NorthEast Grows: Dismantling Narratives of Assumed Mutuality in a Community-Engaged Permaculture Partnership

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Abstract

Higher education–community projects to support food security and food justice can improve health outcomes and increase community cohesion, but university funding may lead to power inequities that perpetuate marginalizing narratives. For this project, a regional state university, a local high school, and a nonprofit focused on building school gardens to offer university and high school students hands-on agricultural education and experience with a permaculture focus. Participant interviews revealed some disconnection and conflict between project goals and participant experiences. In this article we detail the planning phases of the project and self-reflexively unpack what we came to call a dominant narrative of assumed mutuality, which yielded uneven power dynamics that lowered school and community partner participation and buy-in. Findings reveal a need for a project design framework with structured, lateral, reflective communication practices across constituent groups to improve longevity and sustainability of collaborative projects.

Keywords: local food systems, community food security, higher education–community partnership, participatory action research

I n fall 2014, our university hosted a screening and panel discussion of the 2012 film *A Place at the Table* (Silverbush & Jacobson, 2012) on our campus. A campus engagement office, a student coalition, and several local community members working to combat food insecurity partnered together in conjunction with this event, which served to engage conversations on our campus about hunger and food justice, security, and sovereignty in our region as well as serving to connect local and campus groups to one another in an educational setting. The event would set the stage for our eventual project detailed in this article—a community-engaged food justice incubator—utilizing a creative economy grant from our university to implement a permaculture-based school–community garden at a local urban high school in collaboration with a local nonprofit from 2015 through 2018.

However, to be clear, the central focus of this article is not permaculture, participatory action research, higher education–community partnerships, or agriculture in and of themselves—though those are all important facets of the complexity of this project. Rather, it is unpacking what we came to call a "dominant narrative of assumed mutuality" that emerged in the project between the various partners we worked with while engaging each of those facets. The narrative was one that we, the university partners—the ones with the most symbolic power—told about our own project.

Dominant narratives are those that reside with social groups who are dominant in terms of race, class, gender, or, in this case, institutional power, and they often foreclose the stories of those in positions of less power or in marginalized and excluded identity groups. They are "those stories we tell ourselves, learn, or share with others—

whether consciously or unconsciously—that also uphold existing power dynamics" (Morrison, 2019, para. 3). In response to the prevalence of dominant narratives, counter-narratives and counterstory have emerged as a tool and methodology for regaining discursive and social power on behalf of oppressed groups (Martinez, 2020).

In the project, our narrative was apparent as we sought to engage our emergent community-engaged food justice coalition in ways that responded to local conditions but were grounded in what we knew about the macro landscape of agriculture, nutrition, and culture. In reviewing our own 4-year (and counting) participatory action research project, located in an urban, postindustrial community neighboring our university in the Northeastern United States, we see that a type of narrative developed from it, one of assumed shared goals and aims, which ultimately hampered our success. This type of narrative, which we (the authors) refer to throughout this article as a dominant narrative of assumed mutuality, emerged in our research through our collective analysis of the interviews and field notes, and discussions with one another. We define this narrative as a tool we unconsciously used to create a cohesive story of our project together, in ways that marked shared goals while ignoring tensions and differences particularly related to race, power, and institutional privilege even as we asserted an equity framework in the project. Because of our assumptions, we did not consciously articulate the ethics and values behind our choices, or the critical differences among the partners and participants. Put simply, the narrative was one that we told that allowed us to believe we shared mutual buy-in from all our partners and collaborators. Our telling a narrative of assumed mutuality to ourselves and our partners, we believe, may have resulted in missed opportunities for growth as well as a flattening of perspective about the value of the project itself.

What we describe here is not an uncommon phenomenon in this area of work—the assumption that local communities and partners will be willing, enthusiastic, and able to take up the opportunity provided via funding and partnership with a university, in order to build food security in their neighborhoods or schools (Agyeman & Alkon, 2011; Anguelovski, 2015; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Kulick, 2019; Slocum, 2006). Relying on these types of narratives may belie the realities of participation across constituent groups. For example, in global development projects, researchers have seen that participants often enact "public performances" of alignment to governmental or funder goals while making actual decisions about projects through "backstage commentaries" where they are pursuing goals more relevant to them (Cameron, 2009). Other studies (Ramirez-Andreotta et al., 2015) suggest that communication practices in these kinds of projects—a node where we saw our narrative counteracting our larger goals—are often complex. In a community–higher education partnership studying environmental pollutant levels, Ramirez-Andreotta et al. explained that it is often "challenging to maintain bidirectional communication" and that "setting and maintaining" expectations is a challenge (p. 10).

Like Ramirez-Andreotta et al. and others performing environmental justice work, our study, which examined a school–community-based permaculture project from 2015 to 2018, draws from participatory action research, which values community inquiry and local knowledge. The partners included our public university, "Northeast University" (NEU); an urban high school, "Northeast High School" (NEHS); and a community-based gardening program, "Northeast Grows" (NEG), based in building equitable food systems that promote ecological literacy, sustainability, and health. The seed funding for this project, including the planning, programming, and research, came from the university system.

Specifically, this article details key aspects of the planning process of our project, following the three nodes of permaculture ethics (care of people, care of land, care of surplus) detailed in the following sections. Though our primary focus in this article is not permaculture itself, we use its principles—which guided us as university partners—to uncover some of the specific areas that arose as problematic in our project. Here, we reflect on the places that a narrative of assumed mutuality appeared and limited, complicated, undermined, or constrained our work. We hope this article will provide useful takeaways for any university–community partnership; however, rather than making a firm set of recommendations for every context we describe, we have provided a set of critical questions interspersed and italicized throughout this essay. These questions are meant to dem-

onstrate inquiry-driven reflective practice, and they emerged from our own reflective approach to this project. Our hope is that framing this work through a more recursive, ethical, sustainable lens may clarify ways to privilege and fully integrate social justice concerns from the outset of projects, thereby bringing more sensitivity to the particular contexts where we work.

The first section defines and examines how permaculture frameworks can support food security projects. The second section presents our conceptual framework, the narrative of assumed mutuality, with a focus on the theoretical underpinnings of this narrative in terms of equity, ethics of practice, and the key challenges that the partners faced. The third section provides the methodology for the research, including the timeline for the project. The fourth section draws from the three principles of permaculture—care of people, care of land, care of surplus—to delineate how the narrative of assumed mutuality illuminated blind spots and obstacles that the partners faced in the planning and implementation of the high school permaculture garden.

Permaculture Frameworks

Permaculture is the design of food systems and social structures to provide for human needs while restoring ecosystem health. At the same time, permaculture has its own baggage in that practitioners don't always recognize the Indigenous and cultural origins of its approach. Yuan (2020) seeks to provide such recognition, contesting the historical erasures present in the use of the terms *regenerative agriculture* and *permaculture*. Indigenous organizations that speak out against such erasures consider use of this terminology a practice of "whitewashed hope." Using these terms without incorporating an Indigenous worldview perpetuates the historical colonial appropriation of Indigenous techniques, knowledge, and practices by omitting their historical context and dialogue that reflect the basis of this way of developing food and social systems. However, even given this decolonizing viewpoint, permaculture may be well suited to conversations about alleviating food insecurities and food deserts, as it involves building regenerative, socially engaged, and self-supporting systems that can be particularly beneficial for disenfranchised communities contending with food desert conditions (Lovell et al., 2014). As

Millner (2017) noted, permaculture has the capacity to work as political action inside food systems in ways that respect existing cultural practices as well as counteracting the histories of colonialism, land theft, and industrialization (p. 766).

Our project centered on an urban area where the poverty rates are twice the statewide rate and childhood poverty levels are significantly higher than that of the county as a whole (Southeastern Massachusetts Food System Assessment Executive Summary July 2014. These elevated rates of poverty contribute to food challenges such that "food intake of one or more household members was reduced and their eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year because the household lacked money and other resources for food" (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013: 1) NielsenIQ TDLinx (https://nielsoniq.com) and the 2011–2015 American Community 5-Year Estimates (https://www.census.gov) yielded demographic data for the area indicating that 22% of low-income residents live farther than a mile from a grocery store. Given the demographics of this urban area, we imagined that incorporating permaculture ethics and principles (Brush, 2016) in a social and agricultural design process could potentially facilitate food justice with a focus on developing social structures, economic arrangements, and plant materials that yield healthier foods while restoring ecosystem health.

The three principles from the ethics of permaculture practice (Permaculture Principles, n.d.) guided our understanding of permaculture practices: care of people, care of the earth, and care of surplus. Through the lens of care of people—defined as tending to people ranging from our families and communities to all of humanity—we examine specific tensions between constituent groups with whom we thought we (the university partners) were on the same page when, in reality, the group in totality had different ideas of what a food justice project might look like.

With respect to earth care—defined as supporting all living and ecological processes that keep us alive—we examine the challenges of building a permaculture garden on an EPA Superfund high school site where issues of environmental and structural racism bubbled to the surface. (In compliance with our IRB proposal for confidentiality, the name of the Superfund site is omitted.)

Regarding care of surplus (also called fair share)—defined as actions that center on generosity and sharing the abundance—we look at how the distribution of resources potentially undermined the involvement of high school teachers and other key contributors on the project. For example, we prioritized supporting students financially but in some instances took educator participation for granted because we shared surplus with them. Sharing with educators, however, was performed through networking rather than tangible support, because we did not always appreciate the educators' needs.

Nonetheless, our effort was centered in permaculture principles, which seek to integrate multiple levels of life from the biological to the cultural. We therefore hoped it had potential as an incubator and learning laboratory for a microscaled version of a community-based just, creative, culturally sensitive food economy. A key takeaway from our research and reflection centers on how the dominant narrative of assumed mutuality seeped into and undermined aspects of the planning process. Nevertheless, this project continues to operate as an incubator and learning laboratory with the community partner, Northeast Grows, providing ongoing support to the high school garden in collaboration with English language learning (ELL) and environmental studies teachers and students.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks: The Narrative of Assumed Mutuality

The emergent concept from our inquiry here we call a "dominant narrative of assumed mutuality." As mentioned, we define this narrative as a tool that the partners unconsciously used to frame a cohesive story of our project together, in ways that highlighted shared food security and justice goals while ignoring differences and potential power imbalances related to race, class, and institutional privilege. We sought to take up equity in this project, as defined by Dowd and Bensimon (2015) in terms of justice as *fairness, care, and transformation* (p. 10). Yet, we admit that the narrative appeared in our interactions and collaboration over the course of multiple years in our project, and we uncovered its features in retrospective, reflexive, narrative praxis that then helped us better understand our participatory action research data.

In that work, we discovered that part of the difficulty for us in identifying the narrative was the scope of our project, which was complex. The project encompassed community and school partnerships, permaculture design, food justice and sovereignty principles, educational practice, antiracism, and partnership alignment and participation. Employing a holistic equity framework that views people, land, and histories as integrally related, we saw all those components as relevant enough to garner our attention and reflection and ultimately, we argue, make the project stronger.

In our understandings, we rely on several areas of extant scholarship devoted to the ethics of practice in partnerships between institutions of higher education and their community partners (Brunger & Wall, 2016; Garlick & Palmer, 2008; Sarkissian et al., 2009) and with diverse constituencies (Gone, 2017), particularly in the "entry process" (Ochaka et al., 2010). Community-engaged research frameworks also illustrate that researchers must work from "foundational scholarship" to build effective, ethical engagement practices with community partners (Doberneck et al., 2014). Further, scholars that practice community-engaged research argue for the usefulness of self-reflexive practices in order to keep ethics in clear sight and to assess, adjust, and better implement project goals and build effective practice (Mitchell et al., 2015; Moffat et al., 2005). In addition, we recognize the importance of considering the role that race, privilege, and power play in educational institutions, our community partnerships, and our service-oriented pedagogies (Lum & Jacob, 2012; Milner, 2007; Verjee, 2012; Yull et al., 2018).

This kind of work also presents real risks for harm and failure. Citing several studies and reviews of literature (Clapp et al., 2016; Cook, 2008; Wing, 2005), Davis and Ramírez-Andreotta (2021) explained that "persistent cultural disconnects, trust barriers, and real structural inequity may prevent academic researchers from establishing equitable research partnerships" and that studies also show how projects "led by community based groups were more likely to result in responsive action than those led by universities" (p. 2). We as the university partners were mindful of these issues and achieved our ultimate goal, which was to leave the project in the care of our community partner and the school itself. To build that foundation, we sought to assemble a consortium of participants across sectors,

paid student participants, and carefully considered shared decision-making processes. However, we understand that at least two difficulties were at work here for our community-engaged project.

The first was that although we relied on foundational scholarship from critical race theory, sociological inquiry, environmental justice, and decolonial studies, there is not often a clear line from theory to practice for research in these kinds of project-based inquiries. As Pulido (2000) showed us in reference to the scholarship of environmental racism, discrete study of a phenomenon in one arena sometimes risks losing deeper understanding of the phenomenon itself (e.g., racism and how to act against it). Thus, foundational scholarship doesn't *necessarily* lead to effective practice. Second, conversations about racial equity in community-engaged projects are often high stakes and may activate behaviors of Whiteliness or color-blind responses on the part of researchers, regardless of racial or ethnic background (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014; Tate & Page, 2018). We argue that these tendencies are attributable to the enculturation of *all* institutional participants into discourses of Whiteness and intellectual privilege even as we exist at many different social locations as individuals.

Specifically, we see those behaviors as problematic in the way they can foreclose conversations about difference, institutional power, and conflict negotiation in meaningful ways that lead to action. We see them as an effort to achieve a kind of multicultural utopia that ultimately flattens difference. Those behaviors can abstract difficult conversations about the shortcomings, failures, and difficulties of projects that seek to build equity and justice in community–higher education partnerships. Literature discussing failure in this kind of transdisciplinary work can be a productive place to begin a process of recursive reflection for institutional researchers, and we attempt to engage that work here by practicing a kind of "practitioner inquiry" into our own project (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; O'Rourke et al., 2020).

Methods

Guided in this participatory action research by a commitment to community-engaged practice and reflexive critical methodologies, we drew from ethnography, interviews, and a reflexive collective writing practice to examine the ways that the dominant narrative of assumed mutuality infused our planning process. As the institutional partner, we put the implementation of the research hand in hand with the planning, design, and implementation of the high school community garden project. We simultaneously engaged in research methods as we sought to enact what la paperson (2017) called a "school to community pipeline" by harnessing the resources of our institution to serve our surrounding communities and to engage our students in place-based learning. We received IRB university approval for this research.

The timeline for this participatory action research project from 2015 to 2018 included a planning phase with university faculty, students, and staff and community groups working on food systems from fall 2015 through spring 2016 to determine the community partners and site for the permaculture garden project. In winter 2016, NEU, NEHS, and NEG were identified as partners for the project. In spring 2016, the partners met with high school teachers and students to develop a plan and begin constructing the raised beds for the garden project. From fall 2016 through the end of the school year in 2017, the partners worked with two environmental studies classes meeting at least once a month to map out food systems issues in the community, learn about permaculture and food justice, and determine the function and plan for the garden.

During this time from 2016 to 2018, researchers from NEU worked with the partners to develop and implement a research design including interviews, participant observation, grounded theory, and feedback loops as a form of praxis to collectively reflect on the project and attempt to pivot and adjust as obstacles and challenges surfaced. The team received IRB approval in two stages. The IRB granted initial approval in fall 2015 to begin the research project with a participatory community-based focus. In spring 2016, the IRB further granted approval for the high school garden project, after the team submitted additional information about the community partners, as well as a research design including a letter of approval from the high school principal.

The researchers conducted 13 interviews with high school students, teachers, and staff, along with the community partner and permaculture educator (see Table 1), to examine the initial successes and challenges of building social structures (the

garden; student, teacher, and class involvement; community network of experts and practitioners, etc.) and educational programming with three NEHS classes (one ELL class and two environmental studies classes). Students from the environmental studies classes and those that worked on the summer garden project were invited to participate in the interviews; those that participated received a gift card. The adults also received a gift card for their participation in the interviews.

In addition to interviews, this research draws from participant observation field notes from 2015 to 2018 of the planning meetings, summer permaculture garden program, environmental studies classes, partner meetings, and feedback loop sessions. The field notes provide an important layer of thicker description revealing the everyday possibilities and challenges associated with building healthier human and food systems that can address the climate crisis within the context of an urban environment that contends with economic, racial, and environmental injustices.

With a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2005) we developed an analytical framework to examine the evolution of the project, paying close attention to issues of process, engagement, and power imbalance. After coding to identify emergent themes and accompanying thick description, we engaged in feedback loop sessions with the participating partners (high school teachers, students, and administrators; NEG staff) in which we presented the themes and framework for the findings. Participants responded with comments, corrections, and suggestions to enrich the overall analysis and ongoing plans for the garden and to create a recursive view of the project data.

The social locations of the authors Rachel and Anicca, germane to participatory action research, are those of White women faculty, one middle class, one working class. Much of our respective work as scholars and teachers involves a commitment to transparency around our racial, class, and institutional privileges. In this work, we saw the identification of our own blind spots as an opportunity to engage in difficult conversations that call out power and resource imbalances with the aim of finding ways to attend to these inequities as a part of the research process. As a newcomer to the United States to pursue a doctorate in education, Afro-Brazilian woman, first-generation college student, and a graduate student in the United States, the author Fernanda is committed to racial and social justice-oriented teaching and research. She seeks to teach and perform research with multiple designs and possibilities where she can learn from and recognize knowledge, agency, and criticality among students and their communities.

Though we believe our social locations to be of importance, we offer these descriptions not, in the words of Kohl and McCutcheon (2015), to "present a laundry list of identity markers" to "check off"; rather, we seek to move more toward an understanding of how we might engage with a "community-minded approach to reflexivity that extends beyond individual and insular engagements with positionality" (pp. 747–748). We were informed in our research approach by antiracist and decolonizing scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Eduardo Bonilla Silva, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose work assisted us in ex-

Table 1. Participant Demographics for Interviews

Interviewees	Description
High school students (7)	7 high school students (2 females of Latina descent and 5 males of Latino descent)
High school staff (2)	2 staff from Family Outreach Center (females in their 40s of Latina descent)
High school teachers (2)	2 teachers (White females in their late 20s)
Community partner (1)	1 White female garden project coordinator in her early 30s from local community-based organization
University instructor (1)	1 White female university instructor and permaculture educator in her late 30s

ploring how disciplinary orientations are intricately tied to how we "do" research, including underlying and often unstated motives, aims, values, and points of complicity with normative notions of research that are intricately tied to European imperialism, colonialism, and current exploitative processes (Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012). As primary managers of this project, Rachel and Anicca brought academic and research-based institutional perspectives, which ultimately were only sometimes useful and sometimes were deeply irrelevant to the planning stages. Noting specific moments of tension, confusion, and conflict enabled us to investigate our own positionality and accountability, so that a new and more complex picture of our work together emerged.

Four years after our project started and the year following our feedback loop session and initial report, we began to conceive of some type of scholarly product to accompany it. To realize such a product, we engaged in a series of yearlong conversations together. These conversations, which became an additional valuable reflective methodological practice, were tracked in notes and drafts of documents, as well as conversations with some of our partners and multiple reviews of the data collected. This methodology provided us the opportunity to better understand the work, how it unfolded into design and implementation, and how our own set of motives as interdisciplinary participants in community-engaged work and scholarship informed the project. We sought in this process to engage in what Milner (2007) proposed in considerations of race, culture, and researcher positionality to move toward critical race theory approaches by "researching the self, researching the self in relation to others, engaged reflection and representation, and shifting from the self to system" (p. 388). Our process of writing about and reflecting on the planning phase of this project revealed a number of assumptions and tensions that we detail in the following three sections and that we believe can present a heuristic for others engaged in similar projects.

Care of People: Intersecting Roots; Who Is at the Planning Table?

How can partners effectively account for diversity of representation from BIPOC communities when addressing food insecurity in project planning?

Once the university team received funding in summer 2015, we engaged with the larger community outside the institution as we sought to build a "collective landscape analysis" or mapping approach based on listening and engagement, by which we spoke with multiple community groups and coalitions before partnering and implementing our project with our primary partner. This analysis informed our first task: identifying key community partners and introducing them to the project so that, as a group, we could begin to brainstorm how we could work together to build increased capacity for food justice in the area. Effectively, this collective landscape initiated and guided our partnership, instead of the partnership being the first step or nexus of our working design. Rather than plant wholly new ideas in our project, we sought to work rhizomatically, to "intersect roots and sometimes merge with them" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1976).

However, assumptions of mutuality also drove the process, as we decided to hold our first community meeting in September 2015 at our university during workday hours in a small room on the third floor in the library with barely enough seating for the 20 individuals that represented farms, food relief, and policy/education efforts in the area. This group of people reflected the network building Rachel had achieved over the course of the previous years in her outreach and engagement efforts as a new faculty member.

We worked in small affinity groups (farms, food relief, policy/education) to discuss the key challenges, needs, and successes that each sector faces. As the small group reconvened to debrief about the status of food security from our various standpoints, a number of notable observations were made. A few people commented on the social location of the group, as most of us were White educated professionals or professionals in training (university students). The question surfaced: If we are looking to perform food justice work in food-insecure areas with low-income BIPOC communities, who needs to be at the table, and what would elicit their participation? What are their communication needs? What are our own? Participants noted that it was highly problematic to have our first meeting during the workday in a remote space in our labyrinthine university that is difficult to access by public transportation. From this discussion, we developed a chart (Figure 1) to map out some key ele-

ments—coordination, accessibility, diversifying leadership, and time and money—in building a community-driven food justice project.

Guided by the feedback and critique of the first meeting, we developed a clearer set of initial project values, and in November, we had the first site selection meeting in the urban area at the YMCA with key community leaders from the local community economic development center, parks and recreation, a regional food security network, and NEG and their parent institute, many of whom had been at our on-campus meeting. These discussions helped us see more clearly the already existing forays, beginnings, growths, and areas where root systems had been abandoned. This knowledge pushed us toward considerations of what site was likely to be the most successful based on which community leaders would actively be involved as the process unfolded.

After much back and forth about potential sites for a permaculture garden for food justice, the community leaders and NEU representatives collectively selected the high school. NEHS is a Level 4 high school of 2,400 students (50% of the students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, 41% are of Latino descent, and 13% are African American). We saw the partnership as having strong potential for a number of reasons: It could be a way to connect high school students with our univer-

sity students, and there were already some initial plans under way through NEG to potentially start the garden there. Neighbors living near the high school could potentially benefit from a nutrient-dense garden as the school is located in a disenfranchised area with a number of public housing developments across the street and without access to a supermarket within a one-mile radius. As we began to learn more about the student community there, another question surfaced in relationship to our assumed narrative of mutuality:

> *What was the impact of assuming all partners understood the value of permaculture to this project?*

The three primary partners—NEU, NEHS, and NEG—all served wide-ranging student demographics, including immigrant/migrant, multilingual, and first-generation students and staff. However, because we did not articulate and manifest an overall framework for antioppression, antiracism, and social justice explicitly and structurally, *as a part of our understanding of the affordances of permaculture*, those principles and practices remained *assumed* values. Through praxis (action and reflection) in partner meetings, in interviews, in feedback loops, and in the process of writing up our research, it became clear that various partners and constituencies applied differing notions of equity and ethics of practice. This disconnect became apparent in our work in the garden, when

Figure 1. Focus Group Topic Frequency
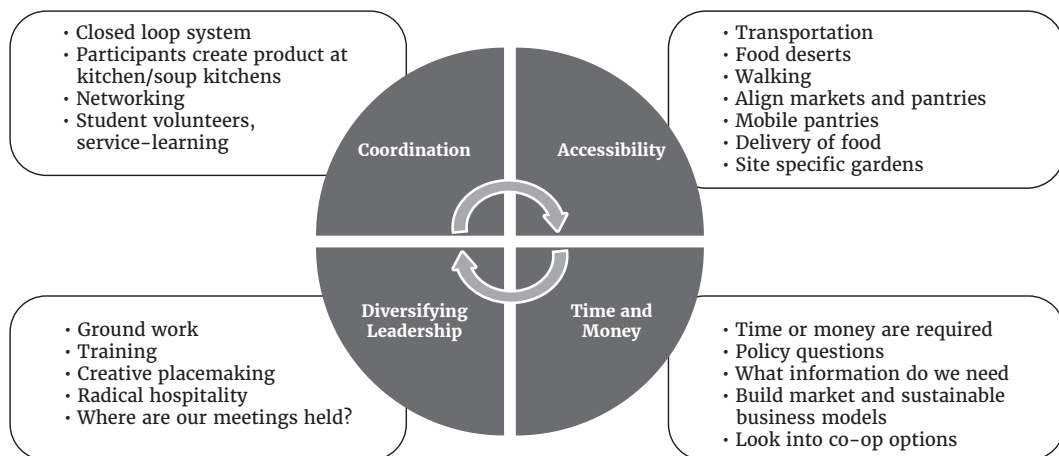
students were unsure how to use and didn't recognize many plants common to permaculture, and when our community partner, in a participant interview, was critical of permaculture overall, and saw it as neither relevant nor culturally sensitive.

Although the high school students were not part of the initial planning, they were the ultimate beneficiaries of the project. Once the high school was on board, the project hired two high school students to work with the permaculture educator and NEG staff in summer 2016 to ensure that student input was in the center of day-to-day planning and programming at the onset of the garden project. One student intern commented:

> It was my way to pretty much get out there and to be outside and to be doing something fun. It was a really great experience and since then I've learned how much I really like gardening and plants, because my grandmother has a backyard and I have been working to help her build her own little garden there. And I keep my own houseplants, and I just very much enjoy the company of my coworkers and my bosses and getting to know people and getting to be out there with the plants and the environment. I just love all of it.

The interns described the summer work as a "chance of a lifetime" to be paid (10 hours a week), to be outside, to be in the dirt, and to draw from gardening experiences from their families and countries of origin.

There was also a point, the following school year in December 2016, when the project partners noticed a lack of engagement with the environmental studies classes. As a result, the permaculture educator switched gears and started 2017 with a survey and brainstorming session to determine the students' interests in the project. While the partners were perceiving the project as a means to increase food access to high school families, the students asserted an interest in using the garden as a springboard to think about producing value-added items to sell, such as adobo sauce. One student commented, "We know how to make food tasty . . . because we are Puerto Rican." If we had not drifted away from the original food security plan and pivoted to a focus on students' interests and cultural backgrounds, the students might have been less invested in the overall plan. Participatory action research, and more specifically praxis, facilitated a more organic process.

From our university perspective, we wanted to devise a project that centered student leadership (both at the university and high school), student relationships, and student needs. Led by the president of a student group aiming to address food insecurity on campus, we developed together Northeast University Grows, a project that would include university student participation with our larger faculty and staff collaborative to engage in two ways.

NEG, Northeast Grows, which was a program within a larger nonprofit organization, builds gardens and cultivates programming in public schools in an effort to engage the community and students alike. NEG looks to school-based community garden models to address the participation and engagement challenges that can arise in low-income, food poverty areas. The guiding principles of the NEG model include cultural affirmation, systemic thinking, and environmental consciousness. NEG's work represents a unique hybrid approach and, as a result, is necessarily negotiated with a variety of constituent groups, starting with students, parents, and community members (neighbors, volunteers, nonprofit workers) and including schools (teachers and administrators) and state regulatory bodies (Environmental Protection Agency). Here, our failure to articulate anti-oppression potential in permaculture work resulted in a somewhat fragmented, rhizomatic project that simultaneously embodied aspects of social justice *and* the reproduction of existing inequities and power asymmetries. For example, in some ways we were careful and intentional in our planning process. We sought to identify contributors and partners already working in the sector and add to, or be allies to, their work, not replicate or co-opt their efforts (LaCharite, 2016) or further reify institutional savior narratives (Navin & Dieterle, 2018). Conversely, in a key moment of feedback from our nonprofit partner SCG, their director—a White woman in her early 30s—pointed out her perception of permaculture as being White, elitist, and not culturally relevant. She expressed that we were growing food that local communities were unfamiliar with and might not be culturally appropriate and thereby problematic.

It is beyond permaculture. Screw permaculture. . . . Permaculture is a tool. It is not my life. And permaculture is very American. . . . So when you're using that term, you're isolating people. . . . when I talk about humanizing, that's part of my goal when I was having trouble vibing with [permaculture]. I had to humanize [permaculture]. Where does [it] come from? You have to humanize everyone.

She had a point, and we had hints regarding the issue well before interviewing her. For example, during indoor and outdoor activities with students at NEHS, students demonstrated how unfamiliar it was to them to plant foods like perennial Egyptian onions, or to taste nasturtium flowers and leaves. We were enthusiastic about sharing this new knowledge and experience but devoted minimal efforts to understanding the impacts of this novelty in order to build a sense of ownership toward the school garden among that local community. In hindsight, these assumptions about permaculture and conversations about difference could have propelled a more honest conversation that included the possibility of permaculture as a form of self-determination work. Instead, we took for granted that permaculture would be an immediately accessible and acceptable framework for our participants.

Nonetheless, our initial phases of the project brought together students, faculty, and community members to write a proposal to support our plans to draw from permaculture ethics and principles to improve food systems on campus and with the community. With permaculture as a foundational touchstone for the proposal, we articulated our project with the framework of three overarching ethics: care of people, care of the earth, and care of surplus. Care of people informed the community engagement component; care of the earth led to garden design with a focus on identifying ways to grow food that involve high nutrient and caloric volume, low maintenance, low carbon, low impact on the soil and land; and care of surplus was reflected in a surplus plan ensuring that any bounty produced would go to individuals and families contending with food insecurity. These proposed efforts were aimed to support students and community groups to develop critical skills in political efficacy and attempt to pioneer and implement practices

that are mutually beneficial for people and the environment. We set the bar high with the hope of cultivating systemic strategies for a more just, creative, culturally sensitive food economy in our local context.

Care of Land: (In)Fertile Ground; Telling Partnership Stories

What care, knowledge, and attention to physical place are necessary to effectively work with partners in agriculture projects?

A major blind spot of assumed mutuality surfaced with respect to the land for the high school–based community garden. On an early spring morning, together with our partners, we walked around the future garden site. The space was accessed via a main road, but it bordered a street to the east with less traffic and had access to the facilities area of the school. To the south, athletic fields bordered the neighborhood where the school sits. A large tree would provide a spot for sitting and shade where we would later gather, rest, plan, and reflect together. The permaculture educator and designer, who was a few months pregnant at the time, walked with us. She wondered aloud where our water source would come from, a key element of the permaculture principles we were seeking to engage. She began to help us imagine how we would create mounds of earth and drainage strategies to hold and utilize that water, to allow plant, human, and animal species to interact, to catch the most out of the sun and hold the most rain. The NEG director got a puzzled look on her face.

"No," she said. "We can't grow anything in the ground here. Nothing. We cannot even break the surface of the ground. This is a Superfund site."

This was one of a series of key moments when the narrative of assumed mutuality was turned on its head, a moment of mixed emotions for us—embarrassment, uncertainty, tension, conflict, and disappointment.

Had we better incorporated antioppression epistemologies into the framework of our project, we would have been able to acknowledge more clearly that we were building a permaculture garden on toxic land and, further, to understand the limits of permaculture itself. With more integration of our existing awareness of the structural

and historical impacts of the confluence of racism, classism, and industrial economies, we could have potentially worked to think through possibilities and constraints in more useful, intentional, and explicit ways.

This community we worked with exists within the long history of environmental racism in this country that targets poor, working-class, and immigrant communities. Aspects of its cultural and historical richness range from Indigenous populations to immigrant groups who have been there hundreds of years—a result of the whaling industry—to newly arrived immigrant communities. The high school's student body reflects these racial and ethnic communities: from Mashpee Wampanoag and Narragansett community members to those from Portugal, Cape Verde, the Azores, Central America, Dominican Republic, West Africa, and others.

The community has deep and highly developed knowledge systems in relation to land, water, and people, both from long-term inhabitants and from those who are newly immigrated there. For example, when the high school students brainstormed to select seeds for the garden, their ideas were rooted in their cultures with the aim of harvesting chili peppers to make adobo sauce, or kale and collard greens to make cachupa—a traditional Cape Verdean stew. A few students working in the garden commented on the linear, symmetric approach to planting the vegetables, indicating that their families' gardens in Central America were packed with vegetables. For their families, it was less about the symmetry and more focused on maximizing their yield with as much food as they could grow.

Our own work, based on the land and the people using it, was replete with the complexities of these regional histories and cultures, institutional and grassroots responses to this urban nutrition context, the interweaving of community members and their efforts to combat food insecurity, the relationship of industry to agriculture, the work of funding allocation, education, and collaboration. These dynamics presented themselves in the very soil.

After the initial discovery of the Superfund restrictions, we regrouped. Later that spring, with the help of NEG, several classes of students, and our student partners at NEU, we cut, built, and erected 15 standing garden beds made of lumber, lined with durable plastic, and we filled them with topsoil and compost. These raised beds would become our school garden. This design did not fit with permaculture principles; however, our adjustment did indicate some dexterity with cultural humility, a practice that would serve us well as the project progressed.

Cultural humility (in this case, toward institutional and local culture) was defined by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) as self-reflective and self-critical practices to "develop and maintain mutually respectful and dynamic partnerships with communities" (p. 118). In that spirit, we worked to plant as best we could, applying permaculture principles of cooperative plant species, perennial edibles and native plants, high-calorie, low-maintenance crops, and planting in a design that would conserve water and use sunlight in efficient ways. We sourced our water from a 300-foot hose, rather than a naturally occurring source. In turn, the process of gathering water each day when we worked on the garden created a new set of relationships with maintenance staff for the school, who stored the hose for us and with whom we interacted on our gardening days. Building these relationships was not formally a part of the epistemological framework of our planning, though if doing so had been, it would have better aligned with our antioppression intentions. Some of that staff would visit the garden, ask questions about the strange plants we were growing, and collect the familiar items to take home to their families. Many students who worked on garden-related lessons and projects indicated that they had small gardens at home, which provided students with an at-home connection and added potential value to the project.

Surplus: Material and Accessibility Constraints in Student and Teacher Participation

What do we need to understand about the material conditions of participants to make our work fair, equitable, and valuable?

On a material level, we believe our project fell short in providing incentives for teachers and their classes. Again, the narrative we told ourselves led us to believe participation would arise altruistically on its own if we were able to articulate the project value. When we first started working with the high

school, we worked with the head of the ELL program to recruit an ELL teacher. However, the ELL director left over the summer, and the ELL teacher, a White woman in her late 20s, received an opportunity to work on a grant that involved compensation and opted for one that paid her for her time:

> I hate to say this, but it's challenging when you're being asked to do these two different things. One's, "Okay, this is really gonna help my students and really benefit the school," because this other thing is also really gonna benefit the students because of that. But I only have time for one thing.

In this context, in the relationship between "care of land" and "care of people," we sought to understand some of the complexities of participation. As we were learning, we ran the risk of our partners concluding that "the time spent on the partnership is not matched by the benefits of participation" (Israel et al., 2006, p. 1029).

Further, even as we worked to strengthen our coalition by working across sectors (Anderson-Carpenter et al., 2017)—university, existing coalitions, nonprofits, school administration and teachers, students and families/community members—we continued to struggle through the project in our efforts to engage a felt sense of ownership of the site itself in the absence of specific training related to permaculture, and/or a sense of ownership and buy-in from all partners. The comments from the ELL teacher point to the realities and constraints of limited time and resources that we heard from a number of students, teachers, and administrators working on the project.

Specifically, our project might also have garnered better participation if we had built teacher labor into our funding structures. Instead, with limited funds, we focused on resource allocation to pay students to work in the garden, a goal we still consider important. The narrative of assumed mutuality was at play here. We assumed teachers would approach our project from the standpoint of opportunity and service, and naturally want to extend themselves into participation for the benefit of their students.

In reflecting back, we see how our narrative of assumed mutuality asserted itself in the material conditions of our partners. In university settings and the institutional citizenships that accompany them, faculty often have appointment types that directly request or materially reward community engagement, community-engaged research and service. Those rewards accrue toward tenure files and/or institutional capital and recognition. In other words, universities expect this kind of indirectly compensated participation. Additionally, we recognize now that our high school partners worked not only on different systems of remuneration but also on different time scales. It is easy to lose momentum in a project for a high school partner when things are unfolding on the glacial time scales of higher education. Continuity was difficult to achieve in this way.

Another consideration that became salient in our reflection was the awareness that institutions of higher education often focus on outcomes and assessment in linear, product-based paradigms. The seed grant for this project required accountability in exchange for funding in the form of reporting progress and achievement of predetermined goals; hence we were unable to fully escape the imperatives of assessment-driven, linear structures. And, of course, we hoped to produce a narrative of success and mutuality in those measures. In fact, it was only by applying a reflective storying methodology (Bratta & Powell, 2016) in the writing of this article that we were able to more deeply consider those complexities from personal, embodied, *and* institutional standpoints.

Conclusion

To revisit, our work here is a response to what we view as potentially dangerous narratives in conversations not only about community-engaged projects and collaborations between educational institutions and communities to support the efforts of food justice/sustainability but even more broadly in service-learning, outreach, and community engagement in institutional settings (Monberg, 2009). We view this particular narrative of assumed mutuality as one of assumed success, mutual benefit, and a problem–solution orientation that can limit understanding of complexity. Further, this narrative runs the risk of positioning this kind of work as the answer to larger systems of power, both agricultural and cultural, without taking on the difficult, uncomfortable work of fully integrating antioppression values into the overall structures and ev-

eryday practices of projects in meaningful, consistent ways.

We continue to believe that permaculture—with its principles of care of land, care of people, and care of surplus—provides a valuable, potentially transformative frame-work for food justice and food sovereignty work, including a foundation for careful, intentional, reflective practice to accompany it. However, operating within the narrative of assumed mutuality as we did foreclosed some of the rich potentials to engage more deeply across our partnerships and collabo-rations. We believe that a design without such explicit antioppression structures may silence some participants and reproduce ex-isting power structures. We therefore hope to join the voices of those who question the inherent value of community–higher edu-cation partnerships that rest in narratives of assumed mutuality, in order to provide more fertile spaces from which to engage across institutions and communities (Fox et al., 2017). We suggest, as Grabill and Cushman (2009) did, that conflict should not be avoided, and that in fact, "discur-sive conflict can lead to deliberation and collaborative problem solving" (p. 7). The conflicts we describe here in narrative were the most valuable places to understand the true impact of our project.

We found ourselves working on this nar-rative and worked to change course, which improved the relationships and outcomes of the project over time. Much of that work was performed reflectively in making sense of our research data, sharing the findings in a series of feedback loops with the stakehold-ers to identify and unpack areas of tension. For example, the community organization hired one of the students as a high school garden coordinator to improve relations and give a student a seat at the planning and implementation table of the school–based community garden project. In addition, as a result of the feedback loop and other fac-tors at the school, the ELL department has taken a more active role in the project as students from Central American countries expressed a strong interest and specific ideas about the garden. These examples highlight the importance of recursive and reflective practice in community-engaged projects to pivot plans in accordance with both areas of tension and feedback from differing stakeholders.

We write this to acknowledge that even when, and sometimes especially when, we believe we are interrupting conditions of oppression in community-engaged work, we are, in fact, susceptible to reproducing them. It is why we advocate for structured, recursive, reflective practice in this work between all participants in ways that align with differences in cultural, racial, his-torical, and institutional knowledges. We particularly believe that ongoing, reflexive practice is important for institutional par-ticipants (like the coauthors), in order to devise more even and ethical ways to dis-tribute power across all participants when the university holds the symbolic power often associated with distributing funding or designing projects. We believe this prac-tice can lead project participants to a better understanding of the conditions under which institutions and communities inter-act with one another and share resources.

We finally argue that the orientation of praxis (action and reflection) offers rich places from which to surface and address the ways in which hegemonic or status quo narratives such as assumed mutuality can seep into partnerships and alliances. For us, this work began with unpacking how the narrative of assumed mutuality infused our work so that we could begin to engage a more nuanced awareness of how mate-rial conditions, local histories, cultures, and communities both shaped and constrained what our groups of participants and we the authors were able to accomplish. It is through participatory action research and praxis that we can begin to bring to light and redress the deeply rooted grammar of racism and oppression that would otherwise be unspoken, unaddressed, and reproduced (Bonilla Silva, 2012).

Acknowledgments

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