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Abstract:

For members of the Nepali community living in Syracuse, New York, gardening and other foodway practices, like communal food preparation, reaffirm a sense of communal belonging. To be able to cultivate, collect, and consume culturally relevant food allows members of the Syracuse Nepali community to maintain a connection to generational foodways that nourish their bodies and spirits. The notion of an "authentic" Nepali cuisine is not present, instead what is centered in home gardens and within communal food preparation spaces is the individual, reflexive capacity to garden and to cook. The Syracuse Nepali community has built the capacity to utilize produce cultivated in far warmer climates in the depths of a Central New York winter through harvest preservation and through the global food system. Despite the capability of the ethnic market to provide tropical foodstuffs year-round, the home garden remains an irreplaceable aspect of the Nepali community in Syracuse because of the agency that a garden provides a individuals, families, and communities, during the growing season. The technical knowledge needed for the cultural reproduction of Nepali foodways are matters of individual creativity and commensality with peers. In the Syracuse Nepali community, the garden is a space that mediates the environmental difficulties of remembering a 365-day growing season and living in an environment with winters almost 150 days long.

Garden Space as Resettlement Tactic, Place-Making through Urban Agroecological Flourishing of Nepali Home Gardens in Syracuse, New York

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B.A. SUNY Oswego, 2019

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Sciences in Food Studies

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Introduction

In Syracuse New York, resettled Nepali people utilize multiple social institutions to reterritorialize living space into productive and psychically soothing vegetable gardens. This research shows us that in gardens across Central New York, members of the Nepali diaspora create spaces that negotiate the tensions of dislocation, promises of resettlement, and hopes for reconstruction. This research builds on existing literature about the relationship between food, environment, space, and identity, and adds a unique and specific perspective on the reproduction of nationality in diasporic communities through the forms and rituals surrounding food. Gardening is here understood to be an action that takes the gardener out of the hustle and bustle of daily life and transports them to a space of their own creation, allowing the mind to wander and for the present to come into sharp focus. By investing time and labor into this place-making practice, Nepali gardeners construct culturally appropriate foodways in a space geographically and environmentally distant from their home-country, providing a footing in unfamiliar space. Through gardening, Nepali people in Syracuse can supply their families with surplus food, control their consumption from seed to scraps, and combine the market availability of produce with the bounty from the home garden. In doing so, Nepali home gardeners also work with their new environment to determine what the best seeds, crops, and planting techniques are to be used. Through an ethnographic study of the Nepali gardeners in Syracuse, I look at the ways that a section of this community collaboratively prepares and distribute quotidian and national cuisine at home and at social events, reaffirming a sense of identity through food preparation across generations. I also attend to the ways in which gardens are reterritorialized spaces that allow gardeners to escape from the pressures of living and working in the United States. The wide availability of foundational ingredients allows for the cultural reproduction of foodways in

diaspora that strongly reinforces cultural memory in the food, even with environmental challenges. Through interviews and participant observation over 16 months, I saw the ways that gardens provided a space for identity production in the Nepali diasporic community, as well as the environmental constraints of a cold and snowy winter, which created a divide between memory and present reality. Despite the challenges that the physical environment in Syracuse presents, it also allows space for Nepali people to center the garden, the perennial axis on which memories new and old hinge on.

The Nepali community in Syracuse is not monolithic, it instead represents a wide range of experiences influenced by geographic and political displacement, labor migration, religious conversion or steadfastness, and disability. Most of my fieldwork and involvement with the Nepali community utilized for this research centered on a Nepali Christian Church near my home. Christianity among the resettled and immigrant Nepali community in Syracuse is, by anecdotal accounts from pastors and congregants, rather strong. The church provides the social institution through which congregants can readily access social capital and community resources. My ability to gain access to the Nepali Church as a field site was aided by my upbringing in the Catholic church coupled with an earnest interest in Syracuse-Nepali foodways that I repeatedly voiced to churchgoers.

The first forays into the field were heavily influenced by my relationship with the head Pastor of the Nepali Church, Pastor Bhim, who exposed to me a rich vein of social life within the Nepali community to examine. Pastor Bhim is Bhutanese-Nepali, as are many other Nepali people in Syracuse. This apparent fusion of a national identity (Bhutanese) with an ethnic identity (Nepali) introduces another facet into considerations of identity within the Syracuse Nepali community. The forced displacement of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese people in the 1990's

and consequential scattering of whole communities to refugee camps across North India and Nepal has implications for attempting to conceive of holistic "Nepali" identity. In what follows I will show that it is impossible to reduce a community and its members down to a type, a mold, a checklist of humanity.

I began this research out of an applied interest in small scale urban agriculture. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic one of the few sources of unsullied peace was my Nepali neighbor, the matriarch of the Wagley family, chopping away at the soil in her backyard, tilling it, mixing in compost, and sowing seed in the Northside neighborhood of Syracuse. As the days grew longer and global chaos continued to ratchet up, the growth of a wide range of backyard crops became a rich agroecosystem of flora and fauna that cut through the haze of worry and uncertainty. Nearing the harvest season, my backyard become overwhelmed with pumpkin plants bursting through the holes in the chain link fence and sending runners across my lawn. Over the years, more and more plants crept across the fence line, populating my backyard with stinging nettle, common hibiscus, pumpkin, beans, bottle gourd, and mugwort. The plant life that the Wagley's had cultivated had begun to unite the two artificially separated spaces demarcated by zoning code.

When I began to look for graduate school programs, I kept the image of my neighbor's garden in my mind, seeking out a program that would permit me the luxury of investigating urban agriculture as a primary site in whatever capacity I could manage. While I was interested in contributing to academic scholarship, I also wanted to remember the reason why I began a Food Studies graduate program in the first place; the bounty of knowledge and skill poured into the vegetable garden by a Nepali grandmother was the anchor that has kept me moored in place. In keeping my research centered on the cultural reproduction in the garden among the Nepali

diaspora, I have been seeking to elaborate upon a system of urban agriculture in a post-industrial metropolis. I have kept a wary eye on the emerging techno-capitalist dynamism on the horizon in the form of JMA Wireless, Micron, and other information and technology corporations. I have long believed that the intense focus on information and technology in the United States economy, while providing income and employment for millions, hobbles our capacity to connect with the land and with our neighbors.

As a white man who only speaks English, I have followed this research track at the risk of appearing like an orientalist. I openly accept that critique, because it allows me to always consider how my subject position influences my commitment to, and representation of, the people and community I am writing about. In actively engaging with the ways that white American cultural hegemony looms over my perception and understanding, I aim to expose its internal inconsistencies in service to a mutual and multi-ethnic collaborative approach to mutual aid at the neighborhood level, actualized in this case through the Nepali home garden. Growing up on a four-acre plot of property in New England I had gone nearly a decade without speaking to any of my neighbors. After moving to Syracuse, I speak to my neighbors daily, offer them vegetables, assistance, or a listening ear. I view urban agriculture, at its most basic, as a community of practice that closes the perceived distance between people through the quotidian substance of food. I have centered those in the Nepali diaspora as agents of change within rust-belt urbanity, and as architects of an alternative agriculture that embeds practitioners in a troublesome and tentacular matrix of greenery. Despite the reality that many Nepali people in Syracuse have been forcibly displaced from Bhutan, through their actions as gardeners they connect themselves with the land. As a white American, my connection to the land is defined by my position as an heir to settler-colonialism, especially since my family has an oral history that

situates us as heirs to colonial New England aristocracy. It is within this zone of contact, between the researcher and research participants, that I do my part to tease out the implications of our commiseration and cooperation.

Gardening and the Reproduction of Identity

Gardening and other foodway practices are central to the reproduction of identity because of their everyday enactment. For those in displacement, to be able to garden and produce (physically, emotionally, culturally, and spiritually) nourishing food from that space provides a tether to which they can connect themselves to memories and materiality of life in the home-country. The act of gardening and food production is a psychic and spiritual salve that sublimates some of the tension of displacement. Families and individuals in the resettled Nepali community in Syracuse reproduce identity through their food and gardens; in doing so they remember sensations of their home-country, revise the meanings of those memories in diaspora, and forge a new synthesis in the gardens of the host-country. This labor, of constructing, maintaining, and recreating year by year, the garden space is highly gendered. Among those in the Syracuse Nepali community that I have been in contact with, the sole architect of the garden is the mother or grandmother. Garden labor is highly feminized, and requires mothers, grandmothers, aunties, and daughters to consider the tastes and preferences of their family members in the construction of the garden in addition to washing, packing, curing, pickling, and other food preparation practices that flow from the garden harvest. Women become not only architects of the home landscape, but also of their family's food memory, an additional burden of emotional and physical labor. Women guide the process of recalling and remembering through their work in the garden. people in the Syracuse-Nepali community reproduce culture in an environment that allows for, and even forces the creation of, new forms of identity.

The gaps between memory, the image of the past as a model for the future, and the environmental reality of the present provide footholds for the emergence of novel foodways and gardening strategies in diaspora. Much of the scholarly literature concerning immigrant foodways describes a friction between the reification of certain food preparation techniques, and the resources and innovation of those in diaspora. The dominant conception of foodways, encapsulated in ideas of "authenticity," a cultural categorization of food, has the capacity to create harm and to fracture communities where it becomes weaponized against culinary creativity (Abarca 2004). Globalized foodways provide some measure of flexibility against this, because of the ease of access to ingredients and foodstuffs that can, in part, reconstruct the culinary practices of transnational, immigrant foodways (Mankekar 2002). However, the globalization of foodways is intertwined with the creation of categories that essentialize ethnic identity and food, which strongly influence the trajectory of foodway reproduction towards a stringent and inflexible one, guided in part by the profit imperative of multinational corporations and the image that they reproduce of an *authentic* ethnic identity.

Gardens, and their affective, multispecies arrangements, offer a space for the reproduction of ethnic identity that encounters the material and environmental limitations in displacement. These limitations are then metabolized by the cultural and culinary framework of those in diaspora, who reconstruct foodways as part of environments with deep and complex ecological webs. This synthesis of memory and materiality within garden space has implications for the continued reproduction of ethnic identity within diasporic communities. As I will discuss below, previous research has produced an understanding of the importance and utility of gardening and food production for many diasporic communities. My research with the Nepali diaspora in Syracuse intersects with previous scholarly literature and builds upon this work to

address gaps concerning how culture is reproduced in diasporic communities and how refugees grapple with food and culture related authenticity in the context of a significant environmental shift. The necessary adaptability towards change demonstrated by Nepali refugees in Syracuse provides the foundation for a food system that endures and evolves in new environments. The Nepali community of Syracuse is a case of a cultural foodway's adaptability as it intersects with globalized markets, intergenerational knowledge, and alternative urban agriculture.

Space and Place

My interactions with Nepali home gardens were not a representative sample of the individual diversity within the Syracuse Nepali community, but instead a deep foray into biodiversity guided by stochasticity and happenstance. Over the course of fieldwork and in my time living in Syracuse, I spent time conducting participant observation in three distinct gardens from 2022 through 2023, primarily during the growing season. The growing season usually extended from early March to late October, And I would interact with some gardens and gardeners' multiple times per week. Over this extended time, I was able to gain an appreciation for the agrobiodiversity present in those gardens.

The first garden, belonging to the Wagley family in their private home space, is a lesson in density, it consumes the entire backyard, and spills out into the driveway and front yard. I spent the most time here, or right next to it in my own yard. It was almost a daily ritual, over the nearly four years I spent as the Wagley's neighbor, to make small talk with the elder people, take garden tours, trade produce, and water the garden at the same time each summer evening. It is the family vegetable garden, but all aspects of its structure, from its daily maintenance to its year-to-year reconfiguration, are completely determined by the grandmother. To attempt to describe her garden is like trying to describe starlight on an acid-trip. She has dozens of micro-

plots growing an incredible variety of crops; mustard greens, amaranth, chayote, pumpkin, corn, sunflowers, cucumbers, daikon radish, marigolds, sunflowers, okra, green eggplant, luffa gourd, pole beans, etc. Toward the eastern side of the yard was the highest trellises, maple branches lashed together with plastic shopping bags, fabric scraps, and jute rope. Bean stalks, pumpkin shoots, and cucumber vines racing through and holding fast the skeleton of a jolly green giant. Down the center of the yard runs the main thoroughfare, a dirt path beaten down and flanked on both sides by mustard greens and orange flowers. At the rear of the yard a dozen scarecrows made from scrap wood t-posts and ratty clothing stand at chest height, crucified in the hopes that their constant presence might deter woodchucks, rabbits, and other vegetable loving vermin. By the western side of the yard are the flowerbeds, drooping towards the earth with heavy heads of petals. Throughout are small root crops, and most uniquely, a Target shopping basket, claimed from the neighbors roadside dumping pile months earlier, filled with good soil and vigorous ginger plants.

The second garden belonged to a local food system celebrity. Manika is a Nepali woman who had come to Syracuse for a better job, the extra income she would send to her family in Nepal. Through her charisma, community connections, and love of farming she had found herself as the farm manager of Salt City Harvest Farm and was my boss for my time as a farm apprentice at the nonprofit. We grew close, working five days a week in the howling wind, blistering heat, and through wildfire smog. Throughout the year I made periodic visits to her home, trading extra farm produce, delivering water storage totes from a local beer bottling plant, and visiting for birthdays. Manika’s garden is small, having to preserve enough space for her young children to run around and use their swing set. She has dozens of buckets and pots bordering her fence and raised beds, all filled with *dalle khursani*. Her raised beds, fashioned

from logs and 2x4s salvaged from the farm landowner's burn pile, are stocked with mustard greens, mugwort, okra, daikon radish, and Jalapeno peppers. Across the yard she built a small raised bed with a trellis for chayote (*iscus*) and *tukruke* to climb. Along the side of the house, Manika planted marigolds and dwarf sunflowers, some mustard greens had reseeded themselves from the previous year and established a solid foothold on the margins of the wooden fence. Out in the front yard, Manika has apple saplings planted, and some perennial flowers against the front of the house. Most amusingly, small spires of dill poke through the pea gravel under the front bay window, perhaps remnants of years prior, or opportunistic seed that had fallen out of a grocery bag. Manika's home garden is only one site of her agricultural impact on Central New York. Throughout the region she has plantings of garlic, ground cherries, and mustard, green fingerprints that outline a story of care and creativity across the county.

The third garden was tended by Sudikshya, one of the churchgoers I built relationships with during my participant observation there, and was considered by friends as an incredible cook and gardener. When the end of the 2023 Spring semester came around and my family was to arrive for a celebration, I asked Sudikshya if I could pay her to cook *momo* (Nepali dumplings) and some other light fare for them. She agreed, we determined a price and on the day of pickup I went to her home to give her and her family the money. When I arrived, I asked if I could look at the garden while the last of the *momo* steamed through. Sudikshya and her husband James permitted me to poke around a little at their highly organized backyard garden plot. In a small space, only 30 by 45 feet, she had managed to fit at least 12 mounded beds each with a different single crop, some with multicropping. Along the back fence was a trellis standing five feet high, interlaced with bottle gourd, bitter melon, and cucumbers. The beds were filled with mustard greens, okra, perilla, potatoes, chili peppers, lamb's quarters, and daikon radish. The

front of the garden was covered by buckets stocked with many varieties of eggplant, fruit tree saplings, and flowers. Covering an entire raised bed was a compost box made by 2x8 boards. On a return trip to delivery 50 pounds of cucumbers, I saw that the compost box had been moved to another bed, perhaps to smother a completed harvest and amend the soil for the next crop. All the Nepali home gardens I had visited were structured differently, they contained a wild diversity of plants, with some overlap but some unique actors. The organization of plots was a creative expression from the gardener, and every garden could be seen from the kitchen window.

Literature Review

Food studies scholars have contributed to an understanding of food as having a fluid social meaning, there is a dynamism to how food is prepared, preserved, shared, and stored that cannot be interpellated as static. Dominant attitudes toward “authentic” food in the United States are centered around the production and consumption of a unchanging other, this is reproduced through headlines featuring the latest Hmong restaurant on the pages of *Bon Appetit*, recipes for ethnic dishes in blogposts or on the Food Network Website, and in everyday conversation with people who describe *adventurous* eating as consuming anything with an (occasionally apocryphal) origin in the Orient or the Global South. The literature I discuss below applies a critical lens to the ways that authenticity is understood among people from different power strata, and how various incarnations of authentic food are utilized to produce identity. I demonstrate how gardeners in the Nepali diasporic community reproduce identity through food and space, while navigating novel environmental conditions that provoke subtle changes to Nepali cuisine. By framing this research within existing scholarly work on authenticity and cultural reproduction, I explicate how the Nepali diaspora creates a community of practice centered on an individualized capacity to grow crops and prepare it into culturally and physically nourishing

food. Nepali food is thus practically conceived as fluid, utilizing goods available to the community and not discounting innovation in service of an imagined essential cuisine.

The debate over culinary "authenticity" motivates authors, practitioners, and communities to continuously critique and reinvent categories of food culture. This critical recognition of food's fluid social meaning guides my analysis. This framing is emergent in the way that members of the Syracuse Nepali community cultivate and cook food; food preparation is thus a matter of taste, sensation, and historical particularity as opposed to a ritualized and prescribed replication of sustenance. Meredith Abarca provides a point of departure for this discussion by stating that "[h]aving authority and claiming knowledge when referring to a particular culinary method for a specific ethnic food, in and of itself, is not the problem. The problem arises when we consider what social settings exist to claim such authority" (Abarca, 3; 2004). At the heart of discourse on culinary authenticity is a concern for the reproduction of hegemonic definitions of food. Abarca's work with Mexican and Chicana working-class women seeks to provide them with a voice against the dominant grain of culinary discourse (Abarca 2006). This subaltern strategy takes the form of "*charlas culinarias*" in which the women Abarca speaks with describe "*chistes*" (twists) to recipes that align them to material and temporal circumstances experienced by the women in their kitchens.

To critique the concept of authenticity the underlying cultural hegemony of culinary ideology must be exposed. Abarca's interlocutors enact an inclusive positionality through their cooking techniques. For example, after describing a particular technique for preparing enchiladas "Alma Contreras… neither claims her enchiladas as authentic nor someone else's as inauthentic; she simply stresses the right to her creative energy" (Abarca, 2004). The refutation of an essential enchilada recognizes that ideas of authenticity are stifling to the creative and affective

power of women in the kitchen. A rigid conception of authenticity is Janus-faced, in that it serves to exoticize ethnic food traditions and techniques but also can displace legitimacy to professionals who can access authentic cooking through perceived professionalism (Abarca, 2006).

Yet, cuisine of any kind is not completely isolated to the ethnic community from which it is generated. The work by Lu and Fine on culinary authenticity in Chinese restaurants in the United States provides insight into the ways that ethnic identity and its associated technical knowledge are utilized narrowly for economic gain and broadly for sociopolitical shifts (Lu and Fine 1995). The authors contend that authenticity is reproduced according to tradeoffs in tastes and aesthetics of the American population; asserting that the Chinese restaurant, while cooking foods that are comforting and recognizable to the American public, also aims "to generate and exotic hyperreality" (539). The economic potential of ethnic restaurants is thus couched in their ability to perform an identity that is strange but not unfamiliar, exotic but available to the palate of the diner. The authors also address the consumption of the exotic with "connoisseur-oriented restaurants" (544), but their conclusion follows a similar pattern. That is, instead of performing an ethnic culinary tradition that conforms to the desires of the lay-consumer, connoisseur-oriented restaurants engage with their patrons to develop a performance of the exotic that is consistent and customer centric, "the goal is more a good reputation than good food" (546). They write that, "authenticity is a locally constructed folk idea" (538) and is subject to shifts in the way that culture is produced, consumed, conceptualized, and reproduced. When authenticity is deployed to create an ideal of ethnic performance, in this case through food, agency is stripped away from those whose food cultures are under critique. Popular consumption is an arena for ethnic performance, which signals the legitimation or loss of culture through food. In contrast,

quotidian consumption reaffirms itself according to the memories, ideals, and beliefs of its practitioners (Lin et al. 2020). Gardens and food places, such as those I observed in my research, are bounded spaces of cultural reproduction that allow food ideology to be preserved and provide the ecological and material wiggle room for the formation of new forms of ethnic and cultural identity.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (2018) work shows us the ways in which understanding the social construction of authenticity can be achieved through an analysis of cultural reproduction. This work has been expounded upon by successive generations of social scientists (Kallunki 2023, Jenks 1993, Slater 1997, among others), provides the foundation to understand how ideas about authenticity emerge within institutions and society. Utilizing this framework of authenticity represents a class and ethnic marker; it reproduces what is perceived as real and unreal, as Jenks writes, "all members [of a society] assume and become aware of reality through and within culture" (Jenks, 1993). "Cultural reproduction is… a sense of social continuity achieved through modalities of change" (6). Bourdieu's notion of cultural reproduction relies on an understanding that society is stratified by class and is reliant on the ways that class hierarchy reproduce themselves to maintain the cultural, political, and economic hegemony of the ruling class. Building on this notion, scholars have argued that food, as an essential part of human culture, should be well considered in discussions of cultural reproduction, as it reveals ideological tendencies and material conditions within communities of practice.

Food and foodways have the potential to be indicators of change, socially and environmentally, especially in times of climatic and ecological change, (Willette, Norgaard, and Reed 2016). In one example, Willette et al.'s (2016) work on cultural reproduction among Karuk families in the Klamath River Basin displays how foodways, that are integrated with endemic

wildlife and seasonal cycles, are endangered by environmental decline and ongoing violence of settler-colonialism. In this research, families are observed to be a self-contained but communally integrated unit of production, which reproduces beliefs, habits, and knowledge that are spatially determined. Beyond the traditional ecological knowledge that the family unit imparts on successive generations, the family, as a unit of labor, functions to propagate ecological complexity in the landscape they live in and with. "Karuk family activities are a conduit of cultural transmission and maintain important social networks necessary for a functioning landscape management system" (384). In cases such as this, where indigenous people are so tightly integrated with the environment around them, changes to the material-ecological conditions of the region constitute an assault on their capacity to sustain family and cultural life in the tribe. "In terms of the process of cultural reproduction, environmental decline limits the transmission of cultural knowledge, values and the identity development of youth" (387). The enforced inability to continue cultural and foodway practices is a result of government land management policies that impose order from top down, as opposed to policy driven from the bottom up by local stakeholders. The institutionalized lack of control over means of subsistence restricts access to and fulfillment of culturally appropriate foodways, especially in a hunting/foraging context.

The nexus of food and identity is a contested arena within the domain of cultural reproduction as food embodies a suite of values and beliefs specific to each producer, distributor, regulator, and consumer. This symbolic particularity renders food a powerful signal of identity and can become involved in the construction of nationality. Nation-States seek to create legitimate citizens through the reproduction of a national culture, and utilize food to that end (Maxwell, 2019). In work by Maxwell (2019), the quest to define the boundaries of French

national cuisine, regional state administrators must juggle the slippery concept of national culture through elementary school lunches. Homogenization of culture becomes increasingly difficult in the context of globalization and is increasingly problematized by transnational migrants and a history of imperialism that draws cuisine from far and wide into the orbit of the French polity. The State does not maintain a monopoly on cultural reproduction, the smaller social units of the family, community, and region have the capacity to resist technocratic influence. However, the regional administrators that have sway over school lunch programs continually reproduce similar cuisines, reinforcing the image of a hegemonic French cuisine across national geography.

A counterexample to the French case, the Tagbanua traditional subsistence system described by Cuevas et al. (2015) reaffirms the bottom-up approach to food sovereignty, understood as a food system that "seeks to provide a viable grassroots alternative to the predominant neoliberal economic stance of free trade" (Cuevas et al., 2015). This stance on food is achieved through a spiritually and ritually entwined system of food production. Tagbanua people interviewed for this article express deep connection to the indigenous technical knowledge involved in upland swidden agriculture, some stating that "If you are a Tagbanua, you do swidden. Because that is the Tagbanua life. That is our life" (36). Tagbanua swidden agriculture has persisted because of the low profit incentive to develop the uplands, but now in times of spatial contracture and growing population, local land stewardship comes under threat from development schemes and profit extraction. The above cases of cultural reproduction through food exemplify the difficult task of successful, successive reproduction because of a host of reasons. Land mismanagement by settler colonial governments, the remaking of a national cuisine within a colonial superpower, and the contraction of traditional ecological knowledge in the face of development all relate to a sense of belonging within a geographic range. Karuk

foodways are reliant on seasonal runs of fish and acorn harvests, French cuisine is premised on the terroir of various foods which have been legitimated over a long imperial history, and Tagbanua swidden agriculture is a response to the relative infertility of the highlands. Inability to link oneself with these cultural tethers destabilizes understandings of identity.

Cultural reproduction is an agentive process, through which members of a community of practice reaffirm their commitment to identity by ritual acts of living. To be thrust into diaspora, dislocated from these spatially determined processes creates significant stress on the individual and the community. In the process of geographic and cultural relocation, “the dispersion of a group of people from a centre [sic] to two or more peripheral places, as well as to the collective memory and trauma involved in such a dispersion” (Hua, in Agnew, 2005), people are left grasping at the frayed edges of connection that placed-ness had once kept woven tightly. The dispersion of people spreads social ties out across national boundaries, and diasporic communities claim transnational membership. It is imperative to consider that diasporic people are not bound together by definition; their ethnic identity in diaspora is not an essential condition, but rather a contested and fluid negotiation of identity on an individual and communal basis. “It is crucial to recognize that a diasporic community is not fixed or pre-given” (194). The shifting subjectivities of those living in the diaspora are expressed in all arenas of culture. Food and memory become stages on which identity is defined, debated, and performed within the specific material conditions surrounding those who engage with it.

Parin Dossa’s ethnographic account of Afghan women in Canada, Pakistan, and Afghanistan provides an introductory case through which food and memory remake identity. Dossa utilizes the concept of “memory work” to understand how “Afghan refugees… recalled past events but reconfigured them in the present to make sense of their suffering” (Dossa, 2014).

Memory work “does not merely evoke the past; it impacts the present” (8); it functions as a political strategy that connects trauma, affect, imagined pasts, and futures in the service of stitching together the tattered fabric of life in the diaspora. Memory itself “intrinsically destabilizes truth through a concern with the subjective ways that the past is recalled, memorialized, and used to construct the present” (Holtzman, 2006). The intersection of food and memory is a productive juncture, especially in diasporic communities, as remembrances of food can delineate “epochal social transformations in a wide range of contexts, serving as a lens both to characterize the past and to read the present through the past” (371). Food enacts memory, and memory is “the construction or reconstruction of what actually happened in the past. Memory is distorted by needs, desires, interests, and fantasies” (Hua, in Agnew, 2005).

Diasporic peoples can connect themselves to a chain of generational, ethnic memory though their foodways, and in doing so continue to construct and reconstruct identities that provide stability in unfamiliar space and circumstance. Of course, there are limitations to the ways that idealized cultural practices can be reproduced, but material conditions in the diaspora “are fostering innovation and creativity, inventing cultural traditions, and constructing new food knowledge” (Williams-Forson 2014). Williams-Forson’s study of Ghanaian immigrants also highlights the importance of “ethnic specialty markets” which provide access to foodways from the home-country, and act as a locus of the immigrant community. In her telling, the ethnic market acts as a mediator of culture between the home and host country, infusing the host country with memories of home. The market thus becomes a space where “powerful emblems of identity” in the form of culturally appropriate foodstuffs can be acquired.

Elisha Renne (2007) adds to this in their study of how West African foodways are reproduced internationally through commodity foodstuffs. Food packaging technology and

globalization, “hygienically packaged foodstuffs” can be purchased by West Africans abroad, who “reproduce and reconstruct forms of social relations through the reinvention of food traditions from home” (617). West African immigrants to the United States through their consumer habits reproduce an ideology of good food, but also align themselves with the rapidity of modern American consumerism (618). The reproduction of taste and place in packaged West African foodstuffs is tightly linked with imagined labor and techniques utilized to create it. The “brand names and food packaging often invoke imagery that suggest ‘age-old’… production techniques” (619), but these and other marketing strategies are actively developed to reproduce a particular moral valence around health and authentic preparation. The content of ethnic markets has the potential to link those in the diaspora to powerful memories, that are imperative to maintaining a sense of identity in dislocation. However, the ways in which these food traditions are reproduced in a sanitized global market has significant implications for the health and cultural sustainability of immigrant and refugee communities.

Arijit Sen’s study of Bangladeshi fish stores in Chicago reflects another concern of transnational culinary communities, the shift in subsistence and diet between home and host-country. The fish store “becomes a mnemonic device in the remaking of diasporic geographies” (Sen, 2016) through its function as a site of local consumption and global trade. Sen’s study is richly multiscalar (Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2021), highlighting the ways that transnational immigrant communities have altered consumptive patterns in the home and host-country. Some of Sen’s interlocutors and respondents have realized that “[t]he Bengali diaspora… has preserved and in some ways transformed a food web that is no longer present in its original native environment” (Sen, 2016). Transnational cultural communities have the agency to transplant

foodways from endemic to transnational localities in a manner that radically alters forms of subsistence and ecology.

Garden space in diasporic communities compress the distance between home and host country. Vitally, it is also a space in which people navigate complex differences in ecology, climate, and culinary accessibility. To garden is to harness, through mutual flourishing, the capacity of the more-than-human world in a way that reproduces and recreates memories across life-histories. Antoinette WinklerPriss' (2003) work on "house-lot gardens" in urban Santarèm Brazil is an explication of the continuity between the urban and rural, making clear that divides between the two are imagined, and it is more accurate to state that each zone of human habitation is interspersed with zones of greater or lesser urbanization/ruralization. Gardens, as described by WinklerPriss, "help maintain a sense of aesthetic pride, a social and emotional link, and a psychological buffer as households move between rural and urban settings" (59). By gardening, people, in this case primarily women, can compress the distance between kinship networks that are organized along the arbitrary division between urban and rural. Food production and relationships are mediated by movement of people and gifts between rural and urban space. The relatively small distance between the urban and rural space in Santarém, "7 to 10 km" (49), permits such an ease of movement, but in cases where food and plants move large distances over national borders, foodways and ecology must encounter larger systems of exchange.

Valerie Imbruce (2007) takes to task how ecology is altered in a commercial fashion, both within immigrant communities in the United States and by transnational agricultural operations. Imbruce's study of New York City's Chinatown economy extends down to Homestead Florida, where immigrants from Southeast Asia have transformed local commodity production through intense diversification of fruit and vegetable cultivation. The connection of

these commodity producers to larger immigrant economic networks, and the existence of large-scale monoculture marketing and packaging infrastructure, creates the opportunity for these small-scale growers to provide culturally appropriate foodstuffs to wide ranging immigrant food system. This is a large-scale example of the ways in which enculturated patterns of consumption are reproduced outside of their originating geography. However, the home gardens of Homestead are not a transplantation of Southeast Asian agriculture, but an original reinvention of fruit and vegetable production to both suit the needs of the homeowner, but also to fit into the larger networks of trade, exemplified in this case by “Chinatown’s Food system”. The garden is not only a site of economic production but also has the potential to invigorate agrobiodiversity.

Trinh and their colleagues delve into this consideration, highlighting the power of home gardens to influence agrobiodiversity. In their study of Vietnamese home gardens, it becomes clear that “the agroecosystem shelters astounding diversity” (332). Despite significant differences in income between the study sites, “agroecosystems maintained high amounts of diversity at both ends of the commercialization spectrum” (333). By utilizing the home as a space and mode of production, Vietnamese home gardeners create pockets of biodiversity across large swathes of land. Home gardening in Vietnam not only improves the lives of its practitioners and their communities, but "if home gardens in a village, a region, or a country were to be taken as an aggregate, they would provide excellent in situ conservation unit for Vietnamese agrobiodiversity” (333). Gardens provide a space to encounter the more-than-human world; plants and, where applicable, livestock provide a touchstone for their caretakers and coconspirators to retrace the experience of those in diaspora to contact those more-than-human actors that have symbolic and affective significance.

Terese Gagnon's investigation of Karen refugee gardening practices focusses chiefly on the affective relationships that Karen people have with plants, and how those connections reinscribe identity through mutual care between plants and humans. She explains that "Karen identity is articulated and negotiated through engagements with plants and food, encompassing fraught sanctuaries and fertile itineraries of memory" (29). Gagnon also is attentive to the ways that cultural reproduction among the Karen is stymied, made impossible by the material and environmental conditions of life in the diaspora. Her twin investigation of Karen refugees at the Burma-Thailand border and those living in Rust Belt cities in New York State expose the apocalyptic realization that in some environments it is impossible to sustain a Karen identity (38). Gardening in diaspora has the capacity to act as a bulwark against cultural erosion, but limitations require that people do not enact a rigid ideology of authenticity. Instead, the affective and creative aspects of gardening and foodways would be best suited to embolden and celebrate the originality of human agency and invention.

Creating a garden space, and maintaining foodways that nourish body and mind, are methods through which the Nepali diaspora in Syracuse encounters memories and senses of home. Using food as a thread, Nepali gardeners weave together identity, memory, sensation, affect, ecology, and human agency into a cloth that those in the diaspora can hold fast to in ceaselessly uncertain times. Ethnic authenticity represents a challenge to the necessary changes that living in the diaspora imposes, it essentializes ethnic identity into something that is historically produced but unchanging across space. The garden and its harvest suggest that, instead, ethnic identity is produced by a dialectic between memories of the home-country with the ecology of the host-country. The ecologically distinct poles of refugee and immigrant communities are linked through the ways in which immigrants and refugees reproduce culture

and identity. The garden is a space that relies on ecological fecundity, but also a flourishing of the human spirit in novel conditions.

Authenticity is a concept that creates social paralysis, it stifles the creativity of those who venture outside the rigid conceptions of appropriate, proper, and real ethnic food. To be original means that food "production always belongs to the person who creates it" (Abarca 2004; 19). Garden space fuses memory, materiality, sensation, and nourishment to synthesize a commensal network, where the food and experience of consumption belongs to the collective. In diaspora gardens and food production provide a foothold to retain knowledge as well as a space to experiment with new possibilities that were either materially or psychically impossible before dislocation. The sites of identity production are strongly rooted in the quotidian domains of affect and commensality, by reinventing the way culture is reproduced, original and unique responses to changing material conditions come to the fore and can blaze a path towards a more ecologically involved method of food production.

Methodology

I collected data for this investigation through surveys, semi-structured interviews, and long-term participant observation. Participants for the surveys and interviews were selected through snowball sampling among regular attendees of a local Nepali Christian Church. Potential participants were asked about their interest and availability in participating in a short survey and interview to contribute to research on gardening in the Syracuse Nepali community. I provided potential participants with a copy of the survey and interview questions at their request and gave them a week to consider if they would be willing to participate. The survey questions are meant to create a demographic outline of those who are willing to participate, separate out those who garden from those who do not, and inquire about interest and willingness to participate in a

longer, semi-structured interview. Following university human subject protocol, prior to survey distribution, I gave participants forms to sign detailing the measures in place to protect their confidentiality, and to express their ability to withdraw from questioning at any time. Once they signed and expressed an informed understanding of the survey procedures, then I began the survey.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out after the initial survey, and after another review of the precautionary measures in place for the participant. The interviews were recorded on an audio recording device. The interviews were a series of open-ended questions intended to determine challenges and advantages to gardening and foodway practices in Syracuse. Once the interview was completed, survey and interviews were transcribed and coded for food procurement, preparation and consumption practices, memories, desires, difficulties, and environmental adjustments. The names of all participants were rendered to their initials as an identity protection measure. Interview and survey participants were limited to Nepali people with some English-speaking skill, and therefore limits the range of information that could be gathered from this research. Further investigation into this topic would be improved by the inclusion of a translator or a PI with conversational Nepali language skills.

My long-term ethnographic fieldwork has centered around the Nepali Christian community in Syracuse, reflecting on food, culture, identity, and intergenerational cultural (re)production. Most ethnographic fieldwork was either conducted at one of the local Nepali Churches or at church events within the county (e.g., cookouts). This was the primary site of my fieldwork as a matter of convenience for the site's proximity to me home. As well as the head pastor's insistence on my attendance of Church services and social functions. Throughout my time attending these Sunday services and other church sponsored events, I positioned myself as

having come from the university seeking questions and answers about Nepali food and ritual in the Church environment. At times when I was questioned on my commitment to the evangelical Christian mission, I always defaulted to my existing Catholic subjectivity, I would entertain discussions of theology but would never state that I was a born-again Christian who attended service for spiritual fulfillment.

Outside of the church context, further ethnographic fieldwork sites included Nepali ethnic markets and various Nepali household-gardens within Syracuse. I spent a significant amount of time working towards gaining access to Nepali home-gardens through cultivating lasting friendships with neighbors, coworkers, and churchgoers. The home-garden is a gendered space, tended to by grandmothers, mothers, aunties, and wives. For me to gain access to these spaces I developed relationships with gardeners centered around their knowledge and experience as growers of food, and I would only enter a garden after an invitation. I would enter the home-garden only carrying curious wonder and leave with images of vibrant greenery swirling through my head. After leaving the field site, I recorded and saved my field notes, with identifying information removed or abbreviated for confidentiality, and then are coded for the themes discussed above. Once the transcription and coding for the fieldnotes were complete, I checked for novel trends or emergent questions about the topic of cultural reproduction through food. By comparing the interview transcripts with the fieldnotes, a more holistic representation of the social phenomena within the Nepali diaspora can begin to crystallize.

Findings

My work shows the ways those in the Nepali diaspora in Syracuse reterritorialize the space of the backyard into a point of connection and healing through gardening and foodway practices. These practices sublimate the stress of daily living, strengthen social connection

through gift giving, and build a community of practice through the sharing of technical knowledge and culinary tasks. Throughout, individual Nepali gardeners utilize the specificity of their ecological and material resources to embody a unique instance of Nepali cuisine that is particular to their tastes, memories, and materiality. In gardening, families and individuals find a peaceful place away from the other hum-drum concerns of life and are instead immersed in a zone that permits the mind to wander to mental landscapes of the past and to step forward in time toward dreams of the future. This place of peace is not without complicated and antithetical attributes.

The environment of Syracuse imposes seasonal limitations on the flourishing of the garden, and thus stands in stark contrast to the garden of the mind for many Nepali "garden-lovers." Seasonality in Central New York reinforce the connections between backyard gardens, cultural institutions (e.g., the Nepali church), and the private enterprise of Nepali ethnic markets. The points of contact between these social forms (the family, the garden, the church, the market, etc.) create a space for the reproduction of memory and identity, but also a testing ground for the working through of novel material and ecological conditions (for example, winter, displacement, difficulties in resettlement, etc.). Gardening creates the opportunity to reflect on the past, realign in the present, and actively reimagine a future that is fundamentally structured by individual and community innovation.

In what follows, I describe the various ways that gardening and foodway practices are used by those in the Nepali diaspora to create spaces of serenity, how seasonality in the United States is perceived, how the pantry at home is stocked from the garden and market, and how ethnicity and nationality is performed by, and for, younger generations. Each of these sections is informative as to how some in the Syracuse Nepali community understand food, gardening, and

specific plants as cultural heritage that allow them to remember pieces of a home left behind, while also retaining and exercising culinary and botanical agency. In the first section I relay the difficulties that some in the Nepali community have with weather and seasonality in Syracuse, with a focus on how the winter is understood as an obstacle to joy. In the second section I discuss how the intersection between the home-garden and the transnational ethnic grocery store provide the raw material for cultural reproduction contingent on the reenactment of food memories. Third and finally, I discuss how claims to nationality are made through food; specifically how some in the Nepali diaspora remember attachments to a Bhutanese national identity through the consumption and sharing of national cuisine.

White and Green

Environmental change is a primary force of discontinuity faced by immigrants and refugees arriving to a host country. It is the shifts in seasonality, climate, flora, and fauna that force changes to how gardening and foodways are maintained and reproduced. To address how the Nepali diasporic community reproduces identity in Syracuse, the environmental and ecological conditions are the foremost consideration. By attending to the existing conditions and novel challenges, such as winter, urban space, and post-industrial soil, I elucidate the successes and failures of cultivating a garden that supports the reproduction of Nepali identity in Syracuse. The construction of a home garden is a representation of the creativity of the gardener, an opportunity for Nepali community members, mostly women, to create a landscape that nourishes their families and inspires daily purpose through care. Through gardening, the mechanisms of cultural reproduction in resettlement are given a stress test, shifting the techniques and processes to fit the new environment while still conferring a holistic sense of identity.

Before resettlement, Laxuman states that concerns about agricultural productivity orbited around water "because too much drought over there, hard to get watering, and then… sometimes, too much rain, sometimes no rain," the environmental issue is usually framed as "the weather condition." Snow and freezing temperatures represented a new environment that was unfamiliar. Bhim, a pastor of a local Nepali church with an endless fount of energy spoke of his families' need to adjust to the new conditions,

> "Coming here in the beginning, winter is very challenging, and it took some year to figure out what is the good food, I mean uh, plants to grow here. We figure out and we succeed."

Among the respondents the adjustment to colder temperatures is found in the variety of plants they grow. While some continue to grow mustard greens, others have turned to more frost hardy plants like kale or spinach. The destiny of the plant remains the same, but its capacity to withstand environmental conditions in Central New York is greater.

Even with years of living in the region, knowledge gained about temperature and seasonality may not be met with an overabundance of caution. When a single night of freezing temperatures washed across the Northeast United States in May 2023, Nepali farmers utilizing rented plots at Salt City Harvest Farm on the fringes of Onondaga County had to take stock of the damage wrought by the subfreezing temperatures. One farmer, Jay, who had moved to Syracuse from Texas, had planted his potatoes and okra a week before the cold snap, and had lost all his cold sensitive plantings. He gave this news to me on a blustery and dusty morning, sun blazing in the sky while clouds of fine sand whipped around us; the heat of the day was in sharp contrast to the cold of the night before. While he had other crops that withstood the frost damage, he was carrying the burden of a lost crop, hours of work that he and his wife has spent

collecting, planting, and cultivating. He and I commiserated over crop losses, him pointing out that we had lost a couple dozen kale, cabbage, and Swiss chard plants to some animal chewing on the leaves. The extremes of heat and cold experienced during the spring in New York throw gardeners and farmers into a disequilibrium, that especially disrupts the capacity of Nepali farmers and gardeners to grow culturally appropriate foods that require long, hot, and humid growing seasons, like Jay's okra, or the ubiquitous *dalle khursani*.

The environment in CNY is permissive enough to grow a range of crops to maturity, but it requires some ingenuity to extract the greatest harvest from certain plants. I have encountered some Nepali community members who over-winter *dalle khursani* plants indoors, or who grow ginger in plastic shopping baskets to easily transport them inside during cold snaps. Regardless of invention, adaptation, or desperation, the environment in Syracuse provides enough room to experiment with new techniques and crop varieties, with each passing growing season expanding the horizon of possibility for Nepali gardeners and farmers.

At the end of the growing season, in late autumn, when the killing frost comes, the surplus from the garden is also saved over the winter so that families will have a consistent supply of tomatoes, chili peppers, and other produce. This stockpiling does not completely replace the benefits of the garden, as during the long winter months the desire to garden does not vanish. Bhim conveyed to me his dismay that gardening is not possible in the winter, stating the "[we feel] bad we are not able to garden in the winter, looking outside at the snow. We want to see from looking from our window, the green vegetable all around and go, and pick, and eat. We can look and all we see is snow, and go and eat the snow!" His joking tone does not diminish the longing for an environment that permits year-round growth. When I asked Laxuman "is the climate in Syracuse good for gardening?" he responded that for "three to five month[s]…it is

good, but when you start winter, it goes. I would say 50/50… not good not bad”. The environment of Central New York is a point of tension for the Nepali gardeners, especially for those with a background in agriculture in Nepal/Bhutan, who have worked with cycles that produce multiple harvests per year.

What Nepali gardeners experience is a sort of environmental discombobulation, they experience an unsettling shift in the cycles of cultivation that they had been accustomed and enculturated to in the home-country. Respondents accept the conditions they live in by necessity, but continually search for ways to defy the environmental constraints on cultivation, keeping tethered to crops that affirm identity through memory while also affirming identity through invention. The Nepali diasporic community in Syracuse “are not merely acted upon by their new environments and do not simply occupy a continuum of assimilation, but that they are actively engaged in the process of (re)locating place and (re)building place in and around new spaces” (Jean 2015; 49). The case of the Syracuse Nepali community provides an example of a unique response to displacement that intersects with a variety of social and economic institutions, which pivots on the capacity of the local environment to provide a limited range of culturally appropriate foods.

Seasonal weather conditions that impact agricultural productivity are not the only form that environmental discontinuities take. Terese Gagnon (2021) describes how Karen refugees must contend with “lead poisoning and contamination from other toxins in the postindustrial soil” (27) but refuse to utilize raised bed gardening, opting instead to travel outside of the urban center to less polluted peri-urban or rural garden plots. In Gagnon’s telling, Karen refugees in Syracuse deny themselves the convenience of gardening close to home in raised beds in order to maintain a connection to “rituals of remembering that help bridge the chasm of meaning between

daily realities in their current place of residence and that of remembered homes" (38). In displacement, gardening and other foodway practices provide "a way of merging labor and recreation as well as a way of making new landscapes legible and familiar" (Jean, 2015, 65). However, rendering a landscape legible does not erase the challenges of unfamiliar or unfriendly seasonality, that tension must be absorbed or sublimated elsewhere. Interview respondents and Nepali gardeners I spoke to always maintained a hopeful view of the warmer months, which gives them the opportunity to restock their freezers and bring fresh food back on the menu. In displacement, new environments and cycles are encountered, and have the potential to interrupt patterns that have been the foundation of daily life. With this potential for disruption there is also the possibility, perhaps an imperative for, the negotiation of new forms of identity that seek to resolve the contradictions between memory and present reality. Over time as challenges are encountered, be it a May frost or post-industrial soil toxicity, new ways of navigating the environment are integrated into everyday practice.

Central New York provides a long enough growing season to cultivate a great variety and quantity of food, but the harsh winter between the growing seasons interrupts the rhythms of life that many Nepali community members recall with yearning. Farming and gardening allow for Nepali community members to maintain a connection to land and to produce food that will sustain individuals and families during the winter months, but the winter season prevents the realization of multiple growing seasons, and thus nullifies certain knowledge on food production. However, the foreclosure of that agricultural knowledge on certain cultivation practices, like citrus fruit agroforestry or rice paddy agriculture, does not remove these crops from Nepali foodways. The presence of ethnic markets in Syracuse provides the space for the Nepali community to dedicate time and energy to crops that can be cultivated in Central New York and

opens links to transnational trade to supplement the yearning for unique produce that carries the taste of home.

Ethnic Markets, Freezers, and Transnational Trade

While home gardens, like Laxuman and Thirtha's, provide enough produce in the form of tomatoes and chilis to allow a family to overwinter without purchasing those goods at the store, ethnic markets provide a much wider range of culturally significant goods and produce that are more difficult to cultivate or source in Syracuse. Nepali grocery stores are also essential for experimental cultivation of fruits and vegetables. In the absence of an environment for the germination of subtropical flora, the ethnic market becomes a space where plant life can find an opportunity to grow, far away from where it was cultivated. Given favorable conditions and some luck, cucurbits grown in Central America can take root in Nepali gardens in Syracuse. The possibility to grow subtropical flora shortens the distance between memory of the home country and identity produced in the host country, this closing of the gap highlights the importance of the ethnic market as a space where memory can be accessed and emerge in new forms in diaspora. Laxuman told me how his wife, Thirtha had found a *chayote* fruit that had a sprout emerging from it, and she had been told to take it home by the store owner to attempt to grow it. Thirtha removed the sprout, placed it in a pot with some soil and a few months later it began to bear fruit. When the colder weather began in October, the vine shriveled and died, but it was still able to be cultivated far away from its native and adopted ranges. Nepali stores become informal and peripheral zones to obtain seed for the garden, where customers and community members encounter the vital substance of seeds and sprouts by chance, and through their own agentive power bring into being an organism that echoes the flourishing of spaces thousands of miles away.

It is not only living plant life that allows families to seize a distant piece of their past gardens. For those Nepali people resettled in Syracuse by way of refugee camps, some of the Nepali grocery stores sell a specific variety of *dal* that was grown in the refugee camps. This information was given to me by Bhim, who told me that this dried bean reminded him of “that life”, dragging a long sigh afterwards. Arijit Sen’s (Sen 2016) explication of the capability of an ethnic market to recreate culinary ecologies abroad intersects with this phenomenon of refugee foods. Ethnic markets have an imperative to provide foodstuffs that connect with a diaspora’s memory of home, for Sen’s study of Chicago’s Bangladeshi population this is centered on frozen fish from the Ganges Delta in Bangladesh. He also identifies a change in the bipolar culinary ecology of the Bangladeshi diaspora, where those in the diaspora consume greater quantities of fish harvested from the delta than those living in Bangladesh because of the market opportunity to collect, process, flash-freeze, and ship whole fish to Bangladeshi populations abroad. The neat packaging and easy availability of this *dal* in diaspora reinforces memories of food in displacement in the context of resettlement, representing a chain of dispossession but one that is reclaimed in an optimistic light. Bhim, spoke of the diversity of foodstuffs available at “groceries that they bring from all over, this country is a blessing it is a blessing.”

The wide range of products available at Nepali International on Teall Avenue in Lyncourt, or the Thai & Nepali Store on grant Avenue in Syracuse, opens a strange forum for memory, one that takes advantage of the transnational food economy in the United States, but recalls sustenance in a refugee camp. But the availability of food and fruit does not replace the act of cultivating these things. Respondents dismay at the winter in Syracuse, because it prevents the cultivation of many crops, essential to their culinary traditions; fresh and local bananas, bamboo shoots, and oranges are a short list of crops that spur longing in those I spoke to. There

is a tense negotiation between the constant bounty of the grocery store, the inexpensive and the sustaining act of gardening at home. Each method of subsistence represents "as a flow of information integrates people into an intelligible social world" (Slater 1997). The availability of objects, like oranges, in a grocery store act as a substitution to the full sensory array of plucking fresh citrus fruits from a tree in a garden grove. Ethnic markets are important for the "regenerating the migrant community" (Tuomainen 2009; 528) but are less context dependent and ecologically grounded than gardens.

Nepali grocery stores in Syracuse provide tropical and subtropical produce year-round at the large scale, providing a great service to those who want to connect with the foodways of their home-country, while also engaging with the transnational flow of produce (Imbruce 2007). However, Nepali gardens in Syracuse can provide enough produce to replace market consumption of basic fruits and vegetables (tomatoes, chilis, leafy greens, etc.). While the store may be carefully arranged with a massive variety of food stuffs and other goods (veils, dishware, utensils, gardening tools) reflective of the material culture of its clientele, it relies on shipments of produce from subtropical locales. For those with the space, time, and capability, replacing the need to consume in the market with the ability to cultivate and grow food allows them to focus more specifically on niche products in the ethnic market.

The ethnic grocery store is an important touchstone for many Nepali families attempting to hold fast to the edible memories carried transnationally. Even certain varieties of dal grown in the refugee camp are sought after, as it is food that inspires memories of growing even the slightest amount of nourishment for oneself in the refugee camps. The ethnic market allows for the bridging of distant geographies and is relied on as an institution to reaffirm and reinforce the act of gardening. The limitations of the climate in Syracuse prevent the cultivation of certain

crops but having multiple Nepali ethnic markets (upwards of ten by some insider estimates) provides a wide range of selection and an ease of access that sublimates the tension of dislocation. The home and the market are spaces where members of the Nepali diaspora can affirm their belonging to a place, both their ideal of the home-country, but also the opportunity and agency available in the host-country.

The market provides the availability of products impossible to cultivate in Syracuse, to return to the Thai & Nepali Grocery Store, its shelves are sorted by spices, cookware, clothes, beans and *dal*, and an open cooler with vegetables. While it primarily serves a Nepali clientele and is owned by a Nepali family, it also serves other ethnic communities within Syracuse. Once, when on the hunt for dark soy sauce to use in making a red braised pork, I entered the store and inquired the employee, Damber, on whether they had any in stock. He notified me that because it was approaching the New Year, many Thai people in Syracuse bulk ordered boxes of dark soy sauce and exhausted his remaining supply.

Besides sauces and stock concentrates, the Thai Nepali store stocks products ranging from puffed lotus seeds, *kasuri methi*, long beans, Burmese sweet potatoes, and ash gourd. It is not only subtropical produce, Nepali stores across Syracuse also stock the essentials for cooking like garlic, onions, and tomatoes, but for those with a home garden, they already have access to a material base for the most significant and utilized of crops for cooking. The ethnic market has even become a place to distribute small parcels of home goods. Once, when making a short trip to the Thai & Nepali store for some garlic and sweet potatoes, I was called to by an employee before I exited after making my purchase. “Brother!” a woman called out to me, handing me a small bag that she had pulled from a chest freezer, “you try these” she instructed. This small, freezer-burned Ziploc bag was full of *dalle khursani*, still green or mottled yellow-green, not

marked with a tag or price sticker or any label. A bit surprised, I was not able to produce any meaningful questions about this gift, but I thanked her for it and went on my way home.

The relationship between the market and the garden in this example becomes far more intertwined than the idea of them as two separate sources of sustenance, instead it is productive to consider them as connected institutions that allow for food to be circulated more broadly within the community or between friends. Regardless, the site of the garden and of the ethnic market cannot be understood as separate, as confined to their own space as matter can move between them with ease. Memory allows shoppers to step through the doors of the ethnic market and find among the aisles and endcaps material that crystallizes a sense of history, belonging, and possibility (Mankekar 2002). Gardening, when recognized in dialectic with the ethnic institution of the grocery store, is an agentive tactic that permits gardeners to exert resistance and practice negotiation, with the market and with the environment. This combination of the home garden and the ethnic market preserves certain forms and ideas of "Nepali food" while also encountering the historical and environmental conditions that trouble strict definitions of Nepali food and force the creation and negotiation of new identities utilizing food as a mechanism for exploration and reclamation.

Reproducing Nationality for Babies

Cultural reproduction is a collective effort the engages a community of practice together in the creation of identity for its members and for the group. In a diasporic community memory and identity are utilized to construct social institutions that employ practices and ways of being that provide space for the reproduction of identity. Nepali cultural institutions, like the Nepali Church, aim to secure a holistic sense of Nepali identity, from the birth and commemoration of newborns to the death of elders. This institutional capacity to engage with a multi-generational

community provides a foundation for the negotiation of identity. Especially through events featuring food preparation and consumption, as well as creating a space in which ingredients, seeds, and crops can be shared amongst community members. The Nepali church hosts numerous "baby dedication ceremonies," and a consistent theme is the use of food to reinforce ethnic, and national identity in diaspora. Several baby dedications for those of Bhutanese descent served the national curry of Bhutan at the after-ceremony buffet. This dish, *ema datshi*, is a spicy broth with whole chilis, sliced radish or potato, with cheese. Meena, an aunt of the baby being celebrated that day explained to me the ethnic and national particularity of this dish, and it crystallized the notion that from the moment a baby is born, they are being introduced to cultural norms.

In the Nepali diaspora, nationality is actively reproduced and guarded. The trauma of displacement has strengthened the will of refugees to hold fast to forms of national identity left to them. In the absence of a formal claim of citizenship, food has become a tether with which parents connect their children to a chain of identity. This tactic, the reproduction of nationality through curry, fuses the subaltern agency of Tagbanua swidden agriculturalists (Cuevas, Fernandez, and Olvida 2015) with the active construction of a nation-state identity of the French Educational Apparatus (Maxwell 2019). In claiming *ema datshi* as the celebratory meal for a child born in the diaspora, the Syracuse Nepali community engages in a subversion of the nation-state by embodying forms of a national community outside its proscriptive geographical boundaries (Agnew 2005).

By utilizing memory work and technical knowledge members of the Nepali diaspora reproduce identity for generations severed from lived experience in the home-country. The inability of the celebrated infant to consume this national cuisine does not impede on the signal

transmitted by the act of serving the curry. The congregation that has gathered and who consumes the meal is nourished by the material and sensory memory of Bhutanese food. Place becomes reproduced through the gustatory experience and is always subject to changes related to environmental and material conditions. While dining on the *ema datshi* in the church basement, I was seated with many of the church pastors and elders. I sat across from Bhim, who continued to expand on his wife Meena's explanation of this curry. Through sips of milky Nepali *chai* and picking chicken bones out of our teeth, we reviewed the process of making the national curry of Bhutan, usually cooked with "stinky cheese," a fermented yak cheese. In the United States, this was replaced with slice of American cheese, layered over the potatoes and chiles to make the final product we were eating. In shifting the ways that food is produced, it shifts the sensory memories of those that consume it. By utilizing *ema datshi* in claiming nationality while simultaneously drawing on the material resources available in diaspora, the Nepali diasporic community creates a synthesis of displacement and resettlement through food. "As immigrants collectively expand and reshape their culinary competence to make sense of new situations, the communal repository of memories and experiences related to the place of origin may also influence the way they relate to each other" (Parasecoli 2014).

In an even more granular sense, the prominence of chili peppers in the dish reaffirms the strength of signals in Bhutanese-Nepali cuisine, I am speaking here of spiciness. The Nepali church hosts baby dedications, birthdays, baptism cookouts, weddings, and funerals. Each of these events is followed by the serving of food, and because the congregation is so large and multigenerational there is almost always going to be a meal served at the church. There is always an opportunity for new cooks to bring and distribute food and trade tips and techniques on how to prepare a bitter melon *sabji* or a yellow *dal* soup, or a cured pork curry. Each event featuring

food promotes a resurgence of sensory memory, and when it is reproduced, it can be interpreted by the congregation in their own individual way, but held together, the understanding is that these culinary demonstrations constitute a part of an interconnected community of practice bound by memory and solidarity. Institutions, like the Syracuse Nepali Church, provide the space for congregants to produce, distribute, and consume Nepali food, and situate the culinary endeavor as a way of being with others in a community of practice. Foodway practices taking place in social institutions allow for the collective remembrance of food and place in diaspora while creating new memories for younger generations, instilling them with a sense of what food is celebratory, satisfying, and significant.

Gardens are one of numerous domestic loci for the lives of the Nepali diasporic community. For those that do not garden, the flora that originates there can be accessed through the webs of social connectivity in the community. From the home-garden, food is eaten raw, processed, preserved, gifted, or cooked at social events in a variety of situations. The garden is an essential landscape in the social lives of the garden-lovers and their families. The produce from the garden is mobile material and has the capacity to connect consumers to any number of backyard garden plots across Syracuse. It also has the capacity to trade sensory memory across generations, as parents and grandparents cultivate crops and prepare foods that they remember from their childhood for their children to eat at special events or in the quotidian space of the home.

Once, when taking a garden walk with my neighbors, we were invited into their home to receive a gift of seeds. The house they lived in was a split-level duplex, with the Wagley family on the first floor, and a single mother and her two daughters on the second floor. While waiting for the Wagley matriarch to return with seeds from elsewhere in the home, one of the upstairs

neighbors, the eldest daughter, poked into the kitchen. I asked her what her favorite food to eat was, she paused and responded, “I like *saag*.” She then retrieved a small container of something to eat from the downstairs refrigerator and retreated to the upstairs apartment. The arrangement between the tenants became clear, that the Wagley family had full run of the backyard to create a vast garden and would then preserve and provide a wide assortment of foods to their upstairs neighbors and others in the neighborhood. *Simsaag*, *gundruk*, dried chilis, and marigold wreaths were cultivated by the elder Wagley family and then given to their upstairs neighbors. On a larger scale the sharing of prepared foods for a church congregation is an event of much greater magnitude.

My first foray into the church was for a baby dedication ceremony for a family in the church. I arrived to help cook goat curry early in the morning in February, and was met by the head pastor, Bhim, and two elder Nepali men. Before any cooking took place, the elderly father of another church pastor, Jagat, began the task of cutting the meat into bite sized pieces. Wielding a large cleaver and bringing down on a dinner plate sized tree stump, shielded from gristle and flying bits of tissue by an apron made from a black plastic garbage bag, he swiftly dispatched twenty pounds of mutton into bits ready to throw into the pot. Throughout the morning a rotating cast of church leaders came to the food preparation area, on the lower level in an indoor parking garage, to cook.

A man named James, a former chef in Nepal, took charge of cooking the goat curry, while his wife Sudikshya jumped right into frying yoghurt-marinated chicken in a large steel wok over a propane burner. All the while congregants arriving early for the event stopped by to make conversation and catch a glimpse of what was to be served later. Near the end of meal preparation, Jagat’s mother descended from upstairs, where the furnished church kitchen is, with

a coffee pot full of Nepali tea. She passed the offered it to everyone there, when she came around to me, she filled the small plastic Dixie cup to the brim with the heavily sweetened, creamy Masala tea. Its taste was luxurious, slightly spiced with cardamom, ginger, and cloves, and so full of cream that a small layer of scum had accumulated at the top.

This choreography of processing, cooking, snacking, and serving has been repeated countless times over my time spent at church cookouts and events. The responsibility for cooking and food preparation is shared amongst the congregants, and the role of lead cook shifts depending on the celebration. The labor of feeding and the gift of a hot meal create the space for a constant rotation of dishes. There are meals that reproduce foundational food memories or dishes that play to the tastes of a younger generation, regardless they are still players in the *Nepali* buffet, and are meant to keep the community together through commensality. The church buffet and the backyard vegetable garden are spaces that create new memories across a multigenerational cohort, reproducing Nepali culture through cuisine and germinating memory through sensory experience.

Conclusion

Following Abarca (2004), I argue that while authenticity is bound in systems of institutional and social power, conceptions of the "authentic" to the individuals I spoke to are not explicitly thought of as reflections of innate or accumulated authority. Abarca invokes Martha Stewart's *tamale* recipe to explain how authenticity is embedded within hegemonic power structures that reflect a heavy focus on expertise. A famous chef with a syndicated cable television program is far more capable of exerting an ownership of authenticity than, for example, Mexican working-class women who reconstruct generational recipes within material constraints of poverty and transnational status.

In the Nepali diaspora, the relative obscurity of Nepali cuisine has, for the time being, prevented the injection of discourse of homogenization into understandings of what is and how to prepare Nepali food. There is no food network special on how to make *gundruk* soup, nor would those in the Nepali community I spoke to respond to a proscribed recipe. “Authentic” is not a term used by those I have spoken to, instead Nepali food has been defined by several respondents, like James and Bhim, as a link to personal experience and technical skill. In my time volunteering and attending services at the Syracuse Nepali Church, the only people who have spoken to me about “expertise” or “authentic” Nepali cuisine have been white pastors who have relationships with the congregation and church leadership. When explaining to Pastor Ryan that my research focuses on the ways that food is used to solidify identity within the Nepali community, he remarked that I “must be an expert on Nepali food by now.” I greeted this statement with deep confusion, and immediately responded by stating that I would never become an expert in Nepali food, I might come to know a recipe or two, but that expertise is not something I was seeking. The presupposition that I might come to a position of authority on a cuisine I had only been exposed two for a few years was jarring, but it made explicit the underlying assumption that some have about academic investigation, that it carries legitimacy and produces a concrete, positivist relationship between investigator and research participant, or perhaps to some, research object.

Among the Nepali churchgoers, home-gardeners, and farmers I have spoken to, the context of resettlement is a liminal period between the lived past and the dreams of the future. The challenges of living in an environmental and social context far removed from that in Bhutan or Nepal are negotiated by contacting the vibrant matter that is translatable across distance; that being the soil, flora, and food. Technology, transnational foodways, and technical knowledge are

axes on which Nepali identity in diaspora can maintain connections to shared history and individual experience. Gardening and foodway practices maintain connections to fellow Nepali community members are the mechanism through which individual culinary creativity is maintained.

The Nepali community members I spoke with utilize foodway practices to provide a means through which to inform their children about a shared past, mediate the daily stresses of life, and it also functions as a cushion between the radically different environmental conditions of their home-country and their host country. Working in the home-garden provides members of the Syracuse Nepali community an opportunity to co-create knowledge, memory, and belonging in unfamiliar circumstances. Produce from the garden sustains families throughout the winter months; in times when there is no fresh produce, frozen tomatoes and chilis are still present during meals. Preserving garden harvests by freezing, pickling, or curing is augmented by the utilization of Nepali grocery stores. The combination of the home garden and the ethnic market allow for the preservation of culinary techniques, styles, dishes, and ingredients that tether Nepali community members to powerful food memories, while also permitting the space for experimentation and invention.

The religious institutions are only one environment in which Nepali community members engage in commensal behavior; by centering food as the substance of celebration, the preparation, consumption, and disposal of it become weighted with meaning. “Nepali food” is easily recognizable by Nepali community members, while simultaneously being reconfigured and reinvented to suit the tastes of the cooks, family members, American born youths, and members of the larger social network. Respondents and interlocutors make use of many opportunities for creating and maintaining Nepali foodways in Syracuse. In doing so they

reinforce the power of memory on what they create, but also express powerful agentive capacity to claim culinary originality at church buffets or at the dinner table.

While conducting this research I have been able to observe this social world through a small window, with limited interactions and over a short period of time. There remain many questions related to this thesis that have gone unanswered: what are the contours of the seed-saving network in the Nepali diasporic community? How does religiosity impact the way the Nepali people garden and their consumptive taboos? What are the effects of Nepali home gardens on ecological successions of flora and fauna? What is the measurable agrobiodiversity of Nepali home-gardens? What ethnobotanical medicines are grown in the home? How would a feminist lens impact this research? Further research on this topic should entertain these tangents and more but would be best improved by a larger pool of respondents, more embedded ethnographic research, and translation services to expand the range of potential respondents. What remains essential to engaging with this research is the embodied act of gardening, to be immersed in the affective labor of cultivation allows for the connection between researcher and participant on common ground, where sharing seeds opens the door for connection and dialogue.

The Nepali home-garden has the capacity to sustain families and communities, physically and psychically, but the institutional structure in the public and private sector may not be adequate to protect resettled refugees from heavy metal poisoning, irate neighbors, or food insecurity. Despite these existing challenges, Syracuse has the capacity to become the proving ground for a New American sociality that is defined by an intersubjective urban ecology that bridges the divides between individuals through unity in a project of sustenance reliant on the unique methods that individuals and small collectives use to reterritorialize space through remembrance of sensory experiences. My research shows that members of the Nepali diaspora

recognize the positive effect of commensality and maintain their foodways through the reproduction of memory and through novel ways of navigating new environments. Central to this social navigation is the centrality of individual creative freedom that expands the boundaries of Nepali cuisine through the encounter and absorption of other foodways and processes. This culinary creativity is contradicting the use of an "authenticity" discourse, which instead attempts to lock the various *achars*, *saags*, and dishes in cultural amber.

The Nepali community in Syracuse is an active participant in a dialectic between food memory, environmental conditions, and other foodways already rooted in Syracuse. The garden is a central site of this dialectic, as it is the arena in which environmental conditions and remembrances of agrobiodiversity come into contact, and through that connection can produce an inflorescence of plant, fungi, animal, and social life. Neighbors and community members all have the capacity to engage with a community's practice of cultural reproduction through the care of the more-than-human world. For the some in the Syracuse Nepali community, the experience of dislocation and discomfort of resettlement is mediated by gardening. There is a knockdown effect wherein foodways become altered at the fringes and expand the repertoire of cooks and gardeners through contact with the social and natural actors in the place that they now call home. To contend that food should remain statically "authentic" for it to be recognized as legitimate or true-to-form is to ignore the benefit that culinary ingenuity brings to individuals, families, communities, and societies. Before the biodiversity of Turtle Island was plundered by European empires, much of the world had no relationship with corn, chili peppers, potatoes, cassava, peanuts and more. Since the era of global colonization, these plants have come to define global political economy and gastronomy. Now that nations and societies have had ample time to

integrate and cultivate preferred varieties of these numerous plant species, the transformation of cuisine through zones of cultural contact is one site through which we can build resiliency.

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Vita:

Ryan Fitzgerald was born in 1997. He aspires to be a farmer, growing food for his family, community, and for all the world's critters.