

**CULTIVATING BELONGING:
THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY FARMING IN THE LIVES OF REFUGEES FROM
BURMA**

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ABSTRACT

Significant research exists supporting the public health benefits of urban green space. Yet little qualitative research has been done regarding how green space impacts refugee populations who have a history of farming. The aim of this thesis is to conduct original research on the transition of refugees from Burma to life in the United States, specifically in relation to green space. This paper explores *how Roots Community Farm (RCF) cultivates a transnational identity and sense of belonging for refugees from Burma in Rock Springs*. Drawing on three ethnographic methods—participant observation at the farm, analysis of end-of-the-year evaluation interviews with the farmers, and semi-structured interviews with community members and staff—this thesis utilizes RCF as a case study to research the role the community farm plays in forming and encouraging social relationships within the community of refugees from Burma and with the larger community of Rock Springs. Through this daily practice of farming, the refugees create a tangible and sensory connection to an imagined and remembered place of Burma. RCF fosters a deeply affective sense of belonging to the other farmers and to the land. This is significant given the increasing recognition of the importance of social connectedness for wellbeing.

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INTRODUCTION

“I want to spend all my time at the farm. I feel I forget everything in this world. I feel like the farm is my home. I don't ever want to leave the farm. I love the farm very much—it is the happiest place for me. The farm place is where my parents lived with me before. This is our life.”
– Naw Paw

Naw Paw has been farming at Roots Community Farm (RCF)¹, a community farm for refugees from Burma², for three years. She is a Karen refugee from Burma who fled from her home to a refugee camp in Thailand because of the civil war. After living in the Tam Him refugee camp for many years, Naw Paw was resettled in Rock Springs, a city in the Southeastern United States, in 2006. She is a short, older woman who wears a blue and pink striped cloth wrapped around her head. Her face is worn with smile creases and her demeanor is kind and warm. In addition to maintaining two beds of vegetables at the farm, Naw Paw works full time as part of the housekeeping staff at the local university. She works at the university from 11pm-7am and then comes to the farm to work with her vegetables and socialize with the other farmers during the day. She grows traditional Asian vegetables³ such as taro, Thai chili, long beans, and

¹ I have anonymized the name of the institution, the larger organization RCF is part of, and the city where it is located. Furthermore, I have changed the names of the farmers, staff, volunteers, and CSA members for IRB purposes.

² Throughout this thesis, I refer to the country that is officially named Mynamar, as Burma. These names are technically interchangeable; however, they have different, highly politicized connotations. The country became the Republic of Burma when it gained its independence from Great Britain in 1948 (Vang et al. 2014). The name was later changed to Myanmar when the current military regime took power. The U.S., among other countries, continues to refer to the country as Burma out of support for the democratic opposition of the military regime (Memcott 2011). I use “Burma” because the interlocutors I engaged with (farmers and staff) refer to the country as Burma.

³ I use “Asian vegetables” to refer to vegetables that are traditionally grown and eaten in countries in Southeast Asia. Throughout this thesis, I use “American” and “Asian” vegetables to mean vegetables that are more traditionally eaten by people who live in America in comparison to those traditionally eaten by the farmers. I use these terms because the interlocutors at the farm use them.

roselle to share with her family and friends. Her favorite vegetable to grow is taro, which she shares with her entire neighborhood.

I first met Naw Paw while interning at RCF the summer of 2016. I had flexibility with this internship, which allowed me to spend time walking about the farm or harvesting vegetables with farmers. One day I found Naw Paw in her row picking Thai chilis to sell to another member of the farm. I started picking chilis with her and she showed me how to snap off the chilis at the tip of the branch and to only pick the ones with a rich, red color. As we squatted in the dirt, Naw Paw asked me if I liked spicy food and said that she and most all Karen people love spicy food. She explained that they freeze chilis for the winter in order to make a chili paste to eat with rice. Our communication was difficult as Naw Paw primarily speaks Karen and Burmese. Her English is rough at best, but we managed to carry on a conversation which was centered around vegetables. She taught me the names of the vegetables in her beds and explained different ways she likes to cook and eat them.

Over the course of the summer, I spent many mornings at RCF with the farmers. This is where I conducted most of my participant based observation to learn about the community at the farm. My favorite part of this internship was spending time with the farmers in their fields, helping them weed or harvest vegetables, which I had never seen or heard of before. The farm is a beautiful space teeming with life and vegetables. I was drawn to this place and believe it is a unique community. Many of the farmers have expressed the same sentiment toward RCF as Naw Paw⁴. They share a love for growing vegetables and being outside in the fresh air with the other farmers.

⁴ Refer to the quote at the beginning of the chapter.

My research examines forms of inclusivity and belonging that the farm enables through community. I take on this idea of *community*, recognizing that there are several different circles of community that are created by the farm: the community the organization strives to create, the community the farmers create through transnational practices, and the imagined community that exists in the minds of people in the non-refugee community⁵. There are many different processes shaping these communities. Through ethnography, I disentangle the nature of these interactions and explore both the possibilities and limitations of these communities. I argue that the relationships fostered between the farmers and non-refugee community are short lived and do not develop into a sustainable, cohesive community. Instead, this community is more of an imagined community. It is a cultural “exchange” and form of cultural communication based on economic transactions. In contrast to this imagined community, RCF offers a social space where the refugees collaborate together to grow food and cultivate a transnational community among themselves. The farmers create sustained relationships with one another and experience a family-like sense of community. I argue that transnationalism allows the farmers to claim their belonging a new society by enabling them to determine what their communities look like.

This thesis is a testament to this community. Many of the farmers at RCF have expressed the importance and value they place on sharing their culture with people in Rock Springs. They are proud of the farm and are eager to engage in conversations about their vegetables, traditional dishes, and culture. With the growing population of refugees from Burma in Rock Springs, it is

⁵ Throughout this thesis, I use the terms “refugee community” and “non-refugee community” to differentiate between the farmers at RCF, and the people in the broader Rock Springs area, specifically those that engage with the farm. I recognize that the terms “refugee” and “non-refugee” are problematic in that they make refugees seem even more separate from the larger community. I hope that this does not contribute to further othering refugees. I ask that the reader be mindful of this as I use these oversimplified terms for the practical purposes of my writing.

important to educate people about these refugees so that they will be welcomed into our communities, especially amidst the current political climate. I hope my research serves to tell these refugees' stories and share their culture.

Historical Context

It is important to set refugee immigration within a larger context. Migration on a global scale has been expanding rapidly since the advance of globalization. As of 2015, an estimated 244 million people resided outside their country of birth (UNFPA 2016). Of these 244 million, 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced, the highest level recorded since the aftermath of World War II (UNFPA 2016). According to the UNHCR Global Trends report, this means that one in every 113 people on earth is either an asylum seeker, internally displaced, or a refugee (UNHCR 2016). Currently, rates of global migration and internal displacement are increasing due to climate change, political conflict, and economic crisis. Refugees from Burma are one such group, pushed to migrate due to political conflict. In 2015, the refugee population from Burma was estimated at 451,800 and was considered the eighth largest refugee population in the world (UNHCR 2016).

Beginning in 1962, the Burmese military regime gradually seized territories formerly controlled by ethnic minorities, resulting in decades of civil war (Vang et al. 2014). Burma's complex history, politics, and culture have been significantly shaped by its diverse population which includes a total of eight main ethnic groups (Burmese, Karen, Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan) that can be divided into more than 130 distinct subgroups (Vang et al. 2014). The dominance exerted by Burmese over minority ethnic populations has been the source

of severe ethnic tension and has resulted in a number of separatist rebellions (Cathcart et al. 2007).

These protracted ethnic conflicts have led to the forced displacement of over one million people (Vang et al. 2014). According to resettlement arrival statistics, in 2015 alone, 19,500 refugees were resettled from Burma, more than any other country (UNHCR 2016). In the last decade, the U.S. has resettled 148,957 refugees from Burma (Zong and Batalova 2015). Burma was the top country of origin for refugee resettlement in the U.S. in 2015 and the second-largest in 2013 and 2014. In these three years alone, the U.S. resettled a total of 49,283 refugees from Burma (Zong and Batalova 2015). Within the U.S., most of these refugees have been resettled in the Southeastern part of the country with Texas, Georgia, and North Carolina as the top receiving states. Rock Springs has become home to more than 1,000 refugees from Burma (Zong and Batalova 2015).

Most refugees from Burma are placed in urban areas upon resettlement so that they have access to basic resources and employment opportunities (Walker 2011). However, this poses a challenge for these refugees, many of whom found their livelihoods in rice paddy fields. Without access to land, refugees from Burma lose this vital connection to their previous way of life. RCF provides a space for them to sustain their agricultural practices in a new context. Roots is a non-profit educational farm in Rock Springs that started in 2010 and serves refugees from Burma. It seeks to address the challenges of food insecurity, healthy food access, and economic inequity in the refugee community. There are currently 32 refugee families that are members at RCF. Roots provides the ability for refugees to grow Asian vegetables and herbs to be able to cook traditional dishes. Furthermore, it provides marketing opportunities through the Community Supported

Agriculture (CSA) program and farmers market to allow families to earn an income through farming.

Research Questions

The objective of this thesis is to reveal the ethnographic complexities of the communities created through RCF. Broadly, I examine whether the farm cultivates belonging for these refugees and on what terms. In order to break down questions of belonging, I look at the reality of the refugees' social relationships within different community circles fostered by the farm.

Transnationalism

I deploy Nina Glick-Schiller's theory of transnationalism in order to situate questions of belonging. While integration theories have held sway in social science approaches to understanding migration experiences in host countries, transnationalism offers an alternative analytic approach for thinking about questions of community in a way that does not presume the end goal of integrating into mainstream, white, middle-class society (Esser 2010).

Transnationalism is an anthropological theory describing the way that migrants maintain political, economic, cultural, and social connections with one or more countries of origin (Schiller 1999). Transnationalism recognizes the agency of migrants to determine the relationships between their host and original society. Through transnational practices, migrants are enabled to choose the ways they want to engage with the dominant society in their host country and their country of origin. Whereas integration theories strive to bring immigrants into an existing community, transnationalism allows migrants to create new community spaces that

may or may not overlap with mainstream society. I will use transnationalism as a framework to understand how community is produced by the refugees and how this fosters belonging.

My Questions

In order to understand the community created at the farm and the lived experience of transnationalism, I examine the following question: how is social cohesion produced at the farm and what is the sense of community? I break this question down into more functional questions: what is the reality of these social relationships? What are the processes shaping this community? Why do farmers choose to come to RCF? This subset of questions provides a more practical way of understanding the everyday aspects of how this community is constructed. The theory of transnationalism provides a way of understanding the processes shaping the farm community. Furthermore, I use Victor Turner's theory of *communitas* to describe the sense of community that exists at the farm. Turner conceived of *communitas* as an intense community spirit, the feeling of social equality, solidarity, and togetherness (Swanson and Turner 1975). This provides a framework for understanding how this community is entered into and what this sense of togetherness looks like.

The second part of this thesis focuses on how these refugees interact with the non-refugee community in Rock Springs. Here I extend my study beyond the farm to ask: What role does the farm play in fostering social relationships between the farmers and the broader Rock Springs community? What is the reality of these relationships? Does the farm establish a cross-cultural connection? Is this important to the farmers? In my analysis, I deploy Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities to describe the more illusory rather than concrete community created between refugee and non-refugee communities (Anderson 1991).

Broader Implications

This research speaks to broader concerns about the role of community farms and/or gardens for refugees who have a close connection to agriculture. Insight into these questions could contribute to culturally-aware refugee resettlement programs and policies by encouraging organizations to provide more community-based farming opportunities for refugees. This could promote social cohesion among refugee communities and smooth their transition to life in the U.S. by fostering a sense of belonging. Typically, from a policy perspective, the settlement period is supposed to initiate the process of integration into the social fabric of the destination country. However, I propose an alternate way of viewing this resettlement process, one that provides resources and services to refugees so that they have the agency to determine their own resettlement process.

Methods

My Interest and Experience

I conducted fieldwork for this thesis at RCF and RCF-related events from June-November 2016. I was initially drawn to RCF because of my interest in and experience with community gardening. During my studies in anthropology and environmental studies, I became fascinated by the relationship between green space and human health. During my gap year, I learned about sustainable agricultural methods while working on an organic farm. Since then, I have been involved in various community garden initiatives in Rock Springs. This experience has shaped my research and has given me a context with which to understand RCF within the larger picture of community green space.

The summer of 2014 I interned in Kigali, Rwanda constructing gardens for families in the Bwiza village. The people in this community belonged to the Twa group (comprising 1% of Rwandans) and were outcast from the rest of Rwandan society because of their ethnicity. During my time in Kigali, I saw directly the struggles and frustrations that come with being part of a socially and economically vulnerable group. Through this experience, I became interested in working with refugees, specifically in green spaces. Working with the Twa people has helped me better understand experiences of the Karen and Chin refugees at the farm because they are also groups that were persecuted because of their ethnicity.

I was originally introduced to RCF through a summer internship opportunity. In the fall of 2015, I heard about the internship program and became interested in doing research on the farm. I met with the program director, Nina, and discussed my research ideas with her. The following summer, I began interning at the farm while simultaneously conducting participant based observation. My research continued at the farm during the growing season and involved several ethnographic methods, including: participant-based observation, semi-structured interviews, and end-of-the-year farmer evaluation interviews.

Participant Observation

Through participant observation, I was able to work closely with the farmers and staff to observe the community at the farm. My position as an intern enabled me to observe and take part in numerous activities and events at the farm. My role was very broad and involved running the children's camp, assisting with teen programming, helping at the farmers market, preparing CSA boxes with the farmers and dropping off the boxes, and other miscellaneous tasks I was assigned. This range of responsibilities provided me with a comprehensive view of RCF. Furthermore, it

allowed me to gain the trust of the farmers and staff and to develop relationships with them. This gave me opportunities to attend board meetings about the future of the farm, attend church with the farmers, participate in community events, and even attend one of the farmers' weddings. Other activities I took part in at the farm included: working in the fields alongside farmers, washing vegetables, attending morning announcements, eating meals with farmers and staff, and participating in workdays. About 25% of the refugees speak English. There are a handful of farmers who speak conversational English, and a few whom I learned to communicate with using hand motions and rough English. I have spent a lot of time at the farm over the past several months and these activities have enabled me to observe firsthand the relationships among the farmers and the nature of their community at Roots.

In addition, I conducted participant-based observations to better understand the nature of the organization itself and the relationships between the farmers and the broader non-refugee community. Through participating in CSA potlucks, working in the office with the staff, interacting with CSA members at drop-off sites, and helping with community dinners, I was able to observe the larger community facilitated by RCF. This participant-based data was collected through extensive field notes.

Interviews

I conducted interviews with ten CSA members, two volunteers, and three staff members. These semi-structured interviews were designed to provide insight into the reality of the relationships between the farmers and the larger community. Furthermore, interviews with the staff provided an understanding of the goals and mission of the organization and their views on integration. The ten CSA members were selected randomly across the four different CSA pick-

up sites located in the Rock Springs area.

Developing trust and rapport with the farmers took determination and patience. As a white, Caucasian woman, I am an outsider with no experience with the culture of people from Burma and no Karen, Burmese, or Chin language skills. However, through time and willingness to learn, listen, and be involved in their lives, I was able to build relationships with the farmers. This established trust was important for my interviews with farmers. During September and November, I conducted end-of-the-year evaluation with twenty-five farmers. RCF conducts these in-depth interviews with every farm family at the end of each year to measure farm programs' impact on the farmers' lives⁶. I analyzed these evaluations in order to understand the reasons that farmers choose to farm at RCF and how it serves as a community space for them.

Overview of Chapters

Moving forward, chapter one draws on literature in public health, sociology, and anthropology to situate my research within the broader context of the scholarship on green space, social cohesion, and community. In chapter two, I describe the layout of the farm and the institutional philosophy of RCF. I lay out the goals and mission of the farm to provide a foundation for the work of RCF. In chapter three, I discuss the theory of transnationalism and how transnational processes shape the community at the farm and allow farmers to enact their belonging. In chapter four, I illustrate the ethnographic complexities of the community at the farm and how this community is constructed. Chapter five transitions into a discussion of the cross-cultural connection established by the farm. I explore the reality of the larger community

⁶ Some of the topics these evaluation interview seeks to address include: food access, economic support from produce sales, community involvement, access to general support resources, and mental health.

between the farmers and the volunteers, staff, CSA, and Rock Springs community members.

Concluding this thesis, I analyze the farm as a model for future resettlement programs and discuss areas for future research.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review serves to situate my research in the larger body of existing research in order to provide context and to illuminate where my research adds to current discourses about green space and social cohesion. This review begins with a discussion of the public health literature that has highlighted the importance of green space in forming social cohesion. Next, I focus on the use of community gardens as a public health strategy specifically for refugee populations and the ways this has been approached through theories of integration. I provide a brief overview of sociological theories of integration and conclude by offering a new approach to issues of community through the anthropological lens of transnationalism. This grounding in the theory of transnationalism is critical to the arguments I pose in subsequent chapters.

The Relationship Between Green Space, Health, and Social Cohesion

A growing body of public health literature supports the idea that urban green space has positive impacts on the health and well-being of communities. Green space, defined as “the presence of vegetation in urban settings, usually human-designed,” is widely viewed as a health-promoting characteristic for residential environments (Wolch et al. 2014). Some of the positive health-related impacts associated with green space include: lower levels of stress, better self-reported health, reduced symptomology for depression and anxiety, and reduced morbidity in multiple disease categories (Barton and Pretty 2010; Beyer et al. 2014; Mass et al. 2009; Pearson and Craig 2014). These findings have led many U.S. cities to implement strategies to increase the amount of green space in order to promote the health of urban residents.

One of the proposed mechanisms through which green space positively impacts health is social cohesion (Mass et al. 2009; de Vries et al. 2013). Green space has been shown to promote social interaction by providing common meeting areas and group-based nature activities such as walking or gardening where neighborhoods and members of the community come together and interact (Hordyk 2015). Furthermore, green spaces, such as parks, forests, green roofs, streams, and community gardens, create beautiful spaces, making them ideal for leisurely use. Because of this, green spaces are welcoming spaces where people can come to meet other people, whom they may bond with over time (Kuo et al. 1998; Veen et al. 2016). These public meeting opportunities are important for the development of local communities and social ties with neighbors because people must meet in order to establish relationships (Coley et al. 1997). A study conducted by Coley et al. suggested that the presence of trees and grass in common spaces attracts residents to outdoor spaces, thereby leading to more frequent contacts among neighbors (Coley et al. 1997). Of the various forms of green space, research suggests that community gardens foster social bonds deeper than mere interaction. Community gardens have been associated with increased social cohesion and sense of community among urban residents (Armstrong 2000; Poulson et al. 2014; Veen et al. 2016).

People who are actively involved in their communities and are socially engaged with others tend to live longer and are physically and mentally healthier (Berkman and Kawachi 2001; Maas et al. 2009). In three important studies, neighborhood community gardens were associated with social cohesion (Maas et al. 2009; Sugiyama 2008; de Vries et al. 2013). In all of these studies, social cohesion itself was positively associated with health and well-being. I will discuss these studies in more depth below.

Zooming in: Community Gardening

Previous Research

For these research studies, it is important to recognize that “social cohesion” is an ambiguous concept which is defined differently by various authors. These studies have primarily focused on asking participants about their motivations to be involved and their perceived benefits of community gardens. Because social cohesion was not the primary research focus, the researchers did not uniformly define social cohesion at the start of the study (Armstrong 2000; Poulson et al. 2014; Veen et al. 2016). Rather, it was formed through interviewees’ responses. Some common responses related to social cohesion include: feelings of neighborhood attachment, strengthened social bonds, and feelings of acceptance and belonging (Armstrong 2000; Poulsen et al. 2014, Veen et a. 2016). Drawing on these responses, social cohesion was broadly conceived of as a sense of community, with a focus on trust, shared norms and values, and feelings of belonging (Armstrong 2000; Poulsen et al. 2014, Veen et a. 2016).

In a qualitative study on thirteen community gardens in Baltimore, Poulsen et al. asked members about the benefits they gained from community gardening. One of the key themes that emerged was community construction. Interviewees reported that the gardens “built a sense of unity by breaking down social barriers to bring people together, strengthened social bonds, and connected gardeners with the greater community” (Poulsen et al. 2014:12). Community gardens often form an urban oasis or sanctuary by providing a gathering space for people who would otherwise be socially isolated (Hale et al. 2011; Poulsen et al. 2014). Armstrong conducted a similar study in upstate New York and found that community gardens improved social networks and provided neighborhoods with a physical location to socialize and learn about community

events (Armstrong 2000). The garden also provided a symbolic focus for the neighborhood, which increased neighborhood pride and sense of community. These studies support the idea that community gardens promote more than just brief interactions by fostering social cohesion and a sense of community among members.

It is significant to note that these studies primarily focused on social cohesion formed by place-based community gardens, meaning that they were embedded in and cultivated by residents from the local community (Veen et al. 2016). However, in an “interest-based” garden studied by Armstrong, the presence of the garden failed to increase local community cohesion because the gardeners were not residents of the same neighborhood where the garden was located (Armstrong 2000). This is an important distinction to note for my study because Roots Community Farm (RCF) is an interest-based community farm, meaning that the farm brings together individuals who “span diverse communities” and live in several different neighborhoods and cities (Veen et al. 2016). My research provides insight into whether or not the same relationship exists between community gardening and social cohesion when its members are not composed of individuals from the same neighborhood.

Processes Fostering Social Cohesion

There are several processes that foster social cohesion in these studies. The concept of mutual reciprocity among the gardeners and the act of relying on one another is consistently cited by garden participants as a way of producing a sense of belonging (Harris et al. 2014; Poulsen et al. 2014; Saldivar-Tanaka et al. 2014; Veen et al. 2016). This mutual help takes the form of exchanging seeds, plants, and vegetables in addition to sharing tools, advice, and responsibilities (Poulsen et al. 2014; Veen et al. 2016). In Poulsen’s study, gardeners reported

sharing responsibility and relying on other members to water their plants for them when they were unable to. In addition to this exchange of goods, sharing of practical knowledge, and mutual dependence, social cohesion is also produced through the act of working together on a common goal to beautify green spaces (Harris et al. 2014; Poulsen et al. 2014; Veen et al. 2016). Participants may work closely together on mutually maintaining a path, or more generally, they work together on the same space to produce a beautiful garden. Many participants in urban setting come together with a common goal to reclaim and transform vacant lots of rubble, trash, and drugs into beautiful, safe green spaces (Armstrong 2000; Poulsen et al. 2014). Social cohesion is additionally formed and enhanced through place attachment (Hordyk 2015; Schmelzkopf 1996; Veen et al. 2016). Place attachment refers to residents' emotional bonding to their community (Kim and Kaplan 2004). Feeling connected with a physical space may increase residents' identification with the neighborhood and feelings of pride, thereby enhancing social cohesion and promoting a sense of unity tied to a common space. In my thesis, I assess whether or not community is constructed at RCF in similar ways.

How Motivations for Involvement Impact Social Cohesion

Studies have suggested that whether or not social interaction is the primary reason individuals choose to be involved, these spaces still contribute to the development of social cohesion (Hordyk 2015; Schmelzkopf 1996; Veen et al. 2016). A recent study by Veen et al. investigated the ways that the motivations of community garden members at seven gardens impacted the enhancement of social cohesion. They found that despite differences in motivation, in all of the interviews, people talk with one another and build relationships. According to Veen et al. (2016:1) “while participants who are motivated by the social aspects of gardening naturally

show a higher level of appreciation for them, these social aspects also bring added value for participants who are motivated primarily by growing vegetables.” Regardless of whether their initial motivation to join the garden or continued reasons to be involved are related to a desire to build relationships, social cohesion is still formed in these community garden (Veen et al. 2016).

Another study conducted by Schmelzkopf on community gardens in New York City supported this same trend. Schmelzkopf pointed out that although most individuals did not cite the social aspect of community gardening as a reason to be involved, almost all of these people spoke about how socializing in the gardens made them feel like they were part of a community (Schmelzkopf 1996). Most people gardened in these community spaces for the purposes of growing food and considered it an economic resource. In addition, most people initially became involved in order to have a safe outdoor place as an option to their crowded apartments. Even though these reasons were cited for their involvement, they spoke over and over about the ways in which they felt part of the land and community through building relationships at the garden (Schmelzkopf 1996). From the literature presented, there is evidence that community gardens foster social cohesion among members, regardless of their motivations to be involved. These studies are significant for my research because I take individual motivations for involvement as a factor informing the kind of community that is constructed.

Defining Terms

In summary, the literature shows that green space impacts health through social cohesion. Previous research has shown that community gardening in urban areas fosters social cohesion. Through my thesis, I will explore how social cohesion is manifested at a community farm in a peri-urban environment. Below I will define terms which are important for this thesis.

Community and Belonging

For the purposes of my research, I see social cohesion, community, and belonging as intertwined. I work with the public health definition of social cohesion as stated by Veen et al.: “people in a society feeling and being connected to each other” (Veen et al. 2016: 2713). I chose this broad definition in order to look at what involvement in the community farm means for the participants and the extent to which social relationships are encouraged between the farmers. Based on themes from various studies, I break down social cohesion into more practical terms by looking ethnographically at the extent to which participants 1) build relationships with each other and 2) offer practical knowledge to and help each other. The first of these is the first step in social cohesion and the second is the way of valuing and trusting these existing bonds (Veen et al. 2016). I chose this broad definition of social cohesion to define community in practical working terms. Social cohesion is an essential aspect of community and from this point on, I use the term community to encompass and include social cohesion. My research focuses on the ways that community is constructed both at the farm and with the larger non-refugee community.

A central aspect of community is belonging. In *The Situated Politics of Belonging*, Nira Yuval-Davis states that, “belonging is about experiences of being part of the social fabric... to belong is to be accepted as part of a community, to feel safe within it, and to have a stake in the future of such a community.” (Yuval-Davis 2006:21). Belonging is a dynamic process in which people actively construct and claim their role in a community. According to Yuval-Davis, “belonging involves an important affective dimension relating to social bonds and ties” (Yuval-Davis 2006:21). In this way, belonging to the affective dimensions of community ties. Through

this thesis, I highlight the ways that the farm cultivates an emotional connection with Burma through the transnational practices of working on the farm.

Peri-Urban

Several scholars have noted the role of community gardens in producing social cohesion in urban areas. However, there is little research on social cohesion produced by community farms in peri-urban areas. Due to this gap in the literature, I focus my research at Roots, a community farm in a peri-urban setting.

It is important to understand the unique factors associated with green space in a peri-urban setting as compared to green space in an urban environment. Peri-urban can be described as the landscape interface between town and country, or the rural-urban transition zone. Roots is situated in a peri-urban environment because it is five miles from the nearest city center and is surrounded by countryside. It is significant to study community produced by green space in this environment because Roots brings together people from various neighborhoods across several different surrounding towns and cities. As a result, the kind of community formed is unique because it is separate from these individuals' living environments and residential communities. Because of this, the farm is not limited to members from one neighborhood. This is a different model than community gardening, which is located within an urban center and is attended by people from the local neighborhood or city.

In this thesis, I assess whether or not the same sense of social cohesion and community is produced at this peri-urban farm as is seen in these urban community gardens. From the literature, it is clear that there is a relationship between green space and health, cohesion and health, and green space and cohesion. Through this research I hope to gain insights into the

unique ways that green space fosters a specific form of social cohesion. I intend to provide an ethnographic understanding of the complexities of this social cohesion—how it is produced at a community farm in a peri-urban area and what the reality of these relationships look like, both between the farmers and with the wider Rock Springs community.

Community Farming

It is important to define and note the differences between a community farm and a community garden to understand the ways that a different form of community might be produced. According to Veen et al., a community garden is defined as “a plot of land in an urban area, cultivated either communally or individually by a group of people from the direct neighborhood or the wider city” (Veen et al. 2016:1275). Although there is not a standard definition of community farming, a farm is defined by the USDA as “any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced or sold” (USDA 2017). A garden produces food for private use whereas a farm produces food to sell to others. Roots is a unique farm because it is a blend of a community garden and community farm. The farm sells produce through a variety of markets. Most of the farmers sell their produce in some capacity, however, this is an individual decision and many people choose to grow vegetables solely for their families. Each of the farmers have their own crop rows, which are contained within the same plot of land. For the purposes of this thesis, I adapt a definition given by Veen et al. of a community garden to define Roots Community Farm as “a plot of land in a peri-urban area, cultivated either communally or individually by a group of people for the purposes of individual or commercial use” (Veen et al. 2016:1275). It is important to note that the community at Roots is partly shaped by the fact that some of the farmers grow food to sell and are motivated by economic reasons.

Community Gardening Among Refugee Populations

Public Health Benefits

Public health literature has also begun to study the role of green space in marginalized communities, such as refugee populations. Refugees who arrive in the United States often encounter many difficulties in transitioning to a new country. Some challenges may include: language difficulties, unemployment, transportation difficulties, and inadequate housing conditions (Hordyk 2015). Refugees come from experiences of trauma and their challenges of coping with the past are exacerbated by numerous stresses of living in a new country. This causes social isolation as well as psychological and physical health problems (Harris et al. 2014). Furthermore, many refugees come from farming backgrounds and their forced migration to a “landless” urban environment compounds these issues (Harris et al. 2014). Based on this context, community gardens emerge as a community health intervention, which addresses several of these challenges for refugees and immigrants adjusting to their new lives in the U.S.

Of the small body of research that has studied the role of community gardening for refugee populations, most has looked at the benefits of this space through a public health lens (Gerber 2015; Hartwig and Mason 2016). Results of this research have shown that community gardens provide increased physical exercise, food security, mental health, and social support among refugee populations (Hartwig and Mason 2016). However, although these studies note the role of community gardens in helping refugees adjust to the complexity of their new lives and cope with past trauma, they don’t take questions of integration far enough. These studies are more focused on the role of community gardens in promoting better health behaviors rather than as a potential model or framework for incorporating refugees into a new society.

Community Gardening as an Approach to Integration

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is one example of an organization that has taken this public health literature a step further. The ORR has implemented community gardening and/or farming as an intervention that supports both improved health in addition to greater community integration for refugee populations. The mission of the ORR is to “help new populations maximize their potential in the United States by linking them to critical resources that assist them in becoming integrated members of American society” (ORR 2011:10). Since 2011, the ORR has provided government based funding under the Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program (RAPP) to help organizations start rural and urban farming projects for refugees (Gerber 2015). Along with increasing refugee income, providing access to familiar food, and fostering better health, one of the primary objectives of this program is to encourage greater community integration among refugee populations. RAPP promotes a “holistic approach to resettlement,” in which refugees have an opportunity to participate in a program that allows individuals to “engage in a familiar activity, supports family self-sufficiency, and promotes a healthier lifestyle” (ORR 2011:2). In this model, food and farming becomes an important mechanism for integrating refugees into the broader community. Roots Community Farm is a project that was initially supported by RAPP. As a result, the farms’ mission and vision is largely influenced by RAPP objectives. Through this thesis, I examine the ways that the farm approaches issues of integration and belonging.

Modes of Belonging

I compare two primary models of belonging among immigrant and refugee populations: integration and transnationalism. Whereas integration theories strive to bring immigrants into an existing community, transnationalism enables migrants to create new community. The concepts of integration and transnationalism should be discussed along with notions of belonging because, “belonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling at home” (Yuval-Davis 2006:3). Integration and transnationalism are different broad scale approaches for welcoming immigrants and helping them to feel at home in a new country and to feel that they have a place in society.

Sociological Theories of Integration

As stated by Harald Bauder and John Shields, there are four types of reactions to acculturative forces—assimilation, defined as abandoning the culture of origin in favor of the new; integration, a blending of the two; rejection, in which the new culture is rejected in favor of the heritage culture; and marginalization, in which neither the old nor the new is accepted (Bauder and Shields 2015). According to Bauder and Shields, “marginalization is accompanied by the highest degree of mental health risk, integration by the least” (Bauder and Shields 2015:39). This belief expresses widespread assumptions about migrant settlement and how this should be done—that it is best for migrants to integrate. All of these reactions offer a concrete path and allow migrants little room for complexity of their lived experience and the agency to define their own path of belonging. In this thesis, I will propose a different approach to thinking about these standard notions of acculturation and integration.

It is a common expectation throughout North American society that immigrants and their descendants will integrate into mainstream society (Bauder and Shields 2015). Notions of

integration entail that immigrants 1) identify with the receiving country rather than anchoring their identity in the country of origin; 2) participate with the institutions of broader society; 3) learn the official language and communicate on an ongoing basis with it; and 4) build friendships and networks that extend beyond one's ethno-specific group (Bauder and Shields 2015). A brief overview of the theories of immigrant integration is important for understanding the notions of integration as supported by the RAPP.

Current sociological theories of immigration are founded upon classical assimilation theory (CAT), which is defined as “the social processes that bring ethnic minorities into the mainstream of American life” (Alba and Nee 1997:40). This route to integration was seen as linear with one clear path and outcome in which migrants assimilate into the culture and social networks of the majority population (Rumbaut 1997). Modern theories, however, focus more on the different factors that drive immigration and promote a deeper understanding of the social dynamics involved in this process (Alba and Nee 1997; Portes 1999). These theories include: segmented assimilation theory, ethnic boundaries and communities, and spatial assimilation (Lee 2009).

The theory of segmented assimilation (TSA) came about with the new immigration wave after 1965 and claims that experiences of assimilation are different for different groups, depending on the influences of the larger social environment and individual behaviors. Rather than one uniform outcome of adaptation as proposed by CAT, this theory supports three different paths that occur: standard assimilation into white, American middle-class, downward assimilation and displacement to the impoverished underclass, and rapid economic advancement while still maintaining ethnic identities (Esser 2010). These paths point to the notion that

assimilation occurs at different rates and in different ways for different immigrant groups, influenced by both individual and contextual factors (Kimberlin 2009).

In their “new assimilation theory” (NAT), Richard Alba and Victor Nee withdraw from the idea that there is a standard cultural “mainstream” determined by one segment of the host society which provides the basis for assimilation (Alba and Nee 1997). Alba and Nee believe that although this mainstream did exist, it was always changing in response to different cultural influences. Furthermore, the NAT recognizes the larger structural conditions that affect the path of integration an individual will take. These new developments focus more on the ways that assimilation is approached and do not offer a new model for reshaping the way we think about integration. Ultimately, despite deviations that can be observed in these more recent developments, the NAT and TSA align with the main idea of the CAT that “the basic mechanisms and structural conditions of the host societies will finally give rise to cultural assimilation” (Esser 2010). These theories have significantly impacted immigration and refugee resettlement policy, which continue to focus on economic and cultural integration of immigrants.

Integration theory exists on a spectrum and encapsulates a broad range of ideas, each with different assumptions and ideas about what the end goal of incorporation into a new society and community should look like. For the purposes of this thesis, I use the terms “integration” and “assimilation” interchangeably. I recognize this is an oversimplification. However, based on sociological literature, I assume that at their core, these theories of integration and assimilation presume immigrants to be in a liminal state of transition before progressing ultimately to the goal of incorporation into the mainstream society. This frame of liminality, in which refugees are seen as ‘betwixt and between’ societies, further reinforces the idea that refugees are the problematic ‘other’ and are expected to be incorporated into the host society.

However, as migration has become more varied, the lived experience of integration has become more ambiguous. With changes in the global economy in the last few decades, it is no longer assumed that migrants entering the U.S. intend to settle permanently. With increases in migrant-laborers and recruitment of low-skilled migrants to fill service-sector jobs, there is no longer one predominant pattern of immigrant integration that is geared toward cultural assimilation and upward mobility (Bauder and Shields 2015). Instead, pathways to immigrant integration have become more varied. Ethnic pluralist theory, for example, insists that there could be group-specific pathways to integration in which the retention of cultural identity could actually help migrants integrate into the civic and socioeconomic life in the U.S. (Bauder and Shields 2015). This theory holds that the U.S. is open to new cultures and is strengthened by diversity. In contrast to standard theories of assimilation, this theory holds that cultural difference is positive and “migrants can pursue different pathways to integration and retain their identities while remaining more or less equal to the mainstream society” (Bauder and Shields 2015:82).

More recently, social science immigration theory has shifted towards placing more emphasis on transnationalism (Kimberlin 2009). I use transnationalism as a different way to approach thinking about issues of community belonging. I believe this theory proves more useful than integration theories as it considers the multiplicity of migrant identities amidst the shifting fluidity of national and cultural borders (Kimberlin 2009). Furthermore, it reframes the process of integration to include the role of immigrants as active negotiators of relationships between their host and original cultures.

Transnationalism

Sociological integration theory has played a critical role in grappling with the process of migration. These theories provide a particular way of thinking about issues of migrant belonging in the context of becoming incorporated into a new society. However, integration theory is limited in its reach because it presumes a particular endpoint of assimilation into the mainstream, white, middle-class society¹ (Esser 2010). Regardless of the method of approach to assimilation, there are multiple levels of exclusion and belonging that are not accounted for by these theories. I move away from discourses of integration to look at how belonging is created in everyday lives through transnationalism.

According to Nina Glick-Schiller, transnational migration is “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Schiller 1999:48). Transnationalism grew out of the recognition that migrants can maintain strong, enduring ties to their homelands even as they become part of their country of resettlement (Horevitz 2009). Within this framework, migrants are free to “move back and forth across borders and between different cultures and social systems, making home and host society a single arena of social action” (Brettell 2000:120). Transnationalism offers another example of how varied the process of migration has become.

¹ I use “mainstream, white, middle-class society” throughout this thesis to refer to an ideology of what it is to be “American.” Although America does not have a unified demographic make-up or culture, integration theories have assumed that assimilation is completed upon incorporation into the dominant, hegemonic, white, middle-class culture. These theories have been critiqued for this assumption as it is clear this is more of an ideology than a reality. This ideology is powerful in that it impacts the way that people define what it is to succeed upon immigrating to this country. Because of this, refugees and immigrants are often pushed to achieve a level of educated, “middle-classness.”

On an empirical level, it is important to point out that the demographic make-up of Rock Springs is almost entirely comprised of white, middle class, educated people as the farm is located in a university town.

This theory shows the ways that the refugees at the farm can create ties with the surrounding area of Rock Springs, while maintaining linkages to Burma.

Schiller suggests that, transnationalism emerges as a response to economic and political uncertainty in the contemporary post-industrial migration period. Schiller believed that, “immigrant transnationalism [was] best understood as a response to the fact that in a global economy, contemporary migrants have found full incorporation in the countries within which they resettle either not possible or not desirable” (Schiller 1999:57). In this way, transnationalism was seen by Schiller as a survival strategy for migrants who choose to spread out connections and resources across multiple countries in order to cope with uncertainty.

Transnationalism, seen as a survival strategy, traditionally consists of activities that are facilitated by developments in transportation and communication technology (Schiller 1999). Transnational participants are “often bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political, and cultural interests that require their presence in both” (Westwood and Phizacklea 2000:116). Transnational processes are of “household and family economies rooted in both sending and receiving countries” (Schiller 1999:53). From this perspective, transnationalism is carried out through a direct, physical flow of items and communication from one country to another. For example, transnational activities consist of business investments in home countries, monetary remittances to family members in another country, retained membership in political parties of one’s country of origin, and communication with family and friends in another country (Schiller 1999).

Although Schiller conceptualizes transnationalism as a coping mechanism, my ethnography shows that transnationalism is much more than a utilitarian survival strategy; it is a way to approach issues of belonging. According to Olivia Sheringham, “transnational practices

relate to the construction of spaces of belonging among migrants” (Sheringham 2010:64). In “A Transnational Space? Transnational Practices, Place-Based Identity and the Making of ‘Home,’” Sheringham explores the everyday practices and spaces through which migrants “negotiate multiple connections, affiliations, and belongings” (Sheringham 2010:69). Along with Sheringham, I argue that transnationalism is used a way migrants claim and create belonging. Through transnationalism practiced at the farm, the refugees are able to create a community that makes them feel more at home here.

In contrast to transnational activities proposed by Schiller, the farmers at Roots engage in transnationalism in more indirect ways. For example, the practice of farming allows the refugees to maintain a critical linkage with their previous way of life in Burma. I add to Schiller’s understanding of transnationalism by exploring the ways refugees at RCF create and maintain linkages to Burma through practices that are carried out in one place. Although refugees at the farm take part in traditional forms of transnationalism², my research focuses on the more nuanced ways the refugees maintain linkages to Burma through the creation of a transnational space. The farm creates a landscape that allows the refugees to engage in transnational practices. The practices are still material in nature, but rely heavily on the memory of the farmers in order to evoke these transnational linkages (Sheringham 2010).

Transnationalist theories represent a shift from conceptualizing immigration as a “one-way process of acculturation, toward viewing it as a two-way phenomenon, involving relationships that span national borders” (Kimberlin 2009:765). Because this theory views immigrants as active negotiators of relationships between their host and original cultures, it gives

² For example, the farmers fly to visit people in Burma, send money to family in Burma, and communicate regularly with family in Burma through phone and skype.

them the agency to create their own sense of belonging and community, free from the expectations of the host society. Instead of becoming fully incorporated into the dominant host society, migrants are able to forge their own paths and communities in society. These paths vary depending on the extent to which migrants choose to engage with the dominant, mainstream culture and society.

In contrast to integration theory, transnationalism proposes a different way of looking at migrant belongings. Rather than assuming migrants are either holding out against integrating into society, currently in the transitional phase of becoming integrated, or already integrated, transnationalism holds that migrants can claim belonging outside of this framework.

Transnationalism is a way of belonging in and of itself because it presumes no end goal. From the transnational perspective, migrants are no longer “uprooted,” but become firmly rooted in their new country while maintaining linkages to their homeland (Schiller 1999).

Transnationalism cultivates belonging because it is a reflection of migrants’ current selves and the relationships and aspects of various cultures that are important to them. Throughout this thesis, I use transnationalism as a model to situate my findings about belonging and community formation.

CHAPTER TWO: THE ORGANIZATION OF ROOTS COMMUNITY FARM

In this chapter, I will give an overview of how Roots Community Farm (RCF) came to be. I will show how the mission and purpose of the farm have been shaped by the Gray County Partnership for Young Children (GCPYC), the farmers, and the RAPP grant. Finally, I will analyze the integration practices at RCF and show the ways that these practices are ultimately carried out to empower this community of farmers and to serve their expressed needs and desires. I argue that because the farm is not focused on the integration of the refugees as an explicit goal, it serves as a safe space for the refugees to enact their own belonging through transnationalism.

Layout of the Farm

Roots Community Farm is located just outside a university town in the Southeastern U.S., about four miles outside of the downtown area. The first time I drove to Roots, I got lost. This surprised me because it is only a fifteen-minute drive from the main street of the town. Because the farm is secluded and in a wooded, rural area, it feels tucked away and separate from the world. After driving along the winding country roads, I came to a small wooden sign with the words “ROOTS COMMUNITY FARM” carved with white lettering. I turned and drove down a wooded, gravel road, through an open metal fence, and into a wide clearing. I saw several farmers working among their rows of vegetables and a few chickens walking about. My first reaction was: “this feels like a safe and wonderful space. I’m going to love it here.”

RCF has five acres of land and is divided into two primary sections. The first section of the farm is an open plot of land and includes an area for chickens, a processing shed with an office, a Greenhouse, and two acres of land dedicated to growing vegetables. There is a small,

gravel road that begins at the entrance and continues through this primary section of the farm back to the woods.

Two of the main features on the farm, which are visible from the entrance, are the processing shed and Greenhouse. The shed is a wooden structure with concrete flooring, a roof, but no walls. It has a similar feel to a barn with fly tape hanging from the rafters. The shed serves many purposes. It is a central gathering place where on a Wednesday or Friday mornings, farmers and staff can be found sitting around the picnic tables for announcements, discussing who wants to buy basil plants or how to cover their beds with plastic to keep weeds down. The shed is a social and community space where meetings, along with dinners, fundraisers, and workshops are frequently held. It is also a communal storage space where farmers store chicken feed, the tiller, and boxes of vegetables in the walk-in cooler. It is a practical space where on most afternoons, May Linn or Hser Win can be found packing their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) boxes or preparing their vegetables to sell at the Rock Springs Farmers Market. Along the backside of the shed, there are four plastic washtubs where farmers and volunteers stand around and chat while washing vegetables. There is an orange hammock hanging near the washtubs where the children like to swing in the summer and Ther Mu likes to nap. Furthermore, the shed serves as the interface between the refugee and non-refugee community. It is where CSA members pick up their boxes, tour groups gather before walking around the farm, volunteers assist farmers, and the staff carry out their primary operations.

The Greenhouse shares the back wall with the shed. It is a fairly small, but warm, cozy space. It has gravel flooring and several wooden tables where farmers can store and dry vegetables such as onions, garlic, and taro (a tuberous vegetable). This is also the space where the Greenhouse crew starts new seedlings in the spring and stores banana trees and lemongrass

plants in the winter. As the Greenhouse manager, Hla Tsu spends a lot of time here, directing other farmers as to which seedlings need to be watered or re-arranging vegetables to create more space on the tables. Veronica and Hla Tsu spend a significant portion of their time at the farm going between the Greenhouse and the shed to prepare seeds and plants to make sure everything will be ready for the CSA farmers.

There are two primary areas dedicated to farming. One is located in this first section across from the shed and the other is located in the back section of the farm. During the summer, farmers can be found in these spaces between sunrise and sundown every day except Sunday, with their umbrella hats and thanaka paste to protect them from the sun. The back section is enclosed on all sides with thick trees and feels even more secluded, like a safe haven. Through the fence of this back section, there is a mulched path lined on one side with chrysanthemum and sunflowers and the other side with Hser Win's ginger plants and a large trellis covered with water gourd. The path continues towards a common space called the "Garden of Tropical Wonders." This space is a small triangular section with small beds displaying different vegetables on the farm. It was designed by the staff and serves as an area open to the public during workdays and tours. San Lee, the landscape crew manager, spends a lot of her time here, maintaining the paths and planting flowers. Also, found in this common space are three picnic tables¹ and a bamboo house where the young mothers rest in the shade with their children and families gather to eat sticky rice and pennywort salad. This space is a second central gathering space on the farm but is kept secluded and private for the farmers.

¹ Although the Garden of Tropical Wonders was originally designed by the staff, the farmers and crew managers maintain this space and shape it how they want it to be. San Lee placed the picnic tables in this space in order to invite people to sit and rest together.

The rest of this back section is characterized by rows of vegetable beds. During the summer this area is like a jungle, teeming with Gray, sprawling vegetables that grow over the ground and crawl up vines and across bamboo trellises. The vegetables grow so thick and tall that it is difficult to see over the rows. Gourds and squash climb up trellises and trees, creating a green canopy of vegetables. Often, I would walk back to this section to find May Linn encircled by vegetables, harvesting bitter melon while talking over the vegetables to Cri Say, who was invisible to her behind the vines. Every inch of the space is covered and growing with life, making this part of the farm feel magical. The vegetable-growing areas are laid out so that the farmers' have their own rows, and these rows are right next to each other in one common area. This way, although they are working on their individual row of vegetables, they share a space together on the same plot of land.

RCF Beginnings

Roots Community Farm developed out of an existing project of Gray County Partnership for Young Children (GCPYC). GCPYC is a 501(c)(3) organization focused on ensuring that “all young children (from birth-age five) arrive at school healthy and ready to succeed.” The organization was established in 1993 and works collaboratively with the community to identify issues and create solutions to concerns facing young children and their families.

The Growing Healthy Kids (GHK) project was an initiative started by GCPYC in 2007 to provide low-income families with children free access to community gardening, nutrition education, and cooking classes. In part because of the low-income requirements for acceptance into the program, the majority of the families who joined the community gardening initiative

were either Latino or refugee families. The project established three community garden spaces in Rock Springs, serving 45 families, nine of which identified as Karen or Burmese.

In 2009, Kendra, the current project director at RCF, began working with the Growing Healthy Kids project at GCPYC. After graduating with a degree in cultural studies, Kendra spent five years gaining hands-on agricultural experience working with eight different farms. Her interests in agriculture and working with low-income families initially drew her to the project. Kendra built relationships with the refugee families and learned that they had been farmers in Burma and wanted more space to grow vegetables. According to Kendra, “some families were practicing large scale operations, some were doing pretty decent size stuff that was more subsistence farming, but they definitely all wanted more space.” After listening to their requests for more space to grow vegetables, Kendra began looking for funding opportunities in order to expand the project to serve the growing refugee population. She came across the Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program (RAPP) grant through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and received federal funding for three years. After receiving funding in September of 2010, Kendra transitioned from working on the GHK project in Rock Springs and broke ground for what was known as the Growing Healthy Kids – Refugee Community Gardening program. In this way, RCF grew out of an existing project and is still technically considered a project of GCPYC.

In terms of leadership, there are currently three core staff members at RCF: Kendra, the project director, Nina, the program coordinator, and Veronica, the assistant farm manager and marketing director². These three women are employed by GCPYC, but do all their own

² Throughout this thesis, I use “staff” to refer to these three core employees: Kendra, Nina, and Veronica.

fundraising and grant writing in order to sustain the project. They run the RCF project independently and are given little to no guidance from GCPYC. In addition to these three women, the support staff at RCF is composed of Mr. Htee, the translator, and four crew managers: San Lee, Dah Wey, Tha Tun, and Hla Tsu.

During the initial years, Kendra shouldered the majority of the responsibility for the project. Kendra, along with the farmers decided how they wanted to structure RCF. The farm has grown and changed significantly over the past five years. The first farm year was in 2011 and was an experiment, focused primarily on intensive education and growing vegetables solely for farmers' families. Kendra prioritized receiving feedback from farmers to understand what farming was like for these families in Burma and what they wanted to learn about agriculture in the Southeastern U.S. RCF had 18 families by the end of the first year, most of which transitioned over from the GHK community garden in Rock Springs. The following year, they started the CSA program and had 14 families interested in selling their vegetables. After the first two years of experimenting with farming and marketing, the staff felt by 2013 that they had received ample feedback from the farmers and had a grasp of what the project was and what the farmers wanted it to be. Since then, the farm has expanded to 32 families and has increased their income-generating opportunities through PORCH³, the CSA, and the farmer's markets. The farm still provides educational workshops, but has transitioned to having the more established farmers take on leadership roles and teach new farmers how to grow for the CSA. Furthermore, the farm

³ PORCH is an all-volunteer, grassroots hunger relief organization whose mission is to collect and distribute food for families in the Rock Springs area. I will not focus on PORCH activities because these opportunities do not provide interactions between the refugee and non-refugee community.

has also expanded to include more community-based events such as open workdays, potlucks, and fundraisers.

The RAPP Notions of Integration: Integration in Theory at RCF

The RAPP grant funded RCF for the first three years and has significantly shaped the organization of Roots. The objectives of the RAPP played a large role in forming the goals and programming of the farm and thus helped lay the foundation for the project. The grant was specifically designed for any nonprofit or educational institute working with a refugee population in an agricultural setting. The program is focused on helping refugees transition to life in the U.S. through an activity that is familiar to them. According to Kendra:

The grant was based on the idea that a lot of refugees come to the U.S. with a strong agricultural background, but often struggle to acclimate in other ways. Yet, they have a strong history in farming and there's an opportunity for that to translate to them being successful here in the U.S.

The goals of the RAPP are to:

Develop strategies that incorporate agriculture and food systems to improve the livelihoods and economic self-sufficiency of refugee families. These strategies should result in sustainable and/or supplemental income, improved access to healthy foods and better nutrition and enhanced integration into communities by refugee families (ORR 2011:1).

These goals along with the broader purpose of the ORR and the RAPP align with standard sociological theories of integration that view immigrant transition as a linear path with an expected outcome of economic and cultural assimilation (Esser 2010). The ORR provides

immediate and long-term assistance to refugee families such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, job readiness, and employment services, “all designed to facilitate refugees’ successful transition to life in the U.S. and help them to attain self-sufficiency” (ORR 2011:1). The ORR’s purpose to improve refugee lives is approached with underlying assumptions of what it means to have a “successful transition” and “improve livelihoods.” These notions are established on the assumption that incorporation of refugee families into the host society is the ultimate goal and would be an improvement on their current way of life.

The RAPP largely conceptualizes of “successful transition” in terms of economic integration. The key requirements of the grant include access to land, training and technical assistance (farming techniques, nutrition, marketing, and business management), and farming production. A large focus of the grant is on marketing and as a result, there are a lot of requirements related to income generating programs and helping farmers start independent businesses. According to the RAPP FY 2011 Annual Report, “an area of emphasis is on teaching clients the many elements of production and emphasis. All grantees are expected to have clients marketing produce in the second year of their project cycles” (RAPP 2011:1). Because of these objectives, RCF focused on preparing farmers for marketing opportunities and moved towards this after the first year. According to Kendra:

We want to give people the opportunity to see if marketing through a CSA or having a farm business is something they’re interested in. You just don’t have that opportunity otherwise to have access to supplies, material, and land to try out a marketing situation. Since we had those structures in place, people could try it out. That’s a big part of the program.

The first three winters, Kendra taught an intensive eight-week class on marketing and business to teach farmers how to sell through the CSA program and farmers market. Although the staff has never pressured any of the farmers to be involved in any form of marketing, the farm is functionally very focused on this and according to Kendra, “marketing is the most time-consuming part of the project.” The farm is focused on economic programming because this is something that many of the farmers have expressed is important to them. As a result, by necessity, integration activities such as budgeting and marketing have become an important part of Roots.

Another aspect of the economic integration of the farmers is being able to speak sufficient English. As part of training and technical assistance, RAPP projects were encouraged to incorporate ESL for the practical purposes of helping farmers succeed in their businesses. The first year, RCF offered ESL classes for farmers who were interested. RCF partnered with the Gray County literacy council and incorporated a lot of agricultural-based words that would be helpful for them in their businesses. These examples of economic related activities show the ways that the grant shaped the mission and goals of the organization of RCF. As a result of this grant, RCF has placed a strong emphasis on promoting economic opportunities for the farmers.

Integration at RCF in Practice

The RAPP grant and staff at RCF play a strong role in shaping the community both at the farm and between the refugee and non-refugee community. In this section, I will show how the staff conceive of integration as something that is done out of economic necessity for the farmers. I show the nuance between abiding by the RAPP grant in theory versus in practice. Furthermore,

I will analyze the ways that this approach to integration allows the farmers to define the ways that they want to construct their own community.

Prioritizing Farmers' Desires

From the language used by the GCPYC grant, in theory, the RCF organizational views on integration are similar to that of the RAPP and ORR. However, in practice the staff and the organization do not prioritize integration as an expectation or goal. This is largely because of the personal beliefs of the staff members and their views on integration and community development. The staff want this project to be grassroots, driven and led by the farmers. All of the projects and goals of the farm come directly from the feedback gathered from the farmers. Because of this, the staff is hesitant to try to intentionally integrate farmers according to the paradigm and assumption of assimilation. According to Nina, “the farm’s job is not assimilation. The farm is to serve what the communities’ needs are. We are not trying to push one thing or another. I’m not trying to push bridging community if people don’t want to bridge community.” First and foremost, the staff prioritize the needs and goals of the farmers. Furthermore, the staff is very aware that this refugee population is the minority group and want them to feel a sense of agency to choose how they interact with mainstream, white American culture. According to Kendra, it is important for them to “have some autonomy over preservation of their culture which gets lost because it is so hard to preserve it as a minority.” Because the staff is aware of this, they leave it up to the refugees to determine the extent to which they want to use the farm as an opportunity to learn English or engage with the larger community.

From my interviews and conversations with the staff, it is clear that they have no underlying goals of integration for the refugee families, but are working to serve the farmers in

the capacities the farmers identify as most important to them. According to Veronica, “the goal for the refugees is for them to have whatever kind of life they want to have to be happy and healthy and if that involves farming, shouldn’t we do whatever we need to do to help them be able to farm? That should be our job.” Although the staff does not intentionally promote integration, they do strive to ease refugee families’ transition to life in the Southeastern U.S.

Furthermore, it is important to note that although economic programming is something the farmers have expressed a desire for, these activities are also pushed from an organizational perspective. Roots was founded on federal funding and is still dependent on state, federal, and private funding to exist. As a result, the farm must continue to implement programs that appeal to funders. These programs shape the kinds of activities at the farm. Below I will discuss the practices through which the staff carries out their ideologies of integration.

Economic Integration

According to staff accounts, a large portion of what it means to ease refugee transition is integrating them into the local economic system in order to help meet the farmers’ practical day-to-day needs. Almost all of the farmers work in service-level jobs in housekeeping or food services at the university and earn between \$25,000-\$49,000 per year. A significant part of the programming at RCF is to help farmers to earn a supplemental income and/or save money through their agricultural efforts. This may range from helping some farmers to cover the cost of transportation with the money they earn, to supporting other farmers who hope to leave their service sector jobs to become independent farmers. Of the 25 farmers I interviewed, twelve of them market their produce through Roots—through the CSA, farmers market, restaurant sales, PORCH, or more informally to friends and coworkers. The farm offers these marketing

opportunities in addition to workshops on financial planning and budgeting in order to help the farmers with their business and economic goals.

The farmers have expressed how important it is for them to be able to earn an income and save money through farming. Because most of the families at the farm work in service sector jobs at the university and earn an average of \$1,800 a month, it is important for them to be able to save money on food. When asking farmers why they choose to come to the farm, twenty of the farmers discussed saving money as one of their reasons. According to Lu Nor, “I come to save money, to get my own vegetables here because it is very expensive in the store and they are not fresh. This is the most benefit I get from the farm.” On average, families reported saving \$80 per week on groceries during the growing season because of the vegetables they get from RCF. In addition to saving money, several of the farmers are able to earn an income through selling their produce to others. In an interview with Hser Win, I asked if RCF made her transition to life in the U.S. easier. She responded:

First year I came here and my children, they go to school. They want a calculator. I want to buy for them, but I don't have money. I feel so bad. Now they go to school and last year, Kaw Ree has to pay \$2,000 like that. I can pay that. It's a lot different now. When I came first year, the calculator was \$160 something, but I can't pay for them. Now school is \$2,000, but I can pay for that. It's a lot different.

For Hser Win, the income she earns through the CSA and farmers market has given her “pocket money” which has created a cushion and has decreased her stress. This is true for many of the farmers who struggle financially.

Because the farmers have expressed a desire to earn an income and save money, economic assistance has become an important function of the farm. A large part of this economic

assistance takes place through community bridging. As stated by Nina, farmers are “going to have to bridge community if [they] want those economic opportunities beyond a certain point because we’re a part of this economy that you have to do that.” Any activities or educational programming that have elements of integration are more functional and rooted in helping the farmers succeed in their economic pursuits. For example, the staff has led several educational workshops during the winter on how to budget money. This was done in part to help farmers keep track of their money in their agricultural businesses and in part because the farmers requested budgeting help for their daily lives.

May Linn’s entrance into the farmers market is another example of how the institutional ideology of integration is carried out for economic purposes. When May Linn joined the Rock Springs Farmer’s Market in the spring of 2016, a staff member practiced English with her and taught May Linn how to introduce herself, talk about where she farms, and what vegetables she grows. The purpose of these lessons was to help her build relationships with her customers and strengthen her business. There were no underlying motivations of cultural assimilation.

From May Linn’s perspective, this practical education is a positive thing that enables her to further her farming business goals. In an interview with May Linn, she said that the farm provided communication education. According to May Linn, “I learn how to talk to other people and other organizations. I increase a lot of my English from the farmers market, from talking to customers. I learn a lot of things—selling, marketing skills, and English vocabulary.” I asked May Linn why this education was important for her. She responded:

It is important in order to work in CSA and farmers market. My main objective is to increase my English and expose myself to understand. If I stay in my house I won’t know how to deal with other people. If I stay in America, I need to communicate. Also, I need

to learn about other culture—the way they behave, they act, they cook so I can deal with the situations at the farmers market in the future. Working with staff, farmers, and farmers market helps me deal with the world and deal with other people.

May Linn is one of the two farmers who sell vegetables at the market. She is very motivated to learn English and engage with her customers and the dominant culture in Rock Springs. This motivation stems from her desire to better serve her customers at the market. The staff is aware of May Linn’s motivations and approach issues of integration from a practical, economic perspective. Activities such as English lessons or budgeting workshops are conducted to serve the farmers in their business pursuits, not to place expectations on them.

Community Empowerment

The staff at RCF believes that “increasing the self-reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs is key to creating a more environmentally sustainable and socially responsible food system” (RCF website). This belief in self-reliance and community empowerment is strongly adhered to as the staff tries their best to prioritize farmer voices in the decision-making processes on the farm. The staff wants to give farmers the tools to make their own decisions, believing that the farmers are the best qualified to make decisions about their own community.

The staff is aware of their identities and of the power dynamic between them and the farmers and recognize their role as outsiders serving in leadership positions. They want to empower the farmers to take on more leadership at the farm to eliminate some of these power differentials. According to Nina:

We're trying to figure out the farmers taking leadership. I feel uncomfortable because white people are in a leadership role and as you've heard in the meetings, there's still very much [an attitude of] *you all are the leaders and we will listen to you* and that is hard for me. I don't want that feeling. I don't want to be the person that makes the decisions. Because the white culture is the dominant culture and we're two white women. And so how does that play into it, of like, people wanting to follow us.

Nina, Veronica, and Kendra have all expressed feeling uncomfortable being the ones in charge and making decisions for the refugee community that they are not part of. They recognize the difficulties of transitioning leadership to the farmers. However, they believe that giving more responsibility to the farmers is the best way to serve their interests and allow them to construct the community that the farmers want.

Ultimately, the staff envision that the farm will be run by the farmers. In the last few years, the staff has begun to transition the leadership away from white, middle class staff and have given more responsibilities to the farmers. For example, they hired three crew-managers to manage various operations at the farm. Currently, the staff is in the process of meeting with crew-managers at the farm to brainstorm and put together a farmer advisory board. The vision is that this advisory board will make decisions about processes at the farm that will shape the direction of the community.

The staff recognize that shifting more leadership to the farmers will force them to become more incorporated into mainstream society, primarily for the purpose of facilitating economic exchanges. Practically, in order for certain things to be accomplished and for the farm to run smoothly, the farmers must interact with the wider community and cannot exist in their own bubble. For example, it is necessary for the farmers to have an understanding of their

predominantly white, middle-class clients and learn to interact with people such as the company where they buy chicken feed. According to Kendra, any focus on integration is “all about relationships and logistically, to get things done. If we were serving only refugees from Burma as customers, even then, they still need chicken food. There’s a forced necessity logistically.” In order to maintain farm operations—to buy seeds, coordinate the CSA program, order mulch, and buy chicken feed—it is necessary for the farmers to interact with people in the non-refugee community. If the farmers are going to have more leadership in the future, the staff believe it is important for them to interact with the non-refugee community for the purpose of carrying out essential economic transactions necessary to the operations of the farm.

The organization of RCF strives to empower farmers to become more independent. This goal provides insight into organizational ideologies that see integration activities as essential for allowing farmers to construct their own community. Integration, therefore, is not the end goal, nor does it presume a particularly trajectory whereby the refugee community must assimilate into mainstream, white, middle-class society, as integration theories have often been critiqued to assume (Esser 2010). Rather, integration at RCF is a way of accomplishing the organizational goal of empowering farmers to have full ownership over their community at the farm.

Gateway into Mainstream Society

In many ways, the farm serves as a safe space for cultural engagement for the farmers, and yet, they can choose to use the farm as a gateway into the mainstream society. The organization does not push the farmers to become more part of mainstream society, however, they are willing to help families learn about and participate in mainstream society if they choose this. The staff, including Mr. Htee, is always more than willing to assist farmers with questions

they have related to navigating mainstream culture. Many of the farmers call Kendra, Nina, and Veronica “teacher” and look up to them with great respect. They value having people in the non-refugee community at the farm who better understand the dominant culture and can help answer their questions. These questions range from how to turn off the flashlight on their cellphone, how to file a W4 tax form, what the differences are between the republican and democratic parties, how to resolve conflict with their bosses at work, how to pronounce certain words, etc. For the majority of the farmers, the extent of their engagement with non-refugee culture and society is out of practical necessity.

In addition to being willing to answer questions, the staff informs families about classes or opportunities they may be interested in related to learning about or participating in mainstream culture. This is mostly done through morning announcements. For example, Nina has made announcements about free ESL classes at the nearby church, weekly citizenship classes, or kindergarten classes for their young children. Furthermore, during election season, Mr. Htee posted information and made several announcements about voting. The staff are willing to answer questions and provide information about opportunities and services that may help the farmers navigate life in a new culture. However, cultural competency is not part of the official programming or a goal of the organization.

The farm offers multiple opportunities for the refugees to interact with mainstream society if they choose to do this. Integration of the farmers into the dominant society is not an intentional goal of RCF and the staff are all very aware of the importance of cultural engagement and the autonomy of the farmers. Because the farm is not focused on integration, it serves as a safe space for the refugees to enact their own belonging through transnationalism. Although farmers are not forced to engage with mainstream society, they are given opportunities through

economic activities, to engage with the dominant culture. Additionally, they are given opportunities to create a transnational community at the farm.

“Integration” at RCF: A Summary of The Impacts of RAPP

The philosophy of RCF has been shaped by the RAPP grant, which emphasized agricultural education and marketing for refugee farmers to integrate them into mainstream society. In 2013, RCF was no longer funded by the RAPP grant and was given the freedom to break away from any stipulations (about working with refugees, farming, or marketing) of the grant. This gave the organization independence to decide the direction of the project. Although they were given the freedom to break away from the stipulations of the grant, the mission and goals of RCF were still significantly impacted by RAPP. This is clearly seen through the programs and goals currently supported by the farm:

- Access to land
- Vegetable marketing outlets and training through farmers’ markets, CSA and restaurant sales
- Year-round agricultural and business education
- A cultural community space for refugees from Burma to come together, strengthen community and preserve agricultural and cultural traditions while simultaneously transitioning to new lives in Rock Springs
- Teen programming that focuses on job building, communication, and leadership development
- Young children’s programming that focuses on outdoor education, nutrition, and physical activity

It is clear from these programs that the farm found its roots in the agricultural education and marketing focus of the grant and then branched out from there to include additional services for

youth and for cultural engagement. I argue that although these practices appear to be forms of integration, they are conducted to serve the farmers practical needs and interests. I use “integration” in quotes because the philosophy and activities at the farm are not aligned with traditional theories of integration that presume a particular endpoint for the refugees into the mainstream society. Rather, they provide opportunities for farmers to achieve their economic goals and engage with the dominant community in the ways that they choose. Transnationalism provides a framework for understanding the approach RCF takes. Within transnationalism, migrants are not pushed to be incorporated into the dominant society, but rather are given agency to determine the ways that they want to engage with their surrounding communities.

Mission and Goals

The mission of the farm was formally established by Kendra and Nina in 2013. At its core, the purpose of the farm according to Kendra is, “to create a community space where families can continue cultural traditions with their children in an agricultural setting. It is a place for refugee adults and youth to gain access to land, healthy food, and entrepreneurial opportunities and to be able to grow culturally important foods.” From the beginning, before the grant was even applied for, it was the farmers’ interests that initiated the startup of the project and guided the direction of the farm. Kendra has been working closely with the farmers since 2009 and developed the mission out of what the farmers expressed they want the farm to be. Throughout the course of the last seven years, Kendra and the RCF staff have modified RCF’s program and goals in order to adapt to the farmers’ needs and requests.

From my observations, RCF strives to carry out its mission through two primary goals: first and foremost, to serve the community of refugees at the farm, and second, to serve the wider

community. From the mission stated by the staff and the website, it is clear that RCF's primary focus is on the community of refugees at the farm. The services provided by the farm are entirely focused on meeting the farmers' needs and helping them succeed.

The second overarching goal is to reach the wider community through education, publicity, and outreach. Although this is not a stated goal of the farm, it is clear through conversations with staff and through the programming at RCF that this is a key component of the farm. This goal of bridging these communities is tied to their mission to "create innovative marketing activities that mutually benefit new American refugee farmers and low-income consumers." In order to help farmers to earn additional income through their efforts, they must establish networks and connections with the surrounding community. Furthermore, in order to exist as an organization, the staff promote these community-bridging activities in order to receive funding.

Through ethnography, I will analyze the ways that RCF goes about accomplishing these overarching goals. By focusing in on the community created both at the farm and between the refugee and non-refugee community, I will assess what forms of belonging are being articulated and by whom. I will provide insight into the community of refugees at RCF and assess the ways the refugees enact their own belonging through transnationalism. Furthermore, I will analyze what it looks like for RCF to "connect cultures through food and farming" and assess the extent that RCF serves as a bridge between cultures.

CHAPTER THREE: TRANSNATIONAL LINKAGES

“When I come here every time, I see a smile on the farmers’ faces because they just love being out here. They feel like they’re at home. Because in America, there’s not much you can do for them that they enjoy. And being out here, farming, working even though it’s hard, hot, they’re sweating. Being out here, growing crops it’s what they like to do. And I also see our culture at this place. Because where we live right now, there’s not really much you can relate to our culture. But this farm is a representation of who we are and where we came from.” – Tay Aye

In this chapter, I will explore the ways that Roots Community Farm (RCF) has created a transnational space and how this has cultivated a sense of belonging for the farmers by connecting them to the other farmers, to Burma, and to the land. This sense of belonging is deeply emotional, brought about by farming, memory, and kinship. I will show the ways that transnationalism is a daily practice, lived and experienced on a physical level. By engaging in dynamic transnational processes, the farmers actively construct their belonging.

Cultivating Belonging

Fostering Transnational Space at The Farm

Schiller’s theory of transnationalism provides a framework for understanding how migrant belonging is created in everyday lives. Transnational linkages “give rise to a new social formation—the transnational community and identity” (Brettel 2000:95). Through this transnational identity and community, migrants define their own sense of belonging. Roots has allowed migrants from Burma the ability to create a transnational space¹ where they can enact their belonging through transnational practices. This unique space has been created, in part, as a result of the intentional decision made by the staff to serve a single population group.

¹ Meaning it is a space that fosters connections to their homeland (Sheringham 2010).

The community at the farm has been significantly shaped by the fact that all of the farmers are from Burma. Initially, when applying for the RAPP grant, Kendra and Gray County Partnership for Young Children (GCPYC) decided that RCF would target Karen and Burmese refugees because refugees from Burma are the largest population of refugees in Rock Springs and Gray County. Due to the overarching mission of GCPYC, Roots focused on serving refugee families with young children. In 2013 after RAPP no longer supported the farm, the staff made the choice to continue to solely work with refugees. Because of logistical and practical reasons related to the farm's capacity and language resources, they decided to continue to limit the refugees to those from Burma. Currently, there are people from three different ethnic groups from Burma: Burmese (one family), Chin (three families), and Karen (twenty-eight families).

Because the staff have limited the project to people from a single country, it is more community-focused and less individualistic than similar projects. Most other community farms that also received the RAPP grant have expanded their programs to people from any ethnic group or country. As a result, the structure of these programs, according to Kendra, is "much more hands-off, with less support for and between farmers." Because similar projects work with a more diverse population, they are less able to provide services (such as translation) to promote community cohesion.

Of the seven partner farm projects listed on the RCF website, RCF is the only project that focuses on refugees from one country of origin. According to Kendra, "we are unique in that in Rock Springs, the predominant refugee population is from Burma. So, we're working with one population that is cohesive around one culture for the most part. That allows us to foster a different sense of cultural cohesiveness." As a result of the decision to work with one group of refugees, RCF prioritizes the farm as a community space and a space for cultural engagement.

Because the farmers are all connected to Burma, they share a transnational identity tied to the same country. As a result, they share the same transnational linkages such as language, farming, and food. Since RCF has focused on refugees from one country of origin, a cohesive transnational space can be created.

Language serves to create an immediate connection to Burma. By sharing a common language, the farmers can communicate effectively and become close to one another while feeling connected to their previous life in Burma. One of the biggest challenges expressed by the farmers is that they cannot speak or understand English. The majority of the farmers spend a lot of time in English-speaking spaces—at their jobs, in grocery stores, at their children's schools, etc. Many of the farmers cannot explain or understand a lot of what is happening around them in these English-dominated places. Because they spend most of their time in places where they are not familiar with the language, it is nice to spend time with other families who speak their language. The ease of being able to speak in Chin, Karen, or Burmese at Roots creates a familiarity and a safe space. At the farm, they have the language abilities to communicate freely with other people without worrying about being misunderstood. According to May Linn, "I feel happy at the farm because I can talk with everyone friendly and they understand me. Different ethnic groups gathering together—Burmese, Karen, Chin—three languages coming together. I can come here and meet with other groups like a whole family. Different ethnic groups talking together and working together makes me happy." By choosing to construct a community space of solely refugees from Burma, Kendra and Nina helped foster a space in which everyone could communicate easily and thus, feel at home.

Furthermore, in addition to choosing to limit the scope of the project to people from one country, Kendra and Nina chose to focus on people who are refugees. This has created an

additional bond of community and safe space at the farm. Even though many of the farmers have received citizenship status, they can still share in the experience of being a refugee. Through participant observation, I have seen many ways that this common identity as a refugee has produced a sense of unity among the farmers. For example, all of the farmers can relate to the experience of entering the country with nothing, and struggling to find transportation, employment, and education services. The farm has become a space where members of the refugee community can come together to share resources and information. According to Hser Win, “we know each other and have community a lot in the farm. This made it easier and better. People who want jobs, we talk to each other and ask each other.” The farm has become a space where the refugees can learn from one another ways to navigate a new culture and society.

By choosing to limit the community at the farm to people from Burma who are refugees, the staff has fostered a transnational space that allows for a unique cohesiveness. RCF has become a safe space where farmers can relate and communicate with one another through common language, similar experiences as refugees, and shared cultural practices. These shaping factors have created a space where the farmers are able to enact their belonging through transnational practices.

The Reality of Transnational Practice and Space

A reciprocal role exists between transnational practice and transnational space. Transnational practices create a transnational space, which allows farmers to further maintain a connection to their homeland through transnational practice. Out of this space and these

practices, a transnational identity is “formed and is continually reinforced through individual practice within a culturally defined space, which is in turn, continually constituted out of these practices” (Martin 1997: 92). Below I will consider how the practices of transnationalism and the space that is formed foster a sense of belonging for the farmers at Roots. Through this discussion, I expand Schiller’s understanding of transnationalism by describing the ways that the construction of a physical space (through practices and objects related to farming) creates a tangible and sensory connection to an imagined and remembered place of Burma.

Yet, as stated by Olivia Sheringham, “this evocation or invention of home is not an escape from the local reality, but rather an active and positive engagement with it, a means of creating a sense of belonging in the town” (Sheringham 2010:77). Drawing on Sheringham, I argue that while farmers at RCF create a sense of ‘home’ at the farm through their connection to Burma, they simultaneously create a sense of belonging within the broader Rock Springs area. By farming land in Rock Springs, using local materials and resources, and consuming vegetables which were rooted in Rock Springs soil, they cultivate feelings of local attachment as well. In this way, the farmers engage in activities that embody transnationalism and allow them to construct a sense of home in a new country. Below I will explore the transnational practices and space at Roots.

Farming

Arguably the most obvious ways that the reciprocal role of transnational practices and space seen at Roots is through the act of farming. RCF is a space designed for farming. Farming is the main function and the primary reason why people join. All of the families at Roots were

farmers in their homeland of Burma and grew up farming in some capacity. Farming is a way of life for them. According to Hser Win, “most Karen and Chin people in Burma are farmers and had a lot of land in Burma; one farmer would have as much space as all of RCF (over eight acres).” The refugees at the farm all practiced subsistence farming with their parents, and some were involved in more large-scale practices, planting rice paddy fields for an entire year. In addition, they grew many vegetables including beans, pumpkin, bananas, pennywort, eggplant, okra, roselle, long beans, cucumber, ridge gourd, cilantro, taro, yam, and so many other vegetables and herbs. Most of the farmers solely grew for their families, or to share with relatives and neighbors. Culturally, according to Lu Nor, “people didn’t sell very much, but used a barter system.” Because the refugee families at RCF grew up on farms, they have a deep emotional connection to the practice of farming. Farming is a transnational practice for the refugees at RCF because of their history of farming in Burma.

Because of the familiarity of farming, RCF becomes what Anne Fortier, in *Migrant Belongings*, refers to as a “habitual space,” or a “space where [they] need not try to make sense of what was going on: all [is] familiar and intelligible” (Anne Fortier 2000:133). The farm offers a known context with which the farmers can understand what is happening around them at Roots. They have seeds and know what they are and how to use them and what they will grow into. They know how to plant the seeds and are able to anticipate what will happen when the rain comes and time passes. They know what to do with the vegetables when they are ready for harvest—they know how to cook them and serve them with rice. The farmers are able to picture and understand how the things feel, taste, and smell at the farm. They are able to explain things they see at the farm and feel comfortable in this habitual space. In contrast to all the newness the farmers are exposed to in Rock Springs, exacerbated by their lack of English language skills and

cultural knowledge, the farm offers a space that is familiar and known. Farming is second-nature to the refugees, thus RCF is a space where they feel at home.

Furthermore, through the everyday practices of farming, the refugees cultivate local place-based attachments to Rock Springs. By working on the land—planting in the soil, sweating in the Southeastern U.S. heat, harvesting vegetables grown in Rock Springs—the farmers physically create roots and strong connections to a new country and place. This shows the ways that “transnational practices enable a sense of local attachment” (Sheringham 2010:78).

Connecting to Farming: The Role of Family and Memory

Many of the farmers choose to come to Roots because it connects them to the practice of farming which they learned and lived in Burma. According to Mu Dah, “in Burma, farming was our main job to farm so that our family could survive. This is maintaining my ancestors culture and way of life.” For Mu Dah, transnationalism is practiced by upholding a previous lifestyle which connects him to his family, many of whom are still in Burma. The connection to parents is a common theme among the farmers’ reasons to join RCF.

There is a certain nostalgia and strong role of memory discussed by the farmers when talking about this connection to family and farming. For Lu Nor, the practice of farming helps her to remember this connection to her family in Burma, “farming makes me happy because since my childhood, my parents were doing farming. It reminds me a lot of working together with my parents in Burma.” Since most of the farmers have not been back to visit Burma since they left between three to twelve years ago, the physical act of farming allows these refugees to remember and create a mental linkage to their family and home in Burma. According to Nina, this is a reason for why the staff and farmers have shaped the space at RCF to resemble Burma:

The decision to do the Garden of Tropical Wonders and bamboo house was along these lines of ‘this farm is a beautiful place people like to come to.’ And people love to see Hser Wins rice growing there, to see the bamboo. These little things are just so nostalgic and reminiscent for people. Especially older people, we hear a lot from them, that they love to see those things because they really miss home. That was one of the main reasons behind creating that garden space.

The linkages that are created through farming are rooted in memories which give shape and meaning to these linkages. Spending time at the farm triggers memories for the refugees and it is these memories that drive them to continue to farm. These memories are critical for all of the transnational practices carried out by the farmers.

The mental act of remembering is an emotional experience tied to the farmers’ previous way of life. While standing in the Garden of Tropical Wonders overlooking the rice field, Taw Kee said, “looking at these rice plants reminds me of my homeland. This is a small plot of rice, but where I came from, there’s a big plot of rice and it’s all green and when the wind comes they all flow in one motion.” Emotions are embedded in memories. For Taw Kee, because rice farming was such an important part of his life, looking at the rice fields has deep emotional meaning. Taw Kee explained that he hadn’t been back to visit Burma in ten years. He said that as you get older, you lose your memory, but “coming to the farm and looking at these vegetables allows [him] to experience [his] homeland again.” Taw Kee comes to the farm with his daughter and wife and daughter. Although he is too old to practice very much farming, he enjoys coming to the farm to experience Burma.

Hser Win is one of the most involved and experienced farmers at RCF. She is 54 years old and has been farming at RCF for six years. She has 45 rows of vegetables and sells her vegetables through the CSA and two farmers' markets with her daughters. Hser Win grew up in the hilly countryside by a river in the eastern part of the Karen state. Her parents were farmers and had an extensive rice paddy field. In addition, they grew many traditional vegetables and raised chickens, ducks, cow, and some buffalo. Hser Win's favorite vegetable is pumpkin. Her parents grew food mostly for their family, but also to share with friends and relatives. As stated by Hser Win, "we had everything we needed—wood from trees for houses, food which we grew, and peanuts that we sold for spending money." When Hser Win was displaced to the Mae La refugee camp in Thailand, she continued to grow vegetables in a small garden in her backyard which she grew for her family and to share with friends in the camp. She grew water spinach, pumpkin, peppers, and a few other vegetables. She had chickens and ducks and a lot of flowers in her yard.

Even before leaving Thailand for resettlement, Hser Win thought about becoming a farmer in the U.S. She prayed that she would be placed in the countryside and feared living in a city. She was relieved to be placed in Rock Springs. She first lived in an apartment and found a small creek behind the apartment complex which reminded her of the river she lived by in Burma. There was a little space nearby the creek where she wished, "oh, if they give me this space, I want to grow vegetables here." It wasn't until three years later, when RCF started, that Hser Win was given the opportunity to grow vegetables. I asked Hser Win why she chose to join RCF. She responded, "why? Because I love—my hobby is planting, farming." For Hser Win, farming is important because it something she deeply enjoys and loves to do. Like many of the

refugees at RCF, Hser Win spent the majority of her childhood in Burma outside working in the fields with her family. This is home to her.

Through the practice of farming, Roots is formed into a transnational space that enables refugees, like Hser Win, to maintain their agricultural traditions in Rock Springs. The majority of the farmers at RCF primarily grow Asian vegetables, which they would have grown in Burma. The farm orders seeds from specialty places such as Kidzawa and Evergreen which have Asian seeds. In addition, some of the farmers buy large quantities of seeds from Thailand and Burma when they go to visit and bring them back to share with other farmers when they return. While harvesting okra with Hla Tsu one morning, she pointed out the differences between two varieties of okra she grew. One variety came from Burma and was purple-colored and smaller than the other. She said in April of 2016, she went back to Burma to visit family and get married. She brought back many seeds that her family had given her. In this way, farmers physically create a space that is rooted, quite literally, in their homeland of Burma. For the farmers, the transnational space produces a sense of belonging which makes them feel more at home in broader context of Rock Springs.

Landscape

The use of bamboo also serves to create a transnational space at RCF. Bamboo is a material that served many purposes for the farmers both in Burma and in Rock Springs. In Burma, bamboo was commonly used to build trellises in their fields for vegetables to climb on, houses in the refugee camps, or as material for basket weaving. After the farmers expressed a desire to have bamboo, Kendra and Nina researched places in Rock Springs where they could harvest bamboo. My first day at Roots, I went with Nina and 30 farmers to the Rock Springs

Country Club where we harvested bamboo with machetes. The farmers brought truckloads of bamboo back to the farm where they have used the bamboo to build trellises and structures for their ridge gourd, luffa, and other vegetables to climb on. Furthermore, Naw Paw uses bamboo to weave baskets which I have seen her carry with a strap around her forehead on her back when harvesting bitter melon and roselle. Many of the farmers have used the larger bamboo to build small shelters and structures that serve as places to store supplies or gather together to rest in the shade. For example, Jae built a vegetable processing area, a kitchen, and a separate sitting area out of bamboo.

In 2015, the farmers harvested especially large bamboo to build a house which was placed in the back section of the farm as a community space. This is a small structure with open walls and a tin roof. It resembles the homes farmers built for themselves in Burma. The use of familiar materials and structures that have become a central part of the landscape of the farm further helps farmers to feel like they are home in Burma. In addition to being mentally transported to Burma, by seeing and using these local structures, farmers are able to re-construct an imagined place of Burma using materials and resources from here in Rock Springs. This creates an awareness of their local context in Rock Springs.

Farming Techniques

Cultivating a transnational space further encourages the use of transnational practices. More specifically, this can be seen in the way the farmers carry out the same agricultural methods they practiced in Burma. For example, it is very important to the farmers to grow organic vegetables, free from pesticides and chemicals. One morning at the farm, I noticed a black, paper-like substance on the leaves of the plants. I asked May Linn about this and she

explained that in Burma, because they did not use pesticides, they would spread a charcoal-based substance on the plants in order to deter bugs and unwanted pests. This is a practice they have continued along with more labor-intensive methods such as hand-picking beetles off edamame leaves and drowning them in water. These methods are much more time consuming, but align with the farmers' values of eating chemical-free vegetables. During my interviews with farmers, I asked why they choose to come to the farm. Of the twenty-five farmers, sixteen of them cited the importance of having the ability to grow fresh, organic vegetables, free from chemicals. According to Takay, "I feel more safe to eat vegetables that I grow than the ones in the store which might contain some chemicals. I am happy because I have no chemicals in my body." The farmers feel very strongly that organic vegetables they grow by themselves are healthier and fresher than the ones they would buy in the store.

Food

The kinds of vegetables the farmers choose to grow help them maintain a connection with Burma and also reflect an important aspect of their culture, namely, food. For many of the farmers, rice and vegetables were their most common meals in Burma. Meat was more expensive and less common to eat. Furthermore, after the Burmese invaded their villages, the refugees were forced to flee to the jungle and then later to the refugee camps in Thailand. According to Mu Thu, "growing up in the jungle, you don't have much meat. All you have is the vegetable you have around you or the plants you have to find to eat if it is edible. We grow things like taro, pumpkin, turmeric, water spinach." Because of this, the farmers consume a lot of vegetables as a large portion of their diets. In a conversation with Kaw Ree, Hser Win's twenty-four year old daughter, she commented on how surprised she was at first at how few vegetables her CSA and

farmers market customers ate. She explained that a box of vegetables given to CSA customers lasts for a week for her customers and even then, some people complain that it is too much. But in Burma, a box that size would last one day for a family. She said, “over there people eat a lot of vegetable. Eat a lot!” The ability to grow as many vegetables as they want has allowed the refugees to continue their dietary habits.

The farmers continually express the central role of food in their culture. It is very important for them to be able to grow food that is familiar and allows them to cook and eat food that they like. According to Sirr Sirr Thart, “I joined the farm so I have the chance to grow vegetables that I grew in Burma. We love these traditional vegetables.” For many farmers, the direct connection to the vegetables grown in Burma is a key reason they choose to come to the farm. Roots provides the farmers with access to seeds they want and most of the farmers solely grow Asian vegetables. The vegetables that they grow and eat allow them to maintain a physical connection with Burma in a very tangible way that engages all of their senses.

In an interview with Hser Win and Kaw Ree, they described how the farm provided a space for them to eat culturally appropriate foods. Below is an excerpt from our conversation:

Kaw Ree: We grew vegetables we got to eat

Hser Win: We got what we want to eat

Kaw Ree: Before it was kind of hard to find ...

Hser Win: We missed a lot of vegetables from over there. We go to Food Lion and buy the vegetables. We ate it but feel like not...

Kaw Ree: Like it's not enough, it's not like vegetables we used to eat. We don't feel full, it doesn't fill you, you know. It's not the same.

Hser Win: It tastes different too. Just we ate, but not full to stomach.

This conversation shows the importance of growing and eating foods that the refugees enjoy. From our conversation, Hser Win and Kaw Ree touched on the difference between food as fuel versus food as emotionally nourishing. Eating familiar foods fills the farmers psychologically by connecting them with Burma. Roots has facilitated a cultural connection for the farmers by meeting both a practical and emotional need through food. I would argue that through food, farmers can imagine the place of Burma and participate in a conscious invention of home.

Sharing and Hospitality

In addition to growing traditional vegetables, the farm enables refugees to share vegetables with friends and neighbors as they would in Burma. While planting cover crops with Hla Tsu one morning, she said that, “in Burma, everyone lives near their relatives. If one person didn’t have enough rice one year, their relatives would share with them and vice versa the next year.” Hospitality and sharing are very strong cultural values in Burma. As stated by Eh Kee:

Culturally, Karen families share vegetables. We feel better when we share than when give away for money. We feel like we are helping someone without taking something from them. It makes me feel happier. When you give away, you feel like you have full credit. Spiritually, you have more marks if you give away freely.

This spiritual value of hospitality is seen through the way people in the community share food with one another. All of the farmers at RCF share the vegetables they grow with friends, church members, neighbors, and co-workers. On a weekly basis, each farmer freely gives away the vegetables they grow to an average of fifteen people. I have experienced this firsthand on multiple occasions. Almost every day before I leave the farm, Kaw Ree or Ther Mu will give me lemongrass or water spinach to take home. San Lee will often prepare a bag of greens for each

staff member at the farm. Every Saturday at the market, May Linn gives me more vegetables than I can carry and refuses to let me pay her. Roots enables the farmers to maintain cultural values of generosity and to carry this out in the same way they would in Burma—through sharing extra food that they grow with people they care about.

Sensory Experience

Even the smells, sounds, landscape, and nature at the farm resemble home and create a transnational linkage for these farmers. During a conversation about initially joining RCF, Hser Win said:

I feel so happy. I live in the farm the whole day, the whole day at the farm. I heard like a cow, goat and chicken, they make the sound like rooster. I heard like that and I was happy. It was feeling like the countryside in Burma. Then I don't have too much stress. Before, I work, come back to apartments stay in the apartment, watch movie, sleep and go to work and come back, eat, sleep. That's all I have.

Hser Win's mention of the sound of the animals was directly tied to her feeling of being at home in the countryside of Burma. This expands Schillers theory and highlights the emotional components of transnationalism. Through memory, this sensation made her feel a connection to Burma. The farm is a place where the refugees can access this feeling of being at home in Burma, and thereby feel at home in Rock Springs.

Throughout my interviews, I was struck by the number of people who cited the importance of coming to the farm as a chance to be outside. Most of the farmers live in apartments and have very little space inside and no common green space outside. They work during the night at housekeeping at the local university inside dark buildings with florescent

lights. If not for the farm, they would spend their days inside a small apartment building. This is very different than the way they lived in Burma where their homes had open walls and they spent the majority of their time outside in their green fields. The farmers are used to living in close connection with nature and the transition to living and working in the U.S. was difficult for this reason. For many farmers, this is a large part of why they decided to join Roots—they felt bored and cooped up in their apartments and wanted a chance to be outside. As stated by Eh Kee:

I feel very good here in a comfortable environment. The fresh air is blowing, I feel the air on my skin, I feel cool. I see plants growing tall and it makes me so happy. I see birds, butterflies, insects, and flowers, and vegetables, trees, lake—all nature. I feel full of energy.

When describing their time at the farm, the farmers focus a lot on their senses. It is through the tangible things they see, feel, touch, smell, and taste that they feel emotionally connected to their life in Burma. In this way, the experience of transnationalism is visceral and takes place on the level of the body. Tha Tun reiterates this:

I am really happy when I come to the farm, my memories take me back to my country, back to where I grew up in Burma, I feel like I don't want to go back home when I am at farm, almost too much time I want to spend here. Because when you come to the open space you can see everything around you, the open space, outside I feel like I am free from tightness, inside a building I feel tight, but here I feel relieved, released from a jail, open. Sunlight, nature and breathe fresh air feels good.

Farming is a full body experience that engages all of the senses. The farmers have expressed the need to move their bodies and sweat. Roots provides a place where the refugees are able to engage with the outdoors in a place that is sensorily familiar and connects them to not only to

their previous life in Burma, but to one another, and to the land in Rock Springs. Because these farmers share a similar real and imaginary place of Burma, the physical actions of farming produce a connection to one another.

This ethnography shows the affective nature of transnationalism. This challenges notions of transnationalism which have traditionally thought of this connection solely as a coping mechanism through more direct ways of political, social, and economic connections.

Concluding Thoughts

From these responses and my observation, I believe that farming is a transnational practice for the farmers, a way for them to engage in maintaining linkages and connection to their homeland in Burma. This is seen in the way Mu Thu describes the time he spends at RCF: “it brings back my life from Burma. The more time I spend here, the more I remember my life and return to my original life in Burma. It makes me feel, although I am in America, that I am back in my life in Burma.” By providing land to these refugee families, RCF enables them to maintain a bridge, or portal to their previous way of life by allowing them to engage with their culture and sustain their agricultural practices.

In this way, the physical space of the farm allows refugees to live a life that transcends national boundaries and is tied to both the U.S. and Burma. According to Sheringham, “within transnational research, transnationalism and attachment to place have tended to be seen as incompatible: transnational practices are often conceptualized as being carried out ‘across spaces’, excluding the possibility of attachments to specific ‘places’” (Sheringham 2010:61). However, I argue that the everyday practices and interactions of the farmers at RCF construct a unique place of belonging and local attachment. This cultivates a sense of belonging in Rock

Springs by connecting the farmers to the other farmers, to Burma, and to the land. Because farming is so important to the refugees' sense of identity and self, the ability to continue farming in a new country is critical for them to feel at home in a new place. Transnational practices are affective, creating a sense of social cohesion with members of the farmers' community both at RCF and abroad. It allows individuals to transcend boundaries of time and space and experience fluidity in who they are and what is important to them.

CHAPTER FOUR: COMMUNITAS AT THE FARM

To better understand how the transnational identity cultivates a sense of belonging and fosters community, I asked the following question: how is social cohesion encouraged at the farm and what is the sense of community produced? Throughout this chapter, I explore the processes shaping the community at the farm, along with the possibilities and limitations for community.

The Theory of Communitas

By engaging in transnational practices and space at the farm, farmers create a transnational identity and community at Roots. I use Victor Turner's theory of *communitas*¹ to describe this sense of community that exists at the farm (Swanson and Turner 1975). Turner's theory of *communitas* is intricately connected and tied to his notions of society. In "Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of *Communitas*," Turner proposed two contrasting notions of society: society as structured and segmented versus society as a "homogeneous, undifferentiated whole, characterized by *communitas*" (Swanson and Turner 1975:98). The first model is often hierarchical in which people are divided by their roles based on class and status. The second model of society is embodied by *communitas*: a society consisting of free and equal individuals unified together. In this notion, society is relatively undifferentiated and unstructured. According to Turner, society as a whole is a "process involving both hierarchical structure and *communitas*," and individuals transition between both social structures (Swanson and Turner 1975:98).

¹ From this point on, I will use *communitas* to refer to the spirit, sense, or feeling of the community.

Liminality, Integration, and Transnationalism

Most social formations are characterized by specified, segmented roles and thus fall into the first model of society. However, as stated by Turner, sometimes groups undergo transition to a different state of society. This period of transition is referred to as liminality, a period that is both in and out of time and “in and out of social structure” (Moore 2012:231). In this limbo, individuals do not belong to the society they were previously part of, and yet are not re-incorporated into a new society. Liminal periods mark a change in the normal way of social relationships because in this phase, humans exist between two models of society. Furthermore, liminality accompanies changes in social position as people are in the process of transitioning into a new role. The framework of liminality is often applied to refugees as they are seen as people outside the “national order of things” and in a state of transition—neither protected by their home country, nor citizens of the country in which they currently reside (El-Shaarawi 2015: 40). According to Turner’s theory, it is through a common experience of liminality that refugees enter into a state of *communitas* together.

The application of the framework of liminality to refugees who have gone through resettlement is problematic, however. Liminality implies that immigrants are in a transition period, but will soon become incorporated into the host society as is expected of them. As explored earlier in this thesis, this theory supports traditional notions of integration that assume a given endpoint: integration into a mainstream, white, middle-class culture. While there is a transition period for anyone when moving to a new country, this phase looks different for each person and is not “completed” upon integration into the dominant narrative of societal belonging. Integration assumes a fixed place and time of belonging, an endpoint, rather than a process that is

constantly being reformed and recreated. I argue that through the ritual of farming, the families at Roots continue to enact their transnational identities and actively create their belonging.

Therefore, I argue that *communitas* at the farm does not arise from a common experience of liminality. Many of the farmers at Roots lived in the U.S. several years before becoming farmers at RCF and are not experiencing liminality by the time they join RCF.

My fieldwork at Roots suggests that *communitas* at the farm emerges, not from a shared liminality, but from the refugees' transnational identities which are created through farming. Due to the bonds of this transnational identity, differences of ethnicity, class, and social status are minimized because of the shared experiences of farming together. The visceral act of farming practices works to override differences that become more salient in other organizational aspects at the farm. This creates a state of *communitas* for these refugees.

Turner conceived of *communitas* as an intense community spirit, the feeling of social equality, solidarity, and togetherness. Within *communitas*, all members of the group or society exist in an unstructured community in which they become equal, usually through a rite of passage. At Roots, *communitas* is formed around a transnational identity which is constructed through the refugees' identity and practice as farmers. This *communitas* is entered into through rite of passage and ritual.

Rite of Passage

The refugees who work at the farm become equal and share in solidarity through the practice of farming. At RCF, this practice is entered through the initiation process of becoming a member of the farm. RCF has never advertised in order to bring in new families. Typically, new farmers hear about RCF through their co-workers, family members, or friends. Before the new

growing season, existing farmer families give Kendra the names and numbers of people they know who would like to join the farm. These interested farmers are contacted by one of the staff and are then interviewed. This interview is a brief, informal interview to collect information about the number of people in the household, workplace, and income level. Furthermore, it is a time to go over the responsibilities of being a member at Roots. Last, they must attend an orientation and mandatory meeting in which everyone comes together to go over and agree to the farm rules². This initiation can be seen as rite of passage that the farmers undergo in order to enter into the *communitas* at the farm.

Transnational Ritual: The Performance of Belonging

Once they have entered into this *communitas*, farmers actively perform their belonging through the transnational ritual of farming. The act of farming can be seen as a ritual because it is a repeated series of bodily movements and actions. From planting to weeding to harvesting to preparing vegetables, there is a steady, repeated motion involved in all the practices of farming. For example, when considering weeding, there is a steady rhythm of bending over, taking hold of the weeds, and pulling them out. Furthermore, the process of washing vegetables: scrubbing and plunging and rinsing the vegetables is, as expressed by the farmers, soothing and cathartic. The process of farming and caring for plants is a full body experience. These movements are familiar to the farmers and create a sense of comfort. Like Anne Marie-Fortier, I propose that in this way, transnational identity is more than a social construct, it is identity continually being formed through the ‘stylized repetition of acts’ (Fortier 2000:133). Through the ritual of farming, the

² Some of these rules include: farmers must attend morning announcements four times a month, take care of their rows, and participate in a work crew in which they must complete two volunteer hours of work on the farm each month.

refugees' transnational identity is embodied and the memories of Burma are incorporated, both as a result of iterated actions (Fortier 2000:133). These in turn, become lived expressions of a deeply felt sense belonging. The ritual of farming is tied to a deep-seated sense of transnational identity that becomes rooted and sedimented into the farmers' bodies, thereby cultivating an affective sense of belonging.

Farming is practiced alongside the other members at RCF, thus fostering a spirit of *communitas*. The *communitas* that emerges at the farm is tied to the farmers' transnational identity and connection to their lives in Burma. Farming enables the refugees to work together and share in the labor, weather, uncertainty, planning, and harvest. This produces a deeper level of transnational *communitas* which cannot be formulated through merely talking about their connection to Burma. Below I will discuss the ways that the farmers cultivate community belonging and what this spirit of *communitas* looks like.

Processes Shaping Community

As expressed by the staff, the community at the farm was formed naturally, in the sense that it was not an intentional decision to create a community space for the refugees to socialize with one another. If this had been the case, they could have created a community center. Rather, the community space that it has become has grown out of their common identities and interests relating to their experience as refugees and farmers from Burma. This fits closely with Turner's theory that, "*communitas* is, existentially speaking and in its origins, purely spontaneous and self-generating" (Swanson and Turner 1975:99). In line with this theory, the *communitas* constructed at the farm is more of an emergent property that materializes from the individual

components—farming, language, common homeland, shared experience as refugees—forming a more complex behavior as a collective, creating community.

In order to better understand what this emergent property of *communitas* looks like, I observed the sense of social cohesion at the farm. In my literature review, I break down the definition of social cohesion more practically by looking at the extent to which participants 1) build relationships with each other and 2) offer practical knowledge and shared help. To accomplish this, I will describe the processes through which farmers build community and what these relationships look like.

Sharing the Work, Challenges, and Joys Together

Because RCF is a community farm, everyone must contribute to the work of keeping the farm running. The farmers don't pay to farm at RCF, but instead, all of the members are required to be part of either the landscape, maintenance, or greenhouse crew and volunteer two hours a month with this group. Because they are put into this smaller group of farmers, they are given a group of people that they consistently work with to improve the farm³. Because this is a community farm, everyone shares common goals related to the upkeep and general functions of the farm. There are many days throughout the growing season where the crew leaders—San Lee, Hla Tsu, and Dah Wey—will gather everyone for a workday. During this time, farmers work together in mulching paths, weeding common beds, and cleaning up the farm.

The farmers are very pleased by their work and the space that they have created. They have expressed a desire for visitors and students to come to the farm and see the space they have

³ Some of the activities these work crews do include: planting seeds, watering seedlings, thinning seedlings, mowing grasses, planting flowers in the common areas, and maintaining the overall appearance of the farm.

created. According to Kendra, “one thing the farm does for farmers is create a place that they’re really proud of and able to show who they are beyond the custodial job that they have [at a local university].” Because they share in a common desire to continue to take care of Roots, they are unified under this sense of ownership and accomplishment.

This sense of ownership stems from their common experiences as farmers in which they share together in the both the challenges and joys of growing vegetables. Many of the challenges for farmers are related to the physical environment. Because they are working outside on a farm, everything is impacted by the weather, which is out of the farmers’ control. According to Nina:

It’s kind of like church in a way or like faith—there is a common faith that the seasons are going to change and that the plants are going to grow and then it’s devastating when they die or there’s a big loss. We all share grief over the loss of things. People are growing so much food you can go through a lot of emotions and a lot is unpredictable and it’s really hard. So many aspects are out of your control and so you’re sharing that experience with people and troubleshooting with them and problems solving and all of that is building stronger community.

Throughout the growing season, everyone shares in weather-related hardships. For example, sometimes it was so hot and dry, the farmers had to constantly water their fields. Other times, it was so rainy that their fields flooded and vegetables were damaged. The rain led to an increase in the number of weeds, which created additional work for the farmers. This led the farmers to express a shared frustration with the number of weeds and to come up with the solution of purchasing weed cloth. Towards the end of the summer, Hurricane Hermine caused a lot of damage on the farm: trellises were knocked over and many vegetables were destroyed. Everyone shared in this loss and could relate to one another. In addition to weather, farmers are met with

challenges related to disease and pests, causing radishes to mildew and tomatoes to turn brown and rot. The challenges farmers face bond them together in a unique way by allowing farmers to commiserate with one another, work towards solutions, and help one another through these struggles. This fosters a sense of cohesion among the farmers that functions to build community and promote a spirit of togetherness.

Because they share in the struggles of farming, they can experience the richness of the joys of farming together as well. During my interviews with the farmers, I asked how working at the farm made them feel and why. All of the farmers reported that they felt less stressed and very happy at the farm. Fifteen of twenty-five farmers reported that part of the reason they felt this way was because they enjoyed watching their vegetables grow. According to Ka Nee:

I see plants growing tall it makes me so happy. I feel happy when I see the germination of my plants. Another thing is making plants possible, I feel satisfaction in this as the creator of this, being responsible for them. I think when I come to the farm and I look around and it looks perfect.

From my interviews and conversations with the farmers, it is clear that their joy and excitement about growing vegetables fosters a common love for green space, which creates an uplifting and joyful sense of *communitas* around a shared passion.

Advice Sharing and Dependence

There is a group of five farmers—May Linn, Ther Mu, Hser Win, Blar Thu, and Nor Wey—who sell their produce through the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. These farmers spend a significant amount of time working together because the CSA requires a high level of commitment and planning on the part of the farmers. In the spring, they are all

required to attend Grower's School, during which the RCF staff help prepare them for the CSA. The farmers come to these classes twice a week for almost two months. During this time, they work together by brainstorming the farming and business skills they want to develop, or helping each other measure out their seeds⁴.

Throughout the growing season, the farmers meet Monday mornings with Veronica to discuss any concerns they may have related to the CSA, how their vegetables are doing, and what they plan to pack in their CSA boxes for the week. On Wednesday and Friday mornings, they gather together under the processing shed to wash their vegetables, weigh out the correct amount, and place them in boxes for their CSA customers. This process is tedious and can take several hours. During this time, all the CSA farmers work together in that space. They talk with one another and joke around. Sometimes Nor Wey will start singing a song in Karen. Even in these small moments of spending time with one another and sharing songs and jokes with one another, the farmers foster a spirit of *communitas*.

Through the act of sharing advice and teaching one another, farmers practice trust and reliance upon one another. While packing their CSA boxes, May Linn, the newest farmer, will often ask Nor Wey or Hser Win how much salad mix she should put in her box or what price to put on her sweet potatoes. According to Veronica, "I think they help each other out a lot. Hser Win has been doing the CSA the longest and is our most experienced grower and she helps May Linn out a lot. They talk with each other and they look – I've seen over the last three years they look each other's boxes over. They've learned a lot from each other." All of the CSA farmers will engage in advice sharing as they look to one another to determine if their produce looks

⁴ Other activities at Grower's School include: calculating how many seeds and feet of gardening space they need, setting business goals for themselves, and participating in workshops to gain knowledge and skills related to pest management, soil maintenance, and budgeting.

good and how much of it to include. They ask each other whether or not a gourd is too big, how many pounds of salad to give, or what bag to use for the tomatoes. Furthermore, farmers teach each other how to plant their cover crop or how to properly store their harvested vegetables so that they don't rot. As stated by Veronica, this sharing also extends beyond the five CSA farmers, "I think you see it through everybody. Whoever, whichever farmers are close to each other in the field will talk and share resources."

All of the farmers depend on one another to perform daily tasks on the farm. When May Linn needs another egg for her CSA box, she doesn't hesitate to ask Hser Win. When Nor Wey is out of town, Naw Paw will come pack her CSA box for her. For the month of December, Hser Win and Kaw Ree went to visit their family in Burma and Thailand. May Linn took care of Hser Win's chickens the entire time she was away—feeding them and collecting their eggs. It is essential for the farmers to build relationships with one another and to be able to rely on one another when they need help. They look out for one another in many ways. For example, in a conversation about whether or not May Linn will choose to sell vegetables to PORCH this month, she said, "I want to consider other people not selling or getting much money." She was conscious of the other farmers' well-being and expressed care for them by valuing those relationships above her own monetary gain. Through my fieldwork, I saw the ways that the farmers look out for one another and rely on each other, thereby fostering community.

Resource Sharing and Exchange

Another mechanism through which relationships are built and carried out is through resource exchange. Farmers constantly share, gift, trade, or buy vegetables from one another. At one point during the summer, Hser Win did not have enough eggplant for her CSA box. She

called over to May Linn, who was working in her rows nearby, and asked if she could give her eggplant in exchange for ginger. May Linn was happy to make this swap and was able to sell the ginger at the farmers market the next day. Another day this summer, while picking peppers with Naw Paw, she explained that she would sell the peppers to Blar Thu because he didn't have space to grow any in his garden. Sometimes farmers share resources more openly with everyone. At the end of the growing season, Hser Win chopped her banana tree stalks down and placed chunks of them on the picnic table for anyone to take one home to cook with.

The farmers have created a network in order to exchange things that are culturally relevant to the refugee community from Burma. In addition to vegetables, I have seen farmers buy things like Betel leaf or coconut sticky rice treats from one another⁵. For example, after harvesting vegetables with Naw Paw, she bought me a treat—sticky rice coconut wrapped in a banana leaf. She bought it from Hsu Lee, one of Blar Thu's friends who came to visit and was selling these treats she made to the farmers.

One of my favorite exchanges that took place on the farm happened while I was walking with Hla Tsu. Ne Win approached us with a giant frog in his hand and handed it to Hla Tsu. According to Hla Tsu and Nina, Ne Win is known for his frog-catching skills in the community. Hla Tsu was very appreciative and patted Ne Win on the back and motioned in a way to express her gratitude. This interaction was especially meaningful because Ne Win is deaf. This is a way that he is able to engage with the farmers and share in relationship building. All of the farmers try to help Ne Win understand by using hand motions and are very kind to him. After thanking Ne Win, Hla Tsu put the frog in a plastic bag in her car to take home for her mother to cook for

⁵ One day, I saw San Lee buy Betel leaf from Cri Say who had ordered it from Thailand. I frequently see farmers squatting near the shed or resting in the shade together, chatting and chewing Betel leaf with areca nuts and tobacco paste.

dinner. Through resource exchange, farmers create an intricate co-reliance that characterizes the spirit of *communitas* at the farm.

Family Bonding

A core component of the *communitas* at the farm is centered around families. Roots has grown into a community largely because the individual farmers have chosen to bring their families and relatives to the farm. There are multiple generations at the farm: grandparents, parents, teenagers, children, and new-born babies who all come to spend time working and relaxing at the farm. The farm is a place and a set-aside time where the whole family can be together. This is especially important and rare because of the adults' work schedules. For several of the farm families, the father works during the day and the mother works at night, so that they rarely spend time all together as a family. It is special for the parents to have a space where they can bring their kids and spend time together while also sharing their farming traditions with their children.

There are a lot of young families at the farm and during the summer, most of the farmers will bring their children with them to the farm. Some of the kids come every day. Many of them help their parents in their vegetable rows—weeding or harvesting alongside their parents and relatives. Some of the children enjoy this, although many of them avoid farming altogether by walking around the farm, or hanging out at the shed or the bamboo structures. The older children who aren't helping their parents with the vegetables, help by watching their younger siblings. All the kids seem to know everyone and it feels like everyone is related. The kids will randomly point out their relatives or their neighbors. It is difficult to know whose kids are whose because all of the adults take care of and play with one another's kids. One morning, I remember a little

girl flipped out of the hammock and started to cry. She is Cri Say's daughter, but Mu Nor went over to pick her up and comfort her. Everyone looks out for one another and it seems to be a very interwoven community.

The CSA farmers who work long hours at the farm depend on their children to help them with their farming tasks. All of the CSA farmers' children are heavily involved with their parents' work. Both Ther Mu and her father, Blar Thu are CSA farmers and each have their own separate CSA customers. Blar Thu has several health problems related to his hypertension and so Ther Mu regularly packs both hers and her fathers' CSA boxes. During the summer when Kaw Ree is not taking nursing classes, she spends her days at the farm or at the farmers market with her mom, Hser Win. For Kaw Ree, it is not her favorite thing to be outside when it is hot and there are mosquitos, but she doesn't mind harvesting vegetables and enjoys selling at the farmers market. Her and Hser Win divide the work. Naw Pyu is May Linn's son. He is twenty-three and takes part time classes, works as a mechanic at Meineke, and helps his mom at the farm. He comes to market every Saturday and helps to translate for his mom and builds relationships with the customers. Pa Pi, Theresa, Cing Htee, and Lun Say are four of Nor Wey's six children. Atleast one of them comes to the farm every day during the summer to help their parents. CSA farmers in particular spend a lot of time working with their children because they have a heavier work load at the farm. This provides a time for them to spend time working alongside and teaching their children about farming.

During my interviews with the farmers, they expressed how important it was to spend time at the farm working with their families. For many of them, this is one of the primary reasons they choose to come to the farm and it is a source of joy for them. Coming to the farm serves as a time for family fellowship. According to Eh Kee, "my family we are happy to plant, my kids like

to plant. My kids like coming to the farm. When family has time we all work together on the farm together and it brings us together, I really have a good time here and peace of mind.” For all of the adult farmers, working in their parents’ fields in Burma was how they spent family time together. Most of their children either grew up in a refugee camp in Thailand or were born in the U.S. They don’t share the memories or experiences of their parents and because of this, don’t have the same context in order to understand their parents’ stories. Because of this, it is meaningful for parents and elders to be able to share this with their children and teach them their agricultural and cultural traditions. According to Tay Aye, one of the teens at the farm:

Coming to the farm is like telling their stories of how they grew up. We didn’t have the chance to grow up on a farm like them. But like coming here, working at this farm is the same experience they went through. It’s not the same, but it crosses each other. I can relate to that more because I can have the experience to see how rice is grown and how he told me how they harvest it by chopping it down and all that stuff. And see how vegetables like taro and banana trees, seeing them grow. If I wasn’t here, I wouldn’t have the knowledge of the vegetables grown here or know their names. So you can relate to them more and in some way you can tell their story too. And be part of it.

As described by Tay Aye, the farm plays a very important role in bridging the cultural gap between generations. Through spending time at the farm, relationships between family members are strengthened. Family relationships are a very important part of the community at RCF. These relationships create a unified, family-like sense of *communitas*.

Tay Aye’s experience speaks directly to the intergenerational dimension of transnationalism. Through their time at the farm, young people who have grown up in the U.S. come to experience and understand Burma. For many of the youth and teens at the farm, Burma

is a completely imagined place. The farm plays a critical role in allowing them to create an imagined place of Burma, and therefore connect with their parents. In this way, transnationalism enabled by the farm, serves to strengthen not only friendships, but also familial relationships.

Meal Sharing

During my interviews with the farmers, I asked how working at the farm made them feel and why it made them feel this way. Of the twenty-five farmers, twelve of them cited the social aspect of the farm as a reason that the farm makes them feel happy and less stressed. As stated by Ne Win, “I don't want to go home and I want to cook here. Because we see many friends, relatives and we talk a lot and socialize and talk about many things and we eat together and it makes me very happy and I forget all my stress and leave it behind.” In these interviews, I noticed that of the twelve farmers that cited the social aspect of the farm as important to them, seven of them had cited other reasons first—such as seeing vegetables and being outside in nature—and mentioned community and friends afterward. This caused me to doubt whether or not the community was as central to the farmers as it appeared to me. However, in a conversation with Veronica, I was reminded that the way I see and understand community may be different than it is for this community of people from Burma. When discussing whether or not the relational or practical aspect of the farm were more important, she said:

It seems like its equal, if not more – the community than the practical. But, they both – and its funny, we talk about them differently. But I get the sense that for a lot of the farmers they're connected and you can't have one without the other. And that's what I love about the farm to them, food and community are so tied and that's the way it should be.

For the refugees at Roots, food, farming, and community is intricately connected. They are tied to the way the farmers lived in Burma where they spent a large portion of their time together with their families or communities working outside in their fields, cooking, or sharing meals with one another.

Food is a central aspect of their culture and an integral part of the time they spend together. Sharing meals with one another is a key part of community building. The relationship between community and food is evident in the way the farmers talk about how they socialize. In the interviews where farmers talked about the importance of the community at the farm, many of them talked about eating with one another or cooking together. This is largely how they socialize with one another. In this way, food and community are not separate for them.

Sharing food is a very important value in Karen, Chin, and Burmese culture. They all share their food. One morning at the teen workshop, Hla Win brought food and everyone just took it and treated it as if it was theirs. Another day, at lunch, Dah brought samosas and even though Kawla and Hickrehay didn't even know her name, they freely ate the samosas. They said that this is their culture – everyone shares food; sharing is caring. During hot summer days, someone would harvest a melon to share, or bring ice cream as a treat. There were countless times when someone had prepared food at home and brought it to the farm to share for lunch, or brought ingredients and quickly prepared food at the farm to share. For one of the children's birthdays during summer camp, their mom brought a huge bowl of noodles with eggs. Everyone—all of the kids and several of the adults came over to share the meal.

I remember one day in particular, I walked out toward Hser Win's bamboo kitchen and a group of farmers—Jae (Hser Win's husband), Hla Tsu and her husband Eh Eh, Tha Tun, Eh Htoo, one of Hser Win's co-workers were sitting in a circle with a pot of rice and plates of

vegetables—Thai eggplant, water spinach, bamboo shoots, and a soup. They asked me to join them and shared their food with me as well. Eh Htoo had prepared the meal and brought it to share. They all ate with their fingers and enjoyed the meal, socializing and talking with one another. The act of sharing is a central aspect to community building and fosters a spirit of openness.

Summary of Processes

From my observation the relationships between the farmers, I see this as a tight-knit community that feels very much like a family. The farm provides a natural community space for people to come together around something they share and love to cultivate relationships. According to May Linn, “I feel like everyone working and sharing together and respecting each other, it has made me full of satisfaction as a community.” Many of the farmers work nights and are busy with their children and providing for their families. They don’t have very much spare time to socialize. The farm offers a space that is a productive use of time because they can grow culturally familiar vegetables to feed their families and save money. In the meantime, they are given a built-in time to socialize and see their friends. According to Ther Mu:

I see my friends here at the farm and if I stay in my house I have no friends and I have no way to socialize. Naturally I am a person who likes to be active and I don’t like to sit at home alone watching tv or on the computer. I am much happier when I am outside working and being with people in my community. Humans are social and this is very important for my health to talk with friends.

For farmers who live far away from one another or who live in small apartments with no communal space, RCF serves as a central gathering space for everyone to come together.

Because there is the primary activity and purpose of farming, relationships are able to grow naturally out of their activities and interests.

Limitations of Communitas

Power Dynamics

Although the farm does create a beautiful communitas, RCF does not exist in a vacuum and there are limitations to this sense of community. From what the farmers have expressed, there are power differentials that exist at the farm among the refugees. Stemming from differences in age, ethnicity, gender, length of time at the farm, and level of engagement in leadership and marketing activities, a subtle form of hierarchy has been created among the farmers. For example, there are a few Karen male farmers who have been at the farm from the beginning and have many children who command a lot of respect from the other farmers. As a result, their voices are louder and other farmers have expressed hesitancy speaking up for themselves. Furthermore, these farmers are both CSA farmers and one of them is also a crew-manager. Because of this, they spend a lot more time at the farm and are involved in more of the decision-making processes at the farm. These farmers' voices are louder and they feel they are able to take up more space (literally) at the farm. In situations where one of these farmers has begun to take up more space and create new beds in another farmers' space, they may feel unable to do anything about this. Furthermore, the crew managers and CSA farmers have a lot of power. They spend the most time at the farm and know about the workings of the farm. These power dynamics show the limitations of the community at the farm; it is not a utopia.

Through creating a farmer advisory board, the staff have started to become aware of this informal hierarchy. Several of farmer crew-leaders have expressed that it will be a good idea to

have this board in order to spread out this power. The staff decided to create this advisory board of farmers in order to transition leadership more to the farmers. This board will also serve as a way to balance the hierarchy at the farm and ensure that all of the farmers' voices will be heard and represented in the decision-making processes⁶.

The fact that RCF will have a farmer advisory board highlights the fact that the community at the farm is ultimately part of an organization and did not form organically. Although the relationships and community among the farmers was able to grow naturally based on their common interests, the farm was shaped by the RAPP grant and Gray County Partnership for Young Children, along with the farmers.

Resource Conflict and Ethnic Tension

In addition to subtle power dynamics, there is often conflict around space and resources that sometimes gets conflated with ethnic tensions. Because land is a limited resource at the farm, Kendra has created a particular structure for dividing the rows between all the farmers. Every spring the farm has to be re-ordered and space is split up and divided as people join and leave the farm. The farmers request the number of rows they want and Kendra maps it all out with a detailed diagram of the farm showing the farmers which rows are theirs. Farmers are very particular about the location of the rows they want at the farm—they want to keep the same rows year after year and grow by their friends and/or family. Kendra tries her best to make this

⁶ Throughout the process of creating this board, the staff have been mindful of culturally-appropriate ways of decision-making. They have consulted with several of the farmers to learn about the leadership structures they established while in the refugee camps in Thailand. For example, when deciding who to place on the advisory board, the farmers said it is best to nominate and vote on people while everyone is together in a group.

happen, although sometimes she is not able to meet everyone's requests. One spring, Lei Say got upset because his rows were reconfigured and he had already prepared his beds the way he wanted them. This led to conflict between him and the staff and he decided to leave the farm.

Furthermore, even with the clear diagram, farmers continually expand their rows or create new rows in common areas. It is very natural for the farmers to do this because it is a farm and the staff have not enforced strict consequences for expanding space. Last summer, conflict arose over expanding space between two of the farmer families. Ther Mu had been expanding taro plants into May Linn and Jue Sah's trellis space for several years. May Linn put up additional trellis poles to allow her gourd vines to continue spreading and assumed Ther Mu would be ok with this because it was her space anyways. Ther Mu took out these poles which angered Jue Sah. Finally, his anger built up at Ther Mu and he let go by cutting down a few of her taro plants. During a conversation with Nina, Jue Sah said he had been patient for two years while people had been looting their vegetables and taking their space and that it was related to ethnic discrimination. While discussing the incident with Nina, Jue Sah said:

Even though there are different ethnicities on the farm, we don't want to be persecuted by another ethnic group. We want to live in peace without discrimination. We don't want one group to dominate or look down on or have prejudice to other ethnic groups. We keep quiet since they are the only Chin family.

This initial conflict has developed into a sort of feud between these families and is related to the fact that some of the farmers (one family in particular) want the farm to be a space only for Karen people. Even though there are shared experiences that bring the farmers together, this tension around space demonstrates that the community at the farm is affected by power and

difference. This conflict at the farm does not negate the family-like sense of *communitas*. Every family and community experiences conflict and opposition.

Additional Forms of Community

It is important to keep in mind that the community at the farm does not hold the same meaning for all of the farmers. Everyone has different motivations and priorities for joining the farm. Some of the farmers see the farm as primarily a way to earn additional income, others see it as a casual hobby to grow vegetables for their families, while still others focus more on the social aspect of being part of the farm. Most of the farmers' reasons for being involved overlap to an extent; however, everyone has different priorities at the farm. As a result of this, not everyone is equally interested in building relationships and being an active part of the community. Furthermore, the farmers all have different levels of involvement. Whereas some of the farmers are there every day and work very closely with one another, other farmers may come only once or twice a week. These farmers may work in their fields alone or with their children and may not interact very much with the other farmers at all.

Through my research, I was reminded that this is not the only form of community these refugees are part of. Some of them experience close community in other places and choose to spend more of their time and social energy in these spaces. Below, I will explore how church forms another community for the farmers.

Church Community

Church is very important to almost all of the members at the farm. Most of the farmers are Baptist, several are Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), and a few are Buddhist. Church is a family-oriented community and a very important part of the farmers' lives.

In several conversations with Kaw Ree, she talked about how important this community was to her and Hser Win. Many of the people that go to their church were their friends and neighbors in the refugee camp in Thailand. Kaw Ree is very involved in her church. She is the youth treasurer and also attends many social events put on by her church—fundraisers, cookouts, and weekend camping trips. During our interview, Kaw Ree said her closest friends are the ones at her church. One Sunday, Kaw Ree invited me to go to church with them and stay for a potluck afterward. Everyone at the church is from Burma and speaks Karen. Hser Win wore a dress from Burma and sat with a group of five other women during the Bible study portion, and sat with Kaw Ree during the sermon. After the service, everyone gathered together for a meal of traditionally cooked dishes from Burma. Hser Win made a delicious eggplant curry using the vegetables from the farm. People sat together and talked while sharing a meal. From my observation and conversations, Hser Win and Kaw Ree have a close community at their church and seem very comfortable in this space.

For many of the refugees at the farm, their church and farm communities overlap. Two years ago, Tha Tun and her husband started their own Karen Baptist church. Many of the farmers attend this church, including Nor Wey and her family, Hla Tsu and Eh Eh, Naw Paw, Ju Htoo, Blar Thu's large family, and others. This overlap in communities fosters closer relationships. For example, Lay Lay, Nor Wey's daughter, was married at this church by Tha Tun's husband. I would imagine that farming alongside the same people that married your daughter would create closer ties. The same family-like *communitas* and spirit of working together that is created at the

farm carries over to their church community. Before Lay Lay's wedding, Nor Wey's family had to prepare all the food for 300 people. This was a team effort. Blar Thu made a pennywort salad, all of Nor Wey's extended family pitched in, and May Linn cooked noodles with egg at Nor Wey's house from 11pm-1am the night before the wedding. In this way, the community created at the farm carries over into friendships and support for one another outside this context.

Church is a safe environment for the refugees because it is a homogenous space, divided by ethnic group. This makes language difficulties a non-issue. For May Linn, church is a community where she can communicate in her native language of Chin, whereas at the farm, Karen is the common language that is used. Furthermore, church is free of any ethnic tension, fostering an environment where farmers don't have to worry about prejudice. This homogenous community is also enabled by the fact that there are no white, middle-class people at their churches. It is important to note that at the farm, there are power dynamics resulting from the white, middle-class staff members in leadership. These power dynamics don't exist in the same way at their churches.

Summary

From my observation and conversations with farmers, although the farm is a beautiful and unique community, it is not the only source of community for the farmers and many of them have expressed closer friendships with people outside of the farm. For Hser Win, her closest friends are at work, then church, and a few at the farm. She spends every night from 11pm-7am working at the university with three other women who are from Burma. She has become close friends with them and shares meals at the farm with them. In a conversation with San Lee, I asked about her friends at the farm, to which she said, "everybody my friend." She definitely

knows and gets along with everyone. However, her closest friends live in Burma. These relationships and communities do not discount or take away from the community experienced at the farm, they are just different spaces where farmers negotiate belonging. Furthermore, although the farmers have different motivations for joining the farm and different levels of involvement, a strong community is still produced. Depending on these motivations and levels of involvement, the farmers experience different levels of connectedness to this community.

Concluding Thoughts

Based on the ethnography I have presented, I argue that RCF is a transnational community that was formed naturally based on the farmers' shared interests relating to their experiences as farmers from Burma. Through various processes, such as meal sharing and family bonding, the farmers have developed relationships in which they trust and rely on one another at the farm. The sense of family-like *communitas* that is formed is an emergent property, stemming from the farmers' transnational bonds. Once they have entered into this *communitas*, farmers actively perform their belonging through the visceral ritual of farming.

Although the farm does foster social cohesion among its members, ultimately, community is complex and mere access to the farm alone does not create social bonds. Within public health literature, community gardens have been associated with increased social cohesion and sense of community among urban residents (Armstrong 2000; Poulson et al. 2014; Veen et al. 2016). However, my research shows that it should not be assumed that green space alone leads to increased social interaction. Farmers must put time and effort into engaging in these

processes shaping community in order to build relationships with one another and experience community. Furthermore, the farmers cannot access this community equally.

The farmers have different levels of access and closeness to this community depending on several factors. For example, some farmers don't have easy access to transportation and thus, spend less time building community at the farm. According to Mu Nor, "we come to the farm twice a week. We don't have a car and can't drive, so I call my friend to pick me up to bring me here. This makes it difficult to come. If I could drive, I would like to come every day." Because of this practical limitation, Mu Nor is not able to be as involved at the farm or in the community as she would like to be. Another factor for why people experience different levels of connectedness is related to whether or not farmers had previous-existing relationships with other farmers before joining RCF. For example, Hser Win has known Mr. Htee for a very long time because they were in the same refugee camp in Thailand together. For farmers like Hser Win and Mr. Htee, pre-existing relationships ease people's transition into the RCF community. Additional factors include: involvement in selling vegetables, free time available to spend at the farm, age, work schedules, and ethnicity. All of these social differences relate to constraints placed on farmers that impact the extent to which they can engage in the community created at the farm.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMAGINED COMMUNITY

Staff at Roots claim that the organization serves as a bridge between the refugee farmers and the broader community. In this chapter, I analyze the extent of the community established between the refugee and non-refugee communities and argue that the community created is more of an imagined community. I explore Roots' ideologies about community-bridging¹ along with the limitations of this bridge. Furthermore, I show the ways that the farmers extend their roots in the broader community and create ties in their host society. To make my conclusions, I draw on participant observation in addition to interviews conducted with ten Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) members, three staff members, two volunteers, and two farmers.

Reasons for Community Bridging

Roots seeks to bridge the farm community with the wider community. This is done for several reasons: outreach and education, economic need, and support for the local food movement. In this section, I will explore the organizational ideologies behind community-bridging.

Outreach and Education

First, the farm seeks to bridge communities to educate the non-refugee community and to create a more welcoming and inclusive space for the refugees. RCF provides many educational opportunities—this year alone, they had almost 700 visitors come to the farm. The idea behind

¹ I use the term “community-bridging,” or “bridging” to refer to the interactions, connections, and cultural exchange of both objects and information that takes place between the refugee and non-refugee communities.

the farm as a bridge originated with the idea of a cultural exchange between the non-refugee and refugee community. This “exchange,” mostly flowing from the refugee to non-refugee community, serves to create more cultural awareness for the dominant group. When discussing the phrase, “connecting cultures through food and farming,” Kendra explained that this is important because, “most people in the wider community don’t know where Burma is or that the refugee community exists. That invisibility is something that RCF helps to lift up and make visible. A community should not be separated from the rest of the community.”

Through workdays, the CSA program, and volunteer opportunities, the farm provides many educational opportunities to help show the non-refugee community the life and culture of the farmers from Burma. According to Veronica, the CSA program director at the farm:

Having farmers that are refugees from a different culture, I hope that our members feel like they get a window into what it’s like to be a refugee in Rock Springs and to be a refugee that chooses to farm. And then, you know, they can then go out and be someone who is more knowledgeable about these issues in their own community. So, I hope that each of our CSA members is a bridge for the refugee community here.

This cultural sharing is not just for the non-refugee community, but also for the farmers.

Veronica later said that the purpose of the activities carried out by the farm are all “ways the farm is a way for these refugees to share their culture with their new neighbors.” From my observations and conversations, the farmers are proud of the space they have created and want people to see the farm. They are excited to share their traditional vegetables and recipes with

people in the non-refugee community. Roots provides the farmers a way to share their culture while educating the broader community².

Economic Need

Second, in order to support both the project and farmers, it is essential for RCF to develop a support system and consistent customer base. As a nonprofit, the farm relies on receiving funding through grants, donations, and income generating activities related to the farm. When discussing the farm as a bridge, Nina said:

I think that it's important for us in order to exist. We can't be insular or a separate little enclave because I don't think that we would get support to do that. I think its logistical – we have to learn how to exist in the larger picture of this community and make connections with other groups. If we want funding to continue the project and we want people to buy vegetables and want to have the CSA, there has to be that bridging.

The need to raise support is an underlying reason behind a lot of the community-bridging programming. The staff don't enjoy fundraising, but recognize that it is necessary in order to sustain RCF's operations. Because the project has few individual donors, it is dependent on activities such as farm tours and annual dinners to raise support. According to Kendra:

² One example of this is the way the farm strives to teach people in the non-refugee community about the difference between Burmese refugees and refugees from Burma. Burma is comprised of many ethnic groups. Because different ethnic groups have experienced conflict with the military and specifically with the ruling Burmese, the farmers (from Karen and Chin ethnic groups) have relayed that it is extremely important for them to be identified as refugees from Burma rather than Burmese refugees. This is because they don't want to be identified as Burmese.

There are some activities that happen at the farm in terms of publicity—just trying to get people knowing about the farm—that are driven by the fact that we’re always trying to raise money. Hopefully one day they’ll sign up for our CSA or start going to the farmer’s market. Or they’ll donate to the project.

Rather than being forceful and asking for donations, the staff has tried to incorporate fundraising into their community-bridging activities so that there is more of an exchange between the refugee and non-refugee community. Through tours, CSA programming, workdays, and annual dinners, the staff focus on getting the word out and showing people the farm community. This is done so that the non-refugee community will see how important RCF is and be motivated to support the organization and the farmers.

Although community-bridging is not a stated goal or aspect of the farm’s mission, it is critical to enabling RCF to meet the goals of the farmers. As stated by Nina:

It’s not directly serving the set goals the farmers have stated, but it’s serving the overarching pictures of those goals. People have to know about the farm and validate it to exist in this community. In order for people to keep farming here and doing their own thing. In fact, public outreach is extremely important in order to make all those things happen.

Connecting with the broader community is not necessarily a desire expressed by the farmers, but more of a practical need to enable the farmers to market their vegetables. The staff strongly believe that in order for the refugee community to be successful in their farm businesses, they need support from established members of the community. Thus, bridging with the community serves an economic purpose.

Support for The Local Food Movement

Last, the farm strives to create connections in order to support the local food movement and the belief in eating local, organic foods, and having a knowledge of one's farmer. Veronica is a farmer herself and runs her own CSA. All of the staff members have experience working on farms and have strong values of eating local, community based food. Because of their experience and values, they have shaped the CSA into more than just a transaction. According to Veronica, "I really like the CSA model because it's a way for your consumer – as an eater to feel closely connected to farming and to learn about a farmers' life and work and culture and to feel personally invested in that farm and those farmers' lives." The staff highly encourages CSA members to come to the farm and meet their farmer. They have worked to foster a connection between the farmers and the community through food and farming.

Creating connection is also important for establishing an educated customer base. According to Kendra, the farmers need people "who are willing to go to the farmers market and CSA customers willing to understand that their beets look terrible because of the heat. For farms to exist, there needs to be a sympathetic and educated population that understands the challenges of farming." By providing opportunities for people to see the farm and understand the work that goes into growing food, RCF helps to create a more supporting community for the farmers.

Processes of Community Bridging

Roots is intentional about creating opportunities for bridge-building. Although this is not directly included as part of their written mission or goals, it is an important component of the project which serves to meet overarching goals. Through the processes described below, I explore the various ways RCF has intentionally connected these communities. Furthermore, I

analyze the limitations of this connection. I will first focus on the CSA program and then move on to other forms of community engagement.

CSA Program: The Extent of Member Involvement

The CSA is a main component of how the farm tries to create connection. The CSA consumes a large portion of the programming focus at the farm for the staff and for a handful of farmers. In this program, CSA members (families or individuals) in the surrounding community are paired with one farmer at RCF for a season. The CSA members receive a weekly box of vegetables, which they pick up from one of four locations. The farmers can choose how many CSA members they want to have (typically between 10-40), depending on how many vegetables they want to grow. With the current local food movement, the CSA program is popular and a great way for farmers to have a reliable source of income.

On the RCF website, the description of the CSA states:

Community Supported Agriculture is a way for you to build a relationship with a farmer, to be closely tied to changing seasons, and to make a firm commitment to eating locally.

Your investments give the farmers the capital they need to start the season strong, buying seeds and other supplies.

Although the CSA does give members the opportunity to build a relationship with a farmer, this is rare. In reality, most of the CSA members pick up their vegetable boxes from a non-refugee staff member at a location off of the farm and never even meet or interact with the farmer.

During my interviews, three of the ten CSA members knew their farmers' name. Although most people knew the country of origin of the refugees, four of the ten knew that there is more than one ethnicity of people from Burma. This is not for a lack of opportunities to understand or gain

information, but rather a choice on the part of the members. The farm offers many ways to learn about the farmers and to interact with them. CSA members are given additional opportunities and specific ways to engage with the farm, including on-farm pick-up for CSA boxes, potlucks, and weekly email newsletters.

For the majority of the members, their focus is not on building relationships with the refugee community, but on receiving a weekly box of fresh vegetables. Most members see the vegetables as the primary reason for involvement and feel it is an added bonus that their contribution is helping to serve refugee families. According to Steven, “from a consumer perspective, the food is terrific. From the perspective of a member of society, to help people as immigrants to become acclimated and economically supported, it feels good.” Members feel the CSA exchange is a chance to support refugees in a way that is better than charity and provides more dignity by empowering the refugees. In this way, many of the members look at this CSA as a “win-win” situation in which they can receive vegetables while doing good and feeling good about themselves. According to one CSA member, Mary:

I think primarily I come to it because of the food. But I also chose it because of the charitable aspect... The thing I like about RCF is its helping people help themselves. It's not, I don't know that I'd call it charitable as much as it provides a platform for people to do it for themselves which I think is much more sustainable.

Although people may initially be drawn to the CSA because of the food, many choose to stay for several seasons or years because of the community at the farm. This was the case for Jen and Isaac who have been members for four years:

I think that the convenience of the CSA, given where it was located, the appeal of having some exotic vegetables as well as more traditional ones. But then as we would go [to the

farm] weekly to pick up our vegetables, we saw how this became a gathering place for the community—it's not just a farm. It's where everybody comes to socialize. It's where their kids come after school. We love that this actually created a little community.

Even if members do not build relationships with the farmers, for those who choose to pick up their vegetables at the farm or become involved in other RCF outreach events, they begin to see the importance of the farm to the refugee community.

In addition to receiving fresh vegetables, seven of the ten CSA members were motivated to join because they were drawn to the story of the “refugee.” The concept of “refugee,” is something that members could both relate to, and/or see as a cause to support. According to CSA member, Jack:

You know, I sort of like stories in general, but this is like, especially given what is going on in politics these days – it's a real American story. My great grandparents came over here when they were – I wouldn't say they were refugees exactly, but they lived in Europe when things were not good. And they came over here to make a better life for themselves and they ended up fingers to the bone to give their kids a better life. I mean it's like the classic American story to me. And its unfolding right here.

Like Jack, Sarah and Steven both spoke of a shared “American” story recognizing that their families had come as immigrants. They explained how people had helped their families along the way and saw their involvement at RCF as a way to give back. For these members, involvement is centered around who the refugees are as a group in society and the obligation they feel towards welcoming this group. For most of the CSA members, it was not important that they were refugees from Burma particularly, but just that they fit the category of “refugee.” Connor, a new CSA member, stated this very bluntly:

For me, it's not so much about them being Burmese or from Burma. It's not so important who they are, but what they are in our society which is refugees, displaced people. I think it's important to try to make them feel the least displaced as we can and make them feel they still have a place.

The concept of what it is to be a refugee is typically very foreign to people. Because of this, individuals place all refugees into a large category of people whom they feel morally obligated to help. Rather than expressing interest in building relationships with these people, members see their role in the program as more of a generic "good cause" or thing to do which they can then feel good about.

Even though they may base their involvement on a category of people they know little about, the CSA members spoke of their good intentions. They want to welcome and support refugees and the CSA program offers a practical way to do that. For some, this program allows people to feel like they are doing something and are actively fighting against injustice.

According to Erin:

Just thinking of the political atmosphere in Rock Springs, it almost feels like a silent protest. It feels like people like that would maybe not be welcome here and it's a way to improve upon their lives and make them feel welcome even though I likely won't meet most of them. Just supporting them in a way that I can. I will never have the opportunity to accept a Syrian refugee into my home, but I can buy food from these people.

The CSA program is a way that they can feel good about doing something, while remaining at a distance. It is a convenient way for people in Rock Springs to receive fresh vegetables, support local refugees and through this, feel like they are doing their part in society to speak out for their political beliefs. Especially amidst the current political climate, some CSA participants may view

their subscriptions as a means for indirectly addressing broader national issues concerning immigration. It is enough for most people to pick up their weekly box of vegetables without delving deeper into who the refugees at the farm are and what their lives are like.

For two of the CSA members, however, their involvement stems from a connection to the Karen community and a desire to support these people. Alexa heard about the CSA program through her students. She is an ESL teacher and chose to become involved in order to support her students' families. According to Alexa:

For me, it was the connection with my school that I wanted to do anything I could to support my students. I really came close to a few southeast Asian students and was just like [RCF] is great for their parents because a lot of them don't speak English and a lot of them miss and want to go back to their country. Also, I wanted to learn more about their culture because I teach so many of them and going into last year I didn't know much about the Karen people.

Alexa and her family have made an effort to learn about the culture of the refugees at the farm—in addition to joining the CSA, they came to both the summer and fall potluck last year.

Hannah is another example of a woman who chose to become involved as a result of a pre-existing connection to the Karen community. Hannah has been involved in the RCF project from the very beginning and has worked with Karen refugees for six years. She has developed relationships with several of the farmers by helping with transportation and assisting with a Karen-language school for refugee children. When asking Hannah why she chose to support RCF, she stated, “well, I knew the people. I was already working with them. I knew them from PORCH – from giving food out. I knew Mr. Htee was involved and I wanted to support them. I knew they were lovely and gentle people; that's one of the reasons I got so involved.” Although

Alexa and Hannah have motivations to help these people, they have a stronger connection to the farmers and have built relationships with individuals in the Karen community. Their involvement is less founded on the basis of an unknown category of people and more a result of real relationships.

Imagined Community

From these interviews and my observations, I argue that CSA members have different reasons for being involved and different levels of investment and engagement with the refugee community at the farm. As a whole, the relationships and interactions between the farmers and CSA members are brief and most people are not motivated to join out of a desire to build relationships with the refugees. Rather, they are drawn to the concept of the “refugee” as a humanitarian cause to support. Members want to feel like they are addressing national immigration issues by being part of the CSA program. It is this humanitarian spirit and felt obligation to “refugees” that CSA members take part in and form an imagined community.

I borrow Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities, which was originally used by Anderson to argue that nations are imagined communities since “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1991:48). Based on this concept, I argue that the “community” formed between the CSA members and farmers is fabricated. This community is not one that arose naturally, but was envisioned and intentionally created by RCF staff for economic and education reasons. It is a community only in the sense that people imagine that they are part of a group. In addition to their humanitarian spirit, it is through the circulation of objects—money, vegetables, and information about the farmers—that

CSA members experience an abstract connection with people they may never meet or have substantive interactions with. In this way, the community itself is limited in terms of what it is capable of providing for both the farmers and CSA members.

Methods for CSA Engagement

Below I will discuss the conduits for engagement of the CSA members, which include the distribution of CSA boxes, RCF newsletters, and potluck dinners. These are ways the institution of RCF has promoted an imagined community for their purposes of economic assistance, education, and support for the local food movement. I will analyze these methods of bridging through an ethnographic examination of the interactions and relationships between the refugee and non-refugee community, highlighting both the possibilities and limitations for sustained engagement between the farmers and the broader community. Throughout this analysis, I argue that food serves a critical role in efforts to bridge communities. However, these efforts to connect the refugee and non-refugee communities create more of a stepping stone than a bridge between these communities. I argue that RCF fosters more of a cultural exchange rather than a cohesive community.

CSA Boxes

Relationships between farmers and members are entirely built, carried out, and centered on food. For the majority of CSA members, the weekly boxes they receive is the only way in which they interact with the farm or farmers.

The CSA boxes are packaged by farmers on Wednesday and Friday mornings. The farmers spend several hours harvesting, washing, weighing, and packaging the vegetables for

their CSA members. Each member has their own box for the season³, packed with a variety of Asian and American vegetables. The boxes that are picked up at the farm also include a harvest list—a list of the names of the vegetables included in the box for the week—so that members are able to identify vegetables they are less familiar with. This harvest list is included in order to educate members about the kind of vegetables the farmers grew in Burma and continue to grow in the U.S.

The boxes are picked up weekly by CSA members at one of four possible locations—a synagogue, a church, a bakery, or the farm—spread across three different cities, all within a 40-mile radius surrounding Rock Springs. A staff member delivers the boxes to the off-farm locations and greets CSA members, assisting them to transfer the vegetables from the boxes to their re-usable bags. Even though their farmers' name is written on their box, most of the members don't take the time to notice or remember. Members have the opportunity at these sites to engage with staff members and are welcome to ask any questions about the project or the farmers. However, from my experiences interacting with CSA members at these drop-off sites, they are more preoccupied thinking about whether or not they will cook water gourd or what vegetable to exchange in the swap box. Most people are quite busy and focused on coming, collecting their vegetables, and leaving. It is rare that someone will take the time to ask how the program works and who the farmers are. The staff are aware of this as a challenge for connecting farmers and members. Veronica states this challenge clearly:

We want to respect that the CSA members are busy people and in some ways, are making their lives more complicated by joining the CSA. So how do we respect their time while

³ These boxes have the CSA member's name, size share, whether or not they want extra Asian vegetables, pick-up site, and their farmer's name written on the outside of the wax covered cardboard box.

also trying to communicate and educate them? It's a big enough step to find out about the CSA and commit to purchasing a share and picking it up every week and cooking it and eating it. I think in a lot of their minds, that's a big thing and that's enough and think 'I don't need to read everything and learn more and be more engaged.' But for some of them, they do seem more engaged, come to events, read every newsletter, donate, and do take an extra step.

Even the members who do pick up their boxes at the farm rarely interact with the farmers. Most members walk to the cooler to get their box, unpack their vegetables, and leave. This aligns with the motivations of the CSA members who are more focused on their vegetables. As stated earlier, many they feel it is enough that they are involved in the program and do not see the need to take an extra step of knowing more about the farmers.

Because the majority of members do not come to the farm or interact with the farmers in any way, the produce boxes become fetishized objects. According to Karl Marx, "since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer's labor does not show itself except in the act of exchange" (Marx 2010:84). Marx discusses the concept of commodity fetishism which refers to the idea that social relations between people—who makes what and for whom—are reduced to economic relations among objects. As a result, once an object is sold, we no longer have a sense of who produced it. We don't see the work put into creating the goods and as a result, the end product, or commodity, seems to be all that exists.

This is the case for many CSA members who do not interact with the producer, but only receive a vegetable box. As a result, they have little understanding or knowledge of the identity of the farmers and the processes and work involved in growing, harvesting, and organizing the

vegetables that make up these boxes. Some of them complain that they want more tomatoes or less bitter melon—they don't see the larger community or relational aspect of the farm. In this way, the social relationships between member and farmer are expressed with objects (vegetables and money). The member receives a nicely packaged box of fresh vegetables and takes it for what it is without understanding the social relationships behind the boxes. This is true for farmers as well, who receive a check from members who they may never even meet. As a result, once the produce boxes are sold, farmers and CSA members no longer have a sense of who produced it and do not maintain relationships with one another.

Although members and farmers do not interact, the boxes are able to communicate with members some information about the farmers and become a primary conduit for cultural and relational exchange between the farmers and members. By including traditional vegetables from Burma, the farmers are able to share with their CSA members an aspect of their culture that is very important to them. Many of the members are excited to learn how to cook with new and different vegetables and enjoy looking up new recipes. Furthermore, some people take this beyond recipes and make an effort to learn more about the culture of Burma. According to Jack, “when something comes in my box I don't know what it is, I end up googling it and surfing the web for an hour and looking stuff up about who eats it and where they come from. But there's no substitute for talking to people obviously.” Jack comes to the farm to pick up his share because it is close to his house. The day of our interview he said he had never seen the back section of the farm, so we walked over to see the fields. I briefly introduced him to May Linn and Naw Pyu who were working in their rows. They waved and said hi. For members who pick up their vegetables at the farm, although they may not interact with farmers at all or have brief

interactions, they are at least given more of a window into the reality of the farm in a way that makes the exchange more personal.

Newsletters

At the beginning of a CSA season, new members receive a small booklet with pictures of and information about all of the CSA farmers. This booklet allows members to learn a little more about their farmer—where they are from, how long they have lived in the U.S., why they choose to farm, what their favorite vegetables are, etc. Throughout the season, Veronica sends out weekly email newsletters to give members a glimpse of the behind-the-scenes of Roots and help to educate the members about the refugee community at the farm. According to Veronica, the newsletter is the main way RCF communicates with CSA members.

A typical newsletter includes a picture of the farm or farmer, one of the farmers' recipes, and general announcements and/or information—a request for volunteers and supplies, an event the youth or teen program were a part of, an upcoming farm dinner, information about RCF partner organizations, or educational workshops the farm is conducting with the farmers. Through these newsletters, Veronica puts a lot of effort into helping the CSA members to feel a sense of connection with the farmers. From my interviews with CSA members, some people read these newsletters and use these letters as the main way they keep up with the project and learn about it. However, for most people, these emails get lost and remain unread. From my observations, these emails can create a shallow sense of connection in which members feel they know about the farmers' lives, but in reality, have a vague understanding.

Potlucks

On-farm potlucks are a way to humanize the relationships between farmers and CSA members and give the boxes a name and a face. At the end of every season, all of the CSA members are invited for a potluck celebration. This is a time where the members are welcomed to the farm for a tour and a dinner with the CSA farmers. In the newsletter, Veronica states that this is a “chance for the farmers and their families to meet [members] and thank [them] for [their] support.” These potlucks align with RCF goals to strengthen ties between the farmers and members to not only build an economic network, but to connect the wider community with their food. Typically, between 20-30 people come to the potlucks, along with most (if not all) of the CSA farmers and the staff. The RCF teens are there as well, largely as a voice for the farmers—they help to welcome CSA members, translate for the farmers, and assist with the tours. Everyone brings a dish to share, including the farmers who bring foods such as pennywort salad, egg curry, and fried water gourd.

At the summer CSA potluck, everyone first gathered under the shed where Kendra gave a brief overview of what RCF is and how it was formed. Next, one of the teens explained about the youth program and talked about why the space at the farm is important for the farmers. Tay Aye explained that everyone was a farmer in Burma and ate organic vegetables and grew rice. Next, Nor Wey asked to make an announcement, which was translated by her daughter, Pa Pi. She thanked both God and the CSA members and apologized if the vegetables were ever not good. She was very appreciative of all the members. The last speech was made by a CSA member, Jen, who was very enthusiastic and said that this is the best CSA she has ever been part of and thanked the farmers. It was a beautiful moment of coming together, recognizing mutual support and appreciation.

After this time, everyone split into groups with their farmer and met them. This was slightly awkward as several of the CSA farmers don't speak very much English and the members speak no Karen or Chin. The members thanked the farmers and tried to think of things to say and ways to communicate. During the tour of the farm, Kendra led one group and Veronica led another along with the teenagers. In Veronica's group, the farmers led most of the tour and people asked them questions about their lives as refugees. Pa Pi and Tay Aye translated for the farmers. At the end of the tour, Hser Win and May Linn walked with their members to show them where they grow their vegetables. They pointed out ginger, cassava, lily flowers, banana trees, lemon grass, rice, and many other vegetables.

It was exciting to see how conversation became more natural between the farmers and the members when they were able to point to different vegetables and ask what they were or how to grow them. The farmers were very eager to bring members and show off their plants. It is clear they are very proud of the farm and their work. Roots provides a place that values the farmers' work. This is rare for the refugees at the farm, some of whom, for example, work night shifts at the university in housekeeping and have jobs that are largely invisible to white, middle-class America (Holmes 2013). Even farming is a very thankless, invisible job. The potlucks create visibility for the farmers and provide a chance for CSA members to show their gratitude for the vegetables. Several of the CSA farmers have expressed feeling encouraged by the appreciation they received from their CSA member. Providing the opportunities to educate and bring people in the community to the farm creates visibility for the farmers and a space for them to feel proud of their culture and feel capable.

After spending time exploring the farm, everyone gathered under the shed and sat down at the rows of picnic tables to eat together. The potluck meal represents a sort of tangible

bridging of these communities around food. Through the physical act of eating meals prepared by farmers or members, both the refugee and non-refugee community gain insight into one another's culture.

During the meal, I noticed that all of the CSA members sat at the picnic tables and talked with one another, while all of the farmers served themselves food last. There were no more seats at the picnic tables and so they all stood around the hammock together. Even the teens were in their own little circle group. Everyone was very divided, except for the children. Throughout the meal, there was a group of both refugee and non-refugee children playing together on the mulch pile, running around. Children became a point of connection for the farmers and members. Towards the end of the meal, Nor Wey reached out to hold one of the families' babies. Nor Wey asked the child's name and then had an easier way to meet the CSA members. After the meal, May Linn showed some of the children and their parents her chickens. Even though she was not able to speak English very well with the families, she didn't have to while interacting with children. She was able to play and laugh with them regardless. This allowed her to interact with both the children and their parents. Children allow farmers and CSA members to overcome barriers of language, race, class, and culture to connect over a shared joy for children.

Social Factors Shaping Community

Throughout the night of the potluck, I noticed the different levels of interaction among farmers and CSA members and reasons for this. For example, because Ther Mu speaks good English, she was able to have a longer conversation with her CSA member and told them about her experiences as a refugee and about her life in America now. Differences among the farmers shape their possibilities for interacting with the wider community through RCF. Farmers who

speak more English and have been part of the farm and CSA program for a longer period of time are better able to engage in conversations and relationships with people in the non-refugee community. Hser Win also speaks conversational English and was very excited to see and talk with Hannah, a CSA member she has known for six years. Hannah stood with her arm around Hser Win's waist and they hugged goodbye. Hser Win has been Hannah's farmer for almost six years and they have developed a relationship with one another outside of CSA exchanges. These types of relationships are very rare, however. Furthermore, farmers who sell vegetables at the farmers' market have additional ways of interacting with their CSA members in other settings. All of these differences impact the community that each individual farmer engages in with the CSA members.

Community is shaped not only by the differences among the farmers, but also by the differences between these communities. The potlucks facilitate a space for people to interact, but there are significant ways that social differences (in education, class, language, race, and age) limit the possibilities for a cohesive community to be formed. The CSA program appeals to the customer base in the wider community, which is largely a wealthy, white, foodie community. Because of the differences between these communities, there are significant social barriers that hinder the ability of people in the refugee and non-refugee community to establish relationships. For example, at one of the CSA pick-up sites, Steven told me he wanted to invite his CSA farmer, Blar Mu, over to his house for dinner. I emailed him later and told him the best way for him to connect with his farmer was at the CSA potluck. At the end of the potluck, I asked Steven if he was able to talk with Blar Mu. He told me they were able to have a conversation with his daughter, Ther Mu, who speaks better English, and that she was a lovely girl. However, in terms of dinner, he said that his wife didn't want to make the farmers feel uncomfortable. He said they

have a big house and a lot of expensive things and felt this, along with the language barrier may make the farmers feel uncomfortable. This example shows how differences in socioeconomic status and language create barriers that make relationship building difficult. Based on my observations, I argue that the relationships fostered between these groups lacks a sense of social cohesion and is more of an imagined than a genuine community.

Potlucks: Final Thoughts

Although the community fostered is more of an imagined one, the potlucks do serve as a chance for the CSA members and farmers to meet and connect around food and farming. Even though their interactions are brief and conversation is difficult, these potlucks do allow farmers and CSA members to meet and interact with one another face-to-face, thus creating a stepping stone between these communities. In this way, potlucks serve to make the community between farmers and non-refugee members more “real” in the sense that it is grounded in personal interaction rather than just newsletters and vegetables. According to Veronica, “even though they don’t get to interact with their customers on a regular basis, even if they’re just meeting them at the potluck once, just like knowing they are serving their new community by feeding people, I would imagine that that would make them feel like they belong and have a place and a role here.” In this way, through sharing their space and food with CSA members and receiving gratitude, the farmers may experience a sense of belonging and a role within the larger community, even though they may not share close relationships with these people.

Additional Forms of Bridging

Annual Dinners and Farm Tours

Although the CSA program is the most extensive way that the farm engages with the non-refugee community, it is not the only way that bridging takes place. As stated earlier, farm tours and annual dinners are two examples of ways the non-refugee community can express an interest in learning more about the project. These activities align with RCF's purpose for community-bridging by raising funds, supporting local farmers, and spreading cultural awareness for the dominant group. The focus of the dinners and tours is not necessarily to build relationships, or 'true' community⁴ between the farmers and people in the Rock Springs area, as these groups do not interact during these activities.

Workdays and Volunteer Opportunities

Workdays and volunteer opportunities are also examples of activities through which cultural exchange takes place. These activities bring people to Roots to work alongside the farmers. Although people in the non-refugee community are able to have in-person interactions with the farmers, these interactions are brief at most. Workdays, held once a month during the growing season⁵, are conducted in the Garden of Tropical Wonders. From my observations, the workdays are predominantly for the broader community to learn about and engage with the project. There were about ten farmers and 30-40 people from the non-refugee community⁶. The

⁴ Refer to my definition of "community" in the literature review.

⁵ The "growing season" is from March to November. This is different from a "season," which is just spring, summer, or fall.

⁶ The people who came were students from the local university, an Asian interest sorority, a youth non-profit organization, along with individuals from the Rock Springs area.

farmers had few, if any conversations with the people who came, whom they will mostly never see again at the farm.

The summer of 2016 was the first time any of the farmers had requested volunteers. Nina believes this is because CSA farmers are more comfortable having people in the non-refugee community at the farm. Volunteer opportunities are for individuals who are able to commit to assisting CSA farmers once a week throughout one season. Although volunteering is the best way to spend one-on-one time with farmers and get to know them, volunteers typically only stay for one season and do not maintain a lasting presence at the farm or relationship with the farmers.

From my ethnography, I argue that the non-refugee people involved in these additional forms of bridging imagine their community with the farmers in the same way that CSA members do. Similar to CSA members, people who contribute financially (through tours and dinners), along with people who volunteer their time at the farm, are largely motivated out of a humanitarian spirit to help refugees. According to several students at the workday, they came to “help change things,” “to make a difference,” and “to help people.” Furthermore, according to Elise, one of the volunteers, when talking about conversations she has with Nor Wey, she said, “sometimes I find gaps in knowledge so if I can fill them with cultural context.” Elise viewed part of her role in her relationship with Nor Wey as that of a cultural educator and informer⁷. Out of this interest to support refugees, people in the broader Rock Springs area imagine themselves as part of a community with these farmers.

⁷ For example, in a conversation between Elise and Nor Wey, Nor Wey said her daughter was taking the SAT. Elise asked Nor Wey if she knew what the SAT was and then proceeded to explain it to her. Furthermore, Elise informs Nor Wey of services such as the United Center, a resource for women and families. In this way, Elise sought to educate Nor Wey about services and information she may not know or understand.

There are different levels at which people interact with this imagined community, as some have more in-person engagement with the farmers. However, even for those working in a more sustained manner alongside farmers, their interactions are still animated by the idea that they are fostering a community, when in reality they are not actually part of a true community. This is not a failure of these individuals, but stems from the way community-bridging is structured. The bridging that takes place is fabricated by an organization and therefore, is economically driven and does not arise naturally. All of the bridging that takes place is heavily mediated by staff members who conduct tours, run the dinners, organize the workdays, and coordinate the volunteers. Community is not formed organically from real relationships between farmers and non-refugee people, but is dependent on the staff. In this way, it is more of an imagined community.

Farmer Access to the Broader Community

Through opportunities such as workdays, CSA programming, farmers' markets, and working with volunteers, RCF provides ways that farmers can engage with the broader Rock Springs community. Below, I will explore the ways that farmers access this community by focusing on experiences at the farmers market. I will show this form of bridging from the perspective of May Linn.

Farmers Market

May Linn and Hser Win both sell at the Rock Springs Farmers Market. They typically attend market with their children and sell a variety of American and Asian vegetables. My observational research primarily focused on the Saturday market, where I assisted May Linn and

Naw Pyu during their first year at market. May Linn, her husband Jue Sah, and son Naw Pyu are from the Chin state in Burma and have lived in Rock Springs since 2008. They have been farmers at RCF for the last three years. Farming is a hobby for May Linn and she hopes to be able to continue to grow her business. Last year, she quit her job at the university so that she could farm full time and sell at market.

Challenges of Social Differences

There are many challenges for May Linn in interacting with the Rock Springs community at market. Her English is very limited, making it difficult to answer questions or have conversations with her customers. There were many times over the summer when a customer would inquire about things such as the difference between Malabar spinach and water spinach. They would begin to ask May Linn, but became frustrated and impatient and turned to me for answers. Even if May Linn began to explain with incomplete sentences, customers quickly deferred to me with the slightest difficulty, or would look to me to confirm an answer May Linn had just given them. For the most part, people are interested that May Linn is a refugee and ask questions and express welcome. However, a few people don't understand why she doesn't speak English or why she needed to come to the U.S. in the first place. Furthermore, May Linn is one of the only people of color at the market, which is dominated by white, middle class people. Many of the customers would look to me as if I were the farmer—handing me their money or asking questions about how to grow the vegetables. Kendra and Veronica have recognized this racism and notice that May Linn sells more vegetables on the weeks she has a white person assisting her at market. In addition to language, the racial and cultural difference between May Linn and her customers is another challenge which make it difficult for her to create connections.

Communication: The Role of Children

Even though May Linn faces these challenges, she is able to find ways to communicate with her customers regardless. One way she does this is by connecting with people at the market by interacting with their children. As stated earlier, babies and children are a natural point of connection. Young children cannot speak, so there is no language barrier for May Linn when interacting with them. May Linn can wave, say hello, tickle them, or offer them vegetables to try. These interactions require no cultural understanding and feel very natural. They allow May Linn to express her personality as a very kind-hearted, gentle woman with a cheery smile. By connecting with children, May Linn is also able to connect with the caretakers of the children as well.

Communication: The Role of Food

For May Linn, her vegetables allow her to meet new people and exchange knowledge and recipes at the market. She is the only farmer who sells Asian vegetables. Many people approach her stand and ask about the different vegetables and comment on how they have never seen Roselle or bitter eggplant before. There is a mix between people who are disinterested in “strange” vegetables and those who are intrigued and want to try new vegetables and recipes. A large number of people are willing to give things a try and then come back week after week to buy their supply of water spinach. This is particularly true of people who are already somewhat familiar with Asian vegetables. May Linn and Hser Win have several customers who have lived in Asia and are excited to be able to buy vegetables they ate while abroad. These customers are

more likely to engage with May Linn because they already have an understanding of the people and culture and vegetables of Burma.

Often, food serves as a starting point from which people engage in conversation with Naw Pyu about their culture. One morning, a man named Allen came to ask about water spinach. He and Naw Pyu started talking about where they were from, where to find Burmese markets and restaurants in Rock Springs, and what recipes they enjoy. Allen came back consistently after that expressed interest in volunteering at the farm as well. Furthermore, during the summer, the teenagers at RCF volunteer at the market and put on cooking demonstrations in order to sell more Asian vegetables. People stop to try various foods and ask the teens about where they are from and where the farm is located. Food opens a gateway through which members of the non-refugee community are able to express interest in the farmers and their lives.

Food allows for an exchange between May Linn and her customers. Many people ask May Linn how she cooks different dishes. May Linn does her best to explain her recipes. Furthermore, May Linn and Naw Pyu will sometimes ask their customers how they cook different vegetables. Their customers really enjoy this and appreciate this exchange. At one point over the summer, a woman came up with a sorbet recipe using May Linn's Aji Dulce peppers. She brought the sorbet to market to let May Linn try. In addition to swapping food and recipes, May Linn and her customers enjoy swapping knowledge and information about various vegetables—how to grow and store vegetables, their medicinal properties, etc. Through the vegetables May Linn grows and sells at market, she is able to engage in the community and offer both goods and knowledge. Food allows May Linn and Jue Sah to transcend cultural barriers and connect over something they share with the broader community.

Presence at Market

The market allows May Linn, Jue Sah, Naw Pyu, Hser Win, and Kaw Ree to have a presence in the community. By physically being at market every week, and by providing food for people in the Rock Springs area, farmers have a place and role in the community. These farmers are part of the broader economic food network in the Rock Springs area. They play a unique role by providing Asian vegetables that customers might be unable to find elsewhere. Through food, the farmers are given the opportunity to feel connected to the broader Rock Springs community. In an interview with Hser Win and Kaw Ree, they both noted that people at the market appreciate them and the vegetables they sell. According to Kaw Ree, “the good thing here the customer appreciates the farmers and says, ‘oh thank you for planting this and for growing these’ and ‘it’s so beautiful.’ You feel so happy about it.” They said this is different than in Burma, where, according to Hser Win, “they don’t appreciate you. They don’t tell you. They are like, ‘oh we have to buy anyway, why say thank you.’” Part of the way that farmers who sell at market feel welcomed and included in this larger food community is through receiving appreciation for their work. This not only creates visibility for the farmers, but also cultivates a sense of belonging and place in the community.

As opposed to many of the other bridging opportunities, the market allows people to meet and interact directly with May Linn. Many people stop to ask questions such as what country they are from, where the farm is located, and who it serves. There is a small placard sign on their table with a picture of their family and a short description of where they are from and why they choose to farm in Rock Springs. Occasionally, people will stop to read this sign and ask them more questions. May Linn is very attentive while at market and welcomes her customers with a smile and “good morning, how are you?” She lights up whenever someone asks her if she is the

farmer and express interest in Roots. May Linn's presence at market allows her to share her love for farming and her Chin culture with the wider community. Furthermore, in comparison to their service-level jobs they work during the night, having a presence at market allows the farmers to show something they are proud of and is more representative of who they are.

The Farmers' Perspective on Community

My observations show that marketing opportunities allow farmers, such as May Linn, to engage with the broader non-refugee community. However, these activities only effect a handful of farmers—five farmers who sell vegetables through the CSA program, and two farmers who sell through the farmers market. The farmers do not choose to participate in marketing activities out of a desire to build relationships with the broader community. According to Kendra, “one of the big reasons people choose the CSA is because it's a lot less customer interaction. People are really nervous around their language skills.” For the most part, farmers are not approaching marketing opportunities with the intention of bridging community, but rather out of economic motivations.

Farmers who want to market understand the importance of building relationships with community members in order to advance their business pursuits. These farmers put more effort into these relationships by attending CSA potlucks and talking with people at the farmers market. In an interview with Hser Win and Kaw Ree, they described the importance of engaging with customers at the market in order to help their farm business. Below is an excerpt from our conversation:

Emily Reckard: Do you like talking to customers?

Hser Win: Yeah, more conversation. I love now, I have two markets – Tuesday and Wednesday, I love it. I have learned a lot in the market. They ask me a lot of questions. But different here than in Burma. We go to the market in Burma and we sell. Ones you want, you buy and go home and cook. Here is different – like they ask how to cook.

Kaw Ree: Over there, they don't ask a lot of questions. Kaw Ree: [In Burma], they don't care about the customer buying or not, if you want it you take it, if you don't want it just leave it there. But here, you have to care about the customers a lot. You say, 'hi how are you?' and stuff like that. But over there they don't really do that.

Hser Win: They don't care if they lose the customer, because I think they're busy or something. Here, they're busy, but they care a lot of customers. Sometimes I think customers are crazy. They'll ask 'I want kale for five people' how much do you think? Sometimes I say, depends on how you like. If you like, you'll eat more. They ask a lot of questions.

In order to sell more vegetables at the market, Hser Win has learned that it is important for her to engage with her customers. This excerpt shows that relationships between farmers who market and people in the broader community are primarily driven out of economic purposes. The staff recognize this and support bridging in order to help the farmers meet their business goals. As Nina stated:

I've heard from Hser Win that the result of going to market for so long is that she has built community and goes to community events now. There are lots of changes in her life that have come from going to market, going to the CSA potlucks, and becoming a better business person and being better at English. I think it's served her, to like build that and she sees that that's true.

Nina's perspective shows that similar to the farmers, the staff conceives of these bridging opportunities as a way to help the farmers pursue and succeed in their economic pursuits.

Level of Engagement

The extent to which different farmers access forms of bridging and connect with the broader community is not only shaped by differences among the farmers⁸, but is also tied to the level that they wish to engage. In an interview with Nina, I asked if the farmers have ever expressed a desire to build community with the people in the Rock Springs area. She said:

I mean, no. I think for a lot of the farmers, they just want to come here and farm and don't really care about building community with the Rock Springs—like the bigger community. And that's fine, I don't want them to have to care about those things.

Because they shouldn't. And that's something, I want there to be space for that. But, for them to be able to keep farming here and growing food, there has to be outreach to be able to carry it forward.

Although the farm offers opportunities to interact with the non-refugee community, this is not required for the farmers and many of them choose not to engage at all in these bridging activities. Most of the farmers just want to come to the farm to be able to grow vegetables for their own families and friends. The farmers that do choose to interact are those that have more of a stake in conversations with CSA members and farmers market customers.

From my observations and conversations with farmers and staff, I argue that the farmers do not imagine themselves to be part of a community with the people who engage with Roots. There are only a handful of farmers who interact with people in the non-refugee community

⁸ Refer to previous section, "Factors Shaping Community."

through RCF marketing activities. A few of these farmers, such as May Linn and Hser Win, have had more extensive interactions and conversations with people in the broader community through the farmers market and volunteer program. Although the market has allowed these few farmers to claim a role in the broader community, the majority of farmers do not have a reason or desire to imagine themselves as part of a community with the Rock Springs non-refugee community.

Concluding Thoughts

From my analysis of the bridge constructed between the refugee and non-refugee community, I believe that the community created is more of an imaginary community, or abstract connection. Although there is a sense of community with the farmers, this not based on a deep and sustained relationships between farmers and non-refugee community. This imagined community, experienced by people in the non-refugee community, is envisioned and promoted institutionally and has not grown organically. The “community” created is spatially and temporally limited to brief interactions that take place during workdays, potlucks, or visits to the market. It is not the same sense of robust community that exists among the farmers. People who engage with the project are motivated to form an imaginary connection because they are interested in refugees and want to support them out of a humanitarian spirit. Rather than a bridge, I claim that this connection is more of a stepping stone.

This stepping stone is founded on the idea of a cultural exchange, that Roots would “connect cultures through food and faming.” From my observations, conversations around food and activities involving farming do allow farmers to share their culture with the non-refugee community. I agree with Kendra’s perspective that the farm “provides a platform, a space of

interest in which there's a common denominator for two communities to connect." Food is a point of connection—regardless of cultural differences—which allows farmers to show a piece of who they are and what is important to them.

The cultural exchange, however, is limited and primarily flows in one direction: from the refugee to the non-refugee community. In this sense, it is more of a cultural giving than an exchange. The bridging activities facilitated by Roots focus on educating the broader Rock Springs community about the refugee community at the farm. The staff do not place any expectations on farmers to learn about the dominant culture. As a result, the cultural giving consists of farmers sharing vegetables and staff sharing information about the farmers and the project. The farmers receive monetarily from this broader community and from their volunteer efforts, however, they do not learn more about these people's lives. The fact that this is more of a cultural giving than an exchange further highlights the sense that the community is a one-sided imagined community. The people in the non-refugee community create an imagined community based on the cultural knowledge they receive—they feel that they know about the farmers' lives, and thus experience imaginary relationships with the farmers. However, the farmers do not receive information from the non-refugee community and have little or no motivation to learn about their lives, or imagine a community with these people.

The bridging activities are a large component of the programming at Roots and serve to foster a cultural awareness for people in the non-refugee community. They are a supporting mechanism for the project's goals, but do not necessarily seek to create a sustained community. As it exists right now, this stepping stone and imagined community are not sustainable without the role of the staff members who mediate between these communities.

From the framework of transnationalism, I argue that although the farmers do not actively engage in relationship building with members of the non-refugee community⁹, they still negotiate belonging and create roots in the broader Rock Springs community. The theory of transnationalism asserts that migrants can choose the extent to which they want to engage with the dominant host culture and society (Horevitz 2009). I argue that through physically working the land and providing food to people in the broader community, the farmers claim a role and place within Rock Springs.

⁹ Atleast not through bridging activities facilitated by the farm.

CONCLUSION

Theories about the impacts of green space have begun to consider social cohesion as a mechanism facilitating the positive relationship between green space and health. Public health research shows that community gardens foster social cohesion among members in urban, residential areas (Armstrong 2000; Poulson et al. 2014; Veen et al. 2016). Through my fieldwork at Roots, I have offered ethnographic insight into the complex processes through which this social cohesion is produced. I have explored both the possibilities and limits for “community” at a peri-urban community farm dedicated to refugees. My research shows that access to green space alone does not produce social cohesion; community is complex and differences among the farmers impact their ability to engage with one another at Roots.

Drawing on anthropological insights on transnationalism, this research study has examined the ways that community farming could be used as a model for incorporating refugees into a new society, by allowing them to enact their own path of belonging in a new country. The farm provides these refugees with a way to maintain a relationship with their previous life in Burma, while planting roots in their new society. Through building a community at the farm while simultaneously becoming connected to the land in Rock Springs, the farmers “experience an emotional attachment, [and] a feeling [of being] at home” (Yuval Davis 2006:3). The framework of transnationalism allows these refugees to become part of the larger Rock Springs society in a way that is a reflection of their current selves and the relationships and aspects of various cultures that are important to them. My research looks to understand the processes through which belonging is enacted both at the farm and within the broader Rock Springs community. In the following sections, I will synthesize my findings.

Communitas: Strengths and Limitations

The community shared by the farmers is centered around their long-lasting relationship with green-space. The farmers' shared passion for the land is tied to their previous life in Burma where they lived closely in connection with nature. In Burma, they formed and experienced community, through food and farming. In this way, the community created at RCF stems from and seeks to support the farmers' transnational identity. By relating to one another through the daily practices of farming, the community as a whole engages in physical and material processes to actively perform their transnational identities. Because of this transnational connection with farming, RCF provides a natural and familiar space for the refugees to come together around something they love to cultivate relationships with one another. Thus, the formation of this *communitas* arose as more of an emergent property of transnationalism.

The farmers and staff have cultivated a family-like sense of *communitas* in which people rely and depend on one another. Farming enables the refugees to work together and share in all the joys and challenges of farming. Through processes such as advice sharing, resource exchange, family-bonding, and meal sharing, the spirit of *communitas* is created. The everyday, lived practices of farming produce a deeper level of *communitas* which cannot be formulated through merely talking about their connection to Burma.

Although the farm does create a family-like *communitas*, the farm does not exist in a vacuum and there are limitations to this sense of community. The community experienced by the farmers at Roots is embedded within the organization of Gray County Partnership for Young Children (GCPYC) and Roots Community Farm (RCF). The organization of RCF is dependent on state, federal, and private funding and needs these external resources to survive. Because of this, the staff promotes particular activities, such as marketing opportunities, in order to receive

funding. Although these activities align with expressed needs and desires of the farmers, they are still promoted institutionally and impact the formation of the community. Marketing opportunities create differences in the ability for farmers to engage with the both the refugee and non-refugee communities. Furthermore, although the staff is making an effort to bring the farmers into leadership positions at the farm, there is still a governing structure that exists at RCF that is guided by white, middle-class women who are not part of the refugee-community. In addition to this, differences in the amount of power the farmers hold¹ creates informal hierarchies that impact the community at Roots. In sum, even though there are shared experiences that bring the farmers together in community, economic programming², along with leadership structures and informal hierarchies, demonstrate that the community at the farm is affected by power and difference.

Transnational Model of Resettlement

My research suggests that RCF serves as a model for the resettlement of refugees who have a background in agriculture. Farming is a way to welcome the refugee community and empower them to continue their cultural traditions. Because these refugees grew up working on farms with their parents, agriculture is a familiar context for which the refugees have a framework for understanding. Furthermore, because the farm solely serves refugees who are from the same country of origin, this creates a culturally cohesive, transnational space that serves as a sort of safe haven. Because of their shared language abilities, cultural context, and

¹ Differences in power held by farmers stems from factors such as age, ethnicity, gender, and length of time at the farm, and level of engagement.

² This programming includes things like budgeting workshops, ESL lessons for farmers selling at market, CSA potlucks, and selling vegetables through various outlets. See chapter two for more details.

agricultural passion, the refugees are able to more easily transition into this community. By providing necessary tools and resources, RCF enables the farmers to continue to pursue their agricultural skills and passions in a new context. Furthermore, the farm supports the refugees to earn a source of income and work towards owning their own farms so they can quit their service-level jobs, if they choose. Thus, the farm can become a very integral part of the refugees' lives in assisting them to reach their goals and dreams for the future.

RCF is a space that allows refugees to enact their own belonging through transnationalism. Through the everyday rituals of farming and the sensory connection to Burma, farmers experience an emotional connection with Burma. By providing the farmers with the ability to grow traditional food and cook meals that are familiar to them, they are able to engage cultural traditions and experience home on a physical level. In this way, transnationalism is much more than a coping mechanism (Schiller 1999). It is a way to create a sense of cultural familiarity, ownership, and pride that these refugees may not experience in other settings in the wider Rock Springs community. Furthermore, this evocation, or re-creation of home at Roots is not an escape from the local reality, but rather way to create a sense of belonging in Rock Springs. This shows the ways that transnational ties and local attachment can be complimentary and "represent ways in which migrants negotiate different scales of belonging" (Sheringham 2010:77). For many, it is through the existence of this transnational space at the farm that they can feel more at home in the broader Rock Springs community. Ultimately, this model of resettlement gives these refugees a sense of power to decide how they want to live in a new country.

Furthermore, the farm also provides farmers with a way they can begin to create connections with members of the non-refugee community if they choose this. Farmers are given

the opportunity to meet people in the non-refugee community at the market, CSA potlucks, and workdays. Although they are given these opportunities, this is not a high priority for many of the farmers and the relationships between members of the refugee and non-refugee community are very surface level and more of brief interactions. The community the farm facilitates between the refugee and non-refugee community, is more of a cultural giving and a stepping stone than a cohesive community or bridge. And yet, this is not necessarily a bad thing. These social relationships are not something that are pushed by the organization as an ultimate goal. This is important for ensuring that the farm remains a safe space for the farmers to negotiate their own belonging.

I would argue that this connection with the broader community through social relationships is not something that is required in order for the refugees to feel a sense of belonging within the broader community. Through the farm, their church, and work place, the farmers have many sources of relationships and support. Rather than through relationships, it is through the act of farming, that the refugees create a sense of belonging in the broader community. Through the daily practice of working the land in Rock Springs, they physically create ties to a new place while enacting ties with their homeland in Burma. Furthermore, for some of the farmers, growing and selling vegetables for people in the broader community provides a place and role in the community. For the farmers who sell vegetables at the market and through the CSA, they are part of the broader economic network and serve a practical purpose. Farmers who sell directly to consumer have an intimate connection with their consumers, which is facilitated by food. Food is such a powerful thing. Everyone makes daily decisions about what to put in their bodies. Farmers grow the food that we consume and regardless of whether a social relationship is established on the basis of reciprocal friendship,

there is nonetheless a relationship present there. This connection and role that some of the farmers hold in the food system fosters a sense of belonging.

This model of transnational resettlement offers refugees an alternative approach compared to traditional models of integration which assume a uniform trajectory and outcome of assimilation into the dominant, white, middle-class society (Esser 2010). Because RCF developed on the grass-roots level, it is focused on allowing farmers to decide how they want to use the farm, thus providing a sense of agency and freedom for the farmers to use the space however they want to and be part of whatever communities they choose. This model allows refugees to both maintain a strong linkage to their previous life in Burma, while establishing a connection with their new host country.

Limitations

When considering Roots Community Farm as a model for refugee resettlement, it is important to recognize that my ethnographic research was carried out within a particular context—with a specific environmental and political climate in addition to unique staff members who have shaped the community at the farm. Without these factors, RCF would not exist in the same way it does now. This has implications for the generalizability of this resettlement model.

The physical climate of Rock Springs is unique in that it is similar enough to Burma that the farmers are able to grow traditional vegetables. Rock Springs experiences less rainfall and colder temperatures than Burma. However, the climate in Rock Springs, especially during the summer months, is similar to Burma's hot and humid season. The physical climate of the Southeastern U.S. is specific to this region and enables the farmers to maintain their agricultural

traditions. As a result, this model of resettlement for refugees from Burma may not be as easily transferrable to other regions in the U.S.

Furthermore, my research was conducted in a specific political climate. Because the city of Rock Springs is a liberal environment, it is more welcoming to refugees in general. The staff recognize that this has been very important for the project, especially for receiving economic support. Because my research was limited to this liberal climate, this model of resettlement may not be as applicable or implementable in other places in the Southeastern U.S.

In addition to environmental and political limitations to this model of resettlement, the community at the farm has been significantly shaped by Kendra, Nina, and Veronica. The staff have intentionally shaped the farm to be more community focused and less business focused. The staff prioritize relationships with the farmers over efficiency or standardization. The values, experiences, and priorities unique to this group of staff have allowed the community at the farm to flourish.

Finally, I recognize there were limitations to my research caused by a language difference between me and the farmers at Roots. All of the end-of-the year evaluation interviews were conducted with the help of a translator. I recognize there may have been things that were lost in translation or interpreted differently than intended. This language barrier also limited the extent to which I was able to engage in casual conversation with all the farmers or understand what they were talking about with one another while at the farm. These hindrances shaped the ways that I understand the community created at RCF among the farmers.

Further Research

From my research, it is clear that green space in the form of community farming does serve to promote social relationships among farmers in this peri-urban setting. This community is accessed differently by farmers depending on their priorities for the farm. Regardless, the green space at the farm acts as a community gathering space that brings people together to facilitate community through the practical purpose of farming. This is true for this community because all of these refugees have a strong connection with green space, thus making this the perfect space to foster community. Because of this, the farm serves as a culturally appropriate model of resettlement. However, further research should be conducted to determine the role of green space in fostering social cohesion among a refugee community that does not have a prior relationship with green space and farming. This research could inform resettlement programs for other communities to determine whether community gardens and/or farms only play a role in encouraging community for groups of people who do not have prior agricultural ties.

Furthermore, my research did not take into account generational differences among refugee populations. The current farmers at RCF grew up farming with their parents in Burma. However, the teenagers were born in Thailand, and the children were born in the U.S. From my observations and conversations with the teenagers and children, they are not very interested in farming. They did not grow up farming and therefore, do not enjoy spending as much time at the farm and do not see the farm as a social community. In terms of using the farm as a model for resettlement, it would be important to know what will happen to these community farms in the future when the older generation is no longer around.

In order to better examine the sense of community created at the farm, more research should be conducted on the ways that having an all-white, middle-class staff at Roots impacts the

community among the farmers. Although I was able to observe this to an extent, there is so much material here that I did not have the time to go fully in-depth with. The staff are very aware of their identities and want to shift leadership over to the farmers. However, they recognize the challenges this would pose for the community of refugees. More research is necessary to better understand how this dynamic affects the farmer community.

Finally, as stated in the literature review, green space has been shown to have a positive impact on mental health and general well-being. One of the mechanisms facilitating this relationship is social cohesion. In this study, I observed the reality of this mechanism, but did not deeply explore the impact social cohesion has on health in this green space. From the end-of-year evaluations, all of the farmers reported that the farm makes them feel less stressed. Many of them cited both greenspace and social interaction as a reason for this. For example, according to Kapaw Say, “I feel cool – I breath cool and fresh air and my health is better. I feel very nice. I feel less stressed because I see birds, butterflies, insects, and flowers, and vegetables, trees, lake, all nature. I see my friends and talking to them.” Further research necessary to determine how social cohesion fostered by green space impacts the mental health of communities. This research is especially necessary for refugees who may have a history of traumatic experience and may be susceptible to mental illness. The farm may offer an alternative approach to improving mental health that could supplement other therapeutic interventions. This could have significant implications for resettlement policy and programming.

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