the Bennett Homes was involved in the preliminary planning stages, and consulted regularly when EJ had new ideas. The vice president of the Resident’s Council, Miss Louise, joined EJ for nearly every gardening day they had, and played a large role in the functioning of the garden (i.e. what got planted, how the produce got distributed, etc.). However, as the following sections will demonstrate, these relationships were important, but still limited in terms of encouraging full, reciprocal collaboration.

The Chester Housing Authority

Even though EJ responded to an expressed desire to have a garden from the CHA, this doesn’t necessarily indicate resident consultation or consent. Most CHA employees
do not live in Chester and may not have regular contact or strong relationships with many of the residents in the housing developments the Housing Authority manages. One EJ member noted:

At the beginning the CHA had been like yeah yeah we want this, and there had been maybe one person on the Housing Authority that was really excited about the idea, and the guy that ran it liked the idea, but he certainly wasn’t part of the community. I think he was supportive, he liked it, but he didn’t have the same connection within the community to really speak for them or represent them.  

(Interview 2/1a)

The CHA plans and implements many programs and policies for the residents, but it is unclear if residents have much say in what goes on. So, though EJ was responding to an expressed need, it may have been a need expressed by the CHA - hopefully with good intentions for the residents, but also possibly to improve the image of the Bennett Homes - not necessarily a need and interest of the residents themselves.

The Ruth L. Bennett Homes Resident’s Council

In order to ensure the CHA heard resident voices, the Bennett Homes had a Resident’s Council comprised of various people from the neighborhood. After the CHA proposed the Bennett Homes as a site for a garden, EJ members met with the Resident’s Council to further discuss the idea; everyone present seemed excited and on-board. Throughout the early planning stages, EJ members recall having conversations about what the garden could and should look like, what the structure of ownership should be, and what should happen with the produce (Interview 2/1a, 2/1b). The Resident’s Council also promoted the garden in their monthly newsletter that got distributed to all Bennett residents, announcing events and encouraging people to get involved (The Chester Garden Project 2013).
Despite these seemingly shared interests and actions in growing the plans for the garden, some EJ members also describe this relationship with the Resident’s Council as more of a formality than a true collaboration. The Council, though, was an important group within the Bennett; it was EJ’s perception that they needed to go through the Council with their ideas in order to be successful and accepted in the community. So, some EJ members suggest that the relationship with the Resident’s Council was superficial: EJ met and talked with them to help develop in them a sense of ownership, but EJ was still making all of the actual decisions. To make matters more difficult, they report that the Council meetings were sporadic and disorganized (Interview 1/23).

I think this was ultimately a useful and necessary relationship, but it’s also true that though members of the Resident’s Council have more contact and stronger relations with Bennett residents, they are also a small group that cannot possibly know or represent all opinions that exist in the community. Even though EJ garnered their support, this does not guarantee that other adults would be excited about getting involved in the garden as well.

Also, I am unsure of the details of how people were elected to the Council. Unfortunately, the Resident’s Council disbanded approximately two years ago. I’m not sure of the politics behind this happening, but, to my knowledge, there is currently no point group for resident representation in the Bennett.

**Miss Louise**

Miss Louise was one of the first people I met when I went to the garden for a big workday in the spring of 2010. Sitting on the front porch of her house right next to the garden, she waved at the Swarthmore van as we arrived that Saturday morning. Throughout that day, I saw her joking around with the older EJ members, whom she’d
known for over a year by then, and helping out with the kids who came out to work in the
garden, many of whom were her grandchildren.

Unfortunately for the garden, Miss Louise and her family moved out of the
Bennett a few years ago and EJ has since lost touch with her. In all the memories of EJ
members who knew her, though, she is an extremely charismatic, warm, and curious
person; she very rarely missed a workday in the garden and played an integral role in the
early stages of development. As vice president of the Resident’s Council, she took part in
all of the conversations they had with EJ. Beyond that, though, she made major decisions
and contributions to the garden by being there every week.

During gardening days, she helped with behavior management of kids who came
out to the garden- many were her grandchildren and she was a generally authority figure
in the community. She also determined how to distribute the produce to people who came
out and worked or she knew around the neighborhood, and just generally served as a
liaison between EJ and the Bennett residents Since she lived so nearby, she always kept
an eye on the garden, from watering plants when they needed it too making sure, to the
best of her ability, nobody vandalized the space. Miss Louise was the unofficial steward
of the Bennett Garden (The Chester Garden Project 2013, Interview 2/1a, 2/1b).

She came to the garden with a lot of knowledge and skills already, and was
always looking to learn more or help in new ways. One original EJ member thinks, “If I
remember correctly, Miss Louise grew up on a farm or had a grandma or someone that
she gardened with. She definitely had the experience in the past, and I think that’s part of
the reason she was so excited to be doing this and putting a lot of energy into it”
(Interview 2/1a).
It also seems like she shared many of the same goals and interests as EJ. When the group decided to build raised beds to avoid flooding and to ensure they were growing in clean soil, one member recalls:

> We felt very aware of the interconnectedness between soil quality and plants and that kind of mechanism for what we eat and did our best to kind of teach and share about that as well. And Miss Louise I remember was definitely concerned about that too, maybe perhaps from a less scientifically literate standpoint, but just from a general awareness and concern. 

(Interview 2/1a)

I unfortunately wasn’t able to interview Miss Louise to ask her about her involvement with the garden, but based on similar recollections from EJ members, and what I remember from when she still lived in the Bennett, Miss Louise also supported the vision of the garden as a space for community gathering, learning, and food access.

In addition to playing a central role in the daily running of the garden, Miss Louise was a hugely influential person for Swarthmore EJ students. One 2011 graduate explained, “I don't know quite much else to say about her except that she disregarded all socio/cultural divisions and was just an awesome human being who treated us like the same” (Interview 3/31). She even attended the 2011 Swarthmore graduation to bid farewell to five members.

However, Miss Louise was the only adult from the Bennett who consistently came out to the garden. An EJ member explains, “My recollection is that there was maybe one person from the community who was really excited, but when it came to having these Saturday morning work days, Miss Louise and a couple of her grandkids and maybe two other children from the area would come out” (Interview 2/1a). What is it that made Miss Louise interested and able to participate? Why wasn’t this the case for other adults in the neighborhood?
An Imbalance of Power and Interest?

In spite of all of these steps EJ took to reach out to the community and to respond to the interests and needs they expressed, there was still an imbalance of power between the Swarthmore students and Bennett Homes residents. One member reflects:

We tried as best as we could to cultivate a sense of ownership in the folks that came, so in Miss Louise primarily, we tried to communicate that we were supporting her. That wasn’t exactly the reality, but we always had the idea of an exit plan in mind, or a transition plan, so that it wasn’t all on us. (Interview 2/1a)

Three years later, though, and there is still no set exit plan in place; EJ continues to be the driving force behind the garden. Why is this the case?

To address this question, we must first consider whose interests were really being promoted, and who the garden was actually benefitting. It is true that EJ members canvassed the neighborhood during the early stages of the garden to gauge interest among residents. When they first started in 2009, EJ reports receiving a mixed response from adult residents about how much time they wanted to commit to the garden (The Chester Garden Project 2013). We receive a similar response today when we knock on doors around the neighborhood; many people express interest in attending events, such as a community block party at the garden or an dinner in the community center, or receiving produce. However, when it comes down to coming to the garden or attending events, few often show up and the majority that do are youth.

There are a number of factors at play. First of all, we can’t assume that all adults who live in the Bennett have the time or desire to be involved with the garden. I will explore this idea further in Chapter 5 through an analysis of the assumptions many garden leaders bring with them to the work they do. I posit that the ideas of alternatives and localized production are romanticized in alternative food practices. This might not always
resonate in communities, who may actually just want to be able to get their food from a traditional grocery store, or who may not value the “putting your hands in the soil” attitude associated with gardening because of the historical weight that kind of discourse evokes (Guthman 2008).

Furthermore, regardless of how it is spun, EJ was a Swarthmore-supported group wanting to go into Chester to make a positive difference. I discussed in Chapter 3 how normalized this act of Swarthmore volunteerism in Chester has become (Meng 2012). Inherent in this idea of volunteerism is the fact that the group going in to do work has access to resources, and often training, that are inaccessible to those for whom they are doing work. This access to money, supplies, and powerful relationships (such as with the CHA, which ultimately makes final decisions about what types of programming happen within the Bennett) automatically puts Swarthmore students in a more powerful place than the residents they are serving. EJ tried and continues to try their best to work with rather than for the residents, but remains the ultimate decision maker regarding the garden.

I believe the garden is an important thing for the Bennett Homes to have; it is a step towards food security and environmental justice, though just the first of many, many steps. It may not be on the top of residents’ priority lists, but this doesn’t counteract the fact that making steps towards food justice is important and necessary. It also seems like it is become more embedded into the community. Though there are no adults who come out, they have become increasingly receptive to produce (both suggesting what to grow and accepting what is grown) over the years. Additionally, there are adults who occasionally stop by during open gardening hours with questions about their own gardening projects at home, which suggests that the garden is a valuable information
resource for some Bennett residents. There is no way of knowing exactly how the relationship between EJ and Bennett residents will evolve through the garden. Will residents become more involved, or will Swarthmore students continue to make all major decisions regarding the garden?

As it stands now, though, EJ came up with the idea, despite the multitude of conversations they had with groups from the community and their constant reflections on their positionality as outsiders. They saw Chester as a fitting receptacle for their ideas, and the knowledge, skills, and resources they had to bring (Ferguson 1994). One member even noted that there seemed to be a sense of disconnect between where this project was coming from (Swarthmore) and where it was intended to land (Chester) (Interview 2/8). Ultimately, these beginnings have acted as obstacles to having more adult resident involvement and developing a truly collaborative program.

Programs that are created for a community rather than built from within or with a community are inherently less sustainable, and in most cases garner less community involvement, or take much longer to encourage this involvement (Cabbil 2010, DBFSN 2013). A major question, then, is: are there retroactive steps that can be taken to successfully develop community ownership and empowerment in community gardens and to establish a more diverse set of leaders in the alternative food movement? Before I directly address that question in Chapter 5, I want to consider who is consistently coming out to the Bennett Garden: the neighborhood youth.

Youth in the Garden

That same first Saturday at the garden when Miss Louise greeted our Swarthmore van from her front porch, the van was also trailed by an exuberant group of kids; the eagerly awaited Saturday afternoon gardening time had arrived. This parade happened
every weekend EJ went to the garden that season, and was often paired with kids trying to sneak into the van with us at the end of the workday in an effort to come with us or to prevent us from leaving.

Through the arrivals and departures are no longer as momentous after three years, the garden continues to attract a large and committed group of kids. They are mostly between the ages of five and eleven, though some younger siblings and twelve and thirteen year olds are also involved. EJ has tried to recruit teenagers, but it seems to be the younger youth who are most interested in being there.

Through my lens, the garden seems to be a very important place to these youth. During the camp I helped to run there this summer, we had a day where we were doing an art and science project with clay. There was some leftover clay afterwards, which two of the older boys used to make a trophy, deeming the Bennett Garden “The Best Garden in the World;” the trophy was left on top of the picnic tables so everyone who came to the garden would be able to see it. Similarly, kids often complain when it comes time for EJ to return to Swarthmore after a workday, questioning why we can’t stay there for longer or come more frequently.

*Giving and Receiving: Questioning Systems of Dependency*

Why is it that youth are so excited about the garden when no adults are coming out? Perhaps they are less skeptical, more willing to spend time outdoors, or more able to do so because they have fewer other responsibilities. I will continue to explore in Chapter 6 how many community gardens intentionally reach out to children, but it also seems like they are the easiest default targets for this kind of work. Due to their inherent dependency on others, “the child functions as the quintessential recipient of aid, and the paternal feelings mobilized to care and protect children are thereby extended to the circumstances
of other peoples who are deemed needy” (Buman 1994:31). Though this isn’t necessarily the approach most gardening programs take, since they are driven by ideas of community engagement and empowerment, it is possible that community garden programs are perceived as a form of charity, as most of the resources and expertise, through garden leaders and other advocates, come from outside of the community with the intention of helping those who need it.

Through her extensive work with poverty, hunger, and food assistance in the US as both a scholar and activist, sociologist Janet Poppendieck, challenges this system of charity that has become embedded into the foundation of our country. In her book *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, she explains how charity has wholly positive connotation for those who provide it; they are altruistic individuals who want to share their resources with those who are in need. For those on the receiving end, though, charity has an damaging implication: “It is the gift, offered with condescension and accepted in desperation, that is necessitated by incapacity and failure… it carries a stigma, a badge of shame, that is almost too much to bear” (Poppendieck 1998:231-232).

Charity is a self-congratulatory and patronizing business of providing handouts to those in need: “No matter how well-meant, no matter how cozy the environment, no matter how nutritious the bag of food, it is an indignity for an adult to be reduced to the level of a child by having to rely on others for care and security” (Brown 1999:383). Under the current limitations of the food system, these emergency food efforts are necessary and driven by well-intentioned people, but they fall short of making sustainable change in the ways people have access to food. Poppendieck writes about “the ways in which ‘feeding the hungry’ distracts us from the urgent challenges of deteriorating economic security and accelerating inequality” (1998:2). Many people have become
complacent with these emergency food supplies as a permanent solution to issues of hunger and poverty in the US.

Alternative food practices seek to shift away from these patterns of charity, instead, as we have seen, they work to empower individuals in where and how they get their food. However, if community members don’t buy in to the gardens outside individuals and groups are establishing in their neighborhoods, it is possible that these gardens will merely reproduce rather than challenge current systems of dependency.

At the Bennett Garden, resident response to produce has strengthened since the garden’s inception. Some residents have begun to request certain vegetables to be delivered to them. Still, EJ members are the ones driving the distribution of food from the garden. We’re colloquially known as “the garden people” by many residents around the Bennett. We, often with the help of youth from the neighborhood, periodically wheel around a barrel full of kale, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, and more, knocking on doors to hand out what’s in our bucket.

Very rarely is there an exchange with the produce. Anyone who comes out to work in the garden is welcome to take home whatever vegetables they want. As we knock on doors, EJ does encourage residents to go out and harvest things from the garden when we’re not there, but very few have taken up that offer. We have thrown around ideas of attaching small prices to the produce, but don’t feel it’s our place as Swarthmore students to impose costs on this produce that grows in their own neighborhood. In the case of the Bennett, this alternative food practice has a different, more progressive face, but it is all too similar to the traditional organization of emergency food handouts.

What other factors might be leading to this disconnect? What else is causing many community gardening programs to have trouble consistently engaging adults in
their programs? To address this question, we must continue to consider how people from outside of the communities, especially white people, are shaping what happens in these community gardens as their predominant leaders and educators. What are the assumptions, strengths, and limitations they carry with them to their work? As a result, what general values and beliefs are driving the conceptualization and practices of the alternative food movement? In Chapter 5, I argue that the true limitations to the relevancy and sustainability of alternative food practices lie within these values and beliefs.
Chapter 5
Coming in from the Outside:
Assumptions and Beliefs in Alternative Food Practices

“But there were these really kind of deep, lingering questions about my role as a white woman working in a community of mostly African Americans, and what I was able to teach, if I was the best messenger or not, how, you know, my lifestyles differed or matched a lot of the lifestyles of the families we were working with, if that made me too separate from them to really be an effective teacher.”

(Interview 11/14)

As the histories of these community gardens and farms have made clear, the majority of the programs have been established and are run by people who are not originally from the communities in which the gardens exist. Aside from geographical separations, race is commonly another marker of difference between many of the leaders and educators of gardening programs and the community residents (both children and adults) the programs are intended to benefit. The majority of community gardening projects are being developed in predominately African American or Latino communities (Yakini 2010), yet the majority of program leaders and educators are white and most often young females (Slocum 2007, Guthman 2008, Yakini 2010).

Yet, conversations about race and its implications are rarely brought up. However, as Molly’s quote suggests, these conversations are slowly starting to arise in some places. I will demonstrate in this chapter how there is an assumption of colorblindness when it comes to race in alternative food practices, and why this shift towards acknowledging the implications of race is essential to the sustainability and effectiveness of individual

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6 I recognize that class is another common factor of difference between those who are advocating for and running alternative food practices and those whom the practices are intended to serve (among many other factors of difference, and similarity). My research does not speak directly to class differences, though I will address it as it interacts with race.
community gardening programs as well as of the environmental justice and alternative food movements as a whole.

I would also like to acknowledge that, though the majority of community gardening programs are run by people who were not initially parts of the communities in which the garden exists, there are a number of organizations with community roots. This is evident in the story of Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living and other community-driven environmental justice efforts in Chester (see Chapter 3). I unfortunately don’t know enough about these types of organizations to do them justice, but I would like to briefly mention one group. The Detroit Black Food Security Network (DBCFSN) is one example of a community grown and driven organization that reinforces the idea that community engagement in the alternative food movement is essential for its sustainability and effectiveness.

The DBCFSN was formed in 2006 to address food insecurity issues in black communities in Detroit, MI, with a focus on developing more local leaders within the alternative food movement to ensure that their community wants and needs were fairly represented and addressed. Their motivation for formation came from an examination in who was involved in leading the alternative food movement:

> We observed that many of the key players in the local urban agriculture movement were young whites, who while well-intentioned, never-the-less, exerted a degree of control inordinate to their numbers in Detroit’s population. Many of those individuals moved to Detroit from other places specifically to engage in agricultural or other food security work. It was and is our view that the most effective movements grow organically from the people whom they are designed to serve. (DBCFSN 2013)

They recognized the unequal access to resources, which created that charity aura around alternative food practices:
Whites engaged in the movement often have access to philanthropic resources outside of the community and are able to leverage their positions of privilege to provide food and gardening resources to the less fortunate. D-Town activists challenge the White privilege embedded in the food security movement and demand that they themselves lead the movement to provide food for the citizens of their community. (White 2010)

So, groups and individuals formed a coalition working to build food security, self-reliance, and food justice from within the community. They work towards these goals by:

1) Influencing public policy; 2) promoting urban agriculture; 3) encouraging cooperative buying; 4) promoting healthy eating habits; 5) facilitating mutual support and collective action among members; and 6) encouraging young people to pursue careers in agriculture, aquaculture, animal husbandry, bee-keeping and other food related fields. (DBCFSN 2013)

By focusing on the perspective of community members, the group is ensuring that their interests are addressed. The DBCFSN and similar organizations mobilize the resources and skills already present in the community; they are inherently more sustainable because it is an effort (at least some) members of the community want and in which they are fully invested.

However, I focus on the fact that the majority of programs are run by people who come from outside of the communities they are serving, often further marked separate by their race. What are the implications of white privilege in these efforts? I will question the strengths, biases, and limitations these leaders bring into the environmental justice and alternative food movements. I argue that the overwhelming presence of people from the outside, specifically young white people, compromises the overall sustainability of the programs and serves to perpetuate the interests of the people running gardening and alternative food programs. Despite their good intentions to do so, they do not necessarily represent the interests and needs of the communities they are intended to benefit.
Before continuing, I want to reiterate the fact that I fully embody the role of an outsider going to do community gardening work in the predominately African American community of Chester, and as someone who would like to continue with urban agriculture and education work after graduating from Swarthmore. This analysis of whiteness in the community gardening movement is driven by my own doubts about the implications of my involvement. I honestly don’t know if I am doing more harm than good based on the disconnect between my background and the backgrounds of the people I’m working with at the Bennett Homes. I do fundamentally believe that community gardening and alternative food efforts are good, but I also think there is much that could be improved about the way these movements are thought about, talked about, and run (specifically, who runs them and whose interests are being prioritized). I hope this paper, as well as continued thinking about and actions related to the role of race in food and environmental efforts, will help begin to address some of the changes that need to be made.

**Uncovering and Questioning Whiteness**

Molly described one of her work partners, Myesha, who is an African American woman who “grew up in DC and has a similar background as a lot of the kids we’re working with, so she’s somewhat able to bridge that gap that [Molly] sometimes [is] not able to” (Interview 12/5). However, Myesha’s position as an African American woman doing farming work also raises questions of the history of slavery and forced labor:

Myesha shares that people that she’s talked to in her family or community organizing people say, ‘You work on a farm? Like a slave?’ You know and she kind of has to deconstruct that idea that, ‘No, this is about learning things that support my own health, things that help me, you know, change the food environment in my neighborhood.’ (Interview 12/5)
Despite the positive efforts of gardening programs and leaders to be inclusive of all people, these programs are inherently tied to racialized histories. These racialized histories clearly influence the ways in which these programs are organized, marketed, and run, thus also influencing who is involved in these programs and how sustainable they are.

Lila Cabbil is an activist in the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. When she spoke in 2010 at a Community Food Security Conference on a panel entitled Food Movements Unite, she called to all people present to engage in a self-assessment: “How are we participating in the empowerment of people toward the elimination of poverty, or how are we participating in perpetuating it?” (Cabbil 2010). Throughout her talk, she discussed the threat of perpetuating oppression within the food system, even as people are working as advocates for food and social justice.

She explains that the root of the problem lies in the fact that people are going in to do work with good intentions, but are focusing their efforts on doing projects for the communities they serve rather than engaging in movements with the communities. As was evident in the goals and missions of gardening programs in Chapter 3, most programs have the ultimate aim of collaborating with and empowering the residents with whom they work, though there are numerous barriers preventing this from happening. Cabbil calls the role of race, and all of the connected histories, assumptions, biases, and hierarchies of power, to be deeply questioned.

Whiteness: Unacknowledged, but with Major Implications

There is little discussion about whiteness as a racial category. As the dominant race, it can go unmarked, “normal,” with universal values (Slocum 2006). Even within
spaces, such as many urban community gardens, where racial differences are evident and have a major (though often unconscious) influence on what happens in those spaces, questions most often go unasked.

Robert Jensen is a professor of journalism; he is white and has written extensively about white privilege and institutionalized racism, among other topics. Jensen explains the ways in which the United States today is a white supremacist society. By this he means we are:

A society whose founding is based in an ideology of the inherent superiority of white Europeans over non-whites, and ideology that was used to justify the crimes against indigenous people and Africans that created the nation... and is used to this day to rationalize the racialized disparities in the distribution of wealth and well-being in this society. It is a society in which white people occupy most of the top positions of powerful institutions, with similar privileges available in limited ways to non-white people who fit themselves into white society. (2005:3-4)

Our nation is founded by white people and run by white people. It is a place where white privilege runs rampant, often giving people access to opportunities more based on their race rather than their skills and experience. Yet, discussion about whiteness and this white privilege and how it drives our society is taboo (2005).

The common rhetoric of our nation embraces the idea that racism is a thing of the past, that our society is no longer driven by white privilege but rather is post-racial. This idea of a post-racial society leads many people to an attitude of colorblindness, the idea that race is no longer a category by which to define people (Guthman 2008, Slocum 2007). Colorblindness allows people to still fight for social justice (with the understanding that they’re treating all people equally), while permitting them to downplay their own white privilege (and not recognizing the biases and limitations they bring to their efforts) (Jensen 2005).
The majority of the alternative food movement is based on this pretense of colorblindness (Guthman 2008, Slocum 2007). One garden educator explained her experiences in graduate school:

I really wanted to deal with these issues of racism and do a lot of work on that, so I got to grad school [for urban planning and food and agriculture policy] thinking ‘Alright! This is a social-justice oriented degree or department, we’re going to talk about this all the time!’ Nobody mentioned it. Ever. (Interview 12/5)

Beyond being silenced in some cases, in other instances race is denied as being something that is important at all. A garden educator from a different site explained:

You know, and my director, she’s like ‘Oh there are, you know, all these white people doing this stuff.’ And she’s a white woman, and I’m like, where are you coming off with this? The majority of them are women, and I go, but they’re so talented, what does it matter? (Interview 11/18)

This educator even went as far as to challenge the continuing legacy of slavery and oppression: “I hear people say, you know, people start talking about African Americans and slavery and I go, let’s stop that vicious cycle right now. All of the African Americans in [Philadelphia] have no ties to slavery, and it’s been 50 years, let’s get over that hump” (Interview 11/18). Colorblindness stems from an attempt to treat all people equally, but ultimately has very negative implications (Slocum 2006).

Colorblindness “does its own violence by erasing the violence that the social construct of race has wrought in the form of racism. Inversely, colorblindness erases the privilege that whiteness has brought” (Guthman 2008b:391). Rather than being seen as a pervasive element in the structure of our society, ideas of post-racialism enable people to wash away instances racism as a stain on the image of our otherwise healthy nation founded on freedom and equality. These assumptions of colorblindness disregard the fact that racism remains a systemic problem that serves to oppress millions of people, while privileging select others (Jensen 2005).
Beyond overlooking the persistence of racism and white privilege, assumptions of colorblindness ultimately paint everyone white. Colorblindness is associated with ideas of universalism, that the values held predominately by whites are normal and shared by all people. If people have divergent interests and beliefs, they are otherized: “When particular, seemingly universal ideals do not resonate, it is assumed that those for whom they do not resonate must be educated to these ideals or be forever marked as different” (Guthman 2008b:391).

By treating white values as universals, those engaged in running or designing alternative food practices can “retain a sense of being morally good” – they are merely helping others to access the knowledge and beliefs they already agree upon, as opposed to forcing ideas upon them (Guthman 2008b:390). I will demonstrate in this chapter, though, the serious ways in which whiteness shapes alternative food practices, including youth education efforts, and spaces, such as community gardens. I argue that the ignorance of the important and persisting histories surrounding gardening and race that is associated with colorblindness limits the effectiveness and sustainability of community gardening programs, as well as environmental, food, and social justice movements as a whole.

“Whitened” Discourses

As we saw in Chapter 3, many gardening programs have similar goals and missions. Among the most recurring was the desire to improve access to healthy foods through a variety of forms- farmer’s markets, produce distribution, accessible pricing-, paired with educational programs to familiarize people with the foods they were buying and with the importance of eating fresh, healthy, locally grown foods. Most gardens seek
to establish strong roots within the community, developing a sustainable, community-driven food source, green space, and place for education.

Such programs fall under the research umbrella of Julie Guthman, currently an associate professor in the Department of Community Studies at the University of California Santa Cruz. Her research, and many of the classes she offers, is centered on social movements that work to change ways of food production, distribution, and consumption, looking specifically at the ways in which race influences alternative food practices.

Guthman interviewed students who wanted to take one of her offered courses, Agriculture, Food, and Social Justice. When asked why they wanted to take this class, her students gave reasons that are reflective of the goals and values of many of the garden leaders I interviewed. Guthman reports, “Ideas that routinely emerge include… the value of real, organic food, putting one’s hands in the soil, and knowing where one’s food comes from by shopping at local and alternative venues. Crucially, the desire to pass these values to others is a central aspect of their social change ambitions” (2008:438). Most people who get involved with the alternative food movement share similar ways of talking about the value of community gardening and related practices.

These ways of talking about the alternative food movement, however, often reflect the privilege of whiteness, without actually acknowledging that whiteness is present or is a privilege. Guthman explains, “The alternative movement has been animated by a set of discourses that derive from whitened cultural histories, which, in turn, have inflected the spaces of alternative food provision” (Guthman 2008:434). Within these “whitened cultural histories,” Guthman defines three discourses that are marked by the privilege of whiteness: (1) the aesthetic of organic, natural food, (2) the
value of ‘getting your hands dirty’ or ‘putting your hands in the soil’, and (3) the very notion of alternatives (2008:435).

As will become evident, these discourses project white values onto food security and community gardening efforts, which ultimately undermines program efforts to engage and empower community members. I do not mean to suggest that there aren’t African Americans or Latinos or other non-white groups involved and invested in alternative and just food practices; “the desire for good and sufficient food… is not white” (Slocum 2008:521). I merely want to point out that in a movement predominately led by white individuals with the intention of benefitting predominately African American and Latino communities there exists unacknowledged influences of whiteness that can limit the effectiveness of gardening programs as part of larger food justice efforts.

Organic, Natural Food

The alternative food movement initially began to appeal to wealthier buyers. Organic, natural foods were and in many cases still are marketed as specialized products, separated into more expensive sections of the grocery store, or by themselves in natural food stores. These have become “white” spaces, as they have been most frequented by white people (Guthman 2008:431).

More recently, the alternative food movement has expanded to try to create reliable access to healthy, natural foods for people who have been limited to unhealthy, processed foods due to the lack of access to grocery stores and other sources of fresh produce.

Operating under the assumption that knowledge, access, and cost are the primary barriers to more healthful eating, much of the on-the-ground work is focused on donating, selling (at below market prices), or growing fresh fruits and vegetables
in so-called food deserts and educating residents to the quality of locally grown, seasonal, and organic food. (Guthman 2008:432)

These ideals about organic, natural foods, though, have been spread to non-white communities without a question of what food practices these communities used to have - before their options were limited through supermarket redlining and other structural barriers. Slocum elucidates, “Because whiteness, as the norm, is largely invisible, none of this appears obvious or problematic” (2010:314). It is just being marketed as “good, healthy food” (314), yet in actuality it is perpetuating the dominant, white understanding of what healthy food is. The aesthetic of organic, natural food, then, is partially (and arguably unintentionally) “the effect of white desire to enroll black people in a particular set of food practices” (Guthman 2008:433).

One garden leader I interviewed declared, “Of course everyone is going to eat healthy food if they could, and if it were available and there and affordable, like who wouldn’t?” (Interview 10/11). The question is: how do healthy foods map onto different groups’ cultural eating practices? For many groups, understandings of food preparation and consumption are central to the development and maintenance of their racialized identities and group or cultural belongings. This includes how food are grown, picked, stored, cooked, eaten, and shared (Slocum 2010). We must be careful not to essentialize different cultures of groups of people, though, or assume cultural relevancy to be static. Furthermore, we must recognize that whether they are historical or current, all groups had and/or have important and sustainable eating practices. Confronting a claim that some groups lack healthy eating traditions, one advocate responded:

Not only is it not true [that some ethnic groups don’t have any ‘culturally appropriate foods that are healthy’], but [it does not include] the context of 1) how unhealthy foods were introduced to these communities, when and why- mainly due to colonialism, or indigenous farming practices/foods stripped away by
traumatic imperialist/industrialist movements; and 2) how violently changing a culture from a land-based self-sustainable model to corporate dependency through force and economics is an undertone that is conveniently omitted, yet it is encouraged that African American and Latino communities embrace a land-based self-sustainable model as if it were never a pre-existing reality.

(Slocum 2006:333-334)

Recognizing these truths, Guthman suggests, “More could be done to understand how neighborhood residents react to such [food access] projects, yet in ways that do not damn one group’s eating practices nor evangelize about another’s” (2008:433). With the end goal of providing healthy, culturally appropriate foods, the advocates of the alternative food movement must honor and support all food histories, rather than assume the dominant food practices of organic and natural food will resonate with everyone.

“Putting your Hands in the Soil”

The second discourse Guthman identifies is the common language and assumed value of “putting your hands in the soil” or “getting your hands dirty” (2008:435). One garden leader described:

The goal is to get these kids who live in a very urban environment exposed to things that they’re definitely not seeing at home and probably otherwise wouldn’t be aware of, just getting them in, giving them a sense of what it is to be in nature and allowing them to develop connections with that. And hopefully an appreciation of being outside and getting you hands dirty and trying produce.

(Interview 12/18)

This rhetoric assumes a universal desire to be with and tend the land. This work is closely linked with healing and empowerment, perceived to be a relaxing and rejuvenating activity. This discourse, then, is driven by the understanding that getting into the dirt will not only reconnect people with the earth, but more specifically it will connect them to where their food is coming from, both of which are assumed to be positive things for everyone (Guthman 2008).
These assumptions, however, come from a privileged place of whiteness and middle and upper class positions, from groups of people who, for the most part, have never been forced to work the land for a living. It entirely disregards histories of slavery and other forms of forced labor associated with African American and Latino communities, also overlooking the role white people have played in this history, often as white land owners with non-white workers. Furthermore, this discourse represents a romanticized vision of nature- the ideas that it is a site of relaxation and rejuvenation.

Guthman shares some data from one of her student’s thesis projects: “In talking to the youth later, she learned that they resented the expectation to work not only for free, but for white farmers” (2008:440). Though it comes from a place of good intentions, this discourse of “getting your hands dirty” also comes from a place of white privilege, serving to alienate community members and reinforce historical injustices.

**Romanticizing Alternatives**

The very idea of alternatives is identified as the third discourse of the “whitened cultural histories” that dominate the alternative food movement. As the missions of the various gardening programs have suggested, “Advocates of alternative food institutions place a heavy emphasis on educating people to the provenance of their food and encouraging the development of localized food systems” (Guthman 2008:431). Most food justice advocates focus on community gardens, farmer’s markets, and community co-operative stores as the main means of alleviating food insecurity.

This, however, makes the assumption that all communities want and can sustain local control of their food system; that they don’t want to branch out or engage in traditional, large-scale methods of food access. Guthman declares:
In conversations with food scholars and activists around the country working on various community food security projects, I have corroborated the claim that African American residents of food deserts seem to want conventional grocery stores… they do indeed want the opportunity of shopping with anonymity, convenience, and normality at conventional supermarkets, despite what advocates of alternative food might want for them. (2008:443)

These assumptions put more, and possibly unwanted, responsibility for food production on community members who have been pushed aside by supermarket chains who consider it too risky to invest in low-income areas (redlining).

Aside from residents maybe not wanting to or not being able to contribute time to growing their own food due to other commitments, community gardens are unable to grow everything people want and need (such as many grains, meats, dairy, etc.), nor everything that is culturally appropriate (since growing climates differ). Describing one of her student’s theses, Guthman explained, “she concluded that the insistence on alternatives may well reinforce a sense of exclusion and stigmatization- as if residents of food deserts are not even deserving of what others take for granted: a Safeway” (2008:441).

Again, this romanticization of localized production has good intentions, but also reflects white privilege. We live in a country owned and operated by white people, for whom food access in traditional stores has almost always been normal. For groups with different histories, access to traditional stores has not always been, and currently is not, reliable. For groups who once had no choice but to grow the food they were to eat, this access represents a freedom- being able to go into a grocery store and shop with choice, in convenience (Stevenson 2013).

White leaders of the alternative food practice cannot simply impose their images of a utopian world onto communities they intend to help. Though I am not arguing
against the value of local production (when it is supported by community members), I am arguing against the idea that these local, alternative approaches are a holistic response to food insecurity. The food movement must also advocate for more traditional, though still responsible, means of food access, such as working to get grocery stores in food insecure communities. There needs to be a balance between both means, so that community members can have a choice as to where and how they get their food, rather than be forced to subscribe to the values and vision of garden organizers who come from outside of their communities.

Putting the Beliefs into Practice

In addition to the content of these discourses being reflective of whitened histories and ideals, Guthman argues that they are implemented with a “missionary zeal,” (2008:436), under the pretense of white leaders, with all of their resources and skills, going in to “fix” what’s wrong with food access in certain communities. Throughout the alternative food movement, there is a somewhat paternalistic rhetoric of, “If only people knew where their food came from, they would change their eating habits,” suggesting that the people making this statement know how everyone should be eating and feel entitled to pass on that knowledge (2008). Guthman explains,

When pushed, the subjects of this rhetoric argue that such an unveiling of the American food supply would necessarily trigger a desire for local, organic food and people would be willing to pay for it. Then, so the logic goes, the food system would be magically transformed into one that is ecologically and socially just. (Guthman 2008b:387)

Again, this not only overlooks the racial and historical implications of gardening and environmental justice, but it also promotes white privilege and universalism. If garden leaders fall into Guthman’s three main whitened discourses, they may be promoting a limited set of cultural values with which residents don’t connect.
One garden educator explained, “Since many folks in urban areas have become so accustomed to eating mostly processed foods, I believe that it’s critical to provide the educational link bank to the source of where food comes” (Follow-up interview, 3/5). As has already been suggested, though, this “source of where food comes from” needs to be respectful of different groups’ food histories. Currently, most low-income African American communities are structurally barred from obtaining much else besides heavily processed foods (Slocum 2010, Guthman 2008), but this doesn’t mean that there don’t exist healthy historical eating practices for these groups (Stevenson 2013). The expensive organic, natural food that has come to be associated with healthy eating is not the only way for healthy eating.

Again, I want to reiterate that it is just and important for these leaders to be going in and fighting against the environmental racism and structural injustices, such as the practice of grocery store redlining. I do believe that local food access and knowledge of where your food is coming from is important and powerful, as long as it is supported by an interest within the community and is conducted in a responsive manner. It cannot just be imposed on them by outside program leaders, nor used as the only response to food insecurity (Poppendieck 1998). I do want to point out how the ways in which alternative food practices are generally presented (a discourse I am a part of) have a major impact on who buys into the practices and whose interests they really serve.

For this reason, it is essential to critically look at how these practices are being promoted, and what assumptions they are making. Otherwise, “The intention to do good on behalf of those deemed other has the markings of colonial projects, in that it seeks to improve the other while eliding the historical developments that produced these material and cultural distinctions in the first place” (Guthman 2008:436). Though simply
recognizing and talking about these historical developments is not enough, it is a first step towards shifting alternative food practices from being dominated by white assumptions, disrespecting or alienating many non-white populations, to encompassing, engaging, and empowering multiple voices, interests, and cultural food histories.

In spite of all of this criticism of these “whitened” discourses and the ways in which they are implemented, I would also like to say that I think these are okay discourses to believe, to some extent. I personally am enamored by the idea of “getting my hands dirty” and playing a major role in growing the food I put into my own body, pushing back against the commodification and disconnect of our country’s current food system. I also, however, am coming from an upper middle-class background, where, in recent generations, my family has never struggled to access food, nor been forced to work the land for our own food or food for others.

I, along with many others, also believe in the healing and relaxing powers of being in a garden. One garden leader told me a story of a woman who walked by the farm every day for a span of a few months. She wasn’t a resident of the neighborhood around the farm, but she was there to take care of her brother, who was recovering from major surgery. One day, the woman decided to stop into the farm to see what was going on, and if there was any way she could get involved. She ended up becoming a regular volunteer at the farm for those few months. Towards the end of her time with her brother, the woman thanked the farm leaders, who didn’t know she didn’t live in the neighborhood, for allowing her to join them. She explained that she had continued to go back to the farm and valued her time there so much because being and working on the farm helped her deal with the emotional stress of having to deal with her brother; it gave her some time to do something restorative for herself (Interview 11/19).
What is essential in this and similar stories is that the individuals have the agency to choose whether or not they want to be working with the land, helping to grow their own food or contribute to a neighborhood beautification project. Alternative food advocates can’t blindly project their own beliefs onto others; they need to learn how to hold themselves accountable to the people they care about, the people they are striving to help and support. For white leaders, Guthman explains that we need to be adamant that we constantly “reflect on [our] own subject positions as whites telling others what to eat” (2008:436). As Cabbil argues, we need to shift away from engaging in projects that provide for communities to efforts that collaborate and share with communities (2010).

Malik Yakini of the DBCFSN echoes this idea: “A food movement that fairly represents African Americans and other people of color must honor and lift up our stories, cultural perspectives, and lessons learned” (2013). In order to fulfill the fundamental goals of the environmental and food justice movements- to provide everyone with access to healthy, safe environments with reliable, healthy, and culturally relevant foods- we need to challenge the alternative food movement to push past the “whitened cultural histories” Guthman identifies.

In this effort, it is imperative that we don’t allow ourselves to erase the differences between groups of people, for it is within these differences that we find strength, innovation, and meaning. Colorblindness fools people into believing they are being not-racist (Slocum 2006). Just being not-racist, though, is insufficient. Jensen writes:

It is possible to not be racist (in the individual sense of not perpetrating overtly racist acts) and yet at the same time fail to be antiracist (in the political sense of resisting a racist system). Being not-racist is not enough. To be a fully moral person, one must find a way of being anti-racist as well. Because white people
benefit from living in a white supremacist society, there is an added obligation for us to struggle against the injustice of that system. (2005:80)

A major question, then, is “How does anti-racism happen through food and what does it mean in places with different racial histories and geographies?” (Slocum 2010:320). With all of the negative implications of the inherently whitened discourses of alternative food practices, it might seem easy to assume that white people should just not even try to be involved in the movement. I don’t think this is the correct reaction, though; there are ways of positive and respectful collaboration and sharing between different groups.

Jensen provides all white people with a starting point for this anti-racist work as he explains:

Those of us who are white and want to be part of movements to change these systems and structures of power have to rein in our instincts to feel self-righteous and understand that in every human interaction there is the potential for connection and transcendence. We have to find the space between the surface triumphalism of our times proclaimed by politicians and pundits, and the deeper cynicism that many ordinary people feel. We have to get angry, stay angry, but not let that anger swallow us. We have to let our passion for justice fuel our work but also make sure it doesn’t lead us to overlook our own flaws and failures. (2005:65)

White people cannot become overwhelmed by their positions of privilege, nor can we continue to exist complacent with the way our society is organized.

With Jensen’s advice in mind, how do we work towards a more effective and sustainable set of alternative food practices? How can we ensure that the solutions these practices address resonate with the communities they are intended to support? What steps can be taken to shift to more diverse leadership and participation? What role do youth education programs play in the sustainability and relevancy of community gardens and the alternative foods movement as a whole? In Chapter 6, I focus on beginning to address these questions.
Chapter 6
Positive Relationships for Productive Change

I firmly believe that community gardens and other alternative food practices can progress to realize their ultimate goals of environmental, food, and social justice. In this chapter, I highlight the ways in which this can begin to happen, with an emphasis on how positive and collaborative relationships can enable productive change. I will first challenge the static binary of “insiders” and “outsiders” to a community, arguing that this discourse of division limits the potential for thoughtful and positive collaboration across groups. I then introduce John Brown Childs’ idea of transcommunality, a vision for how divergent groups can interact constructively. I explore the role of anti-racist work in progressing towards such a vision. Finally, I consider the existing ways in which some community gardening programs are working towards diversifying who is shaping and leading the alternative foods movement, namely through adult garden managing programs and youth education.

Challenging the Discourse of Division

Throughout this whole discussion of alternative food practices—who is running them, who is supposed to benefit from them, whose values they are promoting—there is an underlying discourse of division. There is a clear dichotomy between “insiders” and “outsiders” to communities, different levels of food access, and certain food practices. As has been reiterated, this separation is marked most noticeably by geography and race.

This dichotomy, marking supposedly clear separations between groups of people, makes it easy to “otherize” groups, or understand them to be irreparably different from your own group. This comes through in the discourse of “if only they knew where their
food came from…” which seems to overlook the structural barriers preventing some groups from eating healthier foods, instead suggesting that the eating habits of these groups are inherently inferior to those enacting the discourse.

However, the desire for stable access to healthy, appropriate foods is not inherently white (Slocum 2007). This is clear in the presence of groups like the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, which is fighting for their own rights of food access in a way that is relevant to their community. Slocum explains, “While the ideals of healthy food, people, and land are not intrinsically white, the objectives, tendencies, strategies, the emphases and absences and the things overlooked in community food (i.e. alternative food practices) make them so” (2007:526). Careful not to otherize the practices of communities as lesser than their own, garden leaders need to work to honor the histories and values of people who come from all different places.

Even more, it is essential that we push against this dichotomy of “insiders” and “outsiders.” This separation is extremely limiting; it suggests that productive and collaborative relationships can never exist. On the contrary, there can be “hopeful interactions across difference” (Slocum 2007:529). We need to break down the binary of “inside” and “outside” in order to make exchange possible.

Beyond being limiting, this binary system is often inaccurate. It creates a static way of looking at communities, enabling people to make generalizations based on stereotypes about the way “certain groups of people” are, overlooking any variation that may exist within groups or communities. People who live within the same community generally have some common experiences and understandings, but they are not entirely universal. People have multiple positionalities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, and interests, and experiences, to name just a few, that connect them to different groups.
All of this variation is erased under a binary system, whittling people down to singular, overgeneralized labels. This is dangerous for all groups of people. White alternative food advocates may falsely assume that all African American residents they serve have the same needs, which will limit the effectiveness of and community engagement in their program. Along a similar line, generalizations can dangerously be made about white people involved in alternative food, assuming they are all blindly promoting their own ideals on people. Although this discussion of “whitened cultural histories” has indicated that whiteness is a limiting factor in the inclusivity and sustainability of alternative food practices, “something white” does not always have to equate to “something negative” (Slocum 2007:521). Slocum argues that whiteness has radical potential; it can both exclude difference, such as through exclusionary discourses and values, or it can embrace difference. There are a lot of white people thinking about and doing good anti-racist work, striving to help create a more just and collaborative world. This type of work could be considered one of the first steps towards what John Brown Childs, a Professor of Sociology at the University of California Santa Cruz, terms transcommunality.

Transcommunality: A True Collaboration, but with some limitations

Transcommunality is Childs’ vision for how groups and communities can engage with each other, maintaining their differences while also respecting those of others. The vision challenges the “insider/outside” dichotomy, pushing against the “current perceptions of compartmentalized diversity in which there is no constructive contact among different peoples” (Childs 2007). Childs is driven by the belief that groups can
work together across all kinds of difference to make positive social changes. He further explains:

By transcommunality I mean the constructive and developmental interaction occurring among distinct autonomy-oriented communities and organizations, each with its own particular history, outlook, and agenda. This interaction, developed through interpersonal relations of people engaged in common tasks, is producing working groups of activists whose roots are in communities and organizations, but who also form bridges among diverse peoples as they address substantial, albeit often varied corrosive dilemmas. (Childs 2003:10)

Transcommunality supports activists who work collaboratively across lines of difference, be it race, positionality, gender, or interests.

These positive interactions involve “an overall opening up to share understandings” (Childs 2007). Childs explains, “Transcommunality emphasizes a general ethics of respect in which mutual recognition and acceptance of diverse, divergent, and sometimes opposed perspectives occurs among dynamically interacting partners who themselves are transformed through their mutual contacts” (2007). These transformations do not mean assimilation to the dominant way of thinking about and interacting with the world (within alternative food practices: the whitened discourses and assumptions), rather they are a reciprocal development that gives space to and respects all of the groups that participate (2007).

I bring up Childs’ vision not to suggest it as a model for alternative food leaders and advocates, but rather to highlight the elements of transcommunality that could contribute to making alternative food practices more relevant, effective, and sustainable for the communities in which they exist. This vision of transcommunality is based around the value of interpersonal relations; people come together with a shared political action, collaboratively working to address common problems. These relationships are rooted in open communication and constructive disputing; differences and disagreements are
viewed as resources rather than insurmountable obstacles. A final tenet of transcommunality is that, through these reciprocal relationships, all participants are open to personal transformation; they are responsive to their surroundings and willing to learn and grow with and from others (Childs 2003).

If alternative food advocates were to apply these characteristics of transcommunality to their practices, it is likely that these practices would better reflect the values and needs of those they serve. They would grow from a place of authentic collaboration, challenging the discourses of division as well as the domination of whitened cultural histories and visions currently driving the alternative food movement.

Within the context of the Bennett Garden, it is true that, to some extent, even though EJ and the youth who are involved in the garden come from difference backgrounds and experiences, we create among us a common culture and common experience, hopefully working towards common understandings. For example, we have a set of garden goals, including things like give new things a chance, use words to solve problems, be welcoming to everyone, and treat people, plants, and garden tools with respect. We collectively came up with these goals early in 2010; EJ members worked in small groups with youth from the Bennett to identify the values, attitudes, and behaviors they wanted as the norm in the garden. We shared and voted on the items on this list, compiling a collaborative vision of the garden space and how we would interact with it. Though they aren’t always followed, these goals are meant to represent cooperatively defined values all participants want to embody in the garden. These goals may not be reflective of goals that exist in other contexts of which all of the people in the garden are a part of, but they help to define the garden community.
It is possible to work with groups of people through differences to establish a unique community, but only to a certain extent. Childs’ idea of transcommunality has a lot of positive potential, but it is still an idealized vision. Molly talked about some of the relationships she was able to develop with the youth she worked with on a farm in Detroit. She lived in their neighborhood around the farm, and she spent a considerable amount of time with them outside of structured gardening and work hours going on bike rides, walks by the river, and cooking. She reflects:

I was able to connect with [the youth] and they saw me as a mentor in their life, I think, but I still wasn’t, it still felt like there was a big gap between my background and my own lived experience and their lived experience. And I could have overcome that maybe by staying there longer and just having more exposure to them, but there’s a lot that just comes from having grown up in a community that you just can’t get from just moving there, no matter how much you try to embed yourself. (Interview 12/5)

There is a limit to the amount you can understand about people’s backgrounds just by working with them and not actually sharing in the experiences with them.

Another difficulty with actualizing this idea of transcommunality is the central idea that the relationship building and change making will be entirely collaborative. All of the garden leaders I spoke with have extremely good intentions with the work they do, yet many of them, myself included, also still fall into (possibly unknowingly) promoting their own assumptions that reflect whitened discourses and histories. In practice, then, how do we ensure that the development of relationships and practices is truly reciprocal? How do we work to negotiate the differences across race, place, background, and interest, and also how to respect and use that difference fairly and productively?

One Step Further: Accountability and Anti-racism

In order to begin to address these questions, white garden leaders, and more generally anyone advocating for alternative foods, need to question: How are we being
held accountable to the people we are working for, and how do we shift this to a collaborative working with? We’ve already heard from Lila Cabbil, who explains how service alone (the act of providing for) won’t make lasting change; this practice perpetuates existing structures of dependence. Rather, food justice advocates must act as allies for the people who are being mistreated by the current food system and social hierarchy. Together, they must work towards changing the way the system works (Cabbil 2010).

We need to use white privilege to enact change, not just to provide help in the vein of handouts, and definitely not to perpetuate white supremacy (Cushing et al. 2010). Accountability is an act of pushing against the invisibility and normalcy of whiteness. Accountability is when you are willing to step back to let the people you are working with contribute the skills, resources, and knowledge they have, rather than impose on them your own beliefs. According to one social activist, “Accountability means recognizing that this work is about supporting folks and their projects in a way that is not about me and my involvement, but is about the people directly affected and the way they wish to express their needs and greatest potential” (Cushing et al. 2010:21).

Thus, the process of holding yourself accountable may not be comfortable. White people are benefiting from the system of white supremacy; challenging it will inevitably shift their positions in society. Advocates of racial and social justice need to question, “What [am I] willing to give up? How uncomfortable [am I] willing to be? What [am I] willing to risk?” (Cushing et al. 2010:5). To reiterate, anti-racist work is not about the white people who do it: “Participating in solidarity work implies that I am not from the community in which I am working, that I have skills or privilege to offer, and that I’m
constantly and consciously working towards developing others’ leadership and access to resources” (Cushing et al. 2010:20-21).

So what exactly can this practice of accountability and anti-racist work do? Can it change the face of the alternative food movement to more fully incorporate the voices, beliefs, and needs of the people who the practices are most intended to benefit? In the following section, I briefly consider reasons why white people are the predominant leaders of alternative food practices. I then explore how both adult garden manager programs and youth education programs in community gardens are working to developing new leaders in the movement. Are these the steps along the way to actualizing a vision along the lines of Childs’ idea of transcommunality?

**Growing New Leaders: Steps towards Diversity and Collaboration**

For the most part, the people who are founders and/or leaders in community gardens are the people who have access to the most resources- money, knowledge, skills, time, and networks of support. Molly explains, “It’s about who has access to the organizational resources or grant funding, and so the type of people who are getting that kind of foundational grant support are mostly white people” (Interview 12/5). What this means, though, is that relationships of dependency, in which white people have money and skills to enact project to help “people in need,” is perpetuated.

There needs to be a shift in access to these kinds of resources, which would consequently enable a shift in who is designing and running these programs. Molly reflects on her role within this shift:

I still think that there’s a lot of value in the training that I have and what I’m bringing to the job, in terms of my understanding of the food system and my ability to do curriculum writing and organization, and so having someone like me
in that role is important. I think what we’re seeing is that there’s somewhat of a leadership gap and people of color haven’t gotten access to those level of education that people like us have, or that a lot of white people have, so they’re not ready to take on those leadership roles. So I’m perfectly happy for people to get to that level, and I see my work as really supporting a lot of our kids to see that they can become, you know, achieve, that they can work to close that gap, I think.

(Interview 12/5)

This section will look at two ways we can work towards filling this leadership gap and work towards making the alternative food movement more collaboratively designed and run: hiring adult garden managers from the community and engaging in youth education and internship programs.

Adult Garden Managers

The effort to build leaders of adults, in most cases, is not from scratch. Miss Louise came to the Bennett Garden already with farming experience and interests in her history, for instance. Molly explains, “A lot of what we’re seeing is people who have a lot of gardening experience and they actually know as much as or more than any of our farmer’s do about growing things” (Interview 12/5).

A lot of residents around developing gardening projects were part of the alternative food movement before it became recognized as a national movement, and before it became a popular field to pursue for environmentally minded people, often from more privileged backgrounds. Molly explains, “There’s lots of people who have tremendous amounts of knowledge that can contribute and already have contributed to the urban agriculture movement; they were part of it before the new movement started” (Interview 12/5). So, the idea of hiring adult garden managers to help manage and maintain community gardens is a way of supporting and giving space for these existing skills as well as providing opportunities to grow new skills.
Before coming to Real Food Farms, Molly worked as a youth educator for an urban farm in Detroit, Michigan. She explained to me that the farm has recently become very conscious of engaging in anti-racist work, one element of this being an attempt to diversify who was involved in facilitating farming programs:

They started a program when they hired people, that they were able to pay people in an internship capacity from our neighborhood, to be trained on the farm and then hopefully get placed at different farming or food-based organizations in the city. Because we realized people weren’t just going to come volunteer their time; that’s an issue of privilege… by offering these paid opportunities, we got a lot more interest and we started engaging people in a lot more meaningful way, and so now we’re building leaders from within our community, and that’s been really important. (Interview 12/5)

This is an attempt to break down some of the inherent power imbalances in play when people with access to resources develop programs to provide for people who don’t have access to those resources. It addresses some of the barriers that may prevent adults from getting involved in gardens, such as time and money.

Following in these footsteps, Swarthmore EJ is working with the CHA to establish a garden managers program, which will employ three to five Chester residents to help maintain the garden. They will be involved with deciding what to plant, how to distribute produce, and how to reach out to more community members. In addition to working with EJ, they will work with a Master Gardener (a volunteer who has been trained to advise and educate the public on gardening) who grew up and lives in Chester.

These plans follow through on some of the goals initial EJ members had for the garden when they first started it. EJ “did not want to be perceived as experts or owners of [the] garden” (Interview 2/1a). For that reason, as I already mentioned, they wanted to have some sort of exit plan in place so that residents would have a sense of ownership and the garden could be sustainable from within the community. Though this plan is only
beginning to be realized nearly four years later, it is a positive and essential step in breaking down current systems of dependency in which people with more resources (often white people) can go in to “do good” in communities with fewer resources. The hiring of garden managers moves towards truly enabling and empowering residents to take lead of the garden to organize it in a way that makes sense to them and their communities.

Youth Education Programs: More than just Academics

Gardens are extremely rich places for learning. I reviewed in Chapter 2 the multitude of academic subjects and themes that can be integrated into gardens, ranging from plant biology to nutrition, language arts to social sciences, and environmental values (Allen 2008, Blair 2009, Graham 2005, Ozer 2007). These academic benefits are part of the driving force behind youth education programs in gardens, regardless of whether they are directly connected to schools or act independently.

But, more than just academics, gardens can also be a place for socialization, community building, and empowerment. It is possible, then, for youth education programs in community gardens to enact the central tenets of Childs’ vision of transcommunality, developing a true model of collaboration between groups of difference. As will become clear, it is through education that empowerment happens, as long as those who are teaching are critical of their positionality. It is also through education that the alternative food movement can become more community-driven and sustainable.

Strengthening Food Access Efforts through Education

Education is understood to be a necessary element of food access. Molly from Real Food Farm explains:
We like to talk about food access as depending on ‘price,’ ‘proximity,’ and ‘familiarity.’ Healthy food has to be affordable in order to be accessible. Healthy food has to be physically accessible to your neighborhood in order for you to choose to buy it/eat it. Healthy food also has to be familiar for you to take the steps to buy it, prepare it, and eat it. (Follow-up interview 2/20)

Just making food physically and financially obtainable is not sufficient; without education, it is possible that people won’t want to or know how to cook and eat some foods they are given. Another garden leader clarifies, “Engaging both adults and youth in education programs allows people to learn about new eating habits and gain confidence and familiarity with preparing produce” (Follow-up interview 3/1). With this confidence and familiarity, people are thus able to make more informed decisions about their food.

Some gardens choose to focus heavily on youth education in hopes they will be able to encourage positive health values from early on. Elizabeth from Common Good City Farms explains:

We specifically focus on youth education, because by engaging kids at a young age and getting them connected to food and where it comes from early on, we hope to form healthy bonds that will influence future habits and inspire more people to continue gardening and growing food. (Follow-up interview 3/1)

There are a number of studies that report that kids who are involved in growing and cooking their own food are much more likely than children without this exposure to try and like fruits and vegetables (Blair 2009, Graham 2005, Subramanian 2003).

It is essential, though, to return to the conversations about the assumptions and limitations garden leaders might bring to their practices, especially as they relate to facilitating education efforts. As I will discuss more in the following two sections, leaders need to be self-critical of where they’re coming from and be sure to create space for the voices of those they are teaching. Nutrition education especially must be approached in a way so that it promotes eating practices that are scientifically understood to support well-
being (such as eating a balanced diet of whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, and dairy/meat products) while being careful not to demonize or evangelize any one way of eating (Guthman 2008). Through critical pedagogy, it is possible for youth education to be a means of developing new leaders in the alternative food movement.

**Development through Education: Growing New Leaders**

Included in the goals and missions of most community gardening programs is the intention to encourage the evolution of youth participants in programs to youth leaders in the alternative food movement. Elizabeth states, “It’s also a question of inclusiveness. By educating people in the community you’re serving, as opposed to just handing out produce, people feel a greater sense of ownership and are getting much more out of the transaction” (Follow-up interview 3/1). This sense of ownership and connection would enable youth to become advocates in their communities:

So our trick is going to be, with continuing education on the farm, while [the teen interns] have their T4G hats on, and they know what they’re supposed to do, what they’re supposed to eat, the trick is that once they walk out of here is to keep that hat on and now become advocates in their community, and now become that community leader or that leader in their school to say, ‘Hey, this is what I do,’ or take what they learn and out it into their daily lives. (Interview 11/18)

Not only are the education programs beneficial for youth individually, but they are driven by the pretense that this individual benefit will encourage youth to promote more widespread changes in their neighborhoods.

The youth programs that happen in gardens, then, are not just about academic learning. Reflecting on the youth education programs offered at Real Food Farms, Molly says, “I think of it more as a youth empowerment program, so empowering information and techniques to make different choices, choices that support the world that you want to see and thinking through those different choices” (Interview 12/5). These programs, then,
can be a means of supporting youth to express their own histories, experiences, values, and interests while being challenged to see the world in a way that is appealing to them and beginning to work towards this vision.

Increased Collaboration, Stepping towards the Vision of Transcommunality

It is through this sharing of skills, knowledge, interests, and hopes and the work of supporting the growth of new leaders of the alternative food movement that the true collaboration of Childs’ vision of transcommunality begins to seem possible. This is a process that takes a lot of time, but ultimately works towards the empowerment of individuals and communities and thus the relevancy and sustainability of alternative food practices.

Many of the garden leaders I interviewed oversee youth education and internship programs. One story, however, from Teens 4 Good stood out to me. Jamie, the director, explained a summer assignment all of the teen interns had to do this past summer, “We had a business innovation challenge where each farm had to come up with a product or service, so they presented their budget to me to get seed money, and then they had a marketing plan and a business plan to come up with” (Interview 11/18). Groups of teens designed plans for and created products ranging from salsa to vegetable chips to tea to a composting service. The project created countless learning opportunities for the youth:

What they did is they put together these presentations and at the end, so they’re learning all these skills to put together, you know, everything from putting together a PowerPoint to what is a budget, you know, what does she want for a business plan? How are you going to sell it? How are you going to market it? Who is your clientele? (Interview 11/18)

The idea is that the winning product or service gets taken from paper to production for the following season. This past summer, the tea company won, so they produced and packaged their tea to sell at the local farmer’s markets.
Not only does this project help students develop and practice all of the skills Jamie mentioned, but also it creates a window for them to have more decision-making power regarding what developments happen on the farm. With the support of the farm leaders, the teens are designing and implementing their own products or services to share with the community. This empowers them as entrepreneurs, enables them to develop relationships with people who live around the farm, and supports them in becoming people who can make a difference in their communities.

In order to make these types of activities truly collaborative, rather than driven by the interests of the garden leaders, leaders must engage in self-assessment. They need to make sure they are not blindly projecting their own interests and values onto communities they are working with. Rather than assuming all residents are interested in local food production, for instance, leaders should also talk about and advocate for ways of achieving food security and justice other than through community gardens. They need to engage in conversations with residents to see what interests and goals are present, and figure out the ways in which they can productively help the realization of these goals.

When Molly talked about how she sees her work as helping to develop the next generation of leaders, she qualified it by explaining:

So it’s somewhat about knowing where my strengths are and then knowing where to step back and ask the kids, “So what’s your experience with this?” rather than dictating “So here’s what I think about this.” And so trying to use their lived experience and jumping off from there and trying to be less presumptuous about what I assume their experience is. (Interview 12/5)

An effective and collaborative gardening program honors all of the different strengths and priorities people might be bringing in.

This is an essential element of anti-racist work. White people, many of whom are accustomed to being in a position of power or not having their beliefs challenged because...
they are the mainstream and the norm, need to forgo assumptions of universalism. We need to recognize and address the fact that we play the driving role in maintaining social inequality in our country. If we are not actively working against racism and other forms of oppression, we are perpetuating it (Jensen 2005).

An important step in this anti-racism and anti-oppression work is recognizing that no individual has all of the answers, and especially not all of the right answers for all communities. As Molly suggested in her reflection on her work with the neighborhood youth, white leaders and advocates need to admit that they don’t know everything in order “to open up the space that might allow others to define the spaces and projects that will help spurn the transformation to a more just and ecological way of providing food” (Guthman 2008b:395). It is only after this stepping back that meaningful collaboration can begin to take place.

Through constant self-assessment and reflection, it is possible for leaders who are initially positioned as outsiders to a community, by geography, race, or a number of other differentiating factors, to act productively and collaboratively with residents. Still, though, their positionality does influence who participates in the garden and how beneficial it really is for the community. It is essential for the relevancy and sustainability of alternative food practices to have a more diverse set of leaders, especially leaders who arise from within the community where work is being done. I do think it is possible for this ownership and empowerment of residents to happen retroactively.

Youth education programs in gardens are a step towards this goal. Molly, as a garden educator, understands the role she plays in this process, explaining, “So yeah, it’s building people, I think supporting people to take on those roles, and that takes a while” (Interview 12/5). It takes a while, but it is possible and necessary to engage in real, active
work at breaking down the racialized structures of provision and dependency, of whose values and ideas get prioritized, and towards a just and collaborative future, a version of Childs’ vision of transcommunality.
Conclusion

I set off on this topic of exploring the implications of the race and positionality of advocates in the alternative food movement in an effort to address my own discomforts about my role as a white woman from a suburban upbringing currently involved in and interested in continuing to work in and around the environmental and food justice movements. Rather than finishing this project with concrete answers, though, I am faced with more, but different, questions.

It is clear that the race and positionality of advocates in the alternative food movement implicates the work they do and the spaces they create—whether it’s a community garden or a farmer’s market. They aim to be inclusive and representative, but these spaces are colored white. Despite the best intentions of their leaders, alternative food practices, as they are currently organized with predominately white leaders working in mostly African American and Latino communities, threaten to reproduce existing systems of dependence and continue to privilege white values and visions. In order to honestly and fully realize the goals of the environmental and food justice movements—to provide all people with safe and healthy living, working, and playing spaces, with reliable access to healthy, affordable, and culturally relevant food—there needs to be a major shift in who is running and shaping alternative food efforts.

Beyond recognizing the assumptions, biases, and limitations white people carry with them to this movement, what does active and productive self-assessment look like? What steps can white people take to use the strengths and resources we do have to help support this development of a more representative set of leaders? How can we constructively push this conversation past binaries to honor the multiple differences—and similarities, strengths, interests, and needs—people carry with them? Is a collaboration
along the lines of Childs’ vision of transcommunality a possibility; can we productively cross lines of difference to work together as a society towards the common goal of justice across the board?

As I move out into the working world and continue to engage in the environmental justice and alternative food movements, I honestly don’t know if, right now, I am doing more harm than good. I am hopeful that there do exist ways for groups of people from different backgrounds to positively and meaningfully interact on a widespread level. I am hopeful that I can honestly and effectively be a leader and an ally, holding myself accountable, acting not solely based on my own interests but by responding to the interests and needs of those with whom I work. I am sure, though, that it is only from a starting place of recognizing the role of the race and positionality of those involved in these movements that we can even begin to truly work towards environmental, food, and social justice.
Appendix A
Guiding Questions for Conversations with Program Directors/Leaders

1. What is the story of this project? How did it start? Who was involved?
   a. Now who is involved? Do you do any active recruitment?
2. What is the mission/goals of this program(s)?
3. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? How did you get involved? When did you start gardening? What had been the draw for you?
4. What might an example day in the garden look like?
5. Tell me about the people who work here.
   a. How would you describe experiences outside of school or other formal programs of the youth you work with?
   b. What do you think the kids are getting out of being involved in this program?
   c. Do you have contact with parents? What do they say to you about the garden?
   d. Has anything surprised you through working with this group of kids?
   e. How would you describe your role within this community?
6. What types of behaviors do you find you have to manage or regulate in the garden? How do you deal with this? Could you give me some examples?
7. What would you consider to be the purpose of this garden/this program? Of community gardens in general?
8. When you hear the word “learning,” what comes to mind? How would you define it? What do you think the purpose of learning is? What do you think its outcome is?
   a. What kinds of learning do you think happen in this garden?
      i. Do you incorporate explicit lessons? (some examples?)
      ii. Do you ever feel like there are missed learning opportunities? If so, could you give some examples?
   b. Are there any sorts of evaluation systems in place? If not, what could you imagine being helpful?
9. What happens with your produce? Do you have a set system for distribution?
10. How would you describe the community (teacher, parent, student) response to the program?
11. What has been the most satisfying for you- personally and for the program?
12. What would you consider to be some of the biggest obstacles of this program? How have they been addressed?
13. If you could start this program all over again, is there anything you would change?
14. Finally, is there anything else we didn’t talk about that you think I should know? Is there anyone else you recommend I talk to?

Follow-up questions for Program Directors/Leaders

1. Why do you (speaking personally or based on your organization’s beliefs) think it is important to focus on youth education in gardens, rather than devoting all efforts to food production? (I’m not suggesting that these have to be conflicting
goals, but I'm interested in the shift that's taken place from having community
gardens focused on food production (especially in food insecure areas) to
including the educational focus.)

2. Do you know the initial first steps the garden took to get started? Who was
involved, what were the goals/vision, and what did community input/participation
look like? Now, when developments are made (like when you want to physically
expand the garden, add new programs, decide what to grow, etc.) who is involved
in the decision making process?
Appendix B
Guiding Questions for Interviews with Former EJ Members

1. How did the idea for the garden get started? Who was involved? What did conversations among Swarthmore students look like? How was the relationship with the CHA developed (who was involved, how receptive were they)? Was there any direct communication with the community (specifically in the Bennett) around the garden?

2. Was the garden established with the intention of being mainly for kids from the Bennett?

3. What were the garden’s initial goals/mission?
   a. What was your vision for this garden?

4. How did outreach happen? How did people from the Bennett get involved?

5. What did garden days look like?

6. Do you/why do you think community gardens are valuable places?

7. Do you think learning can happen within a community garden? How? What forms? What elements of learning to do you value and/or think can be highlighted in an outdoor setting like in a garden?
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