Refugees, Radishes, and Relationships: 
How Urban Gardens Facilitate Social Integration Opportunities for Refugees

Ellie Greenler
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Advisor: Josh Moses
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Abstract

Refugees who immigrate to the United States face specific and unique challenges to becoming full members of the communities they join. This thesis focuses on how urban farming can provide an opportunity for refugees to become more socially integrated in the communities that they are farming and living in. It uses one organization, Plant It Forward, as a case study to show how and where this social integration process takes place. Through participant observation, literature review of organizational materials, and in-depth interviews with key players, this thesis points to the challenges and successes of integration through urban farming opportunities. The thesis concludes by suggesting that while there are always ways to improve integration efforts and critiques to be made, Plant It Forward’s efforts to provide Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), market garden, and vegetable sale opportunities, provides a successful model of social integration opportunities for the refugee farmers they work with. This model has possible application in other communities.
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I) Introduction

According to the United Nations there are currently over 20 million refugees worldwide (UNHCR 2017), with the US accepting 85,000 refugees in the 2015-2016 fiscal year (Greve 2017). In fact, the US is the top resettlement country in the world (UNHCR 2017). Once a refugee is cleared to come to the US and has landed on US soil they are met at the airport by a refugee resettlement agency. This agency, which receives a small amount of money from the US government to facilitate this work, helps them find a home, apply for a Social Security Number, register the children for school, and often provide English classes, (USCRI 2017) among other services. This resettlement program is federally funded for each refugee for three months (U.S. Department of State 2017). After those three months are up the refugees are expected to have a job and be financially independent, but this by no means signals that a refugee is part of the community they were resettled into, much less part of the wider US culture. While this is generally successful in the sense that refugees are employed at the same rate, if not higher, than their US peers (Capps 2015) this does not signify that they are happy, healthy, or integrated, they are simply employed. Being employed does not imply that a refugee is a full member of the society around them, their resettlement and integration process has just begun.

The question of how to move forward from this pace and provide a society and communities that mutually benefit from having refugees is one that many people, organizations, and agencies are struggling with. One such organization is Plant It
Forward in Houston, Texas. Plant It Forward is a non-governmental organization that works with refugees to provide them with the opportunity to sustainably farm on urban farms in Houston and provide them with a steady income. While Plant It Forward’s main goal is to provide income for refugees, in reality they are doing far more than this. They are trying to make the refugees they work with part of the community, in other words they are trying to socially integrate the refugees. This thesis will ask the big questions about refugee social integration and specifically Plant It Forward’s program: What is integration? Why is it important? How does the world view integration and integration efforts? How does Plant It Forward assist with refugee social and economic integration? Are they successful? What benefits does integration have for the refugees? And what benefits does it present for the United States as a whole?

These are the questions that I will be exploring throughout this thesis. I will first situate the reader in theory surrounding refugees, integration, and to some extent urban agriculture. Then I will put refugees integration into the context of the current US environments. Next I will touch on why there are refugees specifically from The Congo before I move on to discuss Plant It Forward. As I talk about Plant It Forward I will talk about the organization as a whole and then specifically my experiences spending time with them in Houston. Here I will address what the refugees desired in terms of resettlement and how Plant It Forward addressed or didn’t address these needs. I will also talk about what the refugees themselves voiced about Plant It Forward and their social integration. I will then touch on how Plant It Forward struggles with integration and what they can do to fix that. Finally
I will talk about where to move from here, both in the context of Plant It Forward and more generally. Hopefully throughout this thesis the importance of integration, in its broadest sense, will be realized, and the refugee reality will be brought to light in a little bit of a new way.

II) Methodology

The findings in this thesis were based on significant literature review, one-on-one interviews, and participant observation. I did a literature review of Plant It Forward’s public materials along with materials provided to me in person by Plant It Forward. I also did a significant analysis of publicity that Plant It Forward has received, including a TED talk by the founder about its history, news segments, and television shows that featured Plant It Forward and their farmers. The bulk of my ethnographic research occurred with I spent two weeks in January 2017 at the Plant It Forward farms and warehouse in Houston, Texas. Here I worked with the staff, farmers, and organization as a whole for full workdays, ranging from 6-12 hours long. During this time I helped on the farms, worked in the warehouse, accompanied and performed vegetable deliveries, went to farmers markets, tended a farm stand, and sat in on staff and full organization meetings.

The first week of research was mostly spent doing the above tasks, but then into the second week when the farmers and staff knew me a little better I started doing one-on-one interviews with staff members and the farmers themselves. All of the farmers I interviewed were refugees from The Congo, either the Democratic Republic of The Congo (DRC or Congo-Kinshasa) or Republic of The Congo (Congo-
Brazzaville). All of the staff members I talked to grew up in Houston, though most had not lived there for the complete duration of their lives. These interviews varied from 10-60 minutes and were recorded and later directly transcribed. The interviews varied with some of them occurring in a more formal interview settings with just two of us sitting down and talking and others occurring while doing work in the gardens or during slower times at the farmers markets. These formats varied based on the amount of time the farmers had and what seemed to put them most at ease. One of the interviews occurred in more of a group setting with a couple of farmers and I talking. I was aware this wasn’t an ideal interview format, but it was the way these farmers felt comfortable talking to me. Once transcribed I sorted through the interviews for themes and commonalities and matched them up to observations, quotes, and notes I had taken during my participant observation.

I have intentionally decided that it is not necessary for me to create pseudonyms for the names of the people I talked to because they are not in harms way from me using their names and Plant It Forward has already published their stories and names previously. I was clear about my intentions to use their names with the people I interviewed and this was also cleared through the Haverford IRB.

III) Theory

a) Refugees

Before one starts to delve into any politics, read any articles, or engage others in debates about refugees, one must answer the most basic of questions: what is a refugee? While this question seems like it may be an easily answerable
question with a dictionary definition, it is so much deeper, more political, and more complex than that. Yes, there is a dictionary definition, it is, “one that flees; especially: a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution” (Merriam-Webster 2016), but this only scratches the surface of the cultural definitions and meanings of the word refugee.

The complexities of the word “refugee” become clear when Liisa H. Malkki explains, “there is no “proto-refugee” of which the modern refugee is a direct descendant, any more than there is proto-nation of which the contemporary nation form is a logical, inevitable outgrowth” (Malkki 1995, 497). This idea directly contradicts others who study refugees, notably Stein and Keller, who see refugees as having a universal experience that can be split up into stages denoting the time of exit from a country to complete integration into a new country and culture. Michel Aiger also holds this view, as implied by the title of his book On The Margins Of The World: The Refugee Experience Today. Aiger believes that all refugees go through three stages: the stage of destruction, the stage of confinement, and the moment of action (Agier 2008). Malkki pushes against this saying that “an obvious problem with the intellectual project of defining “the refugee experience” is that it posits a single essential, trans-historical refugee condition” (Malkki 1995, 511). To Malkki “the refugee is a specific social category and legal problem,” but cannot be universalized across all people as it’s social definition is given to people on a case by case basis. This belief that refugee status is a cultural, and not solely a strictly legal, phenomena is shared by William Maley in his book What is a Refugee?. Maley says:

> Everyday understandings of what is a refugee may overlap with legal definitions, but have lives of their own. They are shaped as much in images
contained in mass media and by casual conversations than by any careful conceptual analysis (Maley 2016, 38).

This understanding from Maley touches more on the social understandings of refugees. Social understandings are important to keep in mind and analyze because they will give rise to how others view those people who are legally entitled refugees by international law and government.

Malkki also struggles with the “tendencies toward functionalism and essentialism” (Malkki 1995, 511) of the concept of a “refugee experience.” She believes the concept of the “refugee experience” it ties society, refugee studies, and refugees to the assumption that individual state sovereignty is the strict rule and reality of our world and that there is no changing this basic point. She sees it as creating a system where refugees are constantly the “other” and have no opportunity to become fully part of another culture. It denies refugees the opportunity to have a culture of their own within their realities of being a refugee. It places them permanently in a limbo zone of going through a predefined “refugee experience,” as opposed to this experience being their own and being a result of their culture and reality. Malkki also notes that refugee is not synonymous with stateliness or being displaced, as not all who are stateless are refugees and not all refugees are stateless. This is reiterated by Maley who talks about how the different reasons to flee a country can dramatically shape a refugees experience and because of this how it is not possible to categorize experiences into a neat organization system (Maley 2016).

The other major debate in the world of refugee studies centers on whether or not refugees need be from the lower economic class and be poor (Malkki 1995). One
example of the belief that refugees must be out of resources and hence of a lower class and poor is Andrew Shacknove who believes that a refugee is a person, “who’s government fails to protect their basic needs, who has no remaining resources than to seek international restitution of those needs, and who is so situated that international assistance is possible” (Shacknove 1985, 276). Shacknove’s definition assumes a person who is struggling to stay afloat and not solely trying to escape danger or persecution, as the dictionary definition states. Malkki believes that refugees are a problem all over the world and do not, and should not, be confined to rhetoric of poor and under class peoples (Malkki 1995). Berry Stein, a professor in refugee studies and political science at Michigan State University, agrees with this saying, “Most refugees are not poor people. They have not failed within their homeland; almost all were functional and independent, a great many were successful, prominent, well-integrated individuals who flee because of fear of persecution” (Stein 1980, 2). This point is backed up by the current refugee crisis in which many refugees are of middle or high socio-economic status, yet are still forced to become refugees because of a lack of safety they experience in their home country (Mchugh 2015). This is yet another contradiction in the social definition of what it means to be a refugee and have refugees in your country and community.

While this is the just the start of the debate as to who qualifies as a refugee and what social realities that carries with it, these are important ideas to keep in mind throughout this paper as different people address the idea of refugees from different vantage points. For my purposes I am going to use the word “refugee” to mean one who has come from one country to another country because of
persecution, but who must be intentionally held by the country they reside in so as they can become a full functioning member of the new society that exists with now includes them.

b) Integration

The concept of refugee integration is talked about frequently and in multiple capacities across many academic disciplines including anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, and social work. While there is no universal definition of integration across different authors and disciplines, integration is sometimes viewed as “the optimal goal for any society to ensure that all of its members play an active roll and feel a part of their community” (Wilkinson 2013, 2). It is also stressed that integration must be a process that seeks to change both the newcomers and the existing society (Enns 2013). If one of these is attempting to change and the other is not then integration is not possible nor is it desirable by all parties. This being said, it is also acknowledged that one of the problems with integration is that generally the newcomers, in this case refugees, are asked to change much more than the society around them (Wilkinson 2013). Historically assimilation was the term used to refer to the process of an immigrant or refugee coming to another country and joining that society. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary assimilate means to “absorb into the cultural tradition” while integrate means to “form, coordinate, or blend into a unifying functional whole” (Harwood 2013). While at first these definitions could seem fairly similar, in the context of refugee experiences they are very different. Assimilation implies as loss of identity and “fully becoming part of a
different society” while integration implies “incorporating individuals from different groups into a society as equals” (O’Brien 2016). In this paper I am intentionally using the word integration not assimilation because I am talking about the connections that people make which provide them with the opportunity to be a full functioning part of the society. I am not talking about changing refugees so they look, act, and are the same as everybody around them, but more creating a space they belong in. It is worth acknowledging that integration is not a perfect concept either, the main critique of the term integration is that it “alludes to a two-way accommodation of host and immigrant groups, but offers no clear criteria for operationalization and measurement” (Harwood 2013 as quoted by Banton 2001). While I accept this critique, integration is the language that is universally used and there is no suggested alternative for it so I am going to continue using it with this in mind.

This paper is based on the ideal of “successful” integration into a community, but what does it mean to be successfully integrated? Most frequently successful integration means economic integration into a country or community, but it is becoming increasingly clear that integration must also include social and cultural aspects. Refugees may feel integrated in terms of work and economy, but still feel like they are not part of their community, or even feel they are intentionally “ostracized” by that community (Wilkinson 2013). Given this concern the definition of integration can and should be widened to, “group and individuals having full and equitable access to, and participation in, power and privilege within major societal institutions” (Wong and Tézli 2013, 14). While it is acknowledged that integration is
a “largely unobtainable ideal” (Wilkinson 2013), in order to start working toward a potentially fully integrated society, including refugees, integration needs to be viewed with the wider lens of social and cultural realities along with the aspect of economic independence.

Economic integration frequently gets the first place when talking about integration because it is the political topic that most dramatically affects those in the country that refugees are immigrating to. In fact, about 60% of research on immigration is focused around income, economic and labor market conditions (Wilkinson 2013). There are many specific programs that aim to provide refugees with job opportunities and job training that will help them become a thriving part of the economy of the country in which they are living (From Immigration to Integration 2006). Simon Fass highlights the emphasis on economic integration in our rhetoric about refugees and migrants in general in his paper, Innovation in the Struggle for Self-Reliance: The Hmong Experience in the United States. Fass defines self-reliance as, “an increase in capacity for self-sufficiency rather than as self-sufficiency itself... prerequisites for self-reliance are a willingness of people to move into non-traditional economic activities...”(Fass 1986, 352). Fass does not talk about refugees or migrants needing to be self-reliant in ways outside of economic structures. Self-reliance in the context of refugees is viewed as being off welfare programs and government support. While this is important and undoubtedly a large part of refugee integration, it leaves out a large portion of what is necessary for refugees to thrive physically and emotionally in a country they have moved to.
Social integration is as important for the success of the refugees and the overall mental health of both the refugees and the communities they are joining as economic integration is. All of the 18 lessons established by Morton Beiser in his work with a refugee resettlement project in Canada are created to help “suggest policy and practice innovation that could help make resettlement easier, less costly, more effective, and more humane” (Beiser 2009). Beiser writes about how properly integrating refugees into society completely, including great care for their mental health, can be both beneficial for the refugees and save money for the society, further emphasizing the importance of community centered integration. One of Beiser’s lessons is “policy makers... should consider [mental health as] part of the human capital they hope newcomers will contribute to resettlement countries.” Furthermore he argues that one way to do this is to notice and aid as “new settlers (refugees) are interested in re-establishing themselves at professional levels they formerly enjoyed” (Beiser 2009, 558) This focus clearly is on what the refugee needs to feel comfortable and welcome, what they desire, as opposed to what the country they are coming to desires. Again, importantly, this focus is on community integration as opposed to direct economic integration that is so frequently emphasized. D. A. Duchon (1997) further stresses the importance of refugees feeling integrated into a community in order to ensure their economic success when saying that, “research suggests that successful adaptation is not impossible give the right conditions. Hmong refugees in Georgia have adapted well in a region far from the vanguard of social adjustment services” (Duchon 1997, 88). Duchon further goes on to point reasons for this, including home ownership, a growing Asian community
(in Georgia) and “flourishing” religious networks. Duchon speculates, “Perhaps the answer to... adaption lies not in providing intensive services, but in an environment which allows for personal freedom and a range of choices.” Beiser and Duchon are some of the few people that are looking at integration in a more holistic sense, believing that the long-term happiness of the refugees and prosperity of the country are closely correlated and are of equal importance.

In my research I found that connections that the refugees made with people outside of their refugee community were very important to their sense of self-worth and value and that this lead to them expressing happiness in their lives and their jobs, which will be talked about with specifics and examples further on in this paper. I believe that integration must be seen as beyond just being economically self-sufficient and also include the ability of the refugees to have interpersonal and social connections within the communities they are living in. It may be true that some aspects of integration are not actually desirable to by those being subjected to it, but I believe that social integration is generally desirable if looked at correctly and holistically. If it is viewed as allowing “groups and individual to become full participants in the... society, yet at the same time, enabling them to retain their own cultural identity,” (Wong and Tézli 2013, 14) then it is a positive opportunity for immigrants and refugees to access a full life in a new country, while still being able to nurture the reality of themselves and their cultures.

I believe that successful social integration, which is a board term that includes, connections, friendships, and the feeling of being seen as a real member of a community, is key to long term prosperity, happiness, and success of refugees in
their new countries. I also acknowledge, as I mentioned above, that this type of integration is very hard to produce, if not impossible, but it is a goal to be strived for and a dream that needs to be had in order to attempt to provide the best lives possible to all that exist in US communities.

Integration throughout this paper will sometimes focus on the idea of social integration and sometimes focus on the idea of economic integration, but always with the acknowledgement that you cannot have complete integration without both goals being work toward in tandem and without both the newcomer and the society attempting to change and shift in order to become a new unit that includes the experiences and understandings of the immigrant or refugee.

c. Urban Agriculture and Physical Space

If the goal is to successfully integrate refugees into communities, it is important to look at both what the refugees’ need and what the communities need. It is not possible to have a productive, healthy, and successful integration without intentionally engaging both sides. To achieve this goal it is important to meet the communities where they are currently at before an attempt to integrate newcomers into the community takes place.

The question of what a community needs and wants and how to productively make changes in a community has been something that has been present in urban agriculture discourse for a long time (Lyson 2004). There is a history of organizations coming in and doing urban agriculture work in communities without stopping to ask what the community needs and what the most
productive methods for working in this specific community are. There are lots of debates as to what makes the “best” or “most ethical” urban farm model. Some of the questions raised are; is it important for the money or the vegetables to become part of the neighborhood that the farm is in? Should the farm be tended by a larger organization that isn’t housed in the neighborhood but has the financial stability to shepherd the farm or should the priority be put on community leadership, even if it is at the expense of the farm being in a financial limbo? How should the community be involved in the dreaming/planning aspect of a farm before it is created? In the wider academic areas talking about urban farming there are no clear answers to these questions; there are just positives and negatives in each individual case. These questions become even more prevalent when the goal is not to just grow vegetables and do urban agriculture, but through those activities to integrate a group of refugees. The one thing that is clear is that there has to be community buy-in.

Melissa N. Poulsen (2017), author of Cultivating citizenship, equity, and social inclusion? Putting civic agriculture into practice through urban farming addresses this issue when she talks about two different urban farms in Baltimore. One farm is pitched as a community farm and “farmers prioritize civic exchange over economic goals” by sharing produce within the neighborhood, attempting to gain community buy-in before construction, and prioritizing resident’s needs. The other farm is an “urban commercial farm” which appears to prioritize economic success over community support. This farm mainly sells its produce outside of the neighborhood, as that is where it’s most economically logical. That being said, the farm is still viewed by the community as a positive edition to their neighborhood, even if they
aren’t as directly involved in it (Poulsen 2017) because it provides green space and employment opportunities. Both of these farms have advantages and disadvantages that need to be talked about and acknowledged as they are created and added to communities. Another theory of the most responsible type of agriculture is the concept of “civic agriculture” which is defined as “community-based agriculture and food production activities that not only meet consumer demands for fresh, safe, and locally produced foods but create jobs, encourage entrepreneurship, and strengthen community identity” (Lyson 2004, 2). Civic Agriculture focuses on de-industrializing and de-corporatizing the food systems and, as much as possible, involving communities in the process of food production. Which of these farm models is “best practice” is unclear, but it is clear that in the case of refugee integration having community by-in is of the upmost importance and is the most likely to receive positive and friendly feedback from the communities, which aids integration attempts and eases the transition for the refugees. If these are the goals civic agriculture is one model that has been identified that would provide a useful starting platform for an urban farm working with refugees and space for the refugees to engage in integration with country and community they are now living in.

Once a farm has been established in a neighborhood, the farm and the extensions of the farm, provide a space for communities to come together and for cultural lines to be crossed. Kathleen Bubinas author of Farmers Markets in the Post-Industrial City (2011) talks about this phenomena in the context of farmers markets saying, “farmers markets not only promote physical health through eating fresh seasonal produce; but also inspire societal well-being by providing opportunity for
social interaction within a community and between consumers and producers” (Bubinas 2011, 155). Bubinas goes on to talk about how this is a space that is key in communities accepting different classes, which in the case of refugees could easily be extended to the acceptance of people from different countries and/or backgrounds. Bubinas also talks about how farmers markets are an area that helps farmers feel like they are part of the community and not solely providing services. This is particularly seen through typical farmers market practices like trading goods at the end of the market and casual conversations with returning customers. This ties into the ideas of integration that emphasize not just economic independence, but also the importance of refugees having power and privilege (Wong and Tézli 2013) and refugees playing an active roll in their community (Wilkinson 2013).

Beyond the institutional set up of urban farms, the physical space plays a very specific roll in integration and community support efforts. Donna Haraway (1984) talks about how one can have an extension of oneself (Haraway 1984). For example through phone connections one can be present in a space while not physically being in that room. Equivalent extensions of urban farms exist, in the form of farmers markets, farm stands, Community Support Agriculture (CSA) drop-off points, and restaurants selling produce grown on these farms. These spaces are as important, if not more important, than the physical farm because they provide the same power and ownership that the farmers of the urban farms experience in different parts of their communities. The farmers have the ownership of the spaces, they are the ones who are in control of the vegetables and goods that are being sold so they feel like they can, and should, interact with the communities. This ownership
is key to them feeling part of the community. Community can be defined as, “people of a district or country considered collectively, especially in the context of social values and responsibilities” (Oxford-English Dictionary 2017). If this definition is accepted then having these spaces gives refugees, who may otherwise feel like an “other”, space to be the central part of the “social responsibilities.” Having farms and subsequent extensions of farms situated in an urban setting provides a very different sense of community and aids deeply in refugee integration that is focused on community. This is very different than working on farms that are distinctly outside of the urban area and community the refugees are living in, like in the case of migrant labor. Throughout this thesis I will be talking about Plant It Forward spaces. These spaces include the farms the farmers are working on along with all the extension spaces that I mentioned above, as I believe that these spaces are as relevant as the physical urban farm that the refugees are working on.

IV) The Current US Context

When I started writing this thesis and when I did my fieldwork Barak Obama was the President of the United States. It’s for this reason that I will be talking about the US context and viewpoints on refugees in this period of time. It would be remiss of me not to mention that this context has, and continues to, shift dramatically as the United States shifted presidents to President Trump, but for the sake of this thesis I will not delve into these specific political realities.

Approximately 70,000 refugees from around the world are resettled into the US annually (Wachter 2016) and in 2016 the highest number of refugees from any
nation to come to the US were from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Krogstad 2017).

Historically there has been a general opposition throughout the US to refugees entering the country. Between 1939 and 1999 Gallup polled the US population 14 different times during specific refugee crisis situations about if the public supported the admissions of refugees to the USA. In only two of those instances the majority of the public believed that refugees should be openly welcomed into the US (Gallup 2017). This shows a general negative attitude toward refugees entering the US. When asked why they are opposed to refugees Americans are most likely to cite the threat of terrorism (Jaeger 2016). This fear of terrorism is not just a current US phenomenon, but has been cited multiple times throughout history, including being the most cited reason against Jewish refugees fleeing to the US during WWII. Other common complaints are that refugees and immigrants take away jobs from US citizens, reduce wages, and contribute to unemployment (Espenshade n.d.). The general public doesn’t seem to have a deep desire to have refugees become part of their communities. This could present a particularly difficult barrier to refugees who have come to the US and are attempting to socially integrate and form real and personal relationships.

There have been some attempts by the US government to bring refugees into the country and aid them in integration. For example, the federal government under the Obama administration encouraged acceptance of refugees, saying they would accept 10,000 Syrian refugees, a goal that was met in the last week of August 2016 (Park and Omri 2016). That being said, the Obama administration was mainly
focused on economic integration of these refugees. This is demonstrated by the fact that on their webpage about the “Federal Roll in Immigrant and Refugee Integration” there are only three different categories. The first category is civic integration, which talks exclusively about citizenship accessibility. The next category is economic integration, which focuses on finding suitable jobs. The last section is linguistic integration which talks about increasing English language literacy so that suitable jobs can be found (The Federal Role in Immigrant & Refugee Integration 2014). While all of these are important components, as I have talked about in this thesis integration of refugees must go much further than this and support the refugees as a whole person who should have the opportunities to become completely part of their communities. Integration needs to focus on communities as well as refugees themselves, a fact that is never mentioned on the Obama administration’s webpage.

It is clear that the US is not particularly welcoming to incoming refugees and the resources that are provided to the refugees from a federal level don’t necessarily support integration that will be the best for refugees in respect to long-term and holistic integration. This provides a challenge for organizations working to provide these services because it means they are not only fighting against the negative cultural biases against refugees, but they are also receiving fairly minimal support from the government because the government is so focused on the economic aspect of refugee integration. The US is not a particularly open or welcoming place for refugees to move or settle down into.
V) Background on Congo

It is not necessary to give a huge amount of background as to why the refugees at Plant It Forward were refugees and their stories that lead them to the US, because the majority of this thesis is focused on what happens after they are already in the US. That being said, it would be careless of me not to talk briefly about the general movement from refugees from The Congo given that all of the refugees at PIF at the time of my research were from The Congo. Their experiences in The Congo and traveling to the US inherently influenced their experiences after settling in the US. Their cultural background also influences what they desire their life in the US to look like.

The refugees at Plant It Forward are from two different countries that in the US we generally lump together as one country, The Congo. That being said the recognition of the existence of two different nation states to the refugees was very important and pointed out to me many times. The refugee farmers at Plant It Forward came from the Democratic Republic of The Congo (DRC or Congo-Kinshasa), formerly a Belgian colony, and Republic of The Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), formerly a French colony. Both colonies gained independence in 1960 (Paul 2014).

For over two decades, starting in 1996, The Congo has been in a constant state of war. This recent resurgence of conflict was spurred by large numbers of Rwandan refugees fleeing into The Congo during and after the Rwandan genocide, in 1994 and 1995 (The World Factbook 2017). After this mass emigration of Rwandans to the Democratic Republic of Congo Rwanda and Uganda invaded the
DRC in an attempt to locate those perpetrators of war crimes who had escaped (Congolese Refugee Health Profile 2016). After this invasion a struggle for ruling power over the DRC ensued, leading to the First Congo War, which eventually lead to Laurent Kabila as president. In 1998, fearing invasion, President Kabila ordered Rwandan and Ugandan forces to leave the DRC, leading to the Second Congo War. This was also known as “Africa’s World War” with over 20 militia groups and 9 African countries involved (Congolese Refugee Health Profile 2016). This war was waged until a peace agreement was signed in 2002. Some of the refugees at Plant It Forward came to the US in the early 2000’s before the peace agreement was signed (The World Factbook n.d.). But despite the official end of the war, there still continues to be violence and human rights abuses in The Congo (“Congolese Refugee Health Profile” 2016). The remaining refugees with PIF came over from The Congo between 2002 and 2011 because of the continued danger and human rights violations.

While we now know why there are refugees from The Congo and a little background on that conflict it is important to think about how this history may influence integration, specifically social integration and connections for these people. In a study looking at pre- and post-migration factors of integration for Congolese women it was determined that there are five themes that came up as concerns for female Congolese refugees. These themes are: significant trauma, safety and security, alone lonely and isolated, disempowered and overwhelmed, and precarious survival (Wachter 2016). “Significant trauma” referred to, specifically sexual violence, which occurred in the past and anxiety about that occurring in the
future. “Safety and security” came up as a very important part of integration for these women and they “resoundingly” reported feeling safe in their resettled homes in the USA. “Along lonely and isolated” talks about the fact that these refugees frequently felt isolated from community and felt as if they lacked support networks. This point is particularly relevant when talking about social integration because it points out how important the work around social connections and relationships is. “Disempowered and overwhelmed” are the feelings that women reported in regard to parenting alone and not having the support network of neighbors and family that they had in The Congo, another aspect of life that PIF is addressing through their community connection work. Lastly, “precarious survival” mostly references to economic stability in the United States and the stress of balancing that while maintaining a family (Wachter 2016).

While this is by no means a comprehensive analysis of all ways that Congolese refugees experience integration and is not based on any specific stories from The Congolese farmers at PIF, it is a way to bring to light some of the aspects of integration that could be influenced by the backgrounds of the refugee farmers at PIF. When thinking about and approaching integration efforts it is important to think about the specific realities of refugees you are working with and what their migration experiences were and how that may influence efforts to connect them to local communities post immigration.
VI) Plant It Forward- Urban Farms for Houston, Small Business for Refugees

Plant It Forward is a Houston based organization that provides the opportunity for economically disadvantaged refugees in Houston to make a livable income for a family of four through organic urban farming and vegetable sales. Their mission statement is:

Plant It Forward offers economically disadvantaged refugees an opportunity to become self-sufficient through growing, harvesting and selling produce from a sustainable urban farm within the city of Houston. Each farm will have the potential to generate a fair wage for a family of four while providing premium brand sustainably grown produce to Houstonians. Plant It Forward secures land, selects, trains, and mentors farmers and establishes each on their own urban farm to sell under the Plant It Forward brand.

Plant It Forward is the only organization that is working with refugees in urban farming setting in Houston, so they are constantly evolving and changing in improve their services and better meet the needs of the farms and Houstonians.

a) Plant It Forward-A History

Plant it Forward started as a small project that has now evolved into a sizeable not-for-profit organization. Plant It Forward was started by Teresa O’Donnell, currently the president, as a way to promote “community well-being” at the software company that her and her brother had created. Initially O’Donnell thought that her software company would read and review resumes for educated refugees and help them find employment, but when she approached a refugee resettlement agency about this they told her that the refugees who were struggling the most were the ones who were undereducated and didn’t speak English. While O’Donnell saw no way that her company could help these people, she kept getting
pulled back to doing work with refugees. O’Donnell was Inspired by Tippi Hedren, who worked teaching Vietnamese refugees how to do nails so they could work in nail salons. Hedren’s work lead to the $8 billion dollar industry that is still dominated by Vietnamese-Americans (Morris 2015), This inspired O’Donnell to set out to find the next big entrepreneurial boom for refugees. After months of searching, O’Donnell stumbled upon the concept of “market gardening,” or a small scale farm production of vegetables, fruits, and/or flowers, which are generally sold directly to consumers through farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, or other local and small scale distribution methods. After calling the refugee resettlement agency again, and learning that many of the refugees who were most struggling were farmers in their home country, O’Donnell felt as if she had stumbled upon the next us industry for refugees. Slowly O’Donnell started making connections and having conversations and discovered that there was a church with three acres of land in congruent empty lots. The church believed that they were not being “good stewards of the land god gave them” (TEDx Talks 2016) and thought that the idea of using this land to provide employment for refugees was a productive future use of their resources. It just so happened that this church also had a refugee population, specifically Congolese refugees. Through connections at the church 14 Congolese refugees, “who had all been farmers and who all wanted to farm again” (TEDx Talks 2017) were gathered. After many slow downs and roadblocks with permits and land use, the seed that was O’Donnell’s dream to promote “community wellbeing” in the area of her software company started to grow into the organization that is now known as Plant It Forward.
b) Plant It Forward-Today

When you first pull up to Plant It Forward’s warehouse you might see vegetables being carted out to the organizations trucks, hear the rapid-fire chatter of French as the farmers clean their vegetables, watch kids dart in and out of the doors playing while their family members package produce for delivery, or see customers pulling up to pick up their weekly CSA shares from the shade shelter outside of the building. Started from just an attempt by a software company to be more invested in the community around them, Plant It Forward (PIF) is now a lifeline for nine Congolese refugees and their families.

The Farmers

Plant It Forward currently works with nine farmers and each farmer has their own customers to whom they are responsible for providing vegetables. All of the farmers are from what is frequently considered “Congo”, but to Congolese they are from two different countries, Democratic Republic of The Congo (DRC or Congo-Kinshasa) and Republic of The Congo (Congo-Brazzaville). The farmers range in age from mid-thirties to mid-fifties. Two of the farmers are women and seven are men. All of the farmers came to the United States as refugees. A refugee is legally defined as “as an individual who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence who is unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on his or her race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.” (“Asylum & the Rights of Refugees” 2012). The farmers have been in the US ranging from four to sixteen years.
Becoming A PIF Farmer

In order to start the training process to be a refugee farmer with Plant It Forward there are certain qualifications that must be met. Each farmer must have refugee status in the United States, already be employed, and own a car. Once a farmer is identified and fits all of these requirements they must wait for a cycle of training classes to start. Training classes take place throughout a full year and meet every Saturday. During these classes refugees learn how to farm organically, market their produce to Houstonians, and how to grow produce in an environment with four seasons (as opposed to the two they were used to in The Congo). The employment requirement is tied to this class. It was important to Plant It Forward that these farmers understand that they wouldn’t be selling their own produce for a full year and so in order to sustain themselves they have to have night jobs (most of the farmers worked night shifts in factories) during the training year.

Once the farmers were most of the way through their training they started working part time, for hourly pay, on PIF’s farms to get hands on experience. Then they are each given four beds to make sure they can maintain them by themselves, and more importantly, to make sure they have the motivation to show up frequently and tend to plants. Once farmers have finished the training program they are each given just a little bit under an acre of land. This is estimated is an appropriate amount of land for each farmer to support themselves and a family of four.
**The Farms**

PIF consists of four different urban farms throughout Houston. The biggest farm, their first farm, is a three-acre plot in Brays Oaks. Brays Oaks, commonly referred to in my interviews as “the hood” is a neighborhood in Southwest Houston with a majority black population, and only a 30% white population. The Brays Oak median household income, as of 2017, is $46,000 as compared to Houston’s median household income of $50,400. (Brays Oak’s Management District, 2017). The farm in Brays Oaks has land that is being farmed by 5 different refugee farmers and has been farmed since 2012. Two other farms are also in Southwest Houston, a one-acre plot of land in Sharpstown that is farmed by one refugee farmer, and a two-acre plot in Westbury that has two farmers and a model garden maintained by PIF staff. The last PIF farm is in Central Houston, on the University of St. Thomas campus, this farm is half-acre of land and is farmed exclusively by one farmer. Each farm has a garden shed, farm stand, and, of course, many rows of straight, equally measured, beds in different states of production. Some beds are flush with greens ready to be harvested; others look empty but really are lined with seeds waiting to germinate, while yet others have baby seedling poking out of the rich brown soil that has been so painstakingly augmented and fertilized by the farmers.
A map of the locations of the Plant It Forward Farms
Point A-Sharpstown farm
Point B-Brays Oaks/Fondren Farm
Point C-University of St. Thomas Farm
Point D-Westbury Farm

Selling The Produce

Plant It Forward distributes their produce in four different ways: a Community Supported Agriculture program, sales to chefs, weekly farmers markets and weekly farm stands.

For eight of the farmers their main customers are through the Community Support Agriculture (CSA) program. This is a vegetable distribution method where community members buy “shares” which represent “a pledge to support a farm operation” (USDA 2017) through the bounty and failures of a specific farm and
farmer. Plant It Forward has 15 different drop-off points for their CSA program and each farmer is assigned specific points. Customers can either buy a grand or a petite CSA share, the grand shares come with 7-8 vegetables every week and the petite shares come with 5-6. By assigning specific farmers to different points it means that the customer gets to experience the ups and downs of a season with one specific farmer and, hopefully, that customer gets to know that farmer. The location of these drop off points vary greatly from being at a market that the farmer also attends, to at a church, to a farm stand, at the Plant It Forward warehouse itself, or at a customers home. When at all possible drop off points are places where the farmer is also present, like a market or a farm stand, in order to enhance the feeling that a customer is buying to the larger concept of supporting local agriculture, a specific farmer, and a specific farm.

A typical “Grand” CSA farm share that a customer would receive weekly from Plant It Forward farmers.

(Photo used with permission from plant-it-forward.org)
Plant It Forward also sells produce through local chef sales. If a chef is interested in buying produce from PIF they can visit the PIF website where they can see what is in season each week and then request an order of specific vegetables. This order then is given to a farmer (or farmers) within PIF who harvest, clean, and deliver those vegetables. Generally farmers receive 90% of the money made from chef sales with PIF taking a 10% cut for organizational costs. The one extremely consistent chef sale that PIF does currently is with the Four Seasons Hotel, where one farmer provides food for their weekend brunch omelet bar.

The second biggest sale location for PIF farmers is farmers markets. The farmers are assigned a farmers market that they attend every week. This consistency provides them with the ability to get to know specific markets, customers, and locations. For most farmers the market is a good source of extra income on top of their weekly CSA sales, but for one farmer it is the main place he sells his produce because it’s the largest market in Houston.

The last place that PIF farmers sell vegetables are at farm stands on their farms. PIF received a grant about a year ago that allowed them to build farm stands for each farm as well as hire a coordinator to start the farm stand program. The goal of these stands is to engage the community directly around the farm in a deeper way and give them the opportunity to go to the actual farm to buy produce from the actual farmer. At the time of my research the farm stand program was just starting, so it wasn't a huge source of income for the farmers, though it had the potential to be.
The organizational structure provides a large number of opportunities for the refugees to have personal interactions with many different people. They also have the opportunity to have interactions in spaces that are theirs, so power dynamic of them being “new” is interrupted.

**VII) Integration**

Susan E. Eaton, the author of *Integration Nation* (2016) and research director at the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School, defines integration programs as “the variety of efforts to assist immigrants in becoming full participants in the political, economic, educational, and social lives of their new communities” (Eaton 2016, 124). I will use the experiences I had while working in Houston with Plant It Forward to talk about and analyze how the work that Plant It Forward engages in facilitates integration of refugees into the local
communities they live and work in, the boarder Houston community, and the wider community that is the United States of America. I will look at and talk about the words and actions of the refugees and staff members I had the opportunity to shadow and interview while in Houston to deepen my understanding of PIF’s work.

a) Economic Integration

It is clear that there are significant motivations for governments to economically integrate refugees, the least being that once they become economically independent the government doesn’t have to support the refugees with public programs. While government motivation is clear, economic integration is also deeply important to the refugees at Plant It Forward for several reasons.

The first, and possibly most mentioned reason in interviews I conducted is that economic integration gives refugees a sense of stability. All of the farmers at Plant It Forward came over to the United States with at least one family member and have other responsibilities outside of their jobs. Without adequate and real economic integration they are not able to give the attention they desire to those aspects of their lives because they must be focused on providing financially for their family. At this point it is important to remember that economic integration is a much wider goal than just being off of government programs and aid. Self-sufficiency as a sole goal doesn’t “take into account economic indicators other than welfare utilization, such as employment, total household income, and living conditions” (Potocky 1996). The idea of living conditions is not just the physical space that one lives in, but also the ability to conduct life in a healthy way without the fear of
economic collapse. One female refugee farmer, in her late 30s, with an 8-year-old child pointed this out when she said:

...When I am working over here as a single mother, if they called me, “ohh you need to come to school and get your kid, she has a fever, all of that.” I just have to drop this thing and drive my car and go, but in the company you cannot do that...it is not like the company where if you don’t go to work you miss eight hours paying.

This feeling of flexibility and freedom was clear within the structure of Plant It Forward as farmers were always coming and going. One farmer that I talked to worked another job to help supplement her income at Plant It Forward and the flexibility of PIF provided her the opportunity to do this. This flexibility helps give the farmers another avenue to work towards economic stability. It is worth noting in this case that PIF provided the main source of her income and she referred to her other job as an “extra job.”

Another reason that economic integration is important is that work, meaningful work in particular, gives the refugees a purpose and a sense of value. This was talked about in detail by Teresa, the director of Plant It Forward as she reflected on what Plant It Forward provides to the refugee farmers they work with:

I think what [Plant It Forward] has done for the refugees is given them dignity of work, so when they originally get here they are usually put in overnight factory jobs, low skill labor, quick turnaround like as soon as health benefits are going to kick in they are moved on, have to go get another job.

This desire to be part of the larger economic community of the United States was reiterated multiple times by the farmers. One farmer said, “every job if you are making money in this country you are going to like it,” but then went on to say, “there are a lot of layoffs... people come from Mexico, refugees come, people come
from everywhere, so people have a lot of layoff... this is the reason I didn’t want to work in a company. You know [at Plant It Forward] nobody can push you to “do this” and “do that”. This farmer was making it clear that having a job that provides you with a steady income and makes you economically stable is very important, but more than that, being economically integrated and being treated as a equal in the work place is vital to being happy and healthy. One cannot be economically integrated as a migrant worker who is constantly threatened with layoffs and treated as a lesser

As I spent time with the farmers it was clear that the economic component of Plant It Forward was very important, but beyond just the fact that they have enough money to function, they were very proud to be able to provide a product that was valued and sought after. Being valued by others in their immediate physical community was important and provided ties that were deeper than the refugees just receiving help. This furthers the idea talked about above by saying that being part of the economy is of vital importance to the happiness and health of refugees. These refugees are providing a service that is valued, echoing Teresa’s claim that they must have “dignity of work.”

Farmers spend hours cleaning and preparing their vegetables for their CSA shares. My second full day at Plant It Forward I spent at the warehouse watching the farmers prepare their vegetables for distribution. I worked specifically with one farmer as he prepared his CSA shares for delivery. As I arrived he was pulling some greens out of the washing machine. Encased in mesh bags these greens were coming out of their third round of washing. First he had rinsed them in the sink, taken them
out and sorted through to make sure any grass or weeds that may have been in the bed were taken out. Then he washed them again, carefully sorting all the lettuce, pulling out even smaller bits of non-ideal greenery. After this round of washing they were put in mesh bags and run through a washing machine. The greens were spread out across the table, a fan pointed at them, and let to completely air dry, ensuring that when they were bagged in plastic bags they would stay as fresh as possible. Then, after they were dry, the last, and most careful, pick through began. His wife and him sat around a white folding table which had carefully been washed down and then covered with a clean table cloth and hand sorted through every piece of lettuce to make sure it was of the quality, color, and size they wanted and that no stray weeds were sticking to it. Once every piece of arugula, bit of lettuce, or stem of kale had been looked at they were weighed and put into individual plastic bags. Lastly holes were punched in the plastic bags because, as he told me, even if he asked his customers to take them out and put them in a more breathable container in the fridge so the moister wouldn’t rot them they likely didn’t, so he aerated the bags preemptively. While this may seem like a reasonable amount of work to put into cleaning vegetables this is much more than most of the other vegetable sellers I saw at markets did. By washing your lettuce three times you can label it as “triple washed” and the days I was at market Plant It Forward farms were the only ones that had triple washed their lettuce. This is just one example of the long and careful process that the farmers went through in order to make sure that their vegetables were the best quality that could be provided. It also might imply that the refugee farmers felt they had to go above and beyond the other farmers at market in order
to gain their acceptance into the community because of their refugee status. This kind of care was taken with all the vegetables. Later in this day I sorted and washed carrots in the warehouse and after we sorted them by size and quality we washed them twice, and even washed the greens, to make sure the greens, even though they were never eaten) looked as good as possible. All of this effort is particularly notable because the food was already pre-purchased so it was clear that the cleaning was a point of pride, not a necessity to sell the produce, like it would be if they were at farmers market. They were also very concerned when they received a huge frost in January and they lost most of their vegetables. While they were worried about the financial implications of this frost at market, they were also very worried about their CSA customers. But this worry was not financially based because the CSA customers had already bought into the “shared risk acceptance” clause of the CSA program, so they understood that they wouldn’t receive vegetables, or as many vegetables, in the case of a severe weather event (like a two day long freeze in the notoriously warm Houston, Texas).

The last reason that economic integration is important is that it is vital to the mental health of refugees. Morton Beiser’s addresses this when he says “the relationship between mental health and unemployment is reciprocal: people who were unemployed or who lost their jobs experience a high risk of depression. On the other hand, depressed people were more likely than the non-depressed to be laid off work” (Beiser 2009, 558). This mental health component was clear when talking to the farmers as well, who said things like, “here I am very happy, I can pay my bills” and “if I am making money, that is fine.” This last quote may sound like a moderate
review, but this farmer multiple times said how much she loved farming. I believe the use of “fine” here is actually a very positive review as it was used throughout the interview in very positive contexts. Another farmer talked extensively about how before, when he was working inconsistent construction jobs, “every layback would send me back” and that he dreamed of having a job where laybacks weren’t an everyday worry in his life. It was clear that having a job that was more than just money but consistent and fulfilling was integral to his mental health. He said, “before Teresa call me and ask me if I want to be here I was sleeping and dreaming of planting seeds. That’s it, it was a dream…. It was difficult for me. Now God give us warehouse, give us many many things. Now we are happy.” This link between economic stability and improved mental health has been talked about in a wide range of literature across many disciplines including, but not limited to, philosophy (Williams 1997), sociology (Yu and Williams 1999), biology (Norman 1995) and anthropology (Dressler 1998). The correlation between socioeconomic status and stability and mental health is even acknowledged by the World Health Organization which says, “it is well known that mental health problems are related to deprivation, poverty, inequality and other social and economic determinants of health” (WHO-Europe 2007, 1-2).

It is clear that economic integration is a very big part of what Plant It Forward does and they do it well. The refugees know their job is important and they are happy that what they are doing to earn money can line up with what people want. This gives them a strong sense of belonging in the economy in Houston and even in the wider context of the United States, which is key to having positive
mental health. While having a job was an important component to their feeling of inclusion in the wider Houston community, continually throughout the interviews farmers told me how they dreamed (in one case literately) of being able to farm in Houston and how this was an answer to those prayers. This pride in their work was demonstrated in the great care they showed in their cleaning and preparation of the vegetable they were distributing throughout Houston and the happiness they expressed when asked about their experience with Plant It Forward.

b) Social Integration

The farmer is squatting in the midst of rows and rows of kale, to her back is the rising trellises of peas and to her side is the road full with midday traffic zooming by. She slowly moves down the row picking off the largest kale leaves till she gets a bundle of 10-12 leaves then she snaps a rubber band around their base and sets them to her side, leaving a trail of bundles of kale in her path. Every so often she looks up, one time to wave and smile at a woman walking by, no words were exchanged but the smiles told a story of relationships and normality, it’s clear this woman walks by frequently while the farmer works. The work continues, snapping off the kale leaves and bunching them, the trail of bunched kale behind her grows longer a trail of not only vegetables, but also hope for the farmer. Then a man walks up, he starts speaking in quick, but thickly accented, English. She smiles at him, but her brow furrows, she isn’t quite sure what she is saying, her first language is French though she knows more English than she let’s on. The man and her exchange broken conversation for a little bit, he wants to know how she got this land to farm and if he can get some. Specifically he wants to know if he can raise fish
in the near by bayou. She explains that she doesn’t know about the bayou, she is working with Plant It Forward and got her land a couple of years ago. The man is confused so she gestures him to me. I am down the row from her slowly working my way up the row to meet her, my own trail of kale bundles behind me. The man comes down to me, I explain how Plant It Forward works and that PIF doesn’t have control over the near by bayou. He is not deterred; he stays and chats with us both for another 10 minutes. Right as he is getting ready to go and we are getting ready to pick up our kale bunches, she plunges his hand into his bag and takes out a couple of tea bags, explaining that if we drink this tea we will have lots of energy and if we want more we can just call him. The farmer laughs but takes the tea, I follow suit. The man writes down his number, the farmer writes down hers, they exchange goodbyes and the man wanders back down the sidewalk he came on. While these may seem like menial interactions, they are actually key moments of social integration, which will be discussed in depth in this section of the paper.

While economic integration is easier to measure and has more government-sponsored initiatives put toward its implementation, it is by no means the only way that refugees integrate into communities. *The Encyclopedia of Immigrant Health* when defining integration says, “the wider concept of adaption includes cultural integration, structural integration, economic integration, and social integration” (Iov 2009, 1360). While all types of integration are tied to each other it is important to look at specific integration advantages that extend beyond money and economy and more focused on “social interactions with the new populations [immigrants] are trying to integrate into” (Iov 2009, 1). Social integration is also very important for
refugees and is something that Plant It Forward facilitates, though they don’t advertise and aren’t completely aware of this aspect of their work. It is also something that is clearly very important to the refugee farmers and is evident in the way they talk about Plant It Forward and the way they act on the job.

While I touched on this above, it’s important to understand the meaning of social integration. For the context of this paper social integration will be “inclusion and participation in civil society” (Ager 2008, 324). I also think it is important to acknowledge that social integration is closely linked to economic integration and at point these two terms can be used interchangeably. This phenomenon is talked about in Civic and Social Integration (2006), “the labor market is hereby understood as the place and agent of socialization and social integration. An individual having uncertain and irregular employment within the informal economy, without reliable working conditions and being poorly paid, it is certainly not socially and economically integrated. His situation is rather a situation of permanent insecurity and of precarious economic status,” (Nash, Wong, and Tarlin 2006, 349). While this may be true for many people in the labor market, not exclusively refugees, it is particularly poignant in a refugee population who are inherently “outsiders” because they are entering a country from a culture and country from different ones, which inherently makes them initially not the norm.

As I talked about in depth earlier, integration is a process that is taken on by both the new comer and the community they are joining. While it is easy to focus on what the refugees are doing, it is also important to touch on how Plant It Forward facilitates, or doesn’t facilitate, community involvement and change. I will start by
Greenler

talking about how PIF provides a space for farmers to engage in social integration and then I will touch on how PIF also provides opportunities for communities to engage in this work themselves.

When looking at how people intact with each other, and taking out the context of economic markets, social integration can be seen as social connections. Ager believes that this is key to social integration saying, “social connection is seen to have played a fundamental roll in driving the process of integration at a local level” (Ager, 2008). These connections are so clearly seen when spending time with Plant It Forward and the PIF farmers. The connections are seen when volunteers from the local communities come in and help farmers weed their beds of spinach, they are seen when farmers give the children of their farm stand customers a particularly sweet carrot to eat while their parent is shopping, and when community dinners happen on the farms and farmers and donors sit down together at a long table in the middle of the fields to break bread together. Plant It Forward facilitates connections between community members and the refugee farmers that in turn connect the farmers to the community in a deep and meaningful way.

Plant It Forward eases these without even thinking about the space they are making and providing and the impact that it has on the farmer’s lives and social integration efforts. PIF was founded on the idea that they are providing a space for refugees to grow vegetables in an urban farm setting in order to provide jobs to refugee farmers. This is clearly stated in their mission statement:

Plant It Forward offers economically disadvantaged refugees an opportunity to become self-sufficient through growing, harvesting and selling produce from a sustainable urban farm within the city of Houston.
What the mission statement doesn’t touch on is the integration work that PIF engages in. It doesn’t talk about how through the opportunity to grow produce on urban farms and then sell to the surrounding communities they are facilitating of networks and connections between the farmers and their surrounding community. While some of this community connecting is inherent through the model of Community Support Agriculture, which is defined as, “a system in which a farm operation is supported by shareholders within the community who share both the benefits and risks of food production,” (Oxford English Dictionary 2017), Plant It Forward goes beyond this simple one way connection of farmer selling to person. By promoting their organization PIF is promoting those links with people in the communities around the farms that the refugees live and work in. They are promoting the personhood of the refugee farmers and encouraging the community to take a step toward connections with those farmers.

One of the things that Plant It Forward has recently added, but is very important to their work doing social integration is their farm stand program. In 2016 Plant It Forward received a grant to build a farm stand on each farm and hire a farm stand coordinator, Daniela Lewis. These farm stands, which are each open one or two times a week, are stationed in the most visible space on the farms. The times that the stands are open are posted on their websites and other literature as well as being promoted on social medial during actual open hours.

The farm stands provide an opportunity for the farmers to be visible to the community they are physically working in. The farmers are visible in multiple different capacities through the farm stand program. When the farm stands are
actually set up on their designated days of the week the farmer is sitting or standing out front of their stand, next to their veggies, engaging the community as they go by. They may be just smiling as passers by in car or yelling a casual hello to those strolling by in foot, but that engagement and visibility is of vital importance to social connections for these farmers.

The farmers are also gaining visibility through Plant It Forward’s advertising of the farm stands on their website, Facebook pages, and Instagram. When the farm stands are open Plant It Forward makes a point of posting a picture of the farmer with personal captions, again intentionally putting personality to the faces of the refugee farmers. One such Instagram post said, “Our Montrose Farm Stand reopens today! 🍅🍀🥦 Farmer Roy is selling fresh-picked produce every Saturday 10-2...”. This again gives the farmer a face in the community that provides connections for that farmer, just through the daily workings of Plant It Forward as an organization. Frequently, though not universally, the farmers live in the communities their farms are on, but this doesn’t mean that others in that community are aware of what is going on at the farms. The farm stands provide the physical and virtual space for the farmer to talk about, teach about, and sell their produce to the people that they interact with on a daily basis.

After spending even a couple of minutes at a farm stand it becomes clear that they are a very productive space for farmers too not only sell their vegetables, but to promote social integration experiences. The farm stand on the Brays Oaks/Fondren Farm is placed at the intersection of two very busy roads, and is open on Wednesday’s and Fridays from 3-sundown. This place it’s operation hours right in
the middle of people’s commuting hours, providing a lot of visibility for the farm, the farmers, and the produce. As you sit at the farm stand it becomes clear that the area is mostly governed by roads and cars and that it is clearly constructed for as as little human interaction as possible. Nonetheless the farm stand facilitates a real community. People would walk by on the sidewalk and stop and talk to us, asking about Plant It Forward, their work, and the vegetables. Many people would pull over to the side of the road, put their blinkers on, roll down their windows, and talk to us from their car. They were frequently inquiring if there was a specific type of vegetable available and if there was the farmer would hustle back to his plot and pick it fresh, wash it, and hand deliver it to their car. Frequently an extra bundle of carrots, handful of snow peas, or small cabbage head would also be tossed into their bag, with the muttered words of, “if they are happy they will come back.” In the middle of the interactions with farm stand customers CSA members would stop by to pick up their vegetables from the blue cooler that is placed in the shade behind the farm stand. This is the first week of a new CSA season so many people stop to inquire about how to get their vegetables. The CSA pickup was an important part of the farm stand scene for several reasons. First it provided a constant stream of people which made the farm stand seem approachable to those passing by, but it also provided a wonderful opportunity for social interaction between the farmer and their CSA customers, again forging those social bonds that are key to feeling integrated into a community. Frequently the approached me first, because the farmer was busy running back and forth between his rows of vegetables and the farm stand customers, as soon as I pass their questions along to the refugee farmer
they are both happy to stop and chat about the vegetables that they are receiving that week, how the farm is doing, and what to expect in future vegetable orders. A few old or returning CSA customers stop by, always with at least a nod or smile to the refugee farmer as they pick up their vegetables and some even stop for a longer chat. A few ask about recipes they could use their vegetables in and others just have a minute of small talk, but all acknowledge the bond and connection that they have with their personal farmer, the refugee they are supporting through their CSA share. A community has grown around the farm stand, even if the project was relatively new and cars generally run the neighborhood. As farmer Albert, the farmer in change of the stand that day, would hustle off to pick vegetable for his customers fresh, you could tell that he took great pride in what he was going to bring back to them. He would frequently pull a carrot, determine it was too small, and put it in a separate bundle, not for the customer, but maybe for his family or one of the volunteers who was working with him. The farm stands really provided the space for farmers to be able to put themselves out there and feel like they had a place of key importance in the social structure of the physical community surrounding their farms. For the refugees having such a solid physical location and foundation in the community deeply promoted social integration opportunities for both the farmers and the community to engage in.
Farmers Albert and I at the Fondren Farm Stand on their first day of accepting SNAP payments!

The other aspect to the farm stands is that Plant It Forward also recently received a grant to implement SNAP, or food stamp, infrastructure at each farm stand. While I was there the farmers went through a training to know how to appropriately use the physical machinery and the rules behind SNAP produce eligibility. This addition really increased the integration of farmers into the surrounding communities because frequently those communities were poorer; the area that three of the farms were situated in was frequently referred to as "the hood." Large signs were displayed announcing the first day of the new SNAP implementation and multiple people stopped by to inquire and tell us that they were thankful SNAP would be accepted and that they would be back to buy produce in the future. Just this small change not only had a positive influence in making the produce more accessible to the people in the communities directly around the
farms, but it also provided yet another opportunity for social integration of the refugees. It connected them with a group of people who they hadn’t had access to through Plant It Forward before. Further, it made it obvious to the surrounding communities that the farms were a space they could feel welcomed in and at home. One man stopped by with his daughter and deeply expressed his excitement because his daughter loved local vegetables, but they were expensive. This showed that the service that Plant It Forward was helping their farmers to provide was of need in the community, which continues to reinforce the importance of the farmers work in both the farmer’s own understanding and the experience of the communities around them.

Farmers and volunteers sell produce at the Urban Harvest Farmers Market in Central Houston. (Photo used with permission from plant-it-forward.org)

The other location that provides amazing moments for social integration is at the local farmers markets. Spending time at the Saturday Urban Harvest Farmers Market made it overwhelmingly clear how much of a community existed at the market, both among the farmers and their customers and among all the different vendors selling together. The Saturday I had the opportunity to spend at the market
was below freezing, gray, and raining; not the ideal farmers market day by any stretch of the imagination, but that didn’t freeze the community spirit. While Constant, the farmer that is assigned to this market, was disappointed by the number of people at the market compared to normal, we still sold out of almost all the vegetables we brought to market (granted this was less than normal because of the freezing rain that occurred the day before when Constant was harvesting).

The thing that constantly struck me was how many people intentionally came up to the Plant It Forward stand and looked for vegetables to buy, as opposed to looking for one specific vegetable that Plant It Forward just happened to have it. Multiple people asked if we had something they were hoping for and then when we didn’t proceeded to buy a different vegetable instead of going to the vegetable stand down the row that had the specific vegetable they asked us about. This really pointed to an intentional and continued involvement in Plant It Forward by the community at the market. Even beyond this there were multiple people who had specific relationships with Constant. One woman came up and said “Farmer Constant, are you staying warm? How was the week?” This woman then proceeded to give Constant a big hug and hang out chatting for quite a bit longer. Later on a woman walked up to the stand and in a joking tone said, “Where are my vegetables? I came too late! I’ll have to come earlier next week” and this was followed by people saying, “sold out very quickly today?” and “No basil today?” Constant always changed moods when things like this happened, he would stand up a little straighter and really be present with the people who were talking to him. He would explain to them that the frost took a toll on the vegetables and then talk about what he was
planning on doing to restore his garden so he could deliver the vegetables these people were clearly looking for. Later that day two high school aged boys came up to the stand and asked if they could interview the farmer. At this point Constant asked what they were interviewing about and the boys explained they were doing a school project on organic agriculture techniques. At this Constant immediately said he would talk to them and was very enthusiastic. The boys asked about the difference between conventional and organic agriculture practice, pest reduction techniques, and why Constant enjoyed this work. Throughout this interaction Constant was able to help educate the boys about organic agriculture. He clearly really valued this because he asked me to help the other customers that were coming to the stand so that he could give them his full attention. These interactions, while small and sometimes relatively short, clearly gave Constant a place to fit in within the community, a space that just he fit into, and a home within a large social network. They gave Constant a place where he was valued and he has skills, goods, and knowledge that he could share and give to others, but they were ultimately his. By selling vegetables at market and having these interactions with individuals Constant was engaging in the labor market, which as described above, is, “the place and agent of socialization and social integration.” Selling at the market is very important to Constant, while we were at the market in between customers Constant talked about how he loved seeing people come back week after week and how the market is very busy and he likes it when it is like that. He also talked about how he thinks about starting his own farm and how he would like to be able to continue to provide vegetables to his regular customers if he does this. Frequently throughout our time
at the market when customers that he knew came up he would ask them about how their vegetables from the past week were and slip an extra bunch of carrots or bundle of mint into their bags. This was always accompanied by a little smile indicating that this was his way of nurturing the relationships he formed and maintained through his weekends at market. The importance of the market was clearly emphasized by Constant. Going to market provides an opportunity for the farmers to interact with the people in the communities around them, which provides the opportunity for the farmers to truly become part of these communities. It is a chance for them to have a roll that is needed and desired in the community and through this to become part of the society, or in other words, to continue social integration.

While farm stands and farmers markets are very important places for the farmers to socially integrate, just being a part of Plant It Forward they are being provided with this opportunity. There are many other, smaller but no less significant, opportunities that farmers receive for social integration through Plant It Forward. One of these opportunities is through the different media sources that Plant It Forward has. While I was there Plant It Forward was featured on a large local Houston news station. Farmer Roy was the farmer whose farm and story were featured in this segment and this was a very important opportunity for him. Roy talks about this saying:
Many people know me, they hear me in the news story. Every time I pass in the TV people come and look at me and say, ohh I saw you in the TV. [One woman said] ohh man, I'm looking at you, oh man, I have something to give you. She gave me a sofa from her house. She said, only two months ago I buy that, I give to you, take that. I have that in my storage, you know, because I pass on the TV, I talk to the people on the TV. In my country I never passed on the TV, I have many people here who never pass on the TV. Like today we have a movie on CNN, people see us. Many people say, Ohh I saw you in the movie. You see, it’s not easy? How long I was here before I come with Plant It I never pass on the TV, in my country too.

Here the direct result of social integration is clear. Roy was seen on TV and then gifted a sofa, but it is also clear that the sofa isn’t the important part of that story; it’s the fact that he was recognized and given a gift. In fact, that sofa isn’t even being used, it is sitting in Roy’s storage unit, but that is insignificant as compared to the fact that Roy was seen—“people see us,” this visibility, this social integration, is key to the happiness and success of refugees, and in this case specifically the refugee farmers.

Farmer Roy with Teresa (PIF Founder) along with the TV anchor and the chef that was filming a segment about the vegetables and work of Plant It Forward.
Teresa, the founder and president of PIF, believes that positive press coverage is particularly important, specifically in a city like Houston, which was noted by multiple people to be a particularly difficult place to engage people in both urban agriculture and refugee resettlement work:

There is so much bad press on refugees, that to actually see refugees providing something extremely beneficial, you have to rethink it.

Having press coverage of Plant It Forward provides a positive and easily accessed platform for refugees to put personality behind all the negative press that refugee receive and have received in the US and in Houston.

Plant It Forward also provides opportunities for social integration through farm volunteer programs. Frequently volunteer groups contact Plant It Forward and are assigned to a farmer and a farm to come and help out. This provides the farmers yet another opportunity to engage in the wider community in a place that gives them power, in this case being the leaders and the teachers of the farm volunteer days. While I wasn’t able to be at a volunteer day that a farmer was leading it was clear from the way that farmers approached me helping them out that they took a great deal of pride in being able to teach others about what they do. My first day working with every farmer they would walk me around their farm, talk to me about each plant they were growing, give me vegetables to taste and take home, and really emphasize the knowledge they had and wanted to pass along to me. The pride they took in their gardens was unmistakable; as we walked along they pulled the occasional stray weed, pointed out their largest vegetables, and picked up trash that was around their plots. Providing the infrastructure for farmers to have volunteers
at the farms not only provides extra labor (which is always appreciated), but it also provides the opportunity for farmers to be in a position of leadership in the community and teach about what they are doing, helping them gain a place in the social hierarchy and become a little more part of the communities around them.

Volunteers from the Cristo Ray College Preparatory of Houston volunteer at the Plant It Forward Fondren farm. 
(Photo used with permission from plant-it-forward.org)

The opportunities for farmers to participate in social integration are invaluable, but it’s important to remember that social integration has to happen from the larger society as well as the farmers. PIF also provides these opportunities and this space for the community to engage with the farmers. While this distinction may seem arbitrary, it is actually very important. Too frequently when refugees come into a country they are asked to do the work of integrating, when it needs to be a combined effort with the community in order to be effective.

One way that Plant It Forward engages the community, and asks them to think about and be part of the lives of the refugee farmers, is by asking for help. Let
me talk about one specific instance where this ask for help was very clear and pulled members of the community into Plant It Forward, and in turn into the process of integration. It was early January and I was in Houston doing my research. Houston is an area of the country that never gets deep freezes, in fact the average low for Houston in January is 45° ("Intellicast - Houston Historic Weather Averages in Texas (77061)” 2017), but this year there was a two day period where the temperature did not get above freezing. While for most of Houston this was unpleasant, for Plant It Forward and the refugee farmers this was a serious problem because it meant that all the crops they had growing for their weekly CSA shares were frozen and unable to be distributed. This is when Plant It Forward put out a plea for any and all help and extra local, organic food that survived the frost. Over the next 24 hours there were frantic meetings with the farmers to discuss the frost, markets with tables half empty because the gardens were sad and frozen, and hurried conversations among staff members trying to find a way to start and grow seedlings as fast as possible. But during this time something amazing happened, produce started slowly filling the warehouse. First it was a call from a local woman who had a huge citrus orchard who wanted to donate citrus for the CSA shares. This woman had worked with Plant It Forward in the past, but because she was busy maintaining her own farm struggled to figure out how to engage with the organization and when she saw this opportunity she jumped on it. I was part of the group that went out and picked citrus at her farm and it was clear she was really excited to engage with us. She showed us around the farm, pointed out specific trees that would be good to pick from, and then talked with us for a while. We talked, as farmers do, for a long
time about the frost and how it had affected so many things in the garden, but we also talked about the mission of PIF, how the farmers were doing at market, and how her fruit was going to be helping. Multiple times throughout this process she expressed how excited she was that PIF was going to get her fruit and how she hoped that we could do this again in the future. While we were picking the citrus there was also another women helping us, who was from a local community garden and had offered to help pick when she heard from the women who owned the orchard that PIF was coming out to get citrus post-frost. This woman really wanted to help out PIF by donating extra food from her community garden to PIF when they had bounty, she even found a scrap of paper and wrote her information down for us. This woman also mentioned how she had known about PIF, but hadn’t had a way to get involved until she heard about the chance to help pick citrus. In the end these women ended up providing Plant It Forward with two tons of citrus to give out in CSA shares that week. While they didn’t have a lot of direct contact with the refugee farmers, they took one step towards changing and helping the integration process, and that was gaining knowledge and verbally expressing interest in helping again. While verbal expressions don’t do anything specific for the integration process, they mean that people are engaged, thinking about these issues, and may be more open to a direct opportunity and facilitating social integration in the future when the opportunities present themselves.

As the 24 hours after the frost went on more and more community members stepped up. Another man came to the warehouse with a truck filled with lemons; he pulled his truck up to the backdrop off bay and started unloading many full crates.
Within seconds refugee farmers, staff, and myself were all there unloading the lemons, weighing them (for donation tax deduction purposes), and immediately putting them into CSA shares that were about to get delivered. The most dramatic part of this interaction for me was the switch in the farmers’ moods when they saw the citrus being delivered, they greeted the man with happiness and excitement and thanked him for the lemons. The farmers, who had been snippy, frustrated, and sad because they were not going to be able to fill out their CSA shares, suddenly became happy, animated, and enthusiastic about the opportunity to add lemons. It was amazing what just small opportunities for the community members to take the first step, like providing citrus, could do to providing happiness for the farmers. While this one gesture cannot be considered “social integration,” all of the small interactions go towards the community feeling like they have a personal connection to the refugees and the refugees feeling like they are part of, know people in, and have capital in the community. It also shifts the community toward the refugees’ needs as opposed to the refugees shifting toward the communities’ needs, an important distinction between integration and assimilation. By asking for help Plant It Forward is providing nudging toward the community by providing them with a space to engage, helping facilitate the community side of social integration.

Aside from asking for help Plant It Forward also engages the community in other ways as well. PIF has lots of fundraising opportunities including dinners on the farm, cooking classes with local chefs, and other promotional events. While these events frequently have a more intense focus on the people who will possibly be giving money, they also almost always include the farmers and provide spaces
and opportunities for the farmers to interact with the people around them in a space where they all have equal footing.

Refugee farmers, chefs, volunteers, and staff gather before a fundraising dinner on a Plant It Forward farm. (Photo used with permission from Plant It Forward’s Facebook page)

Plant It Forward also has promotions at the farm like farm stand parties, yoga on the farm, and sometimes pairs with other local shops and stores to have their products at the farm during certain days. These relationships further help promote robust relationships between the farmers and their local communities.

Social integration is a very important part of the work that Plant It Forward, and urban gardens working with refugees in general. By facilitating these social interactions and opportunities for their farmers Plant It Forward is making sure that they are not just economically stable, but are socially stable within their communities and will have the ability to move forward and upward if for some reason Plant It Forward ceases to exist one day. They also ask the communities to shift toward the refugees and don’t just expect the shift to come exclusively from the
refugees. They, in some terms, are providing monetary capital as well as social capital for the refugees and the families of the refugees they work with.

**VIII) A Congolese Farmer Community**

While social integration into the wider Houston community and even the United States is increasingly important and something that Plant It Forward is providing for their refugee farmers, they also provide a more internal community space, an area that the refugees have agency in and a place for a Congolese refugee community to be created. This is not an integral point to refugee general integration, but I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the influence this had on the way that the refugees existed within the communities and societies they belong to.

Plant It Forward facilitates a community within the nine Congolese farmers they work with. From the moment that one walks into the warehouse this is evident, through the near constant French chatter, talking about what vegetables they are selling that week, how their kids are doing, and internal politics of Plant It Forward. This is not an unnoticed phenomenon, in fact it is something that Plant It Forward works very hard to facilitate. Randi, the CSA manager, talks about this and says that while they are trying to form a community amongst the farmers, it is not always easy, particularly because they are from different countries which can create a divide among the farmers. Nonetheless, a strong community is still present. After the heavy frost that took everyone by surprise the farmers really banded together in a lot of ways, they shared produce when they had it, they talked through strategies for growing more produce quickly, and they empathized together over lost labor
and produce. This empathy was clear through farmers showing each other their frozen produce, strategizing about if anybody had anything that could be shared through the farmer community, and expressed anger at the weather whenever one farmer talked about their particular struggles.

There are also a couple of farmers who have paired up and work their plots of land together as one larger plot of land. This gives them the opportunity to be more efficient, but also form bonds with the other farmers they are working with. It is clear while Plant It Forward’s main goal isn’t to form a farm community, it is an important service that PIF provides for the farmers who are part of the PIF programing.

Past the relationships that the farmers have with each other, there is a community in Plant It Forward among the staff and farmers as well. Roy talks about his connection with Teresa, the founder of Plant It Forward, saying:

“I love her, I love her so much. For me she is like my mom. I know somebody is going to say to her she is bad, she is good, somebody is going to say I don’t like that lady. Somebody is going to say, I love that lady.”

These relationships were also evident in the interactions that the farmers had with Randi, their main contact as the CSA/farm share manager. One of the farmers talked to me about how much Randi meant to her daughter saying whenever Randi calls her daughter gets very excited and runs around the house yelling that Randi’s calling. Her daughter also really looks forward coming to the warehouse where she gets to hang out with Randi. The staff relationships are very important to the social connections that the farmers have and are making. Having these close relationships not only mean that work feels more comfortable and PIF becomes a space the
farmers can relax in, but it also provides them with a very valuable resource because the staff are connected to the wider farming world and are able to share those connections with the refugee farmers, furthering their social connectedness and integration.

IX) Integration Struggles

While Plant It Forward is providing a generally productive and positive platform for economic and social integration, there are some struggles that they encounter that make integration not wholly successful and/or more difficult. One struggle is engaging the community that is immediately local to the farms and, correlated with this, the community that the farmers live in. There is also the struggle of who to accept into the refugee farmer program in the first place and what the requirements for that are. Lastly there is the struggle to find the middle ground between teaching to the refugees and learning from the refugees and providing an environment that is productive to both of these things at the same time while promoting integration within PIF itself. In this section I am going to talk about the challenges that PIF faces and the places that possibly hinder the social integration of the refugees they work with and how these challenges could possibly be addressed to provide a more positive and effective experience for the farmers they work with.

As I mentioned above integration is only successful with the active participation and buy-in from both sides: the community and the refugee. If Plant It
Forward wants to make social integration an intentional part of their mission statement then they need to make a distinct priority to engage the truly local community as much as possible. PIF has over 200 CSA shares and the majority of them are driven out of the neighborhoods that the farms are in and sold to people in other, frequently more affluent, neighborhoods of Houston. This was mentioned multiple times by Plant It Forward staff as something they struggle with and how they really want to engage the neighborhoods where the farms are as much as possible. When I was there PIF was opening their first farm stand that took SNAP benefits, more commonly known as food stamps. This was a really big deal for PIF and put them on the track to not only have their food be accessible to the local neighborhoods, but also provide a space where the refugee farmers can interact with those local communities. I was told while I was there that PIF was pretty explicit that their goal wasn’t to feed hungry people, but was to provide economic opportunities to refugees, so selling outside of the neighborhoods wasn’t a first priority thing to fix. That being said, the connections that are made through the selling of the vegetables are so important that even if the sole goal of PIF is to economically support the refugees, by having sale opportunities within the neighborhood they are furthering the social integration of the refugees and long term providing them with more opportunities, hence fulfilling their ultimate goal.

The other area where Plant It Forward may not be working to promote the best chance at integration for the refugees they work with is in their requirements to become a Plant It Forward farmer. In order to even go through the class to become a farmer one must have a car and another job. The reasons they state for
these requirements is that the training is a year long, every Saturday, and the refugees don’t earn any income during this time. For this reason PIF wants to make sure that the refugees aren’t counting on them for money before they have actually joined the organization completely and started growing their own food. The car requirement comes from a place of refugees needing to drive their vegetables to and from their farms and the warehouse. Once the vegetables are at the warehouse they can be delivered in one of two PIF trucks, but there are not enough trucks for the farmers to count on them for every day use. PIF realizes that in an ideal world they would have these trucks be more accessible, but this isn’t possible or the case currently. This is a major hindrance to their integration efforts because the refugees who are struggling the most, those who are unemployed and/or don’t own a car, are not able to access Plant It Forward’s programing. There is one refugee farmer working with Plant It Forward, who doesn’t have a car, but her daughter has a car and her daughter helps her out on the farms a significant amount. The days I was working with this farmer her daughter came multiple times throughout the day to check in, talk about how to get the kids to and from school, and just to be present. In some ways this woman was receiving a special kind of social integration because the farm was not just providing her income, but also providing her with a way to connection with her daughter and her daughters community. One of the times her daughter came to the farm she had some friends with her, furthering the reach of the farms as providing a space for community to gather and be together, even if only for a short amount of time with logistics were being figured out.
While I understand PIFs reasoning for wanting all their farmers to have cars, I wonder if it is hindering their ability to really reach out to a whole community. When I was talking to a different farmer later she said:

You know about the family culture...if you are eating and your brother is not eating then your brother has to come and you are going to share what you are eating with your brother.

This quote really emphasizes how much community means to these farmers and how much their community helps each other out. It seems like Plant It Forward could further their integration efforts and reach refugees who are in the most need of an opportunity like this, if they changed the car requirement to something that acknowledged the depth of community that these refugees have and brought that into their programing as opposed to viewing each refugee farmer as a single entity.

This easily brings me into the last point that Plant It Forward struggles with in their integration efforts and this is the merging of The Congolese culture and the US culture. On the main page of their website Plant It Forward says that, “each farmer is trained to farm using organic methods and sell their produce through farmers markets, farm stands, restaurants, and farm shares.” While PIF does everything in this sentence, and does it successfully, what it doesn’t touch on is the fact that a lot of these farmers had previous farming experience in The Congo that doesn’t necessarily line up with the traditional organic farming practices in the US. Multiple times I heard different members of the PIF staff talk about how hard it was to get the farmers to mechanize their operations in small ways, like installing irrigation, using a rototiller, and using rotational planting to reduce weed pressure. Other times I heard the farmers talk about how they were asked to do these things
but they never did them in The Congo and they were successful there so why did they have to do them here. This is just one example of the different cultural practices clashing that was visible within Plant It Forward.

Earlier in this paper I talked about how social integration must be a combined effort where the community is as enthusiastic about the integration opportunities as the refugees themselves, and the cultural clash between farming practices is a great example of this. If the farmers want to feel welcome and honored as full members of a community who are not just working, but also respected and skilled there has to be opportunities for both sides, the PIF staff and community and the farmers, to learn from and teach each other. By not providing an easy space for the refugee farmers to share their farming knowledge with the staff, community, and each other PIF is hindering their opportunities for their farmers to really fully socially integrate.

There are other organizations that are doing similar work to PIF that are also facing similar problems and have implemented some new techniques to fix it. One such organization, called Transplanting Traditions Community Farm in North Carolina has their farmers grow 50% food that is expected by the US customers (like tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers) and 50% food that is local to the refugees’ country of Burma (like bitter melon, lemon grass, and mustard greens) for their weekly CSA shares. The Global Garden Refugee Training Farm in Chicago has a focus on not only training refuges to farm in the USA, but also emphasizes providing CSA shares and vegetables to refugee families along with the traditional local customers. This provides another opportunities for community to be formed and more refugees
to have access to the integration advantages of the program. These changes by organizations similar to Plant It Forward are options that Plant It Forward could use to help address some of the points that PIF struggles with in regards to complete social integration within their organization.

**X) Moving Forward For Plant It Forward**

Plant It Forward is currently in a transitional state as an organization; their Founder/President, Teresa O'Donnell, is transitioning out of her position, they are looking to take on new refugee farmers, and some of the first “class” of farmers are looking to move on to their own farms and projects. All of these transitions on top of the current political climate of the US are clearly posing a lot of questions for the organization, the staff members, and the refugee farmers. The reality of an uncertain future was clearly placing stress on those invested in Plant It Forward, so it bears talking about.

The main question about the future that was mentioned over and over in my conversations with people at PIF was what happens when the farmers feel like they have sufficient connections, skills, and motivation to split off from PIF and become their own boss and run their own small farm? By some measures this could be seen as the ultimate form of “social integration” because it shows that these farmers have enough interpersonal connections with the people they have been selling vegetables in order to feel like they can sufficiently set out on their own. One farmer I talked to voiced this very clearly to me when he said, “I want to farm on my own, but first I have to fix others stuff in my life because I got divorce and have money problem.” It
was clear from this conversation with this farmer that he felt like he would be successful, mentioning several times that he believed his customers would “follow him.” While in many cases this would be seen as a bad thing, like a worker splitting away from the company and taking business, Plant It Forward didn’t view themselves as a business, they viewed themselves as facilitators and so farmers feeling comfortable enough to leave was an ultimate goal of theirs. When O’Donnell was asked about the future of PIF this question was the first point she touched on, saying:

I think the big question that remains unanswered is what is the next step for the farmers that are in the program, is there any plan for them to save money and move on or become independent. That is a big unanswered question; so figuring that out would be something for the future.

While Plant It Forward never says that they are trying to intentionally connect the farmers with the wider community, through O’Donnell’s desires to figure out how the farmers can move in their own business it is clear this has always been a key aspect of the organization. This is reiterated by Randi Rodgers, the farm share program manager, who when asked about farmers leaving PIF to work on their own said, “that is the ultimate goal, cool, now you don’t have to lean on us. That’s the goal.” This goal is thought about as an economic goal from the perspective of Plant It Forward, but it is as much a social goal as it is economic. While “complete social integration” is not something that may ever be achieved, the fact that farmers possess the resources to feel comfortable in their communities and customers and want to set out on their own seems like an undeniable step towards providing them with that “social connection [which is] seen to have played a fundamental roll in driving the process of integration at a local level” (Ager 2008).
Plant It Forward is also undergoing some major institutional changes, including the shift to a new president of the organization. While Teresa has been the vision holder and dreamer behind PIF for a long time, there will now be a new person in this position. This poses the question of how the new president will approach the organization, what will change, how the expectations for staff and farmers will shift, and what the intuitional priorities will be. While this is an uncertain and sometimes hard place to be it also provides an opportunity for Plant It Forward to do a self-facing evaluation and shift some of their practices in order to focus more on how to improve their program to service the farmers in a more rounded and holistic manner.

Along with the major shifts in staff PIF is also looking at taking on a new group of refugee farmers into another training program. This again provides an opportunity for the organization to make some shifts to improve the points in their organizational structure and working that are hindering complete and holistic integration. It also gives them the space to think deeply about who they are serving and how they can serve them as best as possible form the moment they enter the program to the moment they decided they want to take off and farm on their own and beyond.

Being a fairly young organization Plant It Forward is now facing a transitional period that provides them with a spectacular opportunity to be self-reflective and ask the big questions about how they are serving the refugees they work with.
XI) Conclusion

Social integration is an ideal and standard that may never be achieved perfectly, but through this research it has become clear that it is a goal that should be worked for. The model that PIF uses, while not perfect, is a model that should be looked at and thought about by other organizations and entities that work with refugees. It is important to ask how an organization can serve the refugee population they are working with in a wider way, which will not only improve their health and happiness, but also their future success.

As I look back at my time in Houston working with Plant It Forward there are so many moments that I am thankful for, but one that particularly stands out happened on my first day with the organization. I had spent the afternoon working with one of the farmers; she was quieter and very uncomfortable with her English (she told me this, despite my continued reassurance that her English was fantastic). We had spent most of the afternoon harvesting for her CSA delivery that she had that day; it was warm, but not uncomfortably hot. We worked mostly in silence with little snippets of conversation here and there. As we got ready to go home for the day she came over to me with a bag filled with veggies next to her cooler, I had assumed this was a share for a CSA customer or for her to take home to her family, but she handed it to me. I looked at her confused and she smiled and said, “thank you so much.” She then busied herself running around the farm, picking, cleaning several more things for me, despite my insistence that really I didn’t need two whole heads of lettuce for myself. This moment stands out to me because it was so genuine, she was so happy to have somebody help her, while I was busy being
worried that I was being a burden, she was thankful that somebody had taken the
time to be present with her and help out. She loved her job, and was so clearly
happy to share that with me. It was moments like these that made me realize how
much these refugees were just like the rest of us. They just wanted to have human
connections, be part of a community, and be happy. When she realized that I was
happy just working along side her, that it was in fact an honor for me, she paid me
back in the way she knew how, with a whole bag full of vegetables.

This interaction taught me just how important social integration is because
while it is obviously critical that refugees have jobs and homes, it is also important
they are happy. Yet this happiness doesn’t necessarily come from just barely being
able to pay your rent every month or being off welfare (though those things
certainly don’t hurt). It also must include a feeling of power and belonging that are
part of the reality of social integration. Social integration must be engaged in and
initiated by both the community that has refugees joining and the refugees
themselves. If only one of these parties engages with and desires integration than
integration is not possible. Complete integration may not be possible, but taking the
steps towards it is of vital importance. Many organizations work to help refugees
integrate in a one-dimensional manner, like finding them a job, but don’t realize the
importance of looking at integration as a more holistic process. Plant It Forward at
first glance appears to only support the economic integration of refugees, but with a
little more observation it is clear they are providing so much more than a job, they
are providing the means and spaces for refugees and the surrounding communities
to engage together, helping the refugees that they work with become socially
integrated. While Plant It Forward is by no means perfect, it is engaging deeply with the refugees they work with and in turn are providing them with a chance at health, happiness, and personhood. In today's day of fear and anger toward refugees, it is more important than ever to acknowledge a refugee's personhood and to shift our culture to incorporate them wholly, without this we will be a nation of separate entities, with this we will be united front and an example for the world as to what social integration and acceptance can archive.
XII) Bibliography


Local Economic and Employment Development (Program), and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, eds. 2006. From Immigration to Integration: Local Solutions to a Global Challenge. Paris: OECD.


