

# **PERCEPTIONS ON RACE AND GENDER AMONG URBAN FARMERS: ORAL HISTORIES IN AMERICA’S HEARTLAND**

By

Ahmed Z. Mitiche

An Honors Project submitted to the University of Indianapolis Strain Honors College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Baccalaureate degree “with distinction.” Written under the direction of Dr. Amanda J. Miller.

April 30, 2016

*Approved by:*

---

*Dr. Amanda J. Miller, Faculty Advisor*

---

*Dr. James B. Williams, Interim Executive Director, Strain Honors College*

---

*First Reader*

---

*Second Reader*

*“Can a system where one social group has more power and privilege advance social justice as long as fresh produce is made available and gardeners are diverse?” (Reynolds 2014)*

Urban farmers and those who work with them represent a wide variety of ideas, motivations, and goals within the urban agriculture movement. Their motivations for engaging this work, their perceptions on racial and gender dynamics within it, and their views on urban agriculture as a solution for solving social problems are of central importance. Understanding these perceptions is paramount to understanding how urban agriculture can play an effective and beneficial role in the betterment of those it serves.

Urban agriculture is understood as a response to a predatory food system that harms workers, consumers’ health, and the environment as well as to food access issues (Allen 2013). It can be a form of empowerment for marginalized groups and a tool for developing cities and broken communities (Keiser 2011). Nonetheless, urban farming can also be problematic. Urban farms can be sites where racism and class inequalities are replicated (Guthman 2008). They can also be ones where outsider groups enter into marginalized communities and appropriate their resources and promote gentrifying practices (Poulsen and Spiker 2014). Finally, urban agriculture can create a well-intentioned environment where social ills like hunger and joblessness are disconnected from their racialized roots (Reynolds 2014).

In order to better understand the state of urban agriculture from the perspective of urban agriculturalists themselves, I conducted six oral histories in the Indianapolis metropolitan area of individuals working in or with urban farms and gardens. As part of the oral histories, I asked

questions about the agriculturalists' motivations, their perceptions on race and gender inequality, and how they believed urban farming could potentially help address inequality and injustice. In all, I found that while urban agriculturalists are interested in serving marginalized communities and addressing hunger, the underlying structures of injustice that are the roots of the inequality they seek to address appear to be less salient for them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the literature about urban agriculture emerged in support of the burgeoning urban farming movement (e.g. Colasanti, Hamms, and Litgens 2012; Surls, Feenstra, Golden, Galt, Hardesty, Napawan, and Wilen 2015). Scholars sought to endorse and promote urban agriculture as a means for developing better cities, addressing food insecurity, and empowering marginalized communities (Poulsen and Spiker 2014). Other trends shifted the focus to a more critical approach to urban farming with the goal of saving it from becoming a tool of a sometimes unjust status quo (Alkon, Hope, and Mares 2012). Previous literature also addressed different facets of urban agriculture, including motivations of farmers, racial and gender justice, and ways urban agriculture could solve issues of injustice (Colasanti et al. 2012).

### *Motivations*

Urban agriculturalists are just as diverse in their motivations as they are in their backgrounds and interests and represent a spectrum that often overlaps with itself (Colasanti et al. 2012). Motivations ranged from personal desires to connect with food and the earth (Allen 2013) to socially motivated causes to bring about equality and justice (Poulsen and Spiker 2014). Specifically, agriculturalists understand their work as “religion itself”, a personal calling to

address spiritual connections to nature as well as social causes (Allen 2013). Others sought more pragmatic goals in their work. For those living in Detroit's failing inner city, urban agriculture is seen as way to promote development, vibrancy, and economic opportunity (Colasanti et al. 2012). A common theme is the desire to simply increase access to healthy and nutritious food for marginalized communities (e.g. Allen 2013; Colasanti et al. 2012; Poulsen and Spiker 2014). Finally, urban agriculture is understood as a means for community building and a space for bringing families together, encouraging youth to develop skills and employment experience, and as a way to promote healthier lifestyles and eating patterns (Colasanti et al. 2012).

### *Racial and Gender Justice*

Literature surrounding ideas of social justice in the context of agriculture abound, especially in regards to racial and gender justice (e.g. Alkon, Hope, and Mares 2012; Guthman 2008). Social scientists have clearly documented that the history of agriculture in the United States is one of racial exploitation and that the food system is "profoundly broken" (Allen 2013). For example, government subsidies favor 10 percent of the richest "farmers" (i.e. multi-national agro-corporations) and are used to perpetuate predatory agricultural processes that are detrimental to consumers' health, to exploited minority workers, and to animals and the environment (Allen 2013).

The movement which emerged in the 1960s to respond to this deeply problematic food system sought to create spaces in urban and peri-urban communities that offered people the chance to grow fresh, healthy and accessible produce (fruits and vegetables) for themselves and their communities (Keiser 2011). This new method of food production also offered farmers and

their communities many advantages that transcended economic and material benefits. For example, these farms were a place where “disadvantaged black youth could come to find second chances, to find themselves, to connect to the earth, and to find peace in a hectic environment” (Allen 2013:124). The vacant land in inner-cities that would otherwise have been a community eyesore was, in some cases, turned into sites for empowerment. Vacant land in Detroit, for example, was transformed into a space for reclaiming food production and distribution in the black community, for resisting racism in traditional supermarkets and stores, for youth development and empowerment, and for connecting the community to the sources of their food and the earth (Colasanti et al. 2012).

The gender dynamic also transcended simple tangible benefits. For women of low-income households it was a source of “empowerment within”, symbolizing security and safety, and encouraging community development and family ties (Slater 2001). In the context of the Global South, food gardening for women was used as a response to trauma from violence and powerlessness, where gardening became a form of resistance to societal oppression (Slater 2001). Urban farming also represented stability; it was symbolic of putting down permanent roots in the city which, especially for women who came from rural parts of the Global South, was associated with residence stability and the means for building a family (Slater 2001).

Gender dynamics in urban farming were also a means to challenge existing gender norms. In the context of London’s government allotment plots, Buckingham (2005) found that women entering the “allotment scene” coincided with a shift in attitude among males that once dominated the plots and who gradually began to see women gardeners as competent and capable.

While initial research sought to advocate for urban farming and presented it in a largely positive light, others have drawn on Critical Race Theory and Critical Geography to offer critiques and highlight some of the negative aspects of urban farming (Guthman 2008; Tornaghi 2014). For some, the first wave of literature over-emphasized the benefits of urban agriculture - its potential to address healthy food access, environmental issues, and build stronger communities- without addressing potential problems and unjust dynamics it could reproduce (Reynolds 2014).

One such dynamic is the existence of racism and suspicion of white led initiatives in minority neighborhoods. For example in Detroit, publicly owned and vacant land abound, but white led urban agriculture initiatives are received with suspicion despite efforts to address racism directly (Colasanti et al. 2012). This suspicion is often not unfounded. Whiteness cultural practice is often permeated by a subconscious white missionary zeal and desire to “teach” African American subjects proper eating habits (Guthman 2008). In other cases, white “outsider” projects outright exploit neighborhood resources and create the conditions necessary for gentrification (Poulsen and Spiker 2014). Those who are most well connected, with the most power and voice, are also the ones who have access to additional resources and money (Reynolds 2014). In New York, for example, a news story covering the city’s up and coming urban farmers highlighted seven farmers, six of whom were white; this despite the fact that the majority of urban farmers in the city were black or Latino. This was a case where the news story reinforced white dominance of urban agriculture movements (Reynolds 2014). Finally, alternative food discourse often dismisses racism as an underlying cause of inequities, preferring a “color-blind”

approach that focuses on socio-economic status instead (Reynolds 2014). That is, food discourse has reduced structural inequalities to problems of class disparity without acknowledging their deep racial origins and manifestations.

Another such dynamic that was left behind in the first wave of literature surrounding urban agriculture was that it sometimes addressed symptoms of social injustice but not its roots. Scholars spoke of the benefits of urban agriculture and connected it to social justice, but did not differentiate between alleviating symptoms of injustice (e.g. access to food) and dismantling underlying structures of injustice (Reynolds 2014). Privileged farmers, for example, use planning models that could never be accessible globally and among the world's poorest, but rather only by a small privileged few (Tornaghi 2014). Some community level local efforts which genuinely seek to reduce ecological footprints tend to “represent small-scale economic entrepreneurship... using limited grants and charitable funds and as a means for an income as opposed to a radically alternative form of urban living” (Tornaghi 2014:10).

Finally, urban agriculture itself may reinforce inequities and perpetuate an unjust system (Reynolds 2014). Reynolds found that, despite diversity, increased interest in urban agriculture, and social justice issues, much of the racial and class-based inequalities that are found in broad social systems are being replicated within New York's urban agricultural scene (Reynolds 2014). In other scenarios, urban agriculture is being used as part of health preventative measures that form a prelude to public budget cuts, or to “greenwash” communities with the sole goal of revamping the real-estate market (Tornaghi 2014). Even the plants are not left out. Changes in who farms in urban areas has in some cases effected what gets grown, allowing for the

embourgeoisement- “a kind of vegetable variant of gentrification”- of produce that reflects the tastes and needs of an elite, female dominated class of urban farmers (Buckingham 2005).

### *Urban Farming as Solution*

Urban farming is understood among agriculturalists as being a solution for various social ills and injustices (Allen 2013; Weber 2009). Like the motivations noted above, the social problems urban farming is seen to address, and in what ways, often reflects a wide range of perspectives. The two major contributions urban agriculture was seen to have, however, are in regards to improving the environment and offering an alternative to an otherwise predatory and socially unjust food system (Allen 2013; Colasanti et al. 2012).

Urban farming is understood to be a potential solution for health and food access. It is a means for bringing healthy and nutritious food to communities that cannot otherwise access it (Allen 2013). It is also a means for curbing the need to transport food over very large distances, thereby reducing reliance on fossil fuels (Allen 2013). Not only that, but urban farming can potentially replace or at least supplement a food processes that, as in large-scale, corporatized, monoculture practices, leads to the depletion of topsoil thus rendering food less nutrient rich. Urban agriculture, in comparison, offers people food that is more nutrient dense and flavorful.

Urban agriculture is also seen as an entry-point for challenging a dominant food system which is rooted in racial exploitation and big-money interests (Colasanti et al. 2012). It can lead to workforce development, city development, and the rejuvenation of communities in inner-cities (Colasanti et al. 2012).



Urban farmers are also diverse in their understanding of *how* urban farming can achieve these goals. A common theme was that before urban agriculturalists could create change in communities, they needed to develop trust among residents of those communities, what Will Allen has called ‘staying power’, or the tendency for agriculturalists to stay committed to a community long term as opposed to staying briefly and quickly losing interest (2013). While it is acknowledged that urban farming is not quite yet a sustainable enterprise (farms are often funded through grants and other programs), many agree that it has the potential to be (Allen 2013). This can be achieved by raising awareness about urban farms and their potential and thus increasing demand and legislative support (Dubbeling, Zeuw, and Veenhuizen 2010; Keiser 2011).

Others have noted that in order for food justice to be a reality in the US, and for urban agriculture to play a role in that, an emphasis must be made on challenging and directly opposing the underlying neoliberal political economy and corporate food regimes that hurt disadvantaged people in inner cities (Alkon, Hope, and Mares 2012). They argue that by ignoring the underlying neoliberal framework, agriculturalists are potentially complicit - if not helping to promote - this framework by relieving the market-based economy of its responsibility to cater to those who are most in need (Alkon et al. 2012). The themes addressed in food justice literature can be used to this end by offering those working on food security and environmental issues a better understanding of root causes of hunger and access and can also help environmental activists more broadly incorporate notions of social justice in their work (Alkon et al. 2012).

Finally, farmers can educate those in their communities about structural oppression by incorporating non-hierarchical leadership models and engaging in policy advocacy (Alkon et al.

2012). Others have called for new production and sales models. For example, the community supported agriculture (CSA) model, where consumers purchase “shares” of a farmer’s produce before the planting season, and then are given from the produce when it is harvested, was developed in the mid-1990s, but is often times not feasible for poor people (Allen 2013).

In this study, I sought to address issues of social justice, race, and gender in urban agriculture. I did so by asking three primary research questions: 1. What motivates urban agriculturalists in their work? 2. What are their perceptions on racial and gender justice? and 3. In what ways can urban farming help address issues of injustice? In all, I argue that urban agriculturalists must develop a deeper understanding of the underlying structures that create the conditions of hunger and inequality that they seek to address.

## METHODS

In the fall of 2015, the Marion County Purdue Extension asked for an assessment of the special needs of urban farmers in Indianapolis. The organization’s goal was to better understand the motivations, interests, and backgrounds of Indianapolis area urban farmers so that the Purdue Extension could better serve their needs. Together, my advisor, a representative of the Purdue Extension, and I decided to conduct oral histories in order to capture their motivations and needs in the broadest sense. Personally, I chose to explore urban farmers’ feelings regarding racial and gender justice in the context of urban agriculture as one aspect of this project.

Few studies currently explore perceptions among urban farmers on race and gender together. With the Black Lives Matter movement developing into a national discourse on structural racism and the recent closure of a local food chain in Indianapolis (Double 8 Foods)

that has left more food deserts in low-income, mostly minority neighborhoods, a qualitative study on perceptions among some of the city's more active and influential urban agriculturalists can provide insight for steps to address some of issues of hunger and racial disparity (Staff Reports 2015).

### *Sampling*

I used purposeful convenience sampling to select the participants. The sample was recommended by the Extension Educator for Urban Agriculture at Purdue's Marion County extension office. The participants were farmers or project coordinators and employees of urban farms who did work directly related to urban agriculture. The sample included three males and three females, whose names were changed in order to protect the privacy of the participants. "Ayana" was a 62 year old urban farmer and community center director, "Stephanie" a 35 years old farm program manager, "Tyler" a 40 years old farmer, "Marty" a 31 year old farmer, "Mark" a 27 year old farm project coordinator, and "Melissa" a 38 year old manager and gardener). All of the participants were college-educated, and from middle to upper middle class backgrounds. All of the participants were also Caucasian-Americans except Ayana, who was a Black-Ethiopian and long-time resident in the United States. There was an additional participant who was originally part of the study sample (an African-American male), but his interview was lost due to a malfunctioning recording device. I selected six (originally seven) interviewees because this was the number that could reasonably be studied in the time-frame I had allotted.

## *Oral Histories*

The first step before beginning the oral histories was to conduct background research on urban farming. I looked at previous studies where I identified trends, goals, and problems within urban farming in the United States and abroad. I then used this background study to create an interview guide. These semi-structured interview questions, presented below, helped me address key issues regarding farmers' backgrounds, motivations, and feelings on race and gender justice, how urban farming could address social problems, and how the Extension could better serve them:

What are some of the challenges related to social justice that urban farming can address?

Talk to me about issues of race/ethnicity in urban farming.

Talk to me about issues of sex/gender in urban farming.

In my research, solving the problems posed by food deserts seems to be an important component in many farmers' work. What are your thoughts about these challenges?

Tell me about the challenge food deserts pose to health- especially that of poor, migrant, and black communities?

Will Allen, author of *Good Food Revolution*, talks about a spiritual component of being tied to the soil. One of my favorite quotes is when he talks about kids that he apprentices at his urban farm in Milwaukee. He says

“Something changes in them when they... put their hands in the soil for the first time. They mellow. It can be a spiritual thing simply to touch the earth if you have been disconnected from it for so long.”

What are your thoughts on this?

What are your thoughts on genetically modified organisms (GMOs)?

How would you weigh potential benefits that GMO's offer in comparison to potential

What are your thoughts on the role that agribusiness corporations play in issues of immigration?

Have you experienced or witnessed racism- shoppers not wanting to buy from minority farmers or booths at farmers markets?

Are you aware of any farming programs that help immigrant refugees?

Following in the tradition of Charmaz (2014), questions were able to be modified throughout the interview process for clarity and completeness.

The interviews were conducted in various settings including at individuals' farms, at local coffee shops, or at the University of Indianapolis. The interviews conducted at the farms were especially helpful because I was able to see exactly what farmers were referring to when they spoke about the farm.<sup>1</sup> The interviews lasted between an hour and a half and two hours. They were recorded on a digital recording device, transcribed verbatim, and then de-identified prior to coding and analysis. The full texts of the interviews as well as the study results were then given to Purdue Extension.

### *Analysis Strategy*

After collecting the oral histories and transcribing them my thesis advisor and I began the first round of coding, referred to as "open coding" (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The purpose of open coding, simply, is to generate broad themes. We selected Melissa as the first interview to base our codebook on because her comments were most representative of all respondents. In order to build my codebook I was then able to use that to carefully read through transcripts and highlight blocks of text that related to each research question. After highlighting each quote I tagged it with a code that represented the quote. Codes were derived both inductively, from repeated reading of the transcripts, and deductively, as suggested by past literature. Using these first transcript codes, I created a codebook which had a set of codes for each research question. My advisor then double-coded to check for inter-rater reliability, and then together we refined

---

<sup>1</sup> I even conducted one interview in a car parked in between a row of vegetables!

the code book before final coding. We found general agreement between our codes.

Discrepancies were most often related to names we gave to codes and discussed until we reached agreement. We also merged some codes that were closely related. Using this codebook, I was then able to read through the remaining transcripts and code for each question.

After coding the transcripts, I created a spreadsheet with the names of all of the interviewees on one axis and the codes on the other. I was then able to mark which participants made mention of which code (See Appendix). This allowed me to engage in axial coding- identifying the codes that were mentioned most often and ones that recurred together (Strauss and Corbin 1998). I then examined variability within each code. For example, the most common code for research question one was ‘environmental justice.’ I then went through each interview and noted the ways respondents spoke about environmental justice. For example, some spoke of it in terms of “sustainability” (the process of making ecological systems more enduring), others in terms of “responsibility” (human obligations to the ecosystem), and yet others in terms of “ramifications” (the consequences of human irresponsibility). The final step in the coding process, selective coding, involved determining the overall storyline that emerged from the data (LaRossa 2012).

## RESULTS

The research questions addressed in these oral histories sought to capture the aggregate orientations of respondents in regards to social responsibility and social justice. Respondents felt motivated by bringing about greater food security for marginalized communities. They understood this marginalization to be a consequence of obscure societal forces that were related to but not driven by racism, and even less so by patriarchy or sexism. They felt that urban

farming could address food access issues through education, in addition to physically providing people with fresh produce that was grown on farms. Overall, these findings demonstrate that urban agriculturalists in Indianapolis are interested in addressing problems of hunger and food access, but lack the foundational understanding of how underlying structures of racism and inequality create the symptoms that they are addressing.

### *Motivations for Working in Urban Agriculture*

The first research question, “What motivates you?” asked subjects about their motivations for working as or with urban farmers. Their motives varied. These themes included environmental justice and food access and themes tied to the physical welfare of the earth and of people. Most commonly, however, individuals cared about improving low-income individuals’ access to healthy foods.

### *Environmental justice*

Five of the six interviewees referred to environmental justice as a motivating factor in their work. Those who referred to environmental justice referred to it in the context of sustainability. For example, Tyler was motivated by questions on “how we should act in regards to the environment, how we are responsible, what our responsibilities are, [and] what the ramifications are?” Similarly, Melissa described how her concern for the environment was deeply tied to human responsibility, and how this motivation influenced her work:

I think a lot of times environmental efforts focus just on the natural world and humans are the enemy, and they may be, but that isn’t helpful for finding a solution where everybody can live together and where it’s actually sustainable over longer terms. So in that sense, it’s more kind of environmental stuff was our underlying motivation but all of the food access and security and social justice pieces of all that

certainly have become very apparent in our work here, and are [things] that I've always had a huge heart for anyway; I just didn't necessarily know it was going to fall into place like this.

These examples demonstrate a common theme among our interviewees. They were motivated by compassion, moral responsibility towards the earth, and environmental sustainability, but also understood that environmental issues are deeply connected to political issues like food access, which appropriately, was the second most commonly cited code regarding motivation.

### *Food access*

Similar to environmental justice, five individuals explained that food access was one of their primary motivations for working in urban agriculture. In addressing food access, participants talked about broader food systems, personal relationships with people who struggle with access and poverty, and access to healthy food. Stephanie noted that her:

...motivation was generated from past work, so seeing the way that the food system currently works, knowing a lot of people that live in low food access areas and who struggle with poverty... obviously a lot of our work is based on trying to make that [better], and [to] improve the equality there.

Stephanie captures here that the local and the global are intimately connected by connecting her past work to the broader food system, and that her interests in food access, like many of her colleagues, was rooted in both.

Respondents also discussed food access in the context of healthy food and healthy living.

Mark explained that:

These are people that are never going to retire, and that's why it's so important to try and give them the opportunity to eat healthy on the budget that they have. I mean, household budget really dictates what you eat... They're saying ok, I need to eat for three dollars and feed our two kids too. So how do we make it so they can



eat for the three dollars and feed their two kids? That's kind of what we're working towards.

It was clear that this sentiment was common among the many respondents. They all seemed to be motivated by offering healthy food access, as opposed to access through food pantries or canned food giveaways, or, as Melissa explained, agriculture that is "just going to feed McDonald's feed cattle for cheap hamburgers or corn being converted into high fructose corn syrup that's giving everyone diabetes and obesity. I don't even know if I look at that as growing food really."

### *Feelings on Racial and Gender Justice Issues*

The second research question explored participants' feelings about race and gender in urban agriculture. Respondents were asked, among other things, "How do you feel about issues of racial and gender justice?" Five out of six respondents focused mostly on the experience of whiteness- either in the context of self-reflexivity (all but one of our interviewees were white), or in reference to the healthy intermixing of races, presumably as a process for reducing racial tension and bringing valuable (white) resources into poorer (black, Latino, etc.) communities.

### *Reflexivity*

Melissa offered a pertinent commentary on reflexivity and how her whiteness affected her work and her role in a non-white community:

"I'm real reluctant as a Caucasian to strong arm any of that interaction [between races], it's not- I don't think that's our place... The only real strategy for something like that as a white woman is to encourage all of our neighbors to come garden with us."

Despite this, all of the white participants, when asked about the communities they grew up in, referred to them as "normal" or "lacking in culture", perhaps confirming what critical race

theorists have called “whiteness-as-norm”; the belief that whiteness is normal and “good” and that all else is different and foreign, i.e. “cultured” (Fitzgerald 2014).

Ahmed: Tell me about where you lived.

Tyler: I don’t know I mean I still value where I grew up, because many people I care about [live there], but the actual place I usually think of as a mess of suburbs and strip malls and highways, hard to tell what’s north, south, east or west, just exits and shopping centers everywhere. Like I said, we were close to Philly, and identified with the city, and big Philly sports fans. We had access to cultural things in the city... but many aspects of it felt fairly non-distinctive, didn’t always seem to be a lot of culture right where we lived.

Reflecting this, half of the respondents were quick to dismiss race- and whiteness in particular- as something that should be emphasized in urban agriculture work. They noted that problems around race existed, but that they preferred not to think about food access issues being directly related to them in any way. Marty, for example, preferred to think of hunger issues as being related to class instead of race:

Ahmed: How is race connected with food and poverty, food access?

Marty: So like food access in general- like sources of food in impoverished communities- that idea of food deserts is- can cross racial lines but I don’t know if- I’m knowledgeable enough to say it affects black folks, or Hispanic folks, or white folks more prevalently. My... it seems like, let’s see, to me on the surface it seems a little more of a like economic situation where you have grocery stores or companies have not decide to invest in poor neighborhoods so the food sources that they have are either like distant or terrible or overpriced. So you get, yeah you get screwed over all sorts of way. It’s hard for them to get to produce or to healthy food. The healthy food they can get to is overpriced and it’s not usually being provided for by local business. You know...

Respondents also discussed whiteness in reference to the healthy intermixing of races.

Ayana offered a powerful narrative on the profound effect healthy dialogue can foster:

Here is how the race thing works. Major Tool Machine [a local store]- [the owner's] daughters [white] were like, sixth and eighth grade something like, elementary school- and they wanted to come volunteer here. So we said great, so they came to volunteer. Our kids [predominantly Latino or Black] are here and those kids walk in and say we want to volunteer. And they ['our kids'] look at them and say, what did you do wrong? Why are you in trouble? So those girls were like, "We didn't get in trouble we just want to volunteer. So it's good, so we can be rewarded". "So you mean you get rewarded? And we're getting punished?" So they were just like, they couldn't understand. They started talking like that. Then these kind of cultural relationships developed. With the two girls coming more Carmel kids started coming. So they started talking to each other. [These] urban suburban mixes have been the biggest hit for us; so these students were working together, they grew up together, now they are in high school, and we ended up hiring them. Both girls. One day, the girl from Carmel- we have two or three students that didn't have a ride, and she said "I can take them". And we thought, "Should we let her take them?" You know we were kind of not sure. But we said, "Yeah go ahead take them home". But then she came back in tears. We thought "Oh no what happened!?" "I cannot believe that's where they live! How do they smile with us all day? How do they function?" She was shocked at their houses, and the living conditions... So it was a big thing. Now they even go to the house and help them, and she was able to do a lot of things with school, helping them one on one, "Do you have any issues in high school?" One girl was ready to drop out and one of them really sat down to help her to finish online and helped her get her high school graduation. So they teach each other, and the other learning happened [as well]. One time the other way was, everybody says "Oh Friday, pay day, we get money today, we want to go party", and Lauren just said, "Uh I think I'm going to just put mine in our retirement." A 17 year putting in retirement. The kids just started laughing all over the floor. She said, "Bring me a computer I'm going to show you!" So she's calculating all of this, and she was showing them and they thought like, "Whaaaat!?" They said, "Really it can get that big?" So they spent like an hour- you think we can do that? No! So they did this. So the next year, Dajuan comes back and says "That Lauren did an amazing job on me!" and we thought like, "what"? "I still have money in the bank! Remember what she did? I still save my money." And

Lauren eventually went to DC- George Washington University- and when they ask her about community service hours and that kind of thing, she's the only one that goes to the inner city, because now she knows how to really work with them and stuff. So they teach each other, so we purposely recruit urban to suburban mixes."

Ayana's narrative, while a powerful example of how racial mixing can foster empathy and collaboration, was not necessarily representative of the group, as most did not refer to it at all.

### *Racism*

Respondents (five out of the six) also discussed anti-black racism. While it was discussed as an 'important topic', this was mainly in reference to interpersonal racism at farmer's markets (as opposed to racism as a systemic problem, as was done with food access), and that, while it must be present they had never experienced it themselves.

Ahmed: We've talked about issues of racism. Any final thought about that? Do you see it on the ground in the food scene here in Indy?

Mark: I have not seen any indications of that. I have not. I really think, it's a people problem, not a race, gender, ethnicity... none of that. I think it's a people problem.

Two of the respondents, however, did allude, albeit in a sort of sideways manner, to racism as a systemic problem, especially in reference to policies and ordinances. Marty spoke about how poverty disproportionately affects people of color, and how farmer's markets tend to operate in wealthier white neighborhoods:

Ahmed: Have you ever experienced or witnessed racism at a farmers market to black farmers?

Marty: Umm, no. I haven't. But that's not a good measure, that's just me. Let's see. I think one thing that farmers markets and this is- you know farmers markets are kind of in the same situation as those grocery stores that choose not to invest in neighborhoods, there's like very little incentive

for a farmers market to start up and continue in an impoverished neighborhood. And that's not just the farmer's markets fault, it's like there is a lot of... there's a huge hassle that market has to take on to accept food stamps and for the vendors to accept food stamps... there's just a lot of, there's certain requirements and infrastructure that is required [and] is costly and time consuming. And you know a farmer's market is a business and they need to be in a place where they know people are going to buy their produce or their items or whatever. And so most farmers markets are not in impoverished neighborhoods and Indianapolis is fairly segregated and granted there are certain areas of like upper middle class black folks but not a ton. So odds are good that like where the farmers market will be is in an area that does not have a high concentration of nonwhites. And not saying farmers markets are inherently racist coming out. So I think it's a complicated thing. And I don't think that it's also something that farmers markets shouldn't necessarily have to take on. Farmer's market shouldn't solve racism in Indianapolis but there are all sorts of, they can help raise questions about that sort of stuff.

While Marty and one other respondent reflected on the macro-lens of structural injustice and harmful policies, they did so without making a very direct connection to how these problems may be connected to race and racism.

### *Immigrants*

Finally, respondents (five out of six) discussed race in reference to immigrants, especially in terms of job discrimination. Ayana, an immigrant herself, explained that:

When you come in from a country where you are not allowed to speak against authority it becomes easy for an immigrant to be quiet. You know, I came here for school, but there are a lot of immigrants who come here for work- legal or illegal that's not the point. They are just grateful and so they work 24 hours [a day] if they have to.

Of special note was how seldom respondents addressed gender justice issues. When it was brought up it was dismissed as a non-issue or was re-interpreted as a question about

demographics; respondents talked about the prevalence of women versus men on urban farms, each with differing estimates, but avoided issues related to patriarchy, gender norms, or sexism. Perhaps, as Ayana explained, gender justice was simply not a high priority for marginalized communities:

Ahmed: Is there anything interesting or noteworthy regarding gender, in terms of, points of conflict, significant trends... I'm thinking issues of sexism, in terms of gender role expectations maybe.

Ayana: We just have so many fires to put out... they [the kids] are hungry, they this, they don't have uniforms [for school], their relatives have been shot... they really, they have too many issues to deal with, they're hungry every day, if there is no school lunch they have no food, that kind of stuff. So that's where we are.

For others, the sentiment may be rooted in their own gender biases and assumptions. Mark, for example, when asked why more women came to the farm than men, suggested that women came because they were “bored” or because it was a “stress reliever” and “serene.” Surprisingly, however, the only two individuals who were not coded as dismissing gender were both men.

### *Urban Farming as a Potential Solution*

The third set of questions was about how urban agriculture could be a potential solution for addressing injustice. Respondents were asked, “Do you view urban farming as a potential solution to helping reduce injustice and if so, in what ways?” The most common responses cited food access as the main injustice that could be addressed, and that it could be addressed through increased educational opportunities.

## *Food Access*

Four of the respondents discussed food access as pertaining specifically to *healthy* food access, others to food deserts, and others to distance from outside food sources. Stephanie captured all of these when she described the Equal Initiative project (an effort to subsidize produce from urban farms for needy families) as:

A set of funds... used to match SNAP purchases so that people who are in lower income situations are also able to purchase good nutritious food, because I think that's one of the biggest food justice issues. If you are living in a low food access area you're more likely to be low income, to have higher chances of chronic disease, all that stuff. So we want to offer the opportunity for people to afford the nutritious food in their neighborhood- or at least along the bus line.

Stephanie's response is characteristic of almost all of the farmers, who viewed themselves as community builders in the sense that providing food for marginalized people was a priority.

Marty explained that while many organizations include notions of social responsibility in their missions statements, his farm did not do so explicitly. Despite that, he still saw his farm as contributing towards empowering people and offering them access to food.

Ahmed: What are some challenges related to social justice that urban farming can address?

Marty: Well let's see, so this is a tricky one, because I think, I think often times... I think often times there is a desire or I don't know how this started, but there are a lot of, let's say there are a lot of like urban farms, urban farm programs, initiatives or whatever, that are off shoots of organizations that have some sort of social responsibility mission, and so those farms- it's part of their DNA to try and address those problems directly. My own personal experience I don't, like at Inner City Farms I don't, I mean this sounds uh, hmm I'm trying to figure out how to say this.

I don't want to say I don't, it's not that I don't have time to address those things, but I don't directly. Like explicitly directly.

Ahmed: And it doesn't have to be directly.

Marty: Right, for me what ends up, like, the best thing that Inner City Farms can offer in that sort of regard is like, if ICF can be like a financially sustainable business, using like, vacant or underutilized land, and can create a job or two in the process, with fairly low you know, investment, like capital expenditures or whatever. That's a good, that's a good- that can be a powerful example for like, other individuals who might, want to do something similar... or looking to sort of create economic opportunities for themselves, or [to] just create food opportunities for themselves and their communities. I mean I think the idea of like, look, there is this amount of land that I'm using, and I'm using this amount of food, and that's great and that's impressive, the food is going to these, to CSA members, who the vast majority are like, middle or upper income individuals. I have no illusions about that, it's going to restaurants that are like, who are, they're wonderful, I love the people and the owners and the chefs, but they cater to folks who have more money. So, I think for me that's like the economic reality, but if someone like, you know I talk to, I have talked to plenty of folks over the years who like are just excited about using a vacant lot to grow vegetables for themselves or for their neighbor or whatever, and I think that's the biggest thing. Once you start taking like, people start figuring out those pools that can empower themselves and can like stop some sort of reliance on outside institutions then that can be a radical idea.

Marty's response reflects a sort of trickle-down economic model. He understood that his endeavor might not have a direct mission to solve problems of racial disparity and inaccessibility to food, but he did believe that by running his business well and properly, those benefits might trickle down to those who need them.



## *Education*

Regarding education as a means for addressing food access issues, participants identified education for farmers as very important. Tyler referred to this in reference to expanding urban farming in general:

If we want to have more urban farming we need not only the space to do it but we need farmers. So like I said I didn't have any training and there aren't very good options out there to get real farm training. So a big challenge is how do you learn enough to get started and know where to start and get actual farming training. That's hard. And I don't know the solution to that.

Finally, others referred to youth education on basic home and backyard gardening. Tyler described his Farm Works initiative (a youth empowerment program where youth come work on the farm for produce and pay):

So Farm Works has a dual purpose; to increase food security for underserved populations and to create a sustainable employment opportunity for high school students in Indianapolis. [We] would raise money to hire high school students, I think four or five each the last few years and that was great. So the first year we had four students working for us, it was a part time job for 6 weeks during the summer, they'd work on the farm part of the time, they'd also do educational enrichment programs about food justice... any topic related to farms and food in the city, and it was wonderful, it was great. There were two, three students from that first year who reapplied the second year. They got the job, we hired them, as well as a couple other folks, and you start to see these folks are broadening their sense of what food is, they're expanding their own sense of self, in terms of what role they play in their community."

In this way, urban agriculture is seen as a means for more than material benefits, but a way for students to develop life skills and the confidence to succeed and produce their own food in their communities.

## DISCUSSION

The research questions addressed above were meant to capture the overall orientations of those associated with urban agriculture on issues of social responsibility and social justice. Generally, respondents were motivated by food insecurity and lack of food access in poor and minority neighborhoods. They understood the marginality of these communities as a consequence of social forces that were related to but not driven by racism, and even less so by patriarchy or sexism. They felt that urban farming could address food access issues through education, in addition to physically providing people with fresh produce that was grown on farms. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the urban agriculturalists in this study are interested in helping those that are marginalized. However, they do not make a strong connection between the inequality faced by marginalized groups and broader systems of structural racism.

The motivations of our respondents reflected some of those that are presented in the literature. Providing food for poor and hungry communities was the number one motivation among participants. This is common to almost all of the literature reviewed (Colsanti et al. 2012). In contrast, Allen (2013) speaks of empowerment and connectivity to the earth as a central motivation for urban farming, and although this was confirmed by subjects when prompted, it did not appear to be a central motivating factor. City development, which was the third theme present in the literature, was brought up by most of the respondents in this study. The development varied however, from broader city-wide development (that might correlate with gentrification), to the development and empowerment of marginalized groups. That is, development was spoken of in contexts that produce almost opposite outcomes. Marty spoke of

economic development of the city as a whole; this usually meant redevelopment of homes and properties with the goal of increasing property values and encouraging wealthier patrons to move in and poorer one to move out- in other words, gentrification. Melissa, on the other hand, spoke of development as being led by marginalized groups- development that was careful not to harm the weakest members of the community by allowing for investment without squeezing out the poorest members.

The racial and gender justice question results corroborate both sets of literature- those that advocate for urban farming and highlight its benefits and potential, as well as those that are critical of it. The interviewees were clearly motivated by social justice issues and were keen to discuss their work in the context of broader efforts to address racial justice, provide services for disadvantaged communities, and help address issues of food access. Others, however, represented what Reynolds called “small-scale economic entrepreneurship” that addresses some symptoms like hunger and access, without making clear connections to racialized roots of inequity (Guthman 2008; Reynolds 2014).

Finally, questions on how urban farming can solve problems of injustice focused heavily on the environment in the literature. The critical studies, however, emphasized the need for urban agriculture to be reexamined as a means for disrupting the current predatory food system and for offering an alternative based in social equity (Poulsen and Spiker 2014). They called for this by means of greater awareness of systemic injustices, and how they are replicated within urban agricultural scenes, as well as reflexivity that prevented advantaged groups from abusing their privilege (Reynolds 2014). None of the interviewees were able to make the connections to

broader systems of inequality and racism, though they mentioned racism in its more localized forms. As Reynolds (2014) and others have discussed, urban agriculture as a truly viable tool for social justice must be used with the awareness that broader systems of racial justice must be challenged and dismantled if real change is to come about (Alkon, Hope, Mares 2012; Guthman 2008).

One surprising finding was that only two individuals who were not coded as dismissing gender were both men. In general, the question of gender justice posed to the interviewees was often dismissed and reinterpreted as a question on gender demographics at urban farms. The above finding might suggest that the men who were interviewed were conscious of the fact that gender injustices rooted in patriarchy and sexism play a role in urban agriculture. Future research should further explore this topic.

The greatest limitation of this study is that I was only able to conduct oral histories of six urban agriculturalists in Indianapolis. While this research is by no means generalizable, such generalizability is not the goal of oral histories. Nonetheless, it may be a helpful tool for the Purdue Extension as they conduct their research on ways they can better serve Marion County urban farmers. Using the transcripts and analysis provided in this study, the Extension can better serve the needs and interests of marginalized communities that are affected by urban agriculture, and secondly, further aid farmers in their logistical and practical needs.

Overall, the state of urban agriculture in Indianapolis seems to be tied to the service of marginalized communities and increasing access to healthy, affordable food within them. As many of the scholars reviewed in the literature have argued, though, this is not enough. In order

for urban agriculturalists and their allies to truly solve problems of hunger, they must be committed to tackling the underlying problems of poverty and systemic racism. This study can be a contribution for moving towards addressing these underlying issues and creating conversation around them in the urban agriculture scene in Indianapolis.

## APPENDIX

Table 1

Axial Coding																		
Research Question 1: What motivates you?																		
	Nature	Environmental Justice	Gentrification	Vacancy	Engaged Community	Welcoming Space	Outreach	Food Access	Empowerment	Community Development	Trust	Whiteness	Economic Inequality	Immigrants	Local	Business Sustainability	Personal	
Ayana																		
Stephanie	1	1				1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1		1	
Tyler		1						1							1	1	1	
Marty		1		1			1	1	1	1			1			1		
Mark	1	1					1	1		1			1			1		
Melissa	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>Men</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	
<b>Women</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	

Table 2

Research Question 2: How do you feel about issues of racial and gender justice?															
	Gentrification	Slave Work	Whiteness	Dismissal of Race	Suspicion	Blackness	Racism	Dismissal of gender	Women dominated	Gender equal	Female motivation	Immigrants	Welcoming space	Generational differences	
Ayana			1		1	1	1	1				1		1	
Stephanie					1		1	1				1	1		
Tyler	1		1		1		1			1					
Marty			1	1		1	1		1			1			
Mark			1	1				1		1	1	1	1		
Melissa	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	
<b>Men</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	
<b>Women</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	

Table 3

Research Question 3: Do you view urban farming as a potential solution to helping reduce injustice and, if so, in what ways?																			
	Food access	Safety	Community Development	Disabled	Environmental Justice	Education	Welcoming Space	Economic Inequality	Outside help	Immigrants	Public Policy	Nature	Sustainable Business	Empowerment	Youth	Vacancy	Local	No/Not directly	Exploitation
Ayana	1					1				1		1			1		1		
Stephanie	1		1		1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1				1
Tyler	1		1		1	1	1	1	1		1		1				1		1
Marty	1		1		1	1		1	1			1	1	1	1	1			
Mark	1		1		1	1	1	1				1	1		1				
Melissa	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1								
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Men</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Women</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>



## REFERENCES

- Alkon, Alison Hope and Theresa Marie Mares. 2012. "Food Sovereignty in US Food Movements: Radical Visions and Neoliberal Constraints." *Agriculture and Human Values* 29: 347-359.
- Allen, Will. 2013. *The Good Food Revolution: Growing Healthy Food, People, and Communities*. New York: Gotham Books.
- Buckingham, Susan. 2005. "Women (Re)construct the Plot: The regen(d)eration of Urban Food Growing." *Area Magazine* 37 (2): 171-179.
- Charmaz, Kathy. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Colasanti, Kathryn J.A., Michael W. Hamm, and Charlotte M. Litgens. 2012. "The City as an "Agricultural Powerhouse"? Perspectives on Urban Agriculture from Detroit, Michigan." *Urban Geography* 348-369.
- Dubbeling, Marielle, Henk de Zeeuw, and Rene van Veenhuizen. 2010. *Cities, Poverty and Food: Multi-stakeholder Policy and Planning in Urban Agriculture*. Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishers.
- Fitzgerald, Kathleen J. 2014. *Recognizing Race and Ethnicity: Power, Privilege, and Inequality*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Guthman, Judith. 2008. "Bringing Good Food to Others: Investigating the Subjects of Alternative Food Practice." *Cultural Geographies* 15: 431-447.
- Keiser, Barbie E. 2011. "Urban Agriculture: UA is No Longer an Oxymoron," *Searcher: The Magazine for Database Professionals*, May 2011.

- LaRossa, Ralph. 2012. "Writing and Reviewing Manuscripts in the Multidimensional World of Qualitative Research." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 74: 643–659.
- Poulsen, Melissa N., and Marie L. Spiker. John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. 2014. *Integrating Urban Farms into the Social Landscape of Cities*.
- Reynolds, Kristin. 2014. "Disparity Despite Diversity: Social Injustice in New York City's Urban Agriculture System." *Antipode* 47 (1): 240-259.
- Slater, Rachel J. 2001. "Urban Agriculture, Gender, and Empowerment: An Alternative View." *Development Southern Africa* 18 (5).
- Staff Reports. 2015. "Double 8 closures shock neighbors, create "food deserts"" wishtv.com, July 23. Retrieved April 14, 2016 (<http://wishtv.com/2015/07/23/double-8-foods-closes-all-indy-locations/>).
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Surls, Rachel, Gail Feenstra, Sheila Golden, Ryan Galt, Shermain Hardesty, Claire Napawan, and Cheryl Wilen. 2015. "Gearing Up to Support Urban Farming in California: Preliminary Assessment." *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 30 (01): 33-42.
- Tornaghi, Chiara. 2014. "Critical Geography of Urban Agriculture." *Progress in Human Geography*.
- Weber, Karl, ed. 2009. *Food, Inc.: A Participant's Guide*. New York: PublicAffairs.