



Article

Visceral Encounters: A Political Ecology of Urban Land, Food, and Housing in Dubuque, Iowa

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Abstract: Through a praxis of co-authorship between a university scholar and two community gardeners/organizers/activists, this article showcases the ways in which knowledge, practices, and relationalities emergent in community gardens in Dubuque, Iowa USA directly engage with the politics of food, land, and housing. The authors engage in co-authorship across university and community boundaries to ontologically reframe knowledge production and draw critical attention to the everyday livelihoods and political ecologies experienced within marginalized communities. We use extended conversations and interviews to analyze the food, land, and housing issues that emerge in the context of uneven racial relations and neighborhood revitalization. We then organize our analysis using a Political Ecology of the Body (PEB) framework to consider how people's bodily, emotional, and social lives impact their relationalities with food, gardening, and neighborhood spaces. Our findings show that community gardening efforts are transforming the Washington and North End neighborhoods—even if these changes appear to outsiders to be small-scale or difficult to measure—while also calling attention to the anti-oppression and anti-racism work that remains to be done. Our co-authorship demonstrates how community gardeners and university partners can work together to contest histories of marginalization and foster more socially just relations.

Keywords: community gardens; feminist methodology; co-authorship; political ecology of the body; food insecurity; racism; land politics; affordable housing; neighborhood revitalization; gentrification

Well, I mean, I think having the garden is a great start, and I think that if it sets a good example, maybe more gardens will pop up, but I think probably what's going to make a bigger difference is having more competitive food options. So like, Eagle is the only shopping center in this area, aside from a dollar store and gas stations. So, you're stuck with whatever you get, and you're stuck with whatever prices. And unfortunately, the prices are high. And in the worst part of town that they should be high in. Laura, in conversation with Carrie (2017)

And so not only was [the Dubuque Packing Company] where they slaughtered pigs and animals and everything, they also had a small grocery store, but you had the decent foods in there. So people could get to it. So there was that. But once that went away, nothing. There's nothing in that space to this day, we're talking 20 something plus years. Lynn, in conversation with Carrie (2017)

1. Introduction

Two of us—Laura and Lynn—are community gardeners¹ in the Washington and North End neighborhoods adjacent to downtown Dubuque, Iowa USA. Our roles include engaging with neighbors in vibrant gardening activities and local food networks. One of us—Laura is a horticulturalist, landscaper, and avid gardener who grew up in Eastern Iowa, but who moved to Dubuque after college and, more recently, to the Washington neighborhood. Since moving, Laura has taken on roles as a community organizer, connector, and leader at the Washington Neighborhood Community Garden. The other—Lynn—is an urban farmer, community gardener, social justice activist, former city council member, lifelong resident of Dubuque, and leader and organizer in the Black community. Together, we are demanding that the neighborhoods—two of the most densely populated, low-income, and racially diverse in Dubuque—receive a greater voice in the city. We are demanding a greater voice in the midst of histories of uneven racial relations, recent redevelopment efforts, and threats of gentrification. Our co-author, Carrie, is a doctoral candidate in Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University and met us through a graduate research assistantship with Cooperative Extension. Together as co-authors, our efforts are aimed at broadening opportunities for residents in the Washington and North End neighborhoods; we understand gardening as part of a social and environmental system that is intimately linked with access to cultural foodways, affordable housing, accessible grocery stores, land and public green spaces, and economic opportunity. We hope to influence the policies and actions that could bring about more gardens and quality grocery stores, along with decent housing and job opportunities for residents, without forcing poorer people out to ‘revitalize’ the community. Everyday lived experiences motivate our roles in the food system, roles that include, but extend well beyond, growing food.

This paper presents the ways in which we have embarked on collective experiments of gardening, food sharing, and community activism by engaging directly in the social life of the Washington and North End neighborhoods of Dubuque. Through a praxis of co-authorship, we showcase how the knowledge, practices, and relationalities emergent in the Washington and North End neighborhoods directly engage with a politics of food, land, and housing. We organize our analysis using a Political Ecology of the Body (PEB) framework (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013) because it allows us to consider how people’s bodily, emotional, and social lives impact their relationalities with food. In this way, PEB renders visible the relations of everyday life that are difficult to represent from a macro perspective. Community spaces and activities in the Washington Neighborhoods exhibit food-body and garden-body relationalities full of “collaboration, co-experimentation, and coming together” (Carolan 2016, p. 150; see also Gibson-Graham 2011), even within the broader uneven social landscape that perpetuates precarity and minimizes political voice.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 discusses co-authorship as a mode of community-engaged feminist methodology and considers how power dynamics and hierarchies structure our collaboration. We include a brief history of the relationship between the land-grant university and Cooperative Extension system, community engagement, and knowledge co-production. In Section 3, we situate the community gardening efforts described in this article within the historical and socio-political contexts of racism in Dubuque and the state of Iowa, and consider the impacts of urban revitalization on land, housing, and food struggles. In the Sections 4 and 5, we present accounts of our (’sLynn and ’sLaura, respectively) everyday social lives and the co-experimental knowledges, practices, and relationalities emerging through community gardening, organizing, and activism. Section 6 introduces the PEB model. We describe how consideration of PEB has emerged in response

¹ The phrase *community gardeners* denotes gardeners’ activities in communal and shared spaces. Through community gardening, we pursue opportunities to share food, seeds, plants, and related resources with our neighbors. Community is a broad term with multiple meanings across different contexts, and we acknowledge its various uses to describe spatial scales, places, groups, senses of belonging, relationships, and more. Here, we leave this term open and vaguely defined to reflect its simultaneously capacious and sometimes conflicting usage in everyday spaces and in community gardening contexts.

to the critical issues identified by us, and also through the broader statewide network of community gardeners that Carrie encountered through research with Growing Together Iowa.² In this section, we utilize the PEB framework to further our analysis. The article concludes with discussion of the implications of our analysis for organizations focused on community development. We reflect on the process of our collaboration and co-authorship as a demonstration of how community and university organizations can work together as partners to contest histories of marginalization and foster socially just relations.

2. Feminist Methodology and Co-Authorship

A praxis of knowledge co-construction and co-authorship can begin with a commitment to, as [Whatmore \(2006, p. 604\)](#) describes it, “a redistribution of expertise attendant on the recognition of multiple knowledge practices and communities that bear on the framing of inherently uncertain socio-technical problems” (p. 604). More than just a question of redistribution, this paper aligns with Indigenous and decolonial efforts to shift from “*learning to know the other*” to “*learning as an engagement with the other*” (Kuokkanen as cited in [Sundberg 2014](#), emphasis original). It acknowledges that, along with ontological reframing, praxis demands attention to the everyday livelihoods and political ecological relations experienced within marginalized communities ([Di Chiro 2015](#); [Harcourt et al. 2015](#); [Mollett 2017](#)).

Situating co-authorship and praxis within “a diverse set of bodied knowledges and activities—always attuned to emotion and affect—that do not privilege one way of (scientific, intellectual) knowing as *the right way*” ([Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013](#), p. 86, emphasis original) can shift power relations and critically reframe issues of knowledge, voice, and authority. We see potential for this shift in collaborations like Growing Together, as many community partners have expressed a deep desire for knowledge exchange with other communities across Iowa that are co-experimentally developing networks among growers, food pantry staff and clients, neighborhood residents, and grassroots partners. Through our co-authorship, we demonstrate the importance of multi-directional knowledge flows that can identify—as we do in this article—issues like food, land, and housing as interrelated political ecological struggles. From a starting point of collective struggle, we seek to supplant colonizing and technocratic paradigms of community engagement with collaborative, co-constructed, and socially just partnerships, even as we recognize the tensions, challenges, and limits of this journey.

For our co-authorship, the tensions of co-constructing feminist knowledge through the research process emanate from the power dynamics among us and our different lived experiences. These dynamics infuse our interactions and risk privileging academic knowledge, voice, and authority ([DeVault and Gross 2012](#); [Hesse-Biber 2014](#)). Beginning in 2016, Carrie carried out community-engaged research for Growing Together, including in Dubuque. Feminist methodologies, based on principles of radical vulnerability, co-authorship, and social justice for marginalized and oppressed communities, have guided this engagement (see [Hesse-Biber 2014](#); [Nagar 2014](#)). Two of us, Carrie and Laura, first met in 2016. During our visits, we went to the Washington Neighborhood Community Garden where Laura is a garden leader, walked throughout the neighborhood, visited the community food pantry, engaged in conversations, and exchanged ideas through observational as well as ethnographic, open-ended interview and contextual questions ([Bloom 1998](#); [Hesse-Biber 2014](#); [Stage and Mattson](#)

² We—Carrie, Laura, and Lynn—met through our affiliation with Growing Together Iowa, a statewide community donation gardening effort set into motion as part of the SNAP-Education program in Cooperative Extension, in partnership with the Master Gardener program. Growing Together Iowa, which links together emerging networks of local growers and emergency food stakeholders, seeks to address intertwined social issues related to food access, local food production, community gardening, and nutrition. Carrie’s role as a graduate researcher with Cooperative Extension has facilitated connections with Growing Together sites across the state. Laura’s connection to Growing Together originally began as a Master Gardener coordinator for Dubuque County Extension, as well as through personal involvement with the Washington Neighborhood Community Garden. Lynn became connected to Growing Together as a Master Gardener in Dubuque County.

2003). We sought, as DeVault and Gross (2012) describe it, to produce knowledge for, and not about, the Washington neighborhood (p. 229).

Stories and themes emerged that first year, which pointed to the political ecologies of the neighborhood and its community gardening efforts. Carrie, familiar with PEB through studies of feminist political ecology in graduate school, began iteratively thinking about the model in relation to the issues Growing Together partners identified as important to the well-being of their neighborhoods. We continued to explore the political ecologies of the neighborhood, which led Laura to connect Carrie with Lynn in 2017. However, Carrie did not explicitly discuss the PEB framework with Laura and Lynn at this stage of the collaboration, though it served as a useful tool for Carrie to approach our engagement and analyze our findings. During Carrie and Lynn's visits, we went to the North End neighborhood to see the urban farming and backyard gardening efforts in which Lynn is heavily involved, and we toured Lynn's larger growing space on a collaborative farm outside of Dubuque. We also talked about Lynn's garden in the Washington neighborhood that had been removed for development earlier that year. The themes and issues that we address in this article emerged iteratively over the course of these interactions—through in-depth semi-structured interviews, site visits, and follow-up conversations—and draw on our individual and collective commitments.

In the fourth and fifth sections of this article we present two of our first-person accounts, Lynn and Laura's, respectively. We provided these accounts through in-person conversations, phone and email conversations, and recorded interviews from 2016–2019. The accounts are compiled and typed by Carrie and reviewed by Laura and Lynn. The additional stories, insights, analyses, historical context, and background information throughout the article are derived from our unrecorded conversations from 2016–2019, and from background research conducted by Carrie with Laura and Lynn's guidance.

While academic convention dictates that “scholars” present short quotes from “interview respondents” and enrich those quotes with their own analyses and insights, this article presents longer accounts to highlight the richness of the knowledges and analyses co-authored by the three of us. Moreover, Nagar (2014, p. 3) wrote extensively on the need for feminist principles of co-authorship in response to the asymmetrical relationship between researchers and non-academics, noting problematically:

This material hierarchy can result in a taken-for-granted epistemic hierarchy in which metropolitan knowledges are privileged as “sophisticated” and where nonmetropolitan knowledges are perceived as “raw data” or stories that need to be framed and put into perspective by the formally certified intellectual.

Principles of co-authorship guide our engagement. However, the above passage from Nagar points to the tension in co-authorships that cross the boundaries of academic and local knowledges. Carrie's contribution to the co-authorship stems from a position of academic authority—and with it, the resources and connections to publish and potentially shape Cooperative Extension's role in community food collaborations. The contributions of Carrie also include applying the academic PEB framework, which, while yielding valuable insight, should not be privileged over local knowledges. This aim drives our emphasis in Sections 4 and 5 on the extended accounts of Laura and Lynn as analyses of food, land, housing, and community in Dubuque. We then utilize PEB in Section 6 as further analysis to organize and draw connections among the issues raised in our conversations.

2.1. Cooperative Extension and Knowledge Co-Construction

The tensions of co-constructing feminist knowledge in this article are situated within the broader contexts of Cooperative Extension. The colonizing history of U.S. land-grant universities, in which Cooperative Extension is embedded, continues to shape institutional knowledge production, including what knowledge is produced, how it is produced, whose knowledge counts, and who benefits. Charting land-grant university history, Esty (2016) and la paperson (2017) trace the relational processes of Native American dispossession and genocide and white migration and land-granting enacted through the

Morrill Act of 1862 (7 U.S.C. §§ 301).³ Not incidentally, Cooperative Extension—established in the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 (7 U.S.C. §§ 342)—developed in this nation-building context as a service within land-grant universities to transfer scientific technologies of agricultural modernization in the form of practical, useful education to the “broader public” (Collins and Mueller 2016; Gould et al. 2014; Jones and Garforth 1997; Leeuwis 2004; Morse et al. 2006). The technology transfer mission of Cooperative Extension enacted modes of ontological colonization through “Western technocratic objectivism” and top-down paradigms of engagement in which researchers and specialists enter communities to implement expert-designed programs, a paradigm which persists to present day (Collins and Mueller 2016, p. 326; Hassel 2004).

In recent years, Cooperative Extension has begun to promote alternatives to top-down engagement, including co-learning, co-facilitation, and collaboration (Dunning et al. 2012; Enderton et al. 2017; Hassel 2004; Raison 2010). Moreover, and directly relevant to our co-authorship, Cooperative Extension organizations are increasingly emphasizing the need to address uneven power relations and structural inequities in the food system in the United States, and are acknowledging that local food systems are not inherently more just (Ammons et al. 2018; Enderton et al. 2017; Pirog et al. 2016). Importantly, we emphasize here that engagement includes but also is about more than working with diverse and marginalized community partners; it involves opening up to diverse ways of viewing the world and constructing knowledge, including local and indigenous knowledges (Collins and Mueller 2016; Hassel 2004). Our co-authorship presents Cooperative Extension with an alternative model of community engagement—one with the potential to fundamentally reframe how projects like Growing Together address pressing social issues like food insecurity, a point to which we return in the Section 7.

3. Racial Relations and Inequities in Dubuque, Iowa

In this section, we discuss the ways in which the livelihood of Dubuque’s racially- and ethnically-diverse residents have been impacted, especially by oppressive politics and policies. Historians have documented how the Black community in Dubuque has endured a long history of violence, dispossession, displacement, and social exclusion that continues into present day. We primarily focus on the Black community in this section, as it constitutes the largest non-white group in Dubuque (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a), and because the history of the Black community in the city throughout the 20th and into present day provides a significant context for understanding racial relations and anti-racist activism. Additionally, Lynn’s positionality, as a member of the Black community and lifelong Dubuque resident, enables us to weave together this history with Lynn’s lived experiences.

This history is especially important for understanding the two neighborhoods in Dubuque that we write about in this article—the Washington neighborhood, next to downtown with the Mississippi River bordering on its eastern edge, and the North End neighborhood, north of and adjacent to the Washington neighborhood. The two neighborhoods are among the city’s most racially- and ethnically-diverse. The U.S. Census tracts roughly encompassing the neighborhoods, Census Tract 1 and Census Tract 5,⁴ include sizeable populations of Dubuque’s Black, Latin American, and Pacific Islander

³ The Morrill Act of 1862 granted states “public lands” (30,000 acres for each U.S. Congressional member in a state’s delegation) to finance the establishment of land-grant universities and increase private ownership of land by white settler-colonialists (though in reality, much of the land sold by states was purchased by speculators and land companies, not settlers, (Esty 2016, p. 156; la paperson 2017)). Esty (2016, p. 155) sums up U.S. Representative Justin Smith Morrill’s vision for the land-grant university system as “the blueprint for American progress, health, and civilization,” and “the destiny for white America.”

⁴ The City of Dubuque Neighborhood Association provides maps of the geographic areas for Washington and North End neighborhoods (City of Dubuque 2013). Overlaying these boundaries on the 2010 U.S. Census Tract maps, the Washington Neighborhood stretches across most of the residential section of U.S. Census Tract 1 in Dubuque and into the southern portion of Census Tract 5. The North End neighborhood, adjacent to the north of the Washington Neighborhood, roughly makes up the remainder of Census Tract 5 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Notably, Census Tract 5 also includes areas in downtown Dubuque; block level Census data show that ‘Black or African American’ populations are far less concentrated in the downtown areas of Census Tract 5 relative to the tract’s other block designations (U.S. Census Bureau 2010; Bassman et al. 2013), meaning the Washington Neighborhood has a higher concentration of Black residents than represented overall within Census Tract 5.

communities, among others (City of Dubuque 2013; U.S. Census Bureau 2010, 2017a; See Appendix A). Additionally, families in these two tracts have incomes below the poverty level at estimated rates of 30.0% (± 13.2) and 23.9% (± 9.9), respectively, compared to a citywide rate of 10.4% (± 1.5) (U.S. Census Bureau 2017b). Within metropolitan Dubuque County, the tracts also represent two of the three low-income housing tax credit qualified census tracts (along with tract 7.01; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2019).

While this section focuses on the history of the Black community in Dubuque, we also acknowledge additional histories and lived experiences—among the diverse racial and ethnic communities formerly and currently in Dubuque, and at intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, ability, and so forth—that are not reviewed in this section and that have received far less scholarly and media attention. Lynn and Laura interact regularly with Marshallese Pacific Islander, Latinx, and additional diverse residents through gardening, community engagement, and activism, working to improve their lives and their access to gardening and food through these activities. Our stories, analyses, and recommendations in this article are based upon our interactions with the many racially- and ethnically-diverse communities and low-income residents who live in the Washington and North End neighborhoods and throughout Dubuque. Although we review the history of inequities facing the Black community in this section, we call for future research to document the status, histories, and lived experiences of diverse and low-income communities residing in the Washington and North End neighborhoods and throughout Dubuque.

Understanding the experience of Black people today in Dubuque requires situating present-day events within an historical context. According to Midwest historian Leslie Schwalm (2009), in 1839 Iowa ‘Black laws’ began governing migration to the territory, limiting the settlement of free Black people. The territory and then state continued to expand its Black laws, and from 1851 until its repeal in 1864, state law fully restricted Black settlement in Iowa (Schwalm 2009). While records suggest that the ban was not strictly enforced at the local level, and that Black migration continued to the state, the presence of these laws reflected a broader racialized discourse common in northern states in that era, one which purported that “people of African descent were naturally dependent, appropriate targets of coercive and circumscribing behavior, and therefore deservedly outside the boundaries of respectability and citizenship” (Schwalm 2009, p. 27). Based on Schwalm’s extensive analysis of historical archival documents from Iowa, we know that while some politically radical Iowans fought for the rights and legal status of Black people, a long history of racism and racist ideology became cemented through policies that socially and economically disadvantaged Black Iowans for generations to come.

Racist ideology continued to deter the settlement of Black people in Dubuque and other Iowa communities throughout the 20th century. The interweaving of racist policies—official and unofficial—with discrimination and violence meant that Dubuque’s Black population totals would remain low through the following decades, the lowest among major Iowa cities through the early 1990s (“Fiery Crosses Ignite Town’s Worst Fears,” Bill McAllister (1991), Washington Post, 17 November 1991). As just one example of how the city actively deterred Black settlement, in a 1991 newspaper interview, James Sutton (Lynn’s father) recalled working on railroad maintenance in the 1950s and how Dubuque police officers would approach Black train passengers to, as Sutton described it, “tell them to get back on the train” (“Fiery Crosses Ignite Town’s Worst Fears,” Bill McAllister, Washington Post, 17 November 1991). The families already in Dubuque—there were only a handful when the Sutton family arrived in the late 1950s—faced hatred, threats, and violence.⁵

⁵ Acts of racism were overt and public, but also included private acts that attempted to make Black people’s lives in Dubuque intolerable. In recalling Mr. Sutton’s work at the railroad company, for example, Lynn remembers how other maintenance workers in Dubuque had put sand and dirt in Mr. Sutton’s packed sandwiches. As a result, Mrs. Ruby Sutton (Lynn mother, Mr. Sutton’s spouse, and a recognized leading civil rights activist in Iowa) would walk from home to the railyard each midday with lunch to deliver to Mr. Sutton. Eventually exasperated by the situation, Mrs. Sutton complained directly to the railroad supervisor, who fortunately did put a stop to it.

By the 1980s and 1990s, violent forms of white resistance to Black people ensued in the form of Ku Klux Klan rallies, cross burnings, and racially-motivated school violence in Dubuque ([Gutsche 2014](#)). A plan by the city council to attract more Black residents in response to the initial cross burning only increased white backlash and violence (“Fiery Crosses Ignite Town’s Worst Fears,” Bill McAllister, Washington Post, 17 November 1991). In the midst of this string of racial violence—including 22 cross burnings and 11 additionally racially-motivated incidents—an article in the New York Times in 1991 reported that one of the cross burners, upon returning from jail to work at a meatpacking plant, was said to have been met with “backslaps and a standing ovation” from his co-workers (“Seeking a Racial Mix, Dubuque Finds Tension,” Isabel [Wilkerson \(1991\)](#), New York Times, 3 November 1991; “Will Dubuque be the Ferguson of Iowa?,” Timothy [Trenkle \(2015\)](#), Des Moines Register, 25 September 2015; “Burnt Crosses Found in Dubuque,” [Associated Press \(2016\)](#), Des Moines Register, 15 April 2016).

Despite this violence, the diversity of Dubuque, including its Black population, increased substantially after the early 1990s and continued into the 2000s ([U.S. Census Bureau 2000, 2010](#); see also [Bassman et al. 2013](#)). In Dubuque and across Iowa more generally, these increases have brought about efforts to halt the influx of Black people from urban centers like Chicago ([Gutsche 2014](#)). In 2016, a cross burning again occurred—this time at the corner of East 22nd Street and Washington Street, only blocks from the Washington Neighborhood Community Garden (“Cross burnings in Dubuque show city still in turmoil over race,” Kyle Munson, Des Moines Register, 22 April 2016).

Less than a year prior to the 2016 incident, the Des Moines Register, a major newspaper in Iowa, featured an opinion column tracing the long and extensive history of racial violence and injustice toward Black residents of Dubuque, asking if Dubuque was going to be the next Ferguson, Missouri (“Will Dubuque be the Ferguson of Iowa?,” Timothy [Trenkle \(2015\)](#), Des Moines Register, 25 September 2015). The article summed up the similarities between the two cities: “Dubuque’s white agenda mimicked Ferguson. It included police profiling, segregation, minimal Black ownership of homes and businesses and a racial legacy of exclusion and prejudice” (*ibid.*). As a significant example of these injustices in the area of housing, in 2013, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) issued a finding that the city of Dubuque had failed to comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and other various federal regulations ([U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2014](#); see also “Will Dubuque be the Ferguson of Iowa?,” Timothy [Trenkle \(2015\)](#), Des Moines Register, 25 September 2015). HUD’s investigation revealed that rule changes in the city’s housing assistance program discriminated against Black applicants moving to Dubuque from Chicago and resulted in a sharp decrease in overall Black participation in the program (from 31% to 21% in 2010; “Dubuque and Federal Agency Settle Over Race Discrimination Findings,” Durrie [Bouscaren \(2014\)](#), Iowa Public Radio, 15 April 2014). The findings resulted in the city voluntarily making changes to its housing program (*ibid.*).

Revitalization, Urban Green Spaces, and Land Conflicts

As Iowa’s history of segregation and racial injustice continues to affect communities of color in Dubuque, economic development pressures also are impacting life in the Washington and North End neighborhoods. Residents are witnessing rapid changes in the neighborhood amidst city development efforts to revitalize urban corridors such as the Washington neighborhood areas ([City of Dubuque 2008](#)), which include the use of Community Development Block Grants to address building vacancies and rental unit rehabilitation and provide support for public services ([City of Dubuque n.d.](#); [Inclusive Dubuque 2015](#)). Three important revitalization issues that receive less attention are how residents navigate the affordability of newer affordable housing versus unsafe living conditions in older rental units, and the need for green spaces versus the gentrifying effects of those spaces.

Affordable housing is relative from our experience, and we have grown increasingly concerned that some, if not many, current residents will continue their struggles to afford housing despite newer “affordable” housing options that are in the works (see “Dubuque Facing Affordable Housing Shortage: Proposed Developments Could Help,” Allison [Wong \(2018\)](#), KCRG-TV9, 4 October 2018).

At the same time, within the Washington and North End neighborhoods we have seen that the other options available to are all-too-often neglected and in disrepair. Lynn has taken leadership on this issue, organizing collective action when neighbors have faced unsafe living conditions within their neighborhoods' older low-income housing units (for a recent example in the news, see "City of Dubuque to Ramp Up Inspections of Units Linked to Property Managers with a History of Infractions," Benjamin Fisher (2018), Dubuque Telegraph Herald, 23 November 2018).

The circumstances described above point to the tri-partite relationship between histories of exclusion, segregation, and neglect; property and building vacancies; and emerging local economic development plans, as they come together to constrain housing options residents in the Washington and North End neighborhoods. These circumstances also shape our opportunities to develop neighborhood green spaces as "urban commons" (Safransky 2017). Pudup (Pudup 2008, p. 1232) describes the relationship between, on the one hand, thriving community gardens in vacant spaces, and, on the other hand, "a kind of benign neglect by capital accumulation." As capital flows into our neighborhoods in the form of housing and business development, it shapes our options for gardening in the neighborhood. Growing spaces have sprouted up in the numerous vacant lots in the Washington and North End neighborhoods (see Bassman et al. 2013), in many cases providing an interim use until the land can be repurposed for development (Drake and Lawson 2014; Glowa 2017). We remain aware that, paradoxically, community gardens in low-income urban neighborhoods can often contribute to their own eventual destruction, attracting higher income residents and businesses to the neighborhood and raising property values (Glowa 2017, pp. 236–37; Quastel 2009; Voicu and Been 2008). The potential of gardens to improve neighborhood appeal can even incentivize private land owners to grant permission to community gardeners to cultivate a vacant lot until property values rise (Drake and Lawson 2014; Glowa 2017). While the gardens provide a valued land use for many neighborhood residents, they might contribute to trends of gentrification that complicate neighborhood struggles for quality affordable housing.

Thus, the land politics of vacancies, housing, and community gardens is entangled with economic development considerations, particularly of exchange values versus use values (Smith and Kurtz 2003). McCann (2002), however, more broadly conceptualizes local economic development conflicts as a cultural "politics of struggle" in which city elites and marginalized groups vie over competing visions of a city's future. Interestingly, while property values—both as use and exchange values—do matter to these struggles, local economic development decisions take shape through the power of rhetoric and discourse (McCann 2002). Though elites tend to dominate local economic development politics, the discursive power of marginalized groups also can propel alternative visions of the city (McCann 2002). Relatedly, Safransky (2017) discusses how land development conflicts are about racialized displacement and resource distribution but are also about something much more fundamental. As our neighborhood struggles demonstrate, these conflicts are inseparable from "struggles over race, property and citizenship that undergird modern liberal democracies" (Safransky 2017, p. 1081) and "ongoing struggles for decolonization" (1079; see also Glowa 2017). Urban development scholars call for analyses to consider the role of marginalized groups usually excluded within urban economic development politics, a task that our co-authorship explicitly takes up in this article.

Community gardeners in the Washington and North End neighborhoods have made use of vacant land to create vegetable gardens and green spaces. Seeing decades of disinvestment turn into redevelopment, revitalization, and, potentially, gentrification, we understand the need not only for gardening and greening projects, but also for efforts to make sure communities of color and low-income residents are not displaced. We are intimately aware of the contradictory implications of urban green spaces, and echo the concerns of Rosol (2012), who warned:

... where "upgrading" and beautification are the aims of local authorities...gentrification is close. If strategies to improve living conditions in a neighborhood are not combined with mechanisms that prevent displacement of residents and keep housing affordable, even the most well-meaning projects can become the engine of gentrification. (p. 251)

It is within such historical and socio-political contexts that we define what it means to be gardeners, growers, and community members in the Washington and North End neighborhoods. It is within the context of structural racism—i.e., disinvestment, housing precarity, and, more recently, redevelopment, threats of gentrification, and displacement—that neighborhood residents experience some of the lowest in levels of household income and food access in the city (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2017; Bassman et al. 2013).⁶ These intertwined issues cannot be separated from one another. Keene and Padilla (2010), in writing about the migration of Black people to Eastern Iowa, investigated the stigmas of relocating from ‘tainted’ and ‘vilified’ places—so called ‘urban ghettos’—and the effects of that stigma on the health and well-being of people of color in their new places of residence. Similarly, this section has illustrated how the vilification of Black people relocating to Iowa, from the 19th century through present day, has enabled a persistent and intergenerational effort to exclude communities of color in Dubuque from the social, political, and economic means of influencing local economic development policies, and escaping conditions of racial violence and poverty.

While these conditions persist, the Washington and North End neighborhoods are nonetheless sites of agency and action where residents actively engage in “place making” (McCann 2002; see also Allen et al. 2018). In the next sections, we present Lynn and Laura’s stories, which provide deep insight into simultaneity of political ecological forces at play in the neighborhoods, shaping the relationalities of food, housing, land, and community. Despite the uneven social landscapes that have limited access to spaces and impacted how knowledge is produced, something is happening at and through the gardens to reshape those forces.

4. Social Justice and Neighborhood Revitalization: Lynn’s Account

I (Lynn) am a lifelong resident of Dubuque, leader and organizer in the Black community, Master Gardener, and former city council representative. As a community activist, I speak out against the injustices that are impacting people’s wellbeing. Food security is a major part of that activism. A big challenge facing community gardening in the Washington and North End neighborhoods has been long-term access to land and resources. As background, one of the neighborhood gardens that I led—slated to be part of Growing Together in 2017—was bulldozed overnight early in the growing season. The property landlord did this without telling anyone in order to use the site for the construction of an office building.⁷

When looking around the community now, I see ample vacant, unused spaces that could be utilized for growing food long-term. Recently, for example, I proposed developing gardens in a nearby unused green space that is closer to the highway heading out of town and has been an empty field for decades. The city has focused its efforts on ‘revitalizing’ the vacant locations in and near the Washington and North End neighborhoods. While the city’s plans favor built infrastructure, I believe we should leave more spaces undeveloped. A group of us in the community stays on the lookout for vacant lots with potential to be used for growing food. Upon finding them, we go to the city with our ideas to put in a garden, to feed people, and to teach people how to do that. When we talk to the city about getting more permanent spaces, it is a push and a struggle. There is a tension between how we are thinking of revitalization and the city’s plans. The city’s plans seek to make our neighborhoods better by developing more housing, restaurants, shops, and sites for business, but I always ask: better for whom? Revitalization planning needs to draw upon the diversity of residents living in our neighborhoods, including those with less privilege.

⁶ Lynn adapted plans for that year and remained involved that year through projects such as donating plant starters to the community food pantry. Subsequently, the same landlord told Laura of similar plans to eventually remove the Washington Neighborhood Community garden for development. As of the time of writing in 2018, the Washington Neighborhood Community Garden remains active and in place.

⁷ Laura and Lynn describe the proposed changes discussed by the city to include attracting new businesses to empty store fronts and replacing older and deteriorating multi-unit housing with single-family affordable housing for low and middle-income residents.

While efforts to utilize green spaces for growing food are a struggle, I have kept pursuing incremental opportunities. I have recognized that sometimes you have to start small and go from there. For instance, I partner with an urban farm, Convivium, located in the neighborhood to expand gardening spaces. Without larger spaces for growing food, our community decided to put smaller spaces right in people's backyards (Figure 1). The farm partners with the neighbors and has installed raised bed gardens at their homes. They are wonderful because they create a direct line to food, and those kinds of opportunities are coming about more and more. We remain on the lookout, however, for larger spaces. Every time a house is taken down in our community, we will go see who has the space and if it has a green area. While local politics and plans for revitalization currently restrict our efforts to small, incremental changes, our community is organizing itself around the issue of green spaces because of our desire to make life better for people who live in the neighborhood.



Figure 1. Backyard raised bed garden in the North End neighborhood.

My desire to grow food is rooted in childhood experiences in Dubuque. The types of food and levels of food access that once sustained us have been disrupted. During my childhood, summers were times of gardening, fishing, and hunting, and my parents' friends always shared in their bounties. Beyond summertime, the nearby local pack house operated a grocery store that carried decent foods. When the foods that the neighborhood had access to changed, our diets changed too. Since the grocery store went away, there has been nothing in that space to this day, over twenty years. Children growing up in the neighborhood today have fewer options.

These issues are important to me because it is about people and community. It is about meeting people's needs. Sometimes I think that point is getting missed. I think we get caught up in the aesthetics of the city and neglect the basics. Are people's needs being met? Because we have children facing obesity and a lack of proper nutrition. In Iowa, an estimated 14.7% of 2- to 4-year-olds in WIC and 17.7% of 10- to 17-year-olds are classified as obese ([Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2018](#)). In Dubuque, I see how these issues are reflected in our food differences. Decent grocery stores are

miles away from our community; we need to reduce those numbers (see Footnote 9). Children do not need to start out in life with obesity because it leads to problems later in life.

I ask: if these issues are something we can control, why don't we? Why shouldn't we be concerned? We should be concerned with food's impact on children, and we should look more into the connection between food and children's performance levels at the schools. Of Dubuque's 18 public schools, 10 recently have been identified as low performing ([Iowa Department of Education 2018](#)). Proper nutrition becomes even more critical in this context. If we neglect these issues, nobody wins. I have asked myself, what can we do? I believe it will take a one-on-one approach. We can have all the programs in the world, but we need something in place that is fully dedicated to making this system work for our children. Unfortunately, I see kids hit the convenience store to buy junk food on the way to school, which provides little to no energy. It fills them up for a short time, but not the long term. That is why this issue is important to me; because no one needs to start out life like that.

The disappearances of our food spaces and food cultures impacted my personal health too, which in turn prompted me to turn to gardening and natural foods as an adult. The health issues that I experienced subsequently stabilized. Food can provide for health and nourishment but often I cannot find the types of foods that I want to buy fresh at the grocery store. When I talked to Carrie about this problem, I mentioned the challenges of finding the foods I want to be able to enjoy, like okra. I hardly can find it anymore. One grocery store, Econofood, had it years ago, but now that store is gone and nobody carries it fresh. One time I came across fresh okra at Hy-Vee, a local grocery store. I immediately put a picture on Facebook and messaged my friends, "Look and tell me I'm not seeing things." That is the only time I have seen it, and I gathered it up. The stores carry frozen okra, but it is not the same.

The take home message of this story is that Black community members, as well as community members from Asian-Pacific and African countries, often cannot access or find the foods they want to eat in the Washington and North End neighborhoods, or even in Dubuque. I have friends who even travel to Madison, Wisconsin (nearly 100 miles away) to shop for this reason. I have taken on a role in the neighborhood to grow, share, and promote healthy foods, increasing access to diverse varieties of seeds and vegetable plants. I focus on the crops and varieties in demand in communities of color and immigrant communities but hard if not impossible to find in the city.

In my role as a connector, I work with partners to bring people and food resources together. I have a garden that provides food for the community, naturally. I also do a lot connecting with people and helping them understand what it is to grow something. I help them learn how to grow it, where to get things, and how to move forward with growing food because often they do not know what resources are out there. As an example of bringing people and food resources together, Leslie (pseudonym) at Convivium Urban Farm had started a lot of starter plants and set them out for free. My friend Tamara (pseudonym) took them all but did not have enough space. Rather than letting the plants sit, I helped distribute them out to people so they could start their vegetables.

I want to take a step back here and discuss why all the issues I mentioned above—access to food and land, having a say in the future of our neighborhood—are issues demanding social justice. I understand the pain that comes from being undervalued, from being ignored, and from a long history of racism that has permeated all spaces of the neighborhood. I have experienced firsthand the barriers facing communities of color. That history has come to the forefront of recent political tensions as Dubuque's population has become increasingly diverse. In response, I stay actively engaged in our food and in all the justice issues important to our wellbeing.

To show how racism plays out, take the issues of vacant land and food access. Why is it that every time our community proposes an idea to make it a growing space, it meets resistance? Our inability to grow food is compounded by our inability to buy it in a store. We do not have the same types of quality grocery stores accessible to our neighborhood that are in other parts of Dubuque. Why are these stores only on the other side of town, why aren't they ours? These resources, i.e., land and food, are not benefitting the people in need of these benefits. Why is the idea of moving low-income people

into affordable housing units on the periphery of the city—moving our community close to a better grocery store—considered a better potential solution than working together to make our current, centrally-located neighborhoods habitable for all of us?

In response to all these issues, I have obtained an acre of land within an area of Dubuque identified as a food desert. I am growing food that is affordable so people can receive the benefits. It is also a community effort. I go and speak with the Dubuque city council on a regular basis, and set up meetings with the city manager, city attorney, and the human rights director. I need their buy in to address these disparities.

Dubuque has had a real culture shift, and demographics have changed in recent years. Yet, from what I have seen the city has not coped with these changes. Their policies and actions have created a feeling that those who have migrated to Dubuque, those who are shifting the demographics, are causing the problem. I see the city's revitalization plans as an attempt to push these people out, so that tourism and other city priorities are not impacted. What this has meant for our neighborhoods is that people—people of color, immigrants, and low-income people—are left living in substandard housing and living conditions. I said to Carrie that it is no wonder that there are arguments and fights occurring. They are perpetuated by the way the city has responded to changing demographics.

At the city council meetings, I have voiced these concerns. I have said in these meetings (as retold to Carrie in a 2017 conversation):

You have to look at how you created this. You put the majority of people you think are like-minded in one area. And you close the lid. When you close the lid, you're closing lids to economic [opportunities], to jobs, a decent place to learn, decent food, medical attention, even entertainment. And now they're all there and there's only one way to get out. Here's an analogy, if you put a bunch of lab rats in a box, and you close the lid, how are they gonna get out? They gotta fight each other to get to the top. That's what you have here. Now our challenge is how do we get 'em out? How do we get 'em out? And, more importantly, do you want 'em out? There's our challenge.

In my meetings with city officials, I have been working to combat these issues too, especially given the extent of dilapidated housing in our neighborhood. After years of dedication to these issues, I am now working to take legal action in support of the members of our community who are vulnerable to landlords who refuse to take proper care of rental housing.

Racial relations in Dubuque shape these connected issues—food, land, housing, and community development. In spite of these injustices, I am continuing to pursue incremental efforts, for example, finding ways to provide people with the food they enjoy and with opportunities to grow it. Even as some of our community gardens have been taken away, I keep thinking outside of the box to identify potential new green spaces to grow food and to advocate for better housing. I will keep bringing these opportunities to the attention of the city, in hopes that they will stand behind our efforts to increase green spaces and contribute to people's wellbeing. Across my areas of activism—food security, land access, quality affordable housing, and social justice—I am demanding that plans to revitalize our neighborhoods truly work to make the lives of people living here better.

5. Gardening as More-Than-Food: Laura's Account

I (Laura) am a horticulturalist, landscaper, and avid gardener. I live in the Washington neighborhood in Dubuque, where I am a community organizer, connector, and leader at the Washington Neighborhood Community Garden. In 2016, I met Carrie while in my former role as the Dubuque County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator. Over the course of our conversations in the past few years, I have shared experiences of living in the Washington neighborhood and taking on these multiple roles. To understand the Washington Neighborhood Community Garden, it is important to understand the neighborhood's context. For example, when I first met Carrie, we talked at length about the neighborhood's history and its relationship with outside people, organizations, and institutions.

As a neighborhood resident, I have seen firsthand the tenuous relationship of my neighbors with the city and the police, a relationship linking directly to histories of racism and how that racism has manifested over time, through generations, and in everyday life. Even when people are not overtly racist, I see microaggressions happening in Dubuque on a regular basis.

Racism and its manifestations in the daily lives of people in the Washington neighborhood have impacted my role as a neighborhood organizer and gardener. As someone who is relatively new to Dubuque and to the neighborhood, I have sought to develop relationships with my neighbors but also am constantly aware of the balance required in navigating the racial dynamics of building trust as a white female in a diverse neighborhood. I walk past neighbors every day. When I see someone for the first time and consider saying hello, I have learned to ask myself, “Is my motivation to build a relationship for the sake of relationships? Is it to make me more comfortable (while potentially making them more uncomfortable)?” It requires not trying too hard and not forcing a relationship when people may not want to expend the additional emotional labor to build one with me. In terms of gardening, I think about how to connect with people without being forceful about getting them involved if they do not want to be involved. One might conclude that without a little discomfort on all our parts, bridges might never be built. Yet, I never want to assume that I know what is best for anyone because that is a patriarchal way of thinking. In all my interactions, I have learned to be present and to have respect for people’s space in the neighborhood.

One of my goals in moving to the Washington neighborhood and joining this garden was to disrupt the stereotypes and the stigmas about certain areas of town. When I moved to the neighborhood, I also saw that outside organizations—for instance, city government, non-profit organizations, and universities—often would implement projects without first listening to, considering, and building trust with neighborhood residents. A major goal of my community organizing and gardening has been to reverse this trend, to turn one-sided relationships into reciprocal ones. What is important is not just asking for feedback from neighborhood residents, but having something to offer and inviting them in.

I have made myself into a connector, bridging the city and community organizations in Dubuque with the Washington Neighborhood. From there, if I really want to reverse these historical trends and one-sided relationships, I need trusting connections deeper into the neighborhood. Reaching out to leaders in the Black community who are already working with community organizations has been instrumental. I was very fortunate, for example, to connect at the Farmers Market one day with a leader in the Black community whose organization has been focused on intergenerational poverty. He invited me to take part in the organization’s programming with the correctional facility in the Washington neighborhood. This is just one example of the slow process of chain reactions that is beginning to bridge these gaps.

It is in this context that my role in the Washington Neighborhood Community Garden takes shape. Gardening for me has been about more than food. It has been an important way for neighbors to come together and have physical spaces to appreciate and enjoy. However, efforts to gentrify the neighborhood—including increasing purchases of lots by developers—demonstrate the neighborhood residents’ lack of control of land resources. At the same time, I recognize that food access and food security can be impacted by but require more than gardening. Like Lynn, I want to see more fresh food and grocery options in the neighborhood and question why the most expensive grocery store in Dubuque is located in the neighborhood that can least afford it.

At the garden, my fellow community members and I are driven by our the desire to invest long-term through perennial plants, pollinators, and other species and infrastructures. When I think about this vision, what I would love to accomplish is getting our space to be more permanent. Right now, the space is owned by a property owner. Being able to get a long-term lease or a longer idea of that space would be wonderful because that will then mean more investments in longer term crops, like perennials and shrubs. Also, in 2017 we wanted to put in a drip-irrigation system that would make everything hands-free because it would save so much water. But because we were not sure if we

would have the space next year (because we do not own the land), we felt we could not really put in infrastructure the way that we would want. By 2018, we still did not have a secure space, but we decided to go forward with the drip-irrigation system in hopes that our efforts to make the garden a more permanent space would make it so.

We also have talked about chickens and beehives, and all sorts of things that really take knowing that you have a secure space before you begin. My long-term vision is either to solidify that space, as a permanent location for the garden, or be able to identify another space in our neighborhood that can be a permanent location for our garden, so that we can start moving in that direction. When Carrie asked me in 2017 if I had a sense of what would be needed to go forward with either of those two options, I said that I wanted the work we put to help the property owner see that this is a valuable asset, and taking this asset away is going to cause harm to the community. As far as other land, we have had a difficult time figuring out where else we would go. While we have put out feelers to see what comes up, we honestly have had to have a little faith that wherever the garden is supposed to be, we will get it figured out.

Another challenge—and opportunity—of the garden has been in redefining social expectations about what *participation* in a community garden means. While there are the constraints on the garden and how it is being accessed, I also have seen how encounters at the garden are redefining what it means to be part of the garden. What is interesting is that in the first few years of being at the garden, I grew convinced that the garden was not reaching all our neighborhood's communities. The garden had been reaching people that I know, people in my same general structure and system, and people my age (young adult). I had found that it was not reaching those in poverty as much as we would have liked it to. (This is still true today, though I have been working to change that.)

So, I realized that it was not really reaching the components of the neighborhood that probably needed it the most, and that has been a continuing struggle for us to get that involvement. However, I do think that just having that garden exist, a green space exist, a beautiful space that is growing food and plants—that even if not involved, walking past it provides some sense, perhaps, of enjoyment or meaning. I think that for me, there is a lot of value to just having something beautiful in your neighborhood, even if you are not involved.

For example, we do notice that quite a few people walk by the garden, and they stop and they are looking in, and they are pointing at things. If I am at home, oftentimes—as often as I can if I am near a window and I see somebody stopping by—I run over and greet them, and invite them in. I try my best to involve others. We also have our group gardening day on Sundays, which is an attempt to invite anybody to come in and garden with us and take food home. Though, as I said that is still not quite reaching those that we need to reach. And that is another reason that having a space long-term will enable the garden to reach more and more people the longer that it is there.

One time when Carrie came to visit, and we were inside the garden, I pointed out the vantage to the park across the street where neighborhood children spend a lot of time playing (Figure 2). Later, I brought up the relationship between the garden and the park in our conversation because it illustrated what I had learned about the role of the garden and connecting better with more people in the community. I notice that every time that we are over at the garden, there are kids over at the park. And they are always watching what we are doing. A lot of the time they come over and ask us what are we doing. Or, especially if I am working outside of the garden, like in our little pollinator gardens or such, I will get kids over that actually want to help, and if I have the capacity, a lot of the times the kids will get to come in the garden. Therefore, I would say that the community that we are reaching, across the board, has been kids, because kids always want to come in and see what we are doing, and pick things, and explore. Sometimes there are parents there, and the parents will come over as well. Or the children will go home and tell their parents. That part is extremely valuable, to have that park across the street. Otherwise I do not know how much visibility we would have.



Figure 2. The Washington Neighborhood Community Garden (foreground) and Orange Park (background).

I have learned important lessons from my interactions with the children, including lessons about what it means to connect with people and the factors that stop people from coming to the garden. For instance, the kids who come in and pick raspberries have never picked raspberries before. They have no idea what a ripe raspberry looks like. I think it helps me when I am explaining to new people who come into the garden, what things are. And I realize in that moment that they do not have the same context that I do, and that even the most basic concepts are not familiar, are not something that's just learned.

These experiences broaden my awareness that not everybody knows about even the most basic concepts of gardening. And that has been eye opening, because it has made me look at things differently when trying to evaluate how I am going to approach the garden, how I approach people, and also how I approach, mentally and emotionally, understanding why it is that maybe people do not garden. I am fortunate enough to have a certain knowledge base, whereas others have not even a sliver of that. It has made me understand why feelings about not having that knowledge base might keep somebody out of the garden.

6. Political Ecology of the Body

Political Ecology of the Body (PEB, [Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013](#), p. 87) is a tri-partite framework that conceptualizes political ecological relations through three intertwined components: matter, structure, and knowledge. PEB describes material, everyday food-body relations (relational ontology) as impacting and impacted by uneven social relations (structural forces) and restrictive knowledges (knowledge production) (p. 85). We utilize PEB in our analysis to consider how people's bodily, emotional, and social lives impact their relationalities with food. PEB is particularly relevant to our co-authorship because it emphasizes the intersection of forces in political ecological struggles like food, land, and housing insecurity.

Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2013, p. 83) in their work describe the role of PEB—the interconnections among matter, structure, and knowledge—in bringing about social change, noting that: “structures influence the capacity of the body to affect change at a variety of scales, whether through global political economic forces, mechanisms of belonging at the community level, or linguistic categories that influence our personal experiences of self and other.” In their article, Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy apply the PEB model empirically in the context of school cooking and gardening programs to explore food-body relationships and bodily motivations to eat healthier, and also suggest it can be applied to include a wider variety of material associations, which we take to include garden-body relationships. They developed the model in recognition of political ecology’s increasing focus on “(un)healthy bodies” in addition to “(un)healthy landscapes” (p. 85), domains which community gardening can bridge. By rendering visible diverse community knowledges, practices, and bodies that historically have lacked recognition and authority, relational frameworks like PEB can open up possibilities to co-construct knowledges that actually matter to the reshaping of inequitable social relations.

Thus, PEB is a framework that community-engaged researchers and partners can actively use to contest hierarchical categories, critically interrogate power relations, and make visible non-essentialist relations and enactments that largely have been ignored in dominant constructions of knowledge (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013). Relationality in the context of feminist political ecology includes ontological approaches that “treat humans and nonhumans as mutually constituted in and through social relations (Castree 2003)” (Sundberg 2011, p. 321). Feminist political ecologists utilize the term *naturecultures* (Haraway 2016, 2007) to conceptualize those relations as non-dualistic and non-individualistic (Di Chiro 2015; Harcourt 2015). PEB as a relational framework can guide community-engaged researchers in focusing on the emotional and embodied experiences of community members, while connecting those experiences to the broader social relations that produce inequities like food, land, and housing insecurity.

We seek to advance the opportunities for people living in the Washington and North End neighborhoods and highlight what matters to their/our lives. In terms of the PEB model, the garden makes new relationships and new experiences possible, but we contextualize these enactments in terms of the structural, ontological, and knowledge constraints that need to be disrupted too. Structural factors of food, housing, and land and uneven power relations permeate our neighborhoods. We have shown how structural factors—notably the context of systemic racism and its relationship to social precarities like poverty and food, land, and housing insecurity—directly interrelate with the politics of knowledge production and everyday food-body and garden-body relations. Two examples from our accounts illustrate this interrelationship. It manifests in our struggles to define revitalization in terms of permanent green spaces, quality affordable grocery stores, and thriving cultural foodways. Secondly, in the development of programs seeking to address food, land, and housing insecurity, we see outside organizations re-marginalize already marginalized communities by failing to first listen to people actually living in the neighborhood and take into account their knowledges and visions. Rather than forging one-sided relationships, principles of reciprocity guide our efforts to connect city and community development organizations with diverse and low-income residents in the Washington and North End neighborhoods.

Considering the three factors of the PEB model as overlapping and intertwined, we have critically considered how the Washington neighborhood’s lack of control of land resources is entangled with the possible futures for the neighborhood, its residential housing, and its gardens. At the same time, it is also entangled with visceralities defined by caring body-garden encounters between human neighbors, plants, pollinators, and other species. Laura continues to invest in making the Washington Neighborhood Community Garden a space that fosters these caring relationalities, and helping the rest of the city recognize those values, even as the garden’s future remains very uncertain.

For Lynn, bodily relations to food in the neighborhood—what food one can grow, share, or buy, what one eats, and one’s bodily responses to eating—have been shaped by the changes in food,

housing, and land access over past decades and in more recent years. We began having conversations, documenting the history of racism in Dubuque through Lynn's account and conducting research. We examined how racism has shaped the city, and the effects of recent increases in the Black population and overall diversity of the city, concentrated in a few central districts, including the Washington and North End neighborhoods. Lynn has shown that an ontology of food access takes on more meaning when it is understood in this historical context as place-specific, culturally-specific, and bodily-taste specific. These experiences show how the broader structural struggles within the Washington and North End neighborhoods interplay with emotional, affective, and bodily relations—relations among humans, food, green spaces, living spaces, and other biota and abiota. Lynn's quest to engage in a certain type of food-body relation culturally rooted in childhood experiences forms an important part of being a social justice community activist.

Further connecting structural factors to the politics of knowledge production, we ask: who gets to define what *revitalization* looks like in the Washington and North End neighborhoods? In Lynn's account, the question "Who benefits?" points to the ways that revitalization has been mediated by uneven power relations between neighborhood residents and the city. Revitalization works against diverse and low-income communities when "place-making" is limited to a process "through which residents imagine the neighborhood they want, and through which they work to produce a middle-class landscape, whether by changing the build environment, governing other residents' behaviors, or excluding particular people" (Elwood et al. 2015, p. 128). The changes of Laura and Lynn's neighborhoods, over time and through complex social relations within and throughout Dubuque reflect the negotiations over what counts as revitalization and whose definition of the city comes to dominate policies and action.

In response to currently limited options and opportunities for gardening and green spaces, Laura and Lynn make do through creative collaborations and co-experimentations, alongside their continued activism and organizing. The examples we cited in our accounts—Lynn works with the Convivium urban farm to install small raised beds in neighborhood backyards, and Laura expands gardening practices throughout the Washington neighborhood in unconventional ways and spaces, such as curbside green spaces, to reach even more neighbors—demonstrate an elite land politics in which ontological understandings of *economy* and *development* leave little room for large permanent garden and green spaces in the neighborhoods. Working within and against structural, ontological, and knowledge constraints, Washington and North End residents are engaging in co-experimental, emergent *alternative economies* (Gibson-Graham 2008), even as residents continue to press the city to have a say in the future of revitalizing vacant spaces.

Laura's experiences further demonstrate challenges to dominant forms of knowledge construction; in particular, what does it mean to *participate* in the garden? In Section 5, Laura's account describes the factors that influence an alternative ontology of participation, including considerations of racism and emotional and physical labor, as well as the slow process of building trusting relationships across racial and class boundaries. These factors have the potential to shape new understandings that simply being present in the neighborhood—including walking by and appreciating the garden—constitutes a form of relational engagement with, of participation in, the garden. Structural inequities have made gardening in its traditional sense (laboring to grow food) inaccessible for much of the neighborhood, even as Laura's leadership in the garden and role as a community organizer is working to change it. Participation in the Washington Neighborhood Community Garden is as much about walking by and appreciating the garden or showing curiosity and interest in it—or even growing non-food plants together—as it is about laboring to grow food, suggesting the role of affective and emotional encounters in this ontological reimagining. The structural, ontological, and knowledge barriers to participating in local food systems have reshaped Laura's role in the neighborhood in response. Through these experiences, Laura has seen how newly-conceived practices of participation can contest existing knowledge systems and social expectations about what it means to be part of the garden—and there are opportunities for outside organizations to learn from this ontological reimagining. Combining

the stories and analyses in the previous two sections with a PEB framework suggests numerous opportunities for organizations working in food systems and community development to reframe their role, which we discuss in the next section.

7. Discussion

We consider the implications of our analysis for outside organizations planning to enact community development programs. We recommend that organizations—including Cooperative Extension, universities, governments, non-profits, and for-profit organizations—listen to and learn from communities rather than coming in as experts with predefined solutions already in hand. Outside organizations need to learn from and value the everyday experiences, creative capacities, efforts, and innovative practices already taking place within neighborhoods like Washington and North End.

Engaging neighborhood-based residents, organizations, and businesses in proposed development plans, policies, and programs is an important first step. We also encourage outside organizations to pay more attention to issues of uneven access, power, and authority—structure and knowledge, in PEB parlance—that shape social marginalization and limit possibilities to contest uneven relations. Along these lines, we note that supporting diversity requires more than including communities of color and low-income residents as representatives within local food and community development programs. They need to take account broader social contexts and the political inequities that produce conditions of poverty and insecurity.

Reflecting on community development plans for the Washington and North End neighborhoods,⁸ for example, we have shown how power dynamics are working to exclude residents from having a say in the places where they live. Throughout this article, we discuss how power dynamics come into play in the attempts of residents in the Washington and North End neighborhoods to turn vacant lots into permanent green spaces. Our experiences have shown us that non-market uses of land valued by neighborhood residents often take a backseat to local economic development projects that involve private land owners and business interests as primary beneficiaries. Similarly, as both Laura and Lynn's accounts describe, we remain concerned that new housing being developments being built on vacant lots in the Washington and North End neighborhoods may not be accessible to residents with very low or even no income. The Washington and North End neighborhoods that we envision are places where residents who do not want to take on home ownership or cannot qualify for loans to purchase newly developed homes can still find affordable places to live in habitable conditions.⁹ They are also places where culturally-diverse residents can buy and grow the food they want to eat, and where the neighborhoods' residents—no matter their race, nationality, income level, or social status—can have a say in the future of their community.

Moreover, our analysis gives visibility to the transformations that the Washington and North End neighborhoods are making, even if these changes appear to outsiders as seemingly mundane, small-scale, or difficult to measure. These everyday practices involve co-experimentations with different modes of being and interacting with human neighbors, as well as the biotic and abiotic communities that are a vital part of the daily lives of people. As we have described in detail, our work in gardens, with pantries, and in throughout the neighborhoods is hindered by, but also challenges

⁸ A University of Iowa study on poverty in Dubuque concluded: "Thus, the City's interest in supporting homeowners in the Washington neighborhood and other older neighborhoods is well placed—so long as it improves the ability of existing homeowners to cover their housing costs" (Babb et al. 2012, emphasis original). Adding too this conclusion, we stress the need to support the ability of residents—including renters—to cover their housing costs without relocating away from the neighborhood.

⁹ While not making the important distinction of quality and affordable grocers from lower quality and expensive ones, the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS, 2017) publishes an online interactive Food Access Research Atlas, which maps low income and low food access areas by census tract. The atlas identifies the aforementioned Dubuque Tracts 1 and 5, roughly corresponding to the Washington and North End neighborhoods, as among the few areas in Dubuque classified as low-income and low access at one mile.

head-on, histories of racism, marginalization, and inequity in Dubuque. Our experiences illustrate how projects like Growing Together can expand in scope to enable people, for instance, to experiment with their own definitions of ‘good food’, to expand ideas of what ‘participation’ in a community garden even means, and contribute to understandings about how to best address food insecurity in their neighborhoods (see also [Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013](#), p. 87; [Gibson-Graham 2011](#); [Carolan 2016](#); [Haraway 2016](#)).

Such transformative local knowledges and practices often remain peripheral to projects developed and led by outside organizations. For example, in Cooperative Extension community food programs, the design of activities and data collection historically have been oriented within a supply chain model of production, consumption, and waste reduction ([Iowa State University Extension and Outreach 2017](#); see also [Dunning et al. 2012](#)). This paradigm, grounded in “Western objectivism,” technocratic science, and top-down modes of engagement (see Section 2.1), leaves out important ways of knowing, particularly knowledges rooted in the everyday lives of communities experiencing social marginalization. In projects like Growing Together, supply chain paradigms delineate the parameters of project activities. While the project does not engage in ‘market’ activities commonly associated with supply chains, and arguably constitutes new forms of diverse, non-market ‘alternative economies’ ([Gibson-Graham 2008](#)), it nevertheless reflects supply chain emphases on maximizing production and efficiency. Aims include helping community gardeners make growing and donating activities more productive and efficient and assisting food insecure consumers in accessing and eating foods that maximize individual and societal health ([Iowa State University Extension and Outreach 2017](#)). The project also overlaps with other efforts in Cooperative Extension, including the focus of nutrition experts on influencing eating behaviors and diets to maximize health, implemented through strategies that ‘help’ food insecure people ‘choose’ healthy foods (Carrie, personal conversations within Cooperative Extension and field notes). We show in this article that such models fail to consider histories of racism and colonization. They do not account for how these contexts position marginalized communities in political struggles over interrelated structural issues like food, housing, and land. Moreover, they tend to re-marginalize already marginalized communities by assuming a universal definition of ‘good food’ ([Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013](#)).

Thus, our analyses problematizes the ways in which colonizing ontologies neglect knowledges generated in marginalized communities, and particularly those knowledges which advance their/our political struggles. The stories, co-constructed knowledges, and lessons we present reveal how the prevailing ontologies leave out issues that are important to people experiencing social marginalization. Our analyses show how racism, for instance, has led to economic marginalization, a lack of quality grocery stores and cultural foodways in the Washington and North End neighborhoods, and the implementation of community development plans and policies that fail to work for all residents.

Finally, attending to the interplay of structure, knowledge, and matter in food-body and garden-body relationships requires attention to the spatial-temporal dimensions of community food practice. The location of the gardens matters; we can foster new visceral encounters by being in *these locations*, in *these neighborhoods*, without the threat of our gardens being bulldozed. As we share stories about our neighborhood gardening spaces and efforts, we reveal how the quantity of produce grown matters, but it arguably matters less than the relationalities that are developing, and that have the future potential to develop in the green spaces throughout the neighborhoods.

The PEB approach transforms the very notion of community economy. Structural, ontological, and epistemological factors identified through PEB can constrain but also can open up novel opportunities for developing alternative economies of food, based on social values like care. Applying the relational approach of the PEB model gives outside organizations the tools to break open the knowledge categories that situate dominant ontologies of community and economic development. It suggests roles for outside organizations beyond that of expert and focuses co-facilitation and co-learning roles on transforming inequitable relations in communities.

Through time spent living, engaging fellow community members, gardening, sharing food, creating beautiful shared green spaces, working with the neighborhood food pantry, attending city council meetings, organizing politically, and more, people in the Washington and North End neighborhoods are fostering a range of visceral encounters that aim to have an impact on social marginalization, inequity, and insecurity. It is through a process of coming together and becoming together through active listening, learning about, and addressing the concerns, issues, and opportunities of neighborhood residents that outside organizations can be part of these efforts. Community programs and projects can use models such as PEB to trace these connections. Building on this point, for instance, we (re)define—in a socio-historical context—what it means to participate in a community sharing garden. We have shown how definitions arising from local communities can depart from ‘expert’ knowledges. For example, organizations like Cooperative Extension have constructed their understanding of community gardening and food donation based on idealized production and consumption practices (see [Dunning et al. 2012](#); [Hassel 2004](#)). Through experiences in gardening and in neighborhood spaces, we found a mismatch between the traditional technocratic views of community donation gardening and food access, and views of community gardening as an opportunity for co-experimentation, new relationalities, and visceral encounters.

Re-thinking an ontology of community and food, a new relational ontology permits us to consider how the visceral encounter of walking in the neighborhood streets past a garden can constitute garden participation. Stopping for a moment and noticing it can constitute participation. Finding forms of play and exploration in the garden can constitute participation, as can eating the food it/we co-produce. Finally, experiencing a range of emotions—curiosity, appreciation, connection, trust/distrust, and comfort/discomfort, as well as taste/distaste for the vegetables grown—can also constitute a form of participation. Participation can be understood as relational assemblage, rather than as a numeric accounting of people engaged in garden labor (more indicative of technocratic measures of participation). In each instance of participation, the encounter of garden, body, and community forms a relational assemblage that contributes to the diversity of community food practices. Relevant to Growing Together, as an important part of reframing its relational ontology of food, Cooperative Extension can work with Master Gardeners who come from more privileged backgrounds to develop an awareness of how and why a garden might not reach everyone in a neighborhood, and why participation might take forms beyond traditional notions of gardening labor.

Beyond garden-body relations, when structural inequities persist, producing neighborhoods that lack affordable, quality grocery stores and housing, how can institutional partners build in the flexibility to respond? Transforming an organization’s role from an expert-based model to a facilitative and collaborative one in which communities define their needs and values means that programs will need to become more process-based. In other words, such programs will need to be less strictly defined from the outset to make space for the voices and needs of marginalized communities.

8. Conclusions

Through co-authorship, we have demonstrated how community and university organizations can work together as partners to contest histories of marginalization and foster more equitable social relations. For organizations like Cooperative Extension that are new to framing food, land, and housing insecurity as political ecological struggle, this paper empirically demonstrates how the PEB approach is useful in guiding conversations among partners and framing the social issues that matter to people’s everyday lived experiences. Through a praxis of knowledge-co-construction, we have sought to bring a politics of the everyday into view, and to enact new, more just and caring relations. Painting such a picture of community gardens provides a much richer understanding of how growing spaces can play a role in the transformation of food relations and practices, while also calling attention to the anti-oppression and anti-racism work that remains to be done.

Introducing political ecology into community engagement serves as a re-imagining of food systems for institutional and community partners. The PEB model is just one example of a relational framework

that facilitates this shift—from food, as this reproductive commodity that fills a strictly understood nutritional need of humans, to something else—to food as a core, affective and interconnecting part of all beings. Based on our experiences, we see potential for community food collaborations to rethink what and who counts, and to foster relational ways of doing, thinking, and belonging. In co-authorship, we identified and analyzed the social structures and knowledges that shape the Washington and North End neighborhoods, but also the everyday, seemingly mundane, often ignored relationalities that matter to us and our neighbors. These visceral encounters ground our activism and create unseen opportunities to enhance equity and bring about community well-being.

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Appendix A

The following tables provide 2013–2017 population estimates, broken down by select racial and ethnic classifications, from the [U.S. Census Bureau \(2017a\)](#) American Community Survey for the City of Dubuque, Iowa (Table A1), and the two census tracts roughly overlapping with the Washington and North End neighborhoods (Table A2; see also Footnote 4, above). It is worth noting that relatively large concentrations of ‘Hispanic or Latino (of any race)’ populations also occur throughout several other tracts in Dubuque (see [U.S. Census Bureau 2017a](#)).

Table A1. Select Categories from ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates. 2013–2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. City of Dubuque, Iowa ([U.S. Census Bureau 2017a](#)).

Subject	Estimate ¹	Percent Estimate ¹
One race	57,090 ± 276	97.7% ± 0.5
White	52,934 ± 311	90.6% ± 0.5
Black or African American	2560 ± 242	4.4% ± 0.4
American Indian and Alaska Native	45 ± 40	0.1% ± 0.1
Asian	864 ± 145	1.5% ± 0.2
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	357 ± 17	0.6% ± 0.1
Two or More Races	1320 ± 270	2.3% ± 0.5
A brief summary of reviewers’ comments:	A brief summary of reviewers’ comments:	A brief summary of reviewers’ comments:

¹ All estimates include margins of error.

Table A2. Select Categories from ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates. 2013–2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Dubuque, Iowa Census Tract 1 and Census Tract 5 ([U.S. Census Bureau 2017a](#)).

Subject	Tract 1 Estimate ¹	Tract 1 Percent Estimate ¹	Tract 5 Estimate ¹	Tract 5 Percent Estimate ¹
One race	2816 ± 287	94.1% ± 3.9	3414 ± 404	99.4% ± 0.6
White	1919 ± 236	64.1% ± 7.7	2613 ± 343	76.1% ± 6.6
Black or African American	669 ± 237	22.4% ± 7.0	466 ± 174	13.6% ± 4.2
American Indian and Alaska Native	5 ± 10	0.2% ± 0.3	20 ± 31	0.6% ± 0.9
Asian	111 ± 76	3.7% ± 2.5	0 ± 9	0.0% ± 0.6
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	20 ± 35	0.7% ± 1.1	250 ± 92	7.3% ± 2.7
Two or More Races	177 ± 116	5.9% ± 3.9	20 ± 22	0.6% ± 0.6
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	201 ± 81	6.7% ± 2.7	95 ± 74	2.8% ± 2.1

¹ All estimates include margins of error.

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