

A Garden of Transformation: A Sustainability Journey

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Abstract: This personal narrative details a transformative journey through a Ph.D. in Sustainability Education at Prescott College, culminating in a dissertation on community gardens in Orange County, California. The inquiry was guided by the core question: How may postcolonial theories and decolonization frameworks inform the practices and understandings of community gardens, particularly regarding inclusivity, cultural relevance, and the empowerment of marginalized communities? I reflect on the profound shift from an idealized, objective view of research to an embodied, relational, and deeply personal approach. This journey, rooted in a personal identity as a gay Latino man, exposed the complexities of colonialism and my own positionality, sparking a powerful emotional and intellectual transformation. The article highlights how methods such as post-qualitative inquiry, visual ethnography, and walking ethnography provide a space for authentic engagement and the co-creation of meaning. Ultimately, I share key lessons for the field of sustainability education, including the power of personal transformation, the need to embrace decolonization as a lived practice, and the potential of community gardens as sites for transformative learning. The narrative concludes with a call to action for educators and practitioners to embark on their own journeys of self-discovery, emphasizing that every small act of connection can be a catalyst for a more just and equitable world.

Keywords: Sustainability Education, Decolonization, Community Gardens, Post-qualitative Inquiry, Transformative Learning, Social Justice

Dr. Alexander Garcia, whom you can call Xander, holds a B.S. in Business Administration and Marketing from California State University, Long Beach, an M.B.A. in Sustainability Leadership, and a Ph.D. in Sustainability Education from Prescott College. His doctoral dissertation research produced four articles, in which he developed a decolonized community garden framework and conducted two case studies examining how community gardens can serve as spaces that encourage community engagement and cultural revitalization.

Currently, he is working with the City of Fullerton's Parks and Recreation Department as a Parks and Recreation Specialist, supporting oversight of facility rentals and staff, as well as ensuring smooth operations of senior and youth programming. Additionally, Xander is leading the establishment of the city's first community garden, working towards his goal of creating safe spaces that nurture the community and benefit the greater good of individuals and the environment.

The sun beat down, warm and heavy on my back as I knelt, my hands deep in the soil of an Orange County community garden. I wasn't just a researcher in that moment; I was a participant, my fingers caked with dirt, helping an elderly woman pull up a stubborn root. She spoke to me in a gentle mix of Spanish and English about her family's history with the land and the healing she found in this small, urban plot. It was a simple conversation, yet it was a turning point. It shattered my idealized view of what research could be and revealed that a true understanding of sustainability and decolonization wasn't found in a textbook; it was found in the soil, in shared stories, and in the profound, personal connection to the land. This article reflects that journey, uncovering the lessons I learned and the profound impact the process had on me.

The Influence of Prescott College

My dissertation journey was profoundly shaped by the unique mission and goals of Prescott College's Ph.D. in Sustainability Education program. The program's core commitment to social and ecological justice, experiential learning, and interdisciplinary inquiry was not just an academic framework but a guiding philosophy that influenced every aspect of my work. The college's emphasis on student-led, self-designed inquiry gave me the freedom to move beyond traditional, formulaic research and engage with my topic in a way that was personally meaningful and ethically grounded. This allowed me to explore the complex intersection of community gardens and decolonization, a topic that resonated deeply with my own identity and values as a Latino man.

The program's focus on social justice directly inspired my choice to study spaces that addressed issues of equity and empowerment for marginalized communities. The value placed on experiential learning encouraged me to step away from the desk and into the gardens themselves,

where I could use walking and visual ethnography to understand participants' lived experiences. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of the program was crucial; it empowered me to combine diverse fields, from environmental science and urban planning to anthropology and postcolonial theory, to develop a holistic understanding of how these gardens functioned as sites of healing and cultural reclamation. The college's core principles provided a solid foundation, encouraging me to connect my academic pursuits with real-world issues and to conduct research that was not only intellectually rigorous but also socially relevant and transformative.

My Immersion into the Inquiry

Entering the dissertation stage, I had a somewhat idealized view of what research entailed. I envisioned a clear, linear path for data collection and analysis, in which I would objectively observe and document the dynamics within community gardens. I believed my role was to be a detached, neutral observer, gathering facts and figures from a distance. But engaging with the community and their complex histories shattered this illusion. I quickly discovered that inquiry, particularly in a field as nuanced as decolonization, was unpredictable and deeply relational. It wasn't about extracting information from subjects; it was about co-creating meaning with the participants, allowing their experiences and voices to shape the study's trajectory.

My guiding question throughout this journey was: How may postcolonial theories and decolonization frameworks inform the practices and understandings of community gardens in Orange County, California, particularly regarding inclusivity, cultural relevance, and the empowerment of marginalized communities? This question served as my compass, shaping every part of the inquiry and forcing me to confront my own biases and assumptions. It

challenged my initial view of research and dramatically transformed my understanding of what was possible.

My understanding of post-qualitative inquiry (PQI) transformed from a theoretical concept to a lived experience. Initially, I found this methodology challenging, but it became a powerful tool. It was not just a method, but a philosophy that embraced ambiguity (St. Pierre, 2011), encouraged flexibility, and valued the subjective experiences of both the inquirer and the participants. PQI challenged me to relinquish control, to be open to unexpected discoveries, and to acknowledge the emotional and embodied aspects of the inquiry process. Instead of following a rigid plan, I had to be present and responsive, listening deeply to the unfolding stories.

Similarly, my understanding of decolonization deepened significantly. I had understood it intellectually from my reading, but immersing myself in this inquiry brought it to life. I saw firsthand the enduring impacts of colonialism and the resilience of individuals working to reclaim their heritage. Decolonization became not just a political concept but a deeply personal and spiritual one, rooted in healing and the restoration of relationships between people, their culture, and the land (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Smith, 2012).

Perhaps most significantly, my relationship with the land evolved. As I spent time in the gardens, interacting with the people who cared for them, I began to feel a deeper connection to the soil and the plants. I recognized that land was not just a resource but a source of life, a repository of history, and a place of healing. This direct, sensory experience deepened my understanding far more than any academic text could.

Reflecting on this process, I realized that this study had been as much about personal transformation as it had been about academic inquiry. I had not only gathered data but also

confronted my own biases and privileges. This journey challenged me to think critically about my role as an inquirer and how my work could contribute to a more just and equitable world.

A Personal Perspective on Colonialism

Engaging with this inquiry stirred up a complex mix of emotions and reflections on colonialism. As a Latino man, I found myself in a unique, often contradictory space regarding this history. My heritage was deeply intertwined with the colonial narratives that this inquiry sought to unpack and challenge. The legacies of conquest and cultural erasure were woven into the fabric of my family history, a story passed down through generations of resilience and resistance. The weight of this history was something I carried, and it profoundly shaped who I was and the questions I asked.

This duality—being both a product of and a critic of the colonial system—created a profound tension. This reflection aligns with the concept of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), acknowledging that my perspective is not a “view from nowhere” but is deeply rooted in my specific identity and history. I had to acknowledge my own position of privilege. Born in the United States, with access to higher education, English fluency, and the ability to navigate the dominant culture, I recognized that I had opportunities not afforded to my ancestors. This realization was not easy to carry; it forced me to grapple with difficult questions about my identity and my role in a system that had both harmed my ancestors and provided me with certain benefits. I was a beneficiary of a system I was actively trying to deconstruct, which created an emotional and intellectual paradox.

The inquiry forced me to confront these complexities head-on. It challenged me to think critically about my relationship to power, privilege, and colonialism. I had to grapple with difficult questions about my role as an inquirer, about the potential for my work to either perpetuate or challenge existing inequalities. By acknowledging these power dynamics, I sought what Harding (1991) calls “strong objectivity,” a rigorous starting point for inquiry that begins from the lived experiences of the marginalized. I asked myself how I, as someone who had benefited from certain aspects of colonialism, could authentically engage in inquiry that sought to decolonize spaces and empower marginalized communities. These questions were not easy to answer, and I continued to wrestle with them throughout the process.

This study also brought up deep emotions of anger, sadness, and grief, as well as hope and determination. I felt anger at the injustices of the past and present, sorrow for the losses my ancestors suffered, but I also felt hope in the resilience and strength of our communities. These emotions fueled my inquiry and motivated me to continue. This personal perspective profoundly shaped my inquiry, making me acutely aware of the importance of ethical and respectful engagement with participants, of centering their voices, and of acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in the inquiry relationship.

Reflections on My Personal Journey

This inquiry was a deeply transformative experience that fundamentally altered my perspective on the world and my place within it. I began this endeavor with purely academic questions and intellectual curiosity, but I emerged with a profound emotional and spiritual connection to the issues I was exploring. I saw firsthand the power of community gardens to transform lives in ways I could never have grasped from simply reading about them. I witnessed

the joy on people's faces as they harvested their produce, the pride they felt in their gardening skills, and the deep sense of belonging they found in these shared spaces. I also heard stories of healing, resilience, and cultural continuity. This inquiry sparked in me a deep commitment to working toward a more just and equitable future.

The journey was not without its challenges, which pushed me beyond my comfort zone in ways I hadn't anticipated. I had to grapple with my biases and assumptions, acknowledge my privileges, and confront the complexities of my positionality. I faced the emotional weight of bearing witness to people's stories of trauma, loss, and struggle, learning to hold space for their experiences with compassion and respect. These were difficult moments, but they were also essential for my growth as an inquirer.

However, these challenges were intertwined with incredibly rewarding moments. I experienced the profound joy of building genuine connections with participants, of seeing their faces light up as they shared their passion and experiences. I felt the thrill of intellectual discovery, of uncovering new insights and making connections I had never considered before. I began to see the world in new ways, recognizing the hidden layers of meaning and the unspoken knowledge within these spaces. Ultimately, I felt a deep satisfaction in knowing that my work had the potential to make a real difference, contributing to positive change in communities that I had grown to care about deeply. The experience affirmed that meaningful research is not just about producing a document, but about the profound personal growth that happens along the way.

My Continuing Sustainability Journey: Lessons for the Field

My doctoral journey at Prescott College and the completion of my dissertation have not marked an end but rather a powerful new beginning. The experience fundamentally transformed me, equipping me with the skills, perspectives, and passions necessary for my future endeavors as a sustainability professional. The program's emphasis on social justice, interdisciplinary inquiry, and experiential learning has prepared me to tackle complex global challenges with both intellectual rigor and personal conviction.

This journey has yielded three valuable lessons that I believe are relevant to the broader field of sustainability education. First is the power of personal transformation. My experience affirmed that an authentic sustainability journey is as much about personal transformation as it is about academic inquiry. We, as educators, must model and encourage this kind of self-reflection. My work has shown me that true insight often emerges not from a detached, objective stance, but from a willingness to be vulnerable and to acknowledge our own place within the systems we study. Second, is decolonization as a lived practice. While decolonization is often discussed as a theoretical framework, my work has shown that it is a lived, ongoing practice. It is found in the simple, yet profound, act of community members reclaiming a plot of land or sharing a story. As sustainability educators, we have a responsibility to move beyond theory and support these grassroots efforts by centering Indigenous and marginalized voices and valuing their traditional ecological knowledge. Lastly, is the garden as a site of transformative learning. These spaces facilitate what Mezirow (1991) describes as a “perspective transformation,” where individuals critically reassess their assumptions to create a more inclusive world-view. My dissertation confirmed that community gardens are more than just spaces for food production; they are

powerful sites for transformative education. They provide a place where learning is embodied; where lessons on ecology, social justice, and community-building are literally rooted in the soil. These gardens offer a powerful model for experiential, place-based education that is both holistic and deeply impactful.

The skills and insights I gained during this journey are a foundation for a lifetime of work. The dissertation process taught me how to navigate ambiguity, embrace unpredictability, and find innovative solutions grounded in both theory and real-world needs. It instilled in me a deep-seated belief in the power of community-led solutions and the importance of fostering healing spaces, whether they are physical gardens or collaborative projects. This is a crucial shift from a top-down approach to one that is truly grassroots and empowering. I am now equipped not just with knowledge, but with the practical and ethical framework to advocate for policies that support urban food systems and empower communities to build a more sustainable future.

This journey's most profound lesson returned me to that simple, powerful moment in the garden with the elderly woman. My hands in the soil, helping to pull a root, I understood that true decolonization and healing begin with a single act of connection. It starts with listening to a story, with honoring the land, and with recognizing that our journeys are intertwined. My life's goal is to continue to work for my community, just as the elderly woman had done for decades at the garden she was a participant in, ensuring that these vital green spaces continue to flourish as sites of justice, healing, and ecological balance. The dissertation was not the end of my research; it was the beginning of my life's work.

So, I offer this final call to action to you: look to your own community and your own work, whatever it may be. Find that single act of connection, that simple conversation, that

moment in the soil. Recognize that every sustainability journey, no matter how small it may seem, has the power to become a source of profound personal transformation and a catalyst for a more just and equitable world. Step into your own journey, and trust that the path will reveal itself along the way.

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