

Mentoring for Change: Empowering Communities Through Food Sovereignty

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“Mentoring for Change: Empowering Communities through Food Sovereignty” examines the transformative power of mentorship in developing sustainable and culturally rooted food systems. This work highlights the relationship between mentoring and food sovereignty. Grounded in my community, which has been systematically marginalized, I have come to understand food not just as sustenance, but also as a story, a memory, and a form of resistance. The journey toward reclaiming cultural food practices has been shaped by ancestral teachings and mentorship on how to grow, prepare, and honor food. Through these experiences, I have come to embrace the principles of Food Sovereignty, not as an abstract theory, but as a lived reality. In this narrative, mentorship is not a formalized role but a vital, reciprocal act of survival and cultural continuity that challenges dominant narratives about who holds knowledge and power in food systems. Mentorship within food sovereignty actively disrupts colonial systems by centering on ancestral knowledge and community values, while also serving as conduits for healing, resilience, and the preservation of traditional foodways. Programs and institutions can support these outcomes by valuing community expertise and creating spaces for culturally rooted mentoring practices.

Keywords: Autoethnography, community, food sovereignty, mentorship, qualitative research.

Introduction

This autoethnography outlines the research purpose, research questions, and advances critical insights into the interconnected fields of mentorship and food sovereignty. By examining mentorship and food sovereignty within both local and global movements, this study resonates with La Vía Campesina’s argument that capitalist corporations monopolize food production and trade, rely heavily on chemical use, contribute to climate change, exploit small farmers, and devalue ancestral farming practices (2015). In addition, farm workers, many of whom are immigrants or from marginalized communities, receive low wages, lack access to proper medical care, and often face hazardous working conditions, reflecting systemic injustices within corporate-controlled agriculture. The study’s purpose is to explore how community-rooted food systems, such as Lopez Urban Farm, operate as liberatory spaces for food sovereignty through practices grounded in social justice.

Drawing on the work of scholars and community activists, this study examines how solidarity and engagement contribute to a community-driven, sustainable future. The collaboration embodies a community of praxis rooted in the shared vision of fostering decolonized food justice across Pomona, California. By centering food sovereignty and the lived experiences of a struggling community, this study reveals systemic change through culturally grounded practices that challenge food systems

and turn theory to praxis in personal ways. Drawing on autoethnography to center personal narrative as a valid source of knowledge production is a qualitative method (Gerrior, 2023). Guided by this methodology is the food sovereignty framework, which emphasizes the right of communities to control their food production and consumption, prioritizing local needs, ecological sustainability, and cultural relevance over market-driven trade (Wittman, 2011). Achieving a healthy life for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) populations necessitates dismantling oppression, colonization, and capitalism by using Indigenous frameworks of wellbeing, such as food sovereignty (Jernigan et al., 2023). The food sovereignty framework specifies people’s rights to healthy and culturally appropriate foods produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods (La Vía Campesina, 2008). This work is shaped by the following research questions, which seek to examine the intersections of mentorship, community knowledge, and food sovereignty praxis:

- Research Question 1: How can mentorship rooted in community knowledge and cultural values create transformative food sovereignty practices in marginalized communities?
- Research Question 2: How do tensions between the meritocratic values of higher education and the cultural values of local communities shape the praxis of mentorship and food justice work?

First, we begin with a review of literature that examines mentorship as a liberatory practice, alongside food sovereignty as a pathway to community empowerment and cultural resilience. Through community-based engagement, we present findings that illustrate how mentorship, grounded in reciprocity and cultural knowledge, can foster sustainable change in a marginalized community. The discussion examines the findings, limitations, and policy recommendations. The study concludes with a call for reimagining mentorship and food systems through an equity-driven lens that centers community wisdom and engagement.

Literature Review

Settler colonialism has profoundly disrupted traditional Indigenous foodways and practices,

contributing to disproportionately high rates of diet-related diseases among Indigenous communities. In response, the food sovereignty movement emerges as a culturally grounded effort rooted in traditional Indigenous knowledge (Jernigan et al., 2023). Highlighting the intersections of cultural identity, land, and resistance, affirming that the food justice movement is a social justice movement (Bradley & Herrera, 2016), this research interweaves ancestral knowledge with cultural practices to inform and shape engagement with food sovereignty, which is broadly defined as “The right of local peoples to control their food systems, including markets, ecological resources, and production modes (Wittman, 2011, p. 87).” Food sovereignty is a key component of food justice, but it differs from food security, as described in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Health and food-related inequities disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color, highlighting the need to examine historical systems of oppression and to apply an equity-centered framework to food justice efforts (Livstrom et al., 2022). Such efforts can be seen at Lopez Urban Farm (LUF), where the Founder, Stephen, and the Director of Operations, Bianca, mentor the community about farming efforts based on a reciprocal exchange honoring ancestral knowledge, farmers, and the wisdom of elders. Mentorship models at LUF are rooted in storytelling and communal labor, which center Indigenous and Afro-diasporic foodways (S. Yorba, personal communication, August 27, 2024).

The food sovereignty framework can restore powerful connections to land, plants, and animals. This reconnection is especially crucial as we face global challenges, such as the energy crisis and climate change. The increasing demand for gas and petrol threatens to accelerate the crisis.

In the article by Nicholson and Borras (2023), Nicholson argues that small-scale farmers and peasants are the ones who truly feed the world, while industrial agriculture drives climate change and fails to nourish the planet. The current food crisis has the potential to enable people living in urban areas to produce their own food, even if the outcome is considered marginal. Thus, mentorship can be a valuable tool for urban growers. In the case study by Livstrom et al. (2022), Growing North Minneapolis (GNM) began with community members building pathways with the University and youth through agriculture, food systems, and natural resources. GNM was cautious when training university students as mentors by guiding them in a mentorship role with youth from marginalized communities. Weiston-Serdan & Sánchez (2023) caution that many programs rely on assimilation models rooted in white, upper-class ideals of success, elevating dominant identities while further marginalizing youth. While Weiston-Serdan and

Sánchez (2023) expose assimilationist models, it is worth noting that the small sample size limits the findings from the case study.

Positionality

My scholarly perspective is shaped by my lived experiences that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of institutional knowledge. My intersectionality is informed by the generational wisdom of my parents and grandmother, the critical consciousness shared with my husband, my dual role as an educator and mother, and my cultural and ethnic background as a Chicana/Indigenous female. I identify as Indigenous, though I do not currently know the specific tribal nation my ancestors belonged to. This disconnection is part of the legacy of colonization, forced assimilation, and displacement that has disrupted many Indigenous families' ties to their cultural and genealogical roots. I continue to honor this heritage by seeking reconnection and grounding my work in values of respect, responsibility, and cultural humility. Further grounding comes from my community-based involvement with LUF, where I have gained knowledge of green spaces as sites of social, ecological, and racial significance. These interconnected experiences collectively inform my research orientation, epistemological stance, and commitment to equity and community-centered praxis.

Design & Methodology

As a scholar of color engaged in community gardening, power and privilege remain largely unexamined in academic literature. My engagement as a Board Member of LUF positions me not only as a researcher but also as a participant, making autoethnography a powerful tool for reflection and critical analysis (Gerrior, 2023). Autoethnography allows interrogation of identity, labor, and justice in community-based agricultural work. According to Lapadat (2017), autoethnographic work has tended to focus on traumas and turning points, those personal and social experiences that have led one to be marginalized or feel powerless (2017, p. 598).

In 2024, it became clear to me that food scarcity, rising prices, and climate change were becoming a threat to communities across the United States. One week after graduating with a PhD in Urban Leadership, I found myself unemployed and desperate to utilize the one-acre, steep hillside in my backyard. I had never been to a community green space before someone introduced me to LUF on Instagram. Living seven miles away, I decided to visit LUF to volunteer and learn to grow food in my backyard. I was immediately comforted by the beautiful three-acre farm in the middle of an urban jungle. After requesting how I could be of help, the Founder, Stephen, responded, "Pull those weeds." In ninety-degree weather under the hot sun, I found myself frustrated, hot, and jobless. Just as I was about to quit, a man rode his bike through the

chain-link fence entrance, walked into the clothing container, and put on a clean shirt after throwing away the soiled one he was wearing. He went to the grove of fruit trees and quickly consumed peaches. On my knees, weeding under a Chilean pine tree, I watched him as he went to the portable restroom area and washed his face, hands, and arms. He jumped on his bike and rode off. I knew at that moment that I was in the right place.

A deeper awareness settled in. While I had the privilege of access to healthy food, this was not the reality shared by everyone in the community. This reality prompted me to confront the systemic inequities that shape food access and to reflect on my role within the systemic inequities. Charitable food efforts are an essential resource upon which many people rely. Still, they are often products of the same industrial food system that created the very groups these efforts aim to serve (Gerrior, 2023, p. 80). Stephen and Bianca, the Director of Operations, mentored me, demonstrating how to engage with the food sovereignty movement throughout the country, which serves as a relational setting for the lived realities of food justice and community-based mentorship. The Indigenous farmer, Julian, also mentored me by teaching about the transmission of ancestral foodways. We planted blue corn and nourished our souls by planting seeds donated by Native Seed Search. LUF became a transformative site where tensions between the meritocratic ideals of higher education and the cultural values of our communities were made visible. While higher education often privileges individual achievement, the community at LUF centers collective well-being and ancestral knowledge, which addresses research question #2. Through engagement with issues of food access, resource allocation, and communal green space, mentorship was redefined, not as a hierarchical transfer of knowledge, but as a co-created process informed by community values and resistance to assimilationist norms.

Results

This autoethnographic narrative is not intended to yield generalizable results, but rather to contribute greater nuance to the scholarly understanding of urban farming. Autoethnography requires an ethical responsibility to consider both the risks and benefits for myself as well as for others who contributed to the data (Gerrior, 2023).

To conduct this inquiry, I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data from my lived experiences as a Board Member for LUF in Pomona, California, from 2024 to the present. In addition to my personal story at LUF (i.e., self-observation, self-reflection, and self-analysis), I collected external data (i.e., autoethnographic conversations with Stephen and Bianca, farm leaders, other board members, community participants, and students). Autoethnography requires personal memory, self-reflection, and self-analysis, all of which are documented in fieldnotes (Gerrior, 2023). I followed an iterative process of categorizing, then

reduced categories to themes (Gerrior, 2023). I then linked the themes to the research questions.

Discussion

The findings of this research resulted in three themes: faith, justice, and relationships, which align deeply with the literature on food sovereignty. Faith manifests through eco-spirituality, echoing Jernigan et al. (2023)'s call to restore Indigenous frameworks of being rooted in connection to land, water, and spirit. Justice is practiced through community-driven food production as a form of protest, consistent with Wittman (2011) and Bradley & Herrera (2016), who assert that food justice is inherently a form of social justice. Relationship-building, through trust, parallels the mentorship-centered approach described by Livstrom et al. (2022), emphasizing the importance of non-assimilationist frameworks for empowering communities in transforming food systems. Together, the themes of faith, justice, and relationships embody the food sovereignty framework by combining spiritual values, equitable practices, and relational ways of being to create food systems rooted in cultural and ecological wellbeing. The themes also answer the first research question: How can mentorship rooted in community knowledge and cultural values create transformative food sovereignty practices in marginalized communities?

The first theme is faith. LUF manifests with something ancient, something sacred. When speaking with Stephen, we discuss healing and affirm that the right people will find their way to the farm. I have witnessed it happen at Latino holiday celebrations, peer mentorship meetings, visits to the butterfly garden, Alkebulan, and Native Garden workdays, as well as the Art Fest. The land calls them in. The work here is intentional. "Pay what you can" is not charity; it is equity. It is a belief that we are enough, just as we are. Food is not a product here; it is a right. It is survival. Farming is not a hobby; it is a place of resistance. Food insecurity is not someone else's issue. It is in our backyard. The land feeds us, and we feed each other. The farm teaches us to remember.

The second theme is justice. It is in the stories of loss. "Where did the goats go?" someone asked one day, and we all knew they were referring to more than just animals. They were asking about erasure. About land theft. About the sacred horses of the Muwekma Ohlone people, who once moved through LUF with dignity. It grows food, yes, but it also cultivates justice, as evident in sharing meals to celebrate African diasporic farming, offering free gardening classes, promoting radical unity among poets, building a skate ramp for locals to utilize the land in a safe place, and facilitating ancestral healing through food. Justice is utilizing farming as a form of resistance in both Pomona and Palestine. For example, Stephen is an educator and activist who recently spent two weeks working on a farm in Palestine. By farming under occupation, he embodied a form of resistance,

linking food sovereignty with the broader struggle for liberation and justice. Stephen's experience farming under occupation in the West Bank of Palestine deepened my understanding of justice as a global struggle.

Relationships are the third theme. Knowing someone's story is a kind of responsibility. You carry it with care. Trust here is built through showing up, again and again, with your hands and your heart. This is not just about food; it is about believing that your story matters. I have sat next to strangers and left with new friends. That is the kind of magic the land makes possible. The community at LUF does not resemble a committee, but rather a poetry circle under the oak trees, or moms watching their kids during mud play sessions. It is a quiet beading workshop where hands speak the language of ancestral memory. Junior farmers happily carry worms, learning what it means to be responsible for life. Student volunteers from local colleges form relationships with the staff and the community. The community shapes the farm, not the other way around. This kind of learning is embodied. It is relational.

Limitations

The findings of this study are based on a single, place-based example: Lopez Urban Farm in Pomona, California. While the themes offer meaningful insights, they are deeply contextual and rooted in specific cultural, geographic, and community histories. As such, generalizability to other urban agricultural sites may be limited.

Recommendations

The following are policy recommendations. First, are reparations-informed land return initiatives with Indigenous communities. Additionally, food justice work should center on Indigenous sovereignty and historical land stewardship. Second, food justice policy must prioritize community control over production, local access, cultural relevance, and ecological sustainability in national and local food policies. Furthermore, thirdly, city and state policies should allocate funding and land access to community-led farms that practice culturally grounded food systems. This includes permitting use of vacant lots, easing zoning restrictions, and providing grants that do not require nonprofit status or assimilation into dominant economic models.

Conclusion

LUF engages in critical community-based work through collaboration and mentorship. This form of mentorship disrupts colonial systems in three ways. First, ancestral practices are used, such as seed saving. Second, mentorship centers community values, such as mutual aid. Third, mentorship fosters transformative spaces of cultural sustainability through shared labor, connecting food to histories of resistance. The shared values of social justice

and mentorship are essential in addressing the barriers and power imbalances embedded in the struggle for food sovereignty. The farm teaches us to speak to each other as if we matter because we do. Nature teaches us that even death is sacred; it gives way to new life. In this spirit, we are called to reimagine both mentorship and food systems through an equity-driven lens, one that centers community wisdom, honors lived experience, and cultivates engagement as a form of collective liberation. This work is not only about growing food, but about growing new standards of faith, justice, and relationships.

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