



# Eating Change: A Critical Autoethnography of Community Gardening and Cultivating Identity in Food Systems

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## Introduction

Community gardening efforts involving universities often carry a social purpose (alleviating hunger, addressing climate change, healing people and places), yet there are as many reasons for gardening as there are gardeners. Inquiring one's place, purpose, and identity in the context of community food systems invites a reflexive process of meaning-making, connecting the personal and political.



## Purpose

This dissertation research pairs social identity and critical theories with autoethnographic writing to explore meanings in the author's lived experiences as a community gardener. Centering on university-community partnerships in the Monadnock Region between 2010-2020, it inquires culture through self and vice-versa.

The author's dual and multiple positionality (provider/recipient of food assistance, educator/student, coordinator/volunteer) are considered in relation to gardening and its association with class, motherhood, and environmental identity.

## Methods

The researcher collected data from personal memory, self-observation, artifacts, interviews, and self-reflection exercises. Narrative vignettes, created through data analysis and interpretation, conveyed themes such as food dignity and resilience. To contextualize, problematize, and appreciate lived experiences in their cultural context, the author wove vignettes with scholarly critique.



## Results

The study produced three autoethnographic texts, each integrating metaphor, voice, and critical reflection to convey meanings of lived experience construed from the data. The texts invite readers into the author's meaning-making process.



## Discussion & Implications

Intended impacts are to expand autoethnographic methods in food and environmental studies by embracing vulnerability, visibility of self, reflexivity, engagement, and open-endedness (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013), and invite others to explore their lived experiences in community food systems.



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## Acknowledgements

C&S Workplace Organic Gardens Project & Fellowship, C&S Wholesale Grocers  
Community Garden Connections, Antioch University New England  
Advisor: Libby McCann, PhD, Antioch University New England. Committee: Joy Ackerman, PhD, Antioch University New England; Kim Niewolny, PhD, Virginia Tech Institute & State University