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## Food, Diversity, and Cultural Identity: How a Community Garden Supports New Immigrants and Refugees in Winnipeg, Canada

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# Food, Diversity, and Cultural Identity

## How a Community Garden Supports New Immigrants and Refugees in Winnipeg, Canada

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The Rainbow Community Garden is a place for new immigrant and refugee families in Winnipeg to grow their own food. Using the Rainbow Community Garden as a case study, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions about community gardening by applying an anthropological lens to the multilayered meanings of agriculture in urban environments. This paper is focused on the benefits and challenges of community gardening in the context of new immigrant and refugee experiences. Through a literature review and interviews with gardeners, the role of food and community gardens as a means of facilitating cross cultural interactions, providing culturally appropriate food for new immigrants and refugees, and expressing cultural identity is brought into emphasis. I draw on Strunk and Richardson's (2019) concepts of the material, imagined, and community's garden, to reflect on the different ways in which the community garden is used and experienced by immigrant and refugee gardeners. The main conclusion of this research is that, in the context of new immigrant and refugee participation in community gardening, a garden is not only the physical soil, vegetables, and flowers, but also an important place for practicing one's culture and for engaging in meaningful cross cultural interaction that is beneficial in adjusting to a new life in Canada.

**KEY WORDS** food, community gardens, immigration, identity

 On a Sunday morning in August 2018, people gathered at the Rainbow Community Garden in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Families who had recently immigrated to Canada were spending the day together outside in the sun. They were working in their plots, weeding, watering, and harvesting vegetables. A Nepali couple with two young children was digging in their garden looking for potatoes. The father tossed the small potatoes into a pile at the edge of the plot, while the children were having fun collecting potatoes from the soil and placing them in a baseball cap. The family spoke to each other intermittently in Nepali and English. As the summer was coming to a close, it was time to prepare the garden for the next growing season. Volunteers from Food Matters Manitoba and Foresters Financial had come to help out for the day. Some of the volunteers weeded, cleaned up litter, or mowed the grass. Large containers used for collecting rainwater were moved into better positions. Volunteers painted numbers on long, thin pieces of wood to

be put into the ground as markers for each plot. Each one of these plots would be assigned to a new immigrant or refugee family the following year.

Community gardens are spaces where people, individually or collectively, cultivate plots of land (Jermé and Wakefield 2013). These communal spaces have layers of meaning and are complex in their function and intent (Flachs 2010). This complexity is seen in the range of benefits that community gardens can give to participants. Community gardens can provide valuable resources for new immigrant and refugee families not only in terms of food, but also in their social transition into a new place. Community gardens integrate expressions of culture, social interaction, and environmental restoration (Krasny and Tidball 2009). Within the broader context of alternative food movements, such as the local food movement, the slow food movement, and food justice, community gardens are viewed as an important component, and have generally been understood as being beneficial since their popularization in the twentieth century (Classens 2015). From an anthropological perspective, community gardens and the food they produce can sometimes reflect key markers of cultural identity. Food has played a significant role in advancing anthropological theory and research methods, such as with Richard's (1939) landmark study *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*, Kahn's (1986) examination of food, gender, and social values in Papua New Guinea, and Sutton's (2001) analysis of how the identities and social lives of Greeks living on the island of Kalymnos are informed and defined by culinary memories (Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Yet, there is a growing necessity for an anthropology of food that is grounded in ethnographic studies at multiple points in the supply chain (Macrae 2016).

This paper contributes to ongoing discussions about community gardening, applying an anthropological lens to the multilayered meanings of agriculture in urban environments, and using the Rainbow Community Garden as a case study. The Rainbow Community Garden is a garden for new immigrant and refugee families in Winnipeg that allows them to grow healthy, culturally appropriate food. The focus of this research is on the role that the Rainbow Community Garden plays in facilitating cross cultural exchange for new immigrants and refugees, and how these interactions are beneficial for their acclimation into Canadian society. A second component to the data analysis is a parallel drawn between the findings of this research and the results of a study by Strunk and Richardson (2019) on the ways in which community gardens are used and experienced by refugee gardeners. Strunk and Richardson (2019) identify three ways in which refugee gardeners use and experience gardens: the material, imagined, and community's garden. By situating this case study of the Rainbow Community Garden alongside Strunk and Richardson's (2019) analysis, I demonstrate the usefulness of their approach through a discussion of the dynamic and nuanced nature of community gardens. The paper begins with a description of my research methods, followed by an overview of the Rainbow Community Garden site and operations. Next, the benefits of urban agriculture as documented in the literature are discussed, including sociocultural, health, environmental, and economic factors. Informant interviews are then analyzed with particular reference to the challenges and benefits of community gardening experienced by new immigrants and refugees in Winnipeg. Finally, I consider Strunk and Richardson's (2019) findings relating to the material, imagined, and community's garden as they apply to the Rainbow Community Garden.

## Methods

To conduct this research, I used qualitative methodologies including semi-structured interviews with 14 members of the Rainbow Community Garden, and three professionals with experience and knowledge about urban agriculture in Winnipeg. The purpose of this research was to learn about the benefits and challenges of community gardening in the context of a garden for immigrants and refugees. The interview questions were open ended, and gardeners were invited to share any general thoughts or perspectives they had about their experience at the garden. The intention was to allow the participants the space to tell their own stories while reflecting on their gardening experience. Ten out of the 14 interviews with gardeners were filmed on camera, while the other four were audio recorded. The purpose of filming the interviews was to create a video to document the research in a more widely accessible format, and to give something back to the Rainbow Garden community.<sup>1</sup> Interviews were transcribed and coded to identify key themes and concepts. Other methods used in the research were participant observation at the garden site and field notes in order to document and reflect on my own experiences at the garden. Academic studies and publicly available documents such as newspaper articles and promotional materials related to community gardens were also reviewed and analyzed. All participants of this research were given the option to remain anonymous.

## The Rainbow Community Garden

In the words of garden coordinator Raymond Ngarbouï, the Rainbow Community Garden is “a community place where newcomer — especially new immigrant and refugee — families come to meet, to interact, while growing their own foods.” The project started in 2008 as a community initiative. In its first year, the garden started with 16 new immigrant and refugee families on one acre of land on the University campus, and grew to 212 families in the summer of 2018, on 3 acres of land, including approximately 50 raised beds. Today, a total of 318 families garden at multiple sites across the city of Winnipeg and its periphery, including the University of Manitoba, which was the site of this research. Due to garden members spreading the word to family, friends, and other immigrant families over time, the gardens are now receiving an overwhelming number of applications. The gardens receive more applications than there is space available—57 families were placed on the waitlist in the summer of 2018. Once families are allocated a plot at the garden, they can garden there free of charge for up to three years, after which their space will be opened up for families that have newly arrived in Winnipeg. The exception to this is single mothers with at least five children who are not required to give up their plots after three years. There may also be exceptions for seniors to retain their plots after the three-year period.

Rainbow Community Garden members are immigrants and refugees who have moved to Winnipeg from countries all over the world. Many come from African countries such as Burundi, Chad, Rwanda, and Democratic Republic of Congo. Approximately 60-65% of gardeners come from Asian countries including Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, China, Japan, Afghanistan, and Syria. According to Ngarbouï the main goals of the garden are to provide a place for new immigrants and refugees to interact, build community, and to have



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The Rainbow Community Garden Sign

access to nutritious food by growing it themselves. Protecting the environment is also a key focus at the garden. Compost supplied by the University of Manitoba is used in the garden, and one of the main rules to be followed by gardeners is to not use any chemical fertilizer or pesticides.

The Rainbow Community Garden receives various types of support from multiple organizations in Winnipeg. Volunteers frequently visit the site from numerous non-profit organizations including Winnipeg Harvest and United Way, and private entities such as Foresters Financial, a financial services provider located in Toronto. Food Matters Manitoba has also played a supportive role in the project by helping to secure some funding and assisting at the site through volunteer work. The University of Manitoba has been involved in supporting the project by allowing them to use the land, supplying compost, and implementing infrastructure projects, such as a rainwater collection shelter at the garden site that was built by students in the architecture program in 2016. Students worked closely with the gardeners during the design process to identify their priorities for the project, based on the social and infrastructural needs of the garden community (Nepali Cultural Society of Manitoba 2018). The University had also been supplying water to the gardens in the past, but this has not been an ongoing support. Other organizations that have contributed to the project in various capacities include Knox United Church, Central Neighbourhoods Winnipeg, Winnipeg Central Park Women's Resource Centre, Winnipeg Foundation, Evergreen Canada, and Community Education Development Association (CEDA). Since there is no salary for a garden coordinator, CEDA has been the main source for human resources as they allow Ngarbouli to allocate a small portion of his work hours to help with the Rainbow Community Garden. All other human resources devoted to the project are on a volunteer basis.

## **Benefits of Urban Agriculture**

The literature on urban agriculture reveals many perceived benefits of community gardening in cities, touching on a wide range of considerations, including sociocultural, health, environmental, and economic factors. When considering sociocultural impacts, urban agriculture can provide opportunities for community building, cross-cultural social interaction, skill development, and the expression of cultural heritage (Santo et al. 2016). Community gardens have been shown to promote local pride and citizen participation at the city and neighbourhood level (Macias 2008). The transfer of knowledge can also take place in urban gardens on multiple levels, including intercultural and intergenerational, providing a pathway for relationships across cultures and age groups (Hite et al. 2017). The interactions that take place in urban gardens can work to promote social cohesion and contribute to the production of social capital (Moquin et al. 2016), which has been described as the cultivation of resources, both tangible and intangible, enabled by trusting relationships between individuals and/or organizations (Bauermeister 2016).

In terms of health, urban agriculture has been shown to provide greater access to fresh, culturally appropriate food, and to increase gardening households' fruit and vegetable consumption (Santo et al. 2016). Gardening also provides opportunities for physical activity and spending time outdoors. This has been found to have positive effects on participants' mental health, including stress reduction and cognitive stimulation (Santo et al. 2016). Spending time outdoors can also help to foster a sense of connection to nature for both adults and youth; community gardening was recognized as a best practice at The National Forum on Children and Nature in 2008 (Krasny and Tidball 2009).

Reported benefits of urban agriculture to the environment include increased biodiversity, air particulate filtration and carbon sequestration by vegetation, and a potential reduction of greenhouse gas emissions associated with the transportation of food (Santo et al. 2016). There have also been reports of economic benefits for participants, such as the opportunity for employment training (Santo et al. 2016). Through participating in a community garden, gardeners have the potential to gain skills that increase their chances of securing employment in the Canadian workforce. By growing their own food, gardeners are also able to spend less money on groceries. These cost savings can be even more significant when gardeners harvest enough produce to freeze and eat throughout the winter months. Some gardeners may also sell their produce at local farmer's markets. Because of the potential cost savings, increased access to culturally appropriate foods, and increased fruit and vegetable consumption, urban agriculture projects have been promoted as one way to increase household food security (Santo et al. 2016). While these projects are usually not intended to lead to complete food self-sufficiency, they can contribute as one part of the myriad of initiatives working toward food system transformation (Santo et al. 2016).

## **Analysis**

### **Unique Challenges Faced by New Immigrants and Refugees**

The benefits of the Rainbow Community Garden to participants were found to be generally in line with the literature on urban agriculture in terms of sociocultural impact, access to fresh food, physical activity, mental health, and cost saving. The sentiments from the



interviews indicated that the most significant benefits of the Rainbow Community Garden to its participants were related to the unique experiences of people who are new to Canada. New immigrants and refugees often face a variety of challenges in their adjustment to an unfamiliar way of life in a new country. These social, cultural, and economic challenges can vary for different individuals who all come to a new country with their own personal history and experiences. Research has shown that in countries such as Canada, “rising ethnic diversity has been found to be coupled with ethnic inequities between foreign- and native-born populations in measurable health outcomes” (Wang and Hu 2013, 9). Ngarboui spoke about some of the challenges faced by new immigrants and refugees in Winnipeg relating to nutrition and physical health, and how the Rainbow Community Garden aims to address these issues:

Some of the challenges were about the adjustment to the local food. How can they adjust themselves to the local food? Because the vegetables and some leaves that they used to eat [back home] are imported here frozen, and sold very expensive, which means they can't afford it. So, what to do is to find a place where they can grow their own food, their own vegetables with focus on some ... crops that they [were] used to [back home]... And it helps with newcomer or immigrant access to nutritious food, because in many newcomer families we have been noticing development of diabetes, type 2 diabetes. Why? Because those people, when they come here, they don't know where to go in the summer, in the winter. They do remain inside their apartments ... And then they start gaining weight, for example.

Ngarboui also made the connection between physical health and mental health. When new immigrants remain in their homes and are inactive, this can lead to social isolation, depression, and other mental health issues. Arriving in a new country without knowing many people can be a factor in the amount of time people spend inside their homes and can contribute to these issues. Many gardeners at the Rainbow Community Garden also came to Canada as refugees and are living with the aftermath of civil war and other hardships. Ngarboui said the garden creates a setting for healing and allows participants to make connections with others. Interpersonal communication has been a key focus at the garden related to helping new immigrants and refugees adjust to their new lives in Winnipeg by encouraging social interaction while spending time outside of the house. Ngarboui recounted:

I know many families, family members who, when they start here, it's hard for them even to say hi to others. But in the middle of the growing season, or by the end, they become so open, laughing, interacting with other[s] from different religious backgrounds, sharing food together, and all this... And also, one of the goals is to bring together community members from the same countries who are here, and who cannot interact because of maybe some class considerations, some social, or some ethno-cultural consideration from their back homes. But when they get here, all become [the] same, and then they interact, and the barriers are broken.

This quote points to the ways identities can change as one moves to a different geographical location and interacts with new people. This is also reflected in research that has found ethnicity to be emergent, multifaceted, and negotiable (Nagel 1995), and shows that one's sense of identity is fluid and can be revised and reinvented as social, cultural, and class considerations change. Through interactions that take place while working in the garden, and at other community events such as potlucks and markets, participants have the opportunity to create social capital, gain interpersonal skills, and improve their English. The skills gained through being a member of the Rainbow Community Garden have helped some individuals gain employment, according to Ngarboui. Research has shown that the capacity for community gardens to strengthen relationships among local residents, foster communal support, and provide healthy food sources, can work to promote an overall greater quality of life (Shreve 2016). These things also lay the groundwork for successful social transition into Canadian society, “not simply as a resident, but as a citizen who can also give back and find their own ways to contribute to the greater whole of the community they are engrained in” (Shreve 2016).

### **Diversity, Community, and Cross-Cultural Exchange**

The interviews showed that diversity is a recognizable factor at the Rainbow Community Garden, in regard to both people and the types of crops that are grown. Participants perceived this diversity as an essential part of the garden's identity. Gardeners showed a sense of pride in their diverse community. They spoke positively of the cross-cultural exchange that they have experienced at the garden. Joseph, who has been a garden member for two years, spoke about the international friendships he has made at the garden:

I think gardening makes a big impact to the community because it brings us all together. I've made a few friends from different nationalities. Some from here, some from different parts of the world ... So I think it brings us closer... it gives us that understanding. And while we're gardening, we share about, you know, the stuff that happens in different parts of the world. We get a better understanding.

While learning to cultivate crops in a new country with a different climate and growing season, gardeners bring with them gardening techniques and cultural practices from their home countries. Most participants have at least some past experience working on a farm or in a garden before moving to Canada, and for many, gardening was a major part of their lives. Participants are glad to have the opportunity to have a space to garden in Winnipeg. For some, it helps them feel connected to their home country. Agnes, a woman from Burundi who has been gardening at the Rainbow Community Garden for the past three years, spoke about her past experiences with gardening,

I have been gardening since teenager age. My dad was a farmer. So, it's like culture. I'm practicing my culture... When you are here you are stress free. After you remember back home, culture, and we enjoy food, fresh food, and we enjoy company too.



Amos, a participant from the Democratic Republic of Congo, explained:

In Africa, without our land we can't survive, yeah. That is our life ... You know, in [a] new country you have to study new things, and sometimes when I am here, I think I am in my home country.

Joseph also recalled his past experiences with gardening:

Back at home we had a small garden, so I used to do that, and I used to love it. Me and my family, my mum, doing that. So, when my friends told me about this project here, I was so glad because it brings us together and it gets us out of the house over the weekend. We can get out and do some gardening and it gives me those memories [of] when I was growing up.

With people from all over the world bringing their unique experiences to the Rainbow Community Garden there is great opportunity for cross-cultural exchange and learning. This often leads to people trying new foods or consuming a different part of the plant than they are used to eating, such as the leaves. This kind of exchange is common at the Rainbow Community Garden. Participants expressed the enjoyment of trying new vegetables, and of sharing vegetables from their countries with others at the garden who have not tried them before. Gardeners also sometimes make these new vegetables a part of their diet and start to grow them in their own plots. Garden participants begin to recognize certain vegetables and where they originate from. While walking through the many plots at the garden, one participant noted, "when you see mustard leaves like this, that means it's definitely a Nepalese family. And when you see beans, lot [of] beans and pumpkin, its Africa." The interaction and exchange amongst gardeners seems to be something that is celebrated at the garden. All participants spoke positively about their experiences interacting with other gardeners.

Along with cross-cultural learning, there is also the opportunity for intergenerational learning. Some participants spoke about bringing their children with them to the garden, and acknowledged the importance of their children knowing where their food comes from. A few gardeners expressed concern at their children's lack of knowledge about food. When parents bring their children with them to work in the garden, the children can see how vegetables are grown and the work that is required. Parents can also pass down cultural knowledge through gardening. It is a way for children to learn about their cultural heritage, even if they were not born in their parents' home country.

### **The Material, Imagined, and Community's Garden**

In a study about urban agriculture and place-making in the midwestern United States of America (USA), Strunk and Richardson (2019) identify three ways in which refugee gardeners use and experience gardens: the material, imagined, and community's garden. First, the material garden includes the biophysical aspects that shape the possibilities of what crops can grow. This includes seeds, soil, and other resources necessary for growing plants. Refugees transform the material garden with agricultural practices from



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Two gardeners holding a bag of mustard seed

their home countries, while adapting these practices to the environmental and political circumstances of a new place. Second, the imagined garden refers to the different ways gardeners imagine the cultural interactions that take place at the garden. In the imagined garden, human interaction and the celebration of cultural exchange can mirror the importance of the material garden for the gardeners. Lastly, the community's garden is an embodiment of the challenges and opportunities faced by new immigrants and refugees in constructing spaces that are inclusive. In the community's garden, gardeners envision a place created as a product of the connections and interactions between individuals and organizations.

The data from the Rainbow Community Garden research reflects similar findings to Strunk and Richardson's (2019) research on place-making in urban refugee gardens, and the different ways in which a garden is experienced by gardeners. The distinction between the material and the imagined garden seemed to be present in all interviews with members of The Rainbow Community Garden. The material garden, which includes the physical landscape, soil, seeds, and produce, and depends on environmental and political elements, was not successful in the 2018 growing season because of barriers such as lack of adequate access to water and crop pests. All of the gardeners interviewed were somewhat disappointed with the quantity and quality of what they were able to harvest during the growing season. Some gardeners felt that they had wasted time on their plots because of this. In the material garden, produce is the main concern. Meanwhile, all of the gardeners interviewed spoke about the enjoyment of being able to meet and interact with others, learn about different cultures and foods, and to practise their own culture while being part of a diverse community. The garden members recognize and celebrate the fact that people from all over the world come together to work in the garden, build relationships, and exchange knowledge. Emilienne, a woman from Burundi who has been a member of

the Rainbow Community Garden for two years, was happy to meet and interact with other garden members:

We are really chatting because you will see someone maybe from Asia, because they are not used to maybe our beans, type of beans, they will come and say: 'Oh what is it?' So, we [are] asking questions [to] one another to understand what type of plants they have here, and it has created really a good relationship. We meet in the buses, we meet downtown, and we meet during potlucks. And we are happy for that.

Agnes also shared an appreciation for the opportunity to socialize at the garden:

We meet here, we socialize, we talk. We see other culture[s] because we are not from Burundi we are [from] all over the world. So, we try, some don't speak English yet, some don't speak French, but we try to understand each other. And sometime we create relationship[s] with other people... So many people will tell you, will be asking other tribe or other continent, how do you eat this? How do you cook this? And from there, you start to know what other people eat, and you go, you try too... You know how other culture[s] live and how you live. And we create friendship.

These expressions are what make up the imagined garden. While gardeners did not speak enthusiastically about aspects of the material garden, they celebrated and showed a sense of pride in the diversity of the community of the imagined garden. A successful growing season was not required for gardeners to feel that the garden has been fulfilling in other ways.

The notion of the community's garden from Strunk and Richardson's study was also recognized in some of the interviews. Emilienne spoke about the garden as a place for the community:

I have seen so many people interested in this garden. I see the U of M, I have seen staff, teachers, and now I have seen students coming doing research here... So I can say really that it is amazing. It seems this garden has a lot of friends, and they are interested to bring their input so that we can do better and do more. People are very committed really to continue cleaning the environment, because sometimes we are invited by the chair of this organization to come and clean and everyone is coming, so I think that it is really something for the community, and we see that the community members really like it and are contributing to its growth.

The community's garden is envisioned as a place where connections between people have been created and fostered. These connections exist not only between members of the garden, but also among people at the University, and numerous sponsor and volunteer organizations in the city of Winnipeg. In the community's garden, everyone involved comes together to work toward making the material garden more successful, and also towards the broader social goals of the garden.

## Conclusion

The cultural exchange that takes place in the garden fosters a sense of connection and has resulted in various types of benefits for gardeners, both in terms of social cohesion and in access to culturally appropriate food. In this way, the Rainbow Community Garden is much more than the physical soil, vegetables, and flowers. In the context of new immigrant and refugee gardeners, there are many layers to the benefits of community gardening, which include having access to healthy, culturally appropriate food, saving money, and opportunities for social interaction, which can help them in their adjustment into Canadian society. Most notably, the role of the Rainbow Community Garden in facilitating cross-cultural exchange among gardeners has made a great impact on the lives of participants. Looking at the garden through Strunk and Richardson's (2019) lens of the material, imagined, and community's garden is useful for examining the different layers of a community garden and understanding the dynamic and nuanced nature of the garden, including how it is used and experienced by gardeners. Moving forward, exploring how diverse groups of people interact with each other and the environment may provide insight to the potential of urban agriculture projects to contribute to more just and sustainable food systems. The unique experiences and challenges faced by new immigrants and refugees in their adjustment into a new country, particularly as it relates to acquiring culturally appropriate foods, hold relevance in the context of sustainable development and food policies, and is an area deserving of further academic attention.

## Notes

- 1 The video can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/294580029>.

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