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# "Don't Tell Them I Eat Weeds," A Study Of Gatherers Of Wild Edibles In Vermont Through Intersectional Identities

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“DON’T TELL THEM I EAT WEEDS,” A STUDY OF GATHERERS OF WILD  
EDIBLES IN VERMONT THROUGH INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

A Thesis Presented

by

Elissa J. Johnson

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Science  
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## ABSTRACT

As wild edibles gain in popularity both on restaurant menus and as a form of recreation through their collection, research on contemporary foragers/wildcrafters/gatherers of wild edibles has so increased from varied disciplinary perspectives. Through an exploration of gatherers in Vermont, I examine the relationships between practice and identity. By employing intersectionality through feminist ethnographic methods, this research recognizes the complex intersections of individuals' identities that challenge a more simplified, additive approach to definitions of race, class, gender and the myriad identities that inform one's experience of privilege and oppression. As prior scholarship has established, people from diverse ethnicities, genders, religions, class affiliations, rural and urban livelihoods, and ages gather wild edibles. This thesis draws connections between the intersectional identities of gatherers and the diversity of their gathering practices.

This project includes a discussion of how intersectionality may be applied and employed as analytical theory and as methodological foundation to better approach connections between identity and practice. Key questions driving the analysis are: what are the intersectional identities of gatherers of wild edibles in Vermont, and to what extent are these intersectional identities informing, or informed by, harvest and post-harvest practices? This research contributes to scholarship on foragers from a qualitative methodological perspective and attempts to support the body of literature on intersectionality as methodology as well as research that focuses on the connections between people, practice, and wild foods.

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## **An Introduction to Gatherers of Wild Edibles in Vermont**

“I’m sorry if I lose you, I’m a little all over the place,” Susan said to me over her shoulder as we moved swiftly through the brush alongside her long driveway leading to her homestead in rural, central Vermont. She tells me that she and her husband have lived on this land for over 35 years, “we were high school sweethearts and married young. Then we came out here and started creating our home. We’ve worked hard to get the land to how we want it to be, but it’s all a work in progress, it always is.” Over the course of our time together, Susan and I walked to nearly every corner of her 42-acre property, discussed which home projects she was undertaking at the time and which ones she had in the wings, recapped her children’s scholastic and extra-curricular activities, toured hand-dug swales and huglekulture, mounds made by piling earth atop tree stumps and organic debris, cleared a path of wild leeks by digging them up with a shovel to be replanted elsewhere, took down signs left hanging from a recent festival hosted on their land, and identified a new patch of chaga growth in a section of her property she calls the “fairy ward.” She seemed, in fact, a little all over the place.

After nearly four hours, in need of hydration, and with feet and legs tired from navigating new terrain behind Susan’s quick pace, I was relieved when she asked me inside for some lunch. I had so many questions that I was eager to ask, especially after all of the information I had received through our time together thus far. I suppose I was expecting a living space as unruly as the land over which we had just traveled: half-completed projects, scattered sentimental mementoes, and perhaps a messy dish or two. Upon entering I was met with a realization of my own bias; Susan’s home was spotless. She asked me to remove my shoes and we made our way through the entryway into the

kitchen, with high ceilings, exposed hand-hewn rafter beams, stainless steel appliances, slate floors, and butcher block counter tops.

“I have ADHD and OCD pretty badly,” Susan says, as if she was fully aware of the discrepancies between her indoor and outdoor areas and the bias with which I may have entered, “I’ve had them both since I was a kid and I never knew it, then one day I was just so frustrated because I couldn’t get anything done and I talked with my husband, who does IT work and used to be gone much more than he is now, and he said I should get checked out. It was such a weight lifted, knowing that there was some reason for how I felt, but the medications they prescribe for things like this are really bad sometimes.” Susan said her Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder were more or less kept under control, or as she said, “put to use,” when her two sons were born. “My sons were always active, and one of them does computer work now like his father and the other does a lot with theater and literature. They are both so bright,” she explained, beaming.

If there was one thing that Susan made apparent during our time together, it is that she loves her family dearly, and derives meaning and identity from activities that revolve around caring for them. She homeschooled both of her sons and used to provide daycare in her home for other parents in the area with children around her sons’ ages. She said she began to learn about wild edibles because she wanted to be able to teach her sons about the land they grew up on. After her sons moved away to go to college, and her husband continued to work full-time she said she felt lost, “I wasn’t sure what to do with myself. I had all of this free time and I couldn’t be a mother in the same way that I had been for twenty-some-odd years.” At this point in our conversation she turned to the refrigerator

and pulled out three vessels from which our lunch would come. They contained leftover fried dandelion heads, wild leeks sautéed with young stinging nettle with store-bought mushrooms, and a pesto of garlic mustard covering shredded chicken. I wanted to inquire about this new direction our conversation had taken, but that would have to wait until we sit down at the table to eat.

### **In Pursuit of Transdisciplinary, Intersectional, Ethnographic Research**

In what follows I will present the results of two years of Masters level research, two seasons of data collection through field walks with gatherers of wild edibles in Vermont, and an explanation of the methodological considerations of doing research concerning intersectional identities and highly seasonal field work. I will proceed by introducing the theoretical framework that guides this thesis research project and the article that follows. I will elaborate on the different ways research participants expressed their identities, and how their self-assigned identities provide an expansion of the common race, class and gender analysis. I also draw connections to the practice of gathering wild edibles and how this practice has come to shape certain identities, and has come to be shaped by them.

The following article identifies the ways in which intersectionality may be instrumental as a methodological framework (Syed 2010), and also as a useful theoretical angle for analyzing data derived through ethnographic methods. It addresses two key research questions from the perspective supported by this introduction: (1) What are the intersectional identities of gatherers of wild edibles in Vermont? and (2) To what extent do these intersectional identities inform values and practices of gathering wild edibles and vice versa? This research contributes to scholarship on foragers from a qualitative

methodological perspective and attempts to support the small body of literature on intersectionality as methodology as well as research that focuses on the connections between the people and the practice of gathering wild edibles. This research is exploratory in the collection and analysis of the data, the aim being to draw connections between identity and practice and to provide narrative voice to individuals and groups who may not be represented in popular or academic text. This is in comparison to an approach that aims to answer a specific question, or discover a truth. Instead, I have pursued this project with the idea that creating some initial connections between intersectionality and ethnographic fieldwork with gatherers of wild edibles may lead to some applied understanding that may reach the public sphere. I expand on these possibilities in the conclusion to this thesis.

#### *Inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary research distinctions*

The methodological underpinnings of my research are transdisciplinary in nature, which broadens the scope of literature that is applicable, but also limits the ability for a review of such literature to be comprehensive across all germane disciplines. My compromise is to focus on the points of overlap and intersection within relevant disciplines that will provide the reader with a lens similar to that affixed to my own approach. I will attempt to avoid the critique of transdisciplinary research that insinuates a lack of depth as a result of breadth (Stock & Burton 2011, Wickson, Carew & Russell 2006) and will work toward the creation of new ways of approaching the topics I have put forth that may benefit scholarly work in a range of disciplines as well as other transdisciplinary work. To this end, I attempt throughout this project to define the terms that I am using with some regard to the discipline from which they originate. This may

seem an over simplification in some instances, but I wish to avoid the discrepancy in language often affiliated with the parsing of transdisciplinary work (Stock & Burton 2011).

In the face of such critique, how does a researcher pursue transdisciplinary frameworks for research projects without seeming irrelevant to any one field in particular? The idea of transdisciplinary scholarship is exciting and no doubt growing in popularity across academia, but the reality is that our universities are still siloed, and our journal publications still mirroring, by in large, these silos of discourse and approach. It would seem that there are serious challenges to researchers who embark on such a tall order: to make work that is relevant, meaningful, and broadly applicable so that there is *more* excitement (multiple “homes” for the outputs) rather than the work sitting just outside the margins of any one field of study, so much so that there is no clear “home” for the work at all.

The distinction some have made that seems to be setting transdisciplinary scholars apart (and perhaps creating a home for them and their work) lies within the applicability of the work. Whereas discipline specific research may work for “research sake,” a transdisciplinary underpinning is concerned with what impact the work may have outside of any specific field: “One of the implicit implications of this understanding that a focus on ‘real-world’ problems characterizes [transdisciplinary] research is the notion of creating change. In focusing on problems that exist in society, the researcher aims to contribute to their solution,” (Wickson, Carew & Russell 2006, 1049). Therefore, transdisciplinary research and problems may be referred to as consequential (Wickson, Carew & Russell 2006). Through the dedication to addressing issues with wide impact, or

consequences, transdisciplinary scholars are shifting thought away from the silo and toward the systemic.

*Transdisciplinary work and systemic relevance*

One way to think about transdisciplinary work is through what I refer to as systemic relevance, or the relevance that transdisciplinary work has throughout systems, across disciplines, scales and sectors. This means that transdisciplinary scholarship is concerned with both drawing on, and creating outcomes that apply to, an audience of academics *and* practitioners who are looking to address social issues and solve problems. Transdisciplinary research and problems are therefore concerned with the consequence of the work across scales and sectors, inside and outside of the academy (Wickson, Carew & Russell 2006). This goes beyond simply bridging academic silos of discourse. Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research have addressed the issues, and found the benefits, of reaching across the academic aisles. However, some scholars have been critical of these approaches stating, “multidisciplinary research approaches allow for the provision of different perspectives on a given theme (e.g. unemployment) but the intent is not to provide a ‘solution,’” and of interdisciplinary approaches: “interdisciplinary research can be focused on a problem, he suggests that it is the question of who is involved in the collaborative project that distinguishes interdisciplinarity from transdisciplinarity,” (Wickson, Carew & Russell 2006, 1049).

It is this focus on collaboration that I find to be a discerning aspect of transdisciplinary research, and of my thesis. If transdisciplinary research aims to address a problem with societal impacts, the outputs of the research will best be defined as “usable” to those inside academia and in other sectors. This systemic relevance calls for

collaboration across disciplines, but also across sectors at different scales. My thesis, while still concerned with exploring ideas and connections between identity and practice, draws on multiple fields from within academia, but also provides outputs that are beneficial to the lives and practices of individuals effected by the dearth of work that considers these elements. As I discuss the intersecting identities of gatherers of wild edibles in Vermont in this thesis, I am not simply spotlighting and profiling. This research project takes the time necessary to recognize complex identifies tied to systems of power and oppression, enacted through practice and reinforced or challenged by the social and environmental politics of Vermont's urban and rural landscape. This research highlights the connections that individuals make to the land through the practice of gathering wild edibles, and in turn calls out the complexity of these experiences in relation to others' and their practice. The end product is a window onto the ability for theoretically grounded exploratory research to impact city or state policy regulations on practices that have cultural meaning, educational opportunities for professions not foregrounded with an understanding of identity work, and a broad application to academic sectors concerned with connections between identity and practice.

The article that comprises the body of this thesis project will be submitted to the *Journal of Food Culture and Society*, a quarterly journal published on behalf of the Association for the Study of Food and Society<sup>1</sup>. I have selected this journal from several suitable publications due to the subject matter of the article, methodological and analytical approach taken herein, and the journal's transdisciplinary commitment. Given

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.food-culture.org/fcs-journal>

these elements, I believe my work is well-suited to appeal to the journal's aims through the intersections of identity, culture, practice, and food.

### **Seeking Gatherers Seeking Food: Sample Selection and Seasonality**

Many people in both rural and urban areas of Vermont gather wild edibles (Pierce 2014). Due to time and resources, this thesis project is geographically limited to Vermont and draws on literature that is primarily concerned with the practice of gathering wild edibles in the United States, although the global scholarship on gathering wild edibles and indigenous practices exists and is widely published across disciplines. An extensive review of current and past scholarship on gathering, including in-progress and in-review work connecting values and moral decision making to harvesting practices, can be found within the accompanying article.

Data for this research were collected over one year, primarily during the autumn/early winter 2015 harvest seasons and the spring/early summer 2016 harvest season, with some interactions over winter. Approval for this project was granted by the Internal Review Board of the University of Vermont in 2015. Initial semi-structured interview questions were submitted with the application and the acknowledgement of communication with potentially vulnerable groups was included.

#### *Methods for participant selection collection*

In sum, I met with twelve participants who gather wild edibles (see Table 1). I began selection through three key informants. I met these informants through three different means: an online, Vermont-wide foraging/gathering listserv, a social for young farmers that took place in Chittenden County in northwestern Vermont, and a colleague who teaches in an agriculture and food related program in Rutland County in



southwestern Vermont. When selecting key informants every effort was made to seek out people who occupy different socio-political groups, age groups, and gender representations. The three informants produced connections to over 40 individuals throughout Vermont. Scheduling, seasonality, and chance factored into my ability to engage with potential participants. As I will discuss later in this thesis, gatherers harvest a variety of items that are available during specific times of the year. This seasonality and selectivity of gatherers and their practice lead me to be creative about data collection to contact more participants and conduct fieldwork with greater diversity of participants and locales. Ultimately, two fieldwalks were conducted within Windham County, two in Rutland County, one in Addison County, three in Washington County, and four in Chittenden County. Admittedly, the Northeastern counties of Vermont are underrepresented in this research.

I employed the snowball method to meet other gatherers beyond the initial contacts produced by the three key informants. I limited the scope of this research to those individuals who collect wild edibles, as opposed to those who collect items for decorative, spiritual, or medicinal purposes alone<sup>2</sup>. In an effort to develop a diverse sample of gatherers and gathering practices in Vermont, every effort was made to speak with gatherers from different geographic areas of Vermont, age groups, economic backgrounds, and post-harvest practices.

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<sup>2</sup> There is some overlap here. Often, participants expressed a more-than-food connection to the items they gathered, even if the purpose was food consumption, which could be understood as spiritual. One participant expressed the idea that “wild foods act as medicine.” Generally, for the purposes of this research, participants primarily collected non-timber forest products (NTFP) for the purposes of consumption or sale as food.

*Table 1: Research Participants with Identity Data Categorized*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>County in Vermont</b>	<b>Gender expression</b>	<b>Racial / cultural / ethnic identifier</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Economic class</b>	<b>Unique Intersectional identities</b>	<b>Data collection method</b>
<b>Andrew</b>	Chittenden	man	white Caucasian	30-40	Modest middle class, raised poor	survivalist, environmental steward, works toward self-reliance	fieldwalk
<b>Anka</b>	Washington	woman	Polish	40-50	Poor class, Peasant class in Poland	immigrant, loosely Wiccan, spiritual, natural lifestyle, rural	kitchen interview
<b>August</b>	Chittenden	female-bodied human	white	30-40	Lower middle class now, from wealth and upper class upbringing	Anti-government, entrepreneur, concerned with living close to the land, chronic illness, self-reliance	kitchen interview
<b>Devin</b>	Windham	man	white	20-30	Upper middle class	Father, educator, leader, feels responsible for skill-sharing, land steward	Fieldwalk
<b>John</b>	Washington	man	white	40-50	Middle class	Small business owner, farmer, adventurer, rural Vermonter	Fieldwalk
<b>Les Hook*</b>	Rutland	man	white multi-generational Vermonter	50-60	Self reliant middle class	Couple [with Kim], stewards of the land, rural educators, wild-crafter NOT forager	Fieldwalk
<b>Noella</b>	Chittenden	woman	Somali Bantu	40-50	Not wealthy	Mother, African, responsible for educating her children about where they come from	Fieldwalk

<b>Nova Kim*</b>	Rutland	woman	Osage	50-60	Skilled Middle class	Couple [with Hook], entrepreneur, land steward, educators, and environmentalist, wild-crafter NOT forager	Fieldwalk
<b>River</b>	Windham	Gender non-conforming, Queer	Brown	20-30	Farmer class, working poor	Farmer, self-reliant, political activist	Fieldwalk / kitchen interview
<b>Samiliya</b>	Chittenden	woman	India	50-60	[no data]	Mother, grandmother	Fieldwalk
<b>Susan</b>	Addison	woman	white	50-60	Middle class	Mother, rural Vermonter, teacher, mental illness survivor	Fieldwalk / kitchen interview
<b>Tashi</b>	Washington	man	Tibet	20-30	[no data]	Son and brother, provider	Fieldwalk

\* Participant requested that their real name be used in all element of this research.

Of these twelve participants, I conducted an depth analysis of four of them (Noella, River, Nova Kim, and Les Hook) and a narrative introduction and discussion on one additional participant (Susan). I chose these participants based on the completeness of the data collected and the representation of unique connections between identity and practice and marginalized voices. For example, data collected with Tashi and Samiliya was incomplete and the data that was collected was not as rich as the data collected in other fieldwalks. Participants Andrew, Devin, and John represented similar demographic identities regarding race, gender, current socioeconomic status. While I think it is important to recognize groups of white, middle to upper middle class, men who participate in the gathering of wild edibles, I also feel that there need be an academic imperative to address the experiences of individuals with marginalized identities. I have the opportunity through this research to encounter and highlight many complex

relationship between identities and see it as meaningful to spend the space elucidating those connections. I have spent a great deal of time elucidating the importance of positionality and identity in the latter half of this introduction.

Post-harvest practices include gathering for home use, for raw resale like at the farmers' market or to another business, or for use in one's business as part of a value added product. Since this research aims to examine connections between identities and practices, it was important to take these elements into consideration while selecting participants.

#### *Methods for data collection*

Gathering wild edibles is a hyper-seasonal practice. Some items are only harvestable for periods of two weeks or less, while others may last for an entire season. Due to these time considerations, I felt that it was important to include gatherers who participate in harvests during two major times of the year: spring and autumn. To safeguard against the possibility of a dearth of participation in spring/summer participant interaction, and since I have only one set of seasons during which I could collect data and remain on a reasonable timeline for my graduate program, I employed active interviewing and object probe approaches to semi-structured interviews that took place inside two participant's kitchens (De Leon and Cohen, 2005). I will elaborate on this creative solution after explaining the major mode of data collection for this project here:

#### *The go-along fieldwalk*

The methods for data collection primarily relied upon methods of participant observation. The most common method I used was semi-structured interviews while on field walks with participants. I recorded all the time spent with participants with their

permission. I asked the participant to meet at a spot of their choosing whereupon we would hike together with the possibility, and hope, of locating and harvesting some wild edible that they commonly seek to gather. Often the participant would preface our engagement with a statement like, “we may not find anything,” to which I replied with indifference. I explained that the purpose was not so much to find the item, but to use the search as a catalyst for talking about their practice. The aim of this research is not to catalogue or quantify items or species, thus the focus on practice and identity defines a successful fieldwalk as one that simply *took place*, instead of one that resulted in a large harvest of wild edibles.

While on these walks with gatherers I noted their movement patterns over the terrain, their methods of seeking out and locating wild edibles and other plants and fungi, and their general way-of-being in the environment of their choosing. Because I was recording the time spent with the participant using a battery powered, hand-held, digital recorder, I was able to verbally note these movements and interactions. I would do this by acknowledging their pace of step, their method of identifying wild edibles, and any other behavior I felt contributed to the participant’s interaction with the space around them and their practice of collecting wild edibles. My occasional assertions (such as “you seem to be scanning the forest floor far out in front of us,”; “you’re moving very quickly over this uneven terrain,”; “you appear to be very relaxed in this environment,” or “you are referring to your identification book” instigated conversation about the participant’s practice, helped to note inaudible components of the fieldwalk, and I believe added to the depth and richness of the recorded data.

This method is reminiscent of the go-along which uses participant agency to determine many elements of the encounter and to, “study people’s perceptions, processing, and navigation of their environments,” (Carpiano 2008). Since the participant was driving the pace and content of our journey, it was up to them to determine how and with what they would engage. I merely went along and provided audio commentary and questions to develop rapport and to get at the connections that participants were already making between themselves and their gathering practice.

#### *The object probe kitchen interview*

I employed active interviewing styles for both the fieldwalk participants and the kitchen participants. Where the two differ is the elements related to participant agency. In the fieldworks, I have asserted that the participant had much of the choice regarding where and what data were collected. In the kitchen interviews, space is confined, so object probes were used to stimulate conversation, but the participant was in control of this process as well. The methods used for the sites in kitchens may still be considered equally applicable as the outputs of the method is similar. By employing elements of object probes (De Leon 2005) and semi structured interviews I similarly noted the ways in which gatherers processed, with care and intention, the items they had harvested. Harvested items acted as the objects, and provided a platform for me to inquire about the process and practice behind the object’s collection. Then, I was able to witness, and in most cases, participate in, the processing, cooking, or preserving of the item (object) that had been collected previously. Similar to the fieldwalks, I did not manage the conversation to a great degree in order to allow meaningful topics to manifest on their own, from the participant’s perspective, without my leading.

## **Methods and Methodological Approach**

Before moving further, I would like to take a step back and discuss the methodological theory and philosophical underpinnings of this research project. As the project as a whole suggests, this work is reflective of transdisciplinary research. Although the design of the project is predominately qualitative in data collection and participant selection methods. The research questions drive the qualitative angles or, the concern of the project with social, cultural and individual elements (Creswell 2013). I will explicate the impact of intersectional identity theory on the foundations of this research, and as an analytical tool later in this Introduction. Preliminarily, I have approached this project from a hybrid social constructivist and transformative framework. I draw on social constructivism by employing an appreciation for the subjective and narrative experience common in research that draws on this perspective (Creswell 2013). The description of my methods of data collection above present a clear description of this viewpoint through participant-led dialogue, and the ability I afforded participants to self-identify and describe their practices in their own words rather than adhering to a prescribed definition of identities or practices.

Additionally, I employ a transformative worldview in the analysis and discussion of data through the lens of intersectional identity theory. Transformative research acknowledges the structures of power and oppression that work to further marginalize individuals and communities based on socially constructed identities (Creswell 2013). I am not convinced that a social constructionist worldview *alone* fully encapsulates the dynamics of this research. The basic discussions of intersectional identity are predicated on the notion that power exists within social systems and that power works to suppress

some while privileging others. If one consider the implications of research devoted to exploring these notions of power, then it will be clear the connection between transformative methodological theory and intersectionality as the guiding theory in this work. However, I feel it is important to recognize the social constructivist allowances for social constructions of identities, also foundational to intersectionality, which I will elaborate further in this introduction. I address some opportunities for application and further development of the issues raised in this project in the conclusion as well.

I practice an ethnographic research design common among other social sciences such as Cultural Anthropology and Human Geography. This approach is reflected in my choice of methods explained in the section above. Ethnographic fieldwork fits this project due to its concern with behavior, patterns, or practices of a certain group, for example, gatherers of wild edibles (Creswell 2013). While I am drawing on multiple methods to approach the individuals and the data collection, they all fall under the umbrella of possible ethnographic pursuits.

Within the range of ethnographic research, I draw upon a critical ethnographic approach. Critical ethnography is based in the ethnographic tradition, but goes further to examine sociocultural structures of power, knowledge, performance, and action, (Madison 2011, Thomas 1993). As I stated above, ethnographies are generally concerned with behaviors, practices, and groups of individuals, *critical* ethnography works to address the power within the social systems that impact these behaviors and practices. Critical ethnography may also be applied to groups and individuals as they perform their identities or experience the impact of identities created by social systems of power that are subsequently placed upon them, willingly or not. As a critical ethnographer, I



“contribute to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice,” (Madison 2011, 7). The research presented here reflects this dedication I hold as a researcher, which is reflected in the intended impact for this research. In the discussion of transdisciplinary work and application I discuss at length the political possibilities for this research and the importance of working through theory toward an applied. The critical ethnographic research design is indicative of this project as issues of power and social critique are woven into the theoretical framework and methods through an exploration of intersectional identities that are tied to practices of gathering wild edibles. This concept is elaborated on in the sections below on intersectionality.

#### *Methods for data analysis*

After recording during fieldwalks and kitchen interviews I listened to the recordings. Through this process, I determined which recording contained the most complete data. Of the twelve recordings six of them were subsequently transcribed verbatim, in full, and four of them were time stamped with indicators matching the codes developed through hand coding of the transcriptions. An emergent structure of codes from formed around two major identity themes: social identities (e.g. gender, race, ethnic identity, socioeconomic class) and what I call practice-based identities (e.g. entrepreneur, land steward, gatherer, wildcrafter). The two major categories helped to determine many sub categories with respect to participant identities. Some of these may be seen in Table 1. I also coded for themes that were not seemingly directly related to identity such as items gathered, post-harvest use, and region of the state of Vermont.

Finally, I categorized the codes by participant and constructed a table of participants and codes to determine final themes, consistencies, or contradictions in the

data. It is at this point I determined that I would focus on five participants instead of including most or all of them. This would allow me to provide a more in depth analysis of the data and a richer discussion of the findings. The structure of the ethnographic data collection is done justice by allowing a narrative exposition within this thesis. It would have been potentially difficult, and definitely lengthy, to provide a narrative exploration of each of twelve participants in the way that I do Susan, whose story opens this thesis.

Susan's narrative is a good example of the combination of the methodological approach and the multiple methods of data collection. While we began our time together outdoors gathering ramps and other wild greens, we ended it inside her kitchen, cooking and eating a combination of leftovers and preserved wild edibles from her previous forays. Both methods developed organically and produced rich, complementary narrative data. Both experiences led from one story to another, linking her experiences to her identities and to her practice of gathering wild edibles. I believe by employing these methods I was able to encourage exploratory research and rich, meaningful content to emerge with little researcher bias or influence. I was also able to accommodate seasonality and scheduling difficulties that might have otherwise prohibited the unencumbered time spent with participants. These long fieldwork sessions took between 2 and 5 hours, not counting the time it took to travel to the location. Nevertheless, I have found these methods to be well worth the time, and in fact, due perhaps in large part to my commitment to slower methods. The results that follow will illustrate this concept.

### **Intersectional Identity, Place & Practice: The Impetus for This Research**

After reheating the contents of the containers, Susan and I had a seat at the kitchen table. I commented that I thought she had a lovely home. She replied with a monologue

that would become the central theme of our time together: a fluid sense of identity presently anchored in gathering wild edibles.

“My husband and I built this place. Before [our sons]<sup>4</sup> were born we really worked to make this our dream home. Then the boys came along and I became a mother and things changed. I went from being a wife, to a mother, to a homeschool teacher and a daycare person. I really loved it! Anything I could do with my kids. We started taking hikes and they’d have all sorts of questions, you know, about everything they were seeing, that’s how the identification started...”

Susan was easy to listen to. She spoke with enthusiasm and passion. She explained that she began looking up the names of plants that she, her sons, and the other children who she looked after would commonly see around her property. After a few months she said she could identify many of the trees, shrubs, and flowering plants on the property. She then became interested in the fungi and some edible plants. “I started noticing which plants the guidebooks would say were edible, then I’d go down here to the farmers’ market and I’d see the same ones, like the leeks and the chanterelles. I thought, ‘I wonder how many of these things I have growing out here?’ and so I started looking up these plants in guidebooks and online and then in forums and I realized I had a lot of edible stuff here.” Susan said this was how she came to participate in numerous fieldwalks and guided tours hosted by other gatherers who would lead workshops on wild edibles identification. “I realized I knew more than they did! So, by this time the boys had left [home] I had nothing to do and I thought, well I can do what they’re doing at

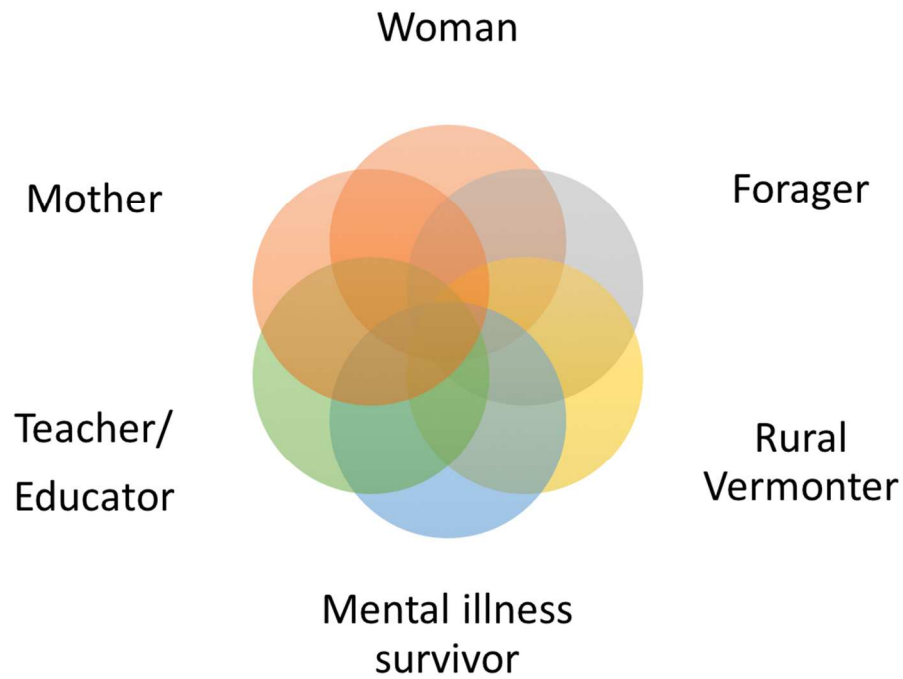
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<sup>4</sup> Names were omitted for confidentiality.

least as well, so that's how I started my workshops." Susan now leads guided tours every weekend throughout the spring, summer, and autumn at her home where she guides people over her landscape and explains permaculture principles, and wild edibles identification. Guests have the opportunity to dig wild leeks on her property within a designated area, cordoned off by brightly colored tape which Susan moves each week to protect against overharvesting.

She explains that this new project, teaching as a guide to wild edibles on her property, has helped to fill a gap left by the absence of her sons under her immediate care. "I sort of figured out who I am after my sons left. I didn't know what to do for a while, you know, because I was a wife, and then a mother, and I'm still a wife, but my boys don't need me in the way they used to and they're both gone doing their own things. As I learned more about foraging and wild foods I learned more about myself." This statement gets at Susan's connection between her work and her identities.

The complexity of Susan's experience is rooted in the intersection of her identities as woman, mother, and educator, but also impacted by her status as a daily survivor of mental illness, and as a rural Vermonter where she found resources and support for growing her talent for edible plant identification and newfound passion as educator. A cursory analysis of this intersection allows one to examine that Susan is drawn to the harvest of wild edibles and the subsequent educator role she has taken on through a need to engage in meaningful activity since her sons are no longer in need of her primary care. It is a way for Susan to derive meaning and identity for herself. She has found



*Figure 1: Diagram of Intersectional Identities of Susan<sup>5</sup>*

legitimization through the development of knowledge around wild foods. Her identity (while always underpinned by physical and cognitive impairments and requirements of her mental illness) has been fluid - mother, wife, homeschool teacher then educator of wild edibles - and informed by her practice of gathering. Because Susan draws self-worth through the work in which she engages, her practice of gathering wild edibles has indemnified her identities at the intersection of woman, mother and educator and has led her to a practice, and an intersectional identity, that is unique and her own.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the creation and conceptualization behind these diagrams see the article section of this thesis where the layout, relevance, and inspiration for this design are discussed in detail.

Here we might employ common critiques of credibility awarded to different types of labor. Labor and feminist scholars differentiate labor in two ways: reproductive and productive (Smith 2013, Duffy 2007, Ferguson 2004). Reproductive labor describes unpaid activities that take place in the home as legitimate work, which assigns value and visibility to this often invisible sector of labor, commonly by women (Smith 2013). As a mother, wife, and caregiver Susan performs reproductive labor, and so derives value from the experience and the task of those identities that double as occupations. As her sons and their friends grew older, she lost the position of caregiver, which complicated her relationship to the identity she found in that role. After her sons moved out of the house, her role as immediate caregiver was compromised, and the daily duties of motherhood diminished (although the identity of mother remained, as she is still a mother to her sons, this is meant to imply that the active time of mothering left with her sons.) As Susan describes figuring out who she was after her sons left the house, she is describing a sort of shift in the identity work she performed. Now, she had gained new purpose through her identity as gatherer and through that practice has redeveloped her identity as educator.

As I elaborate on other participants in the article section of this thesis, I will continue to draw upon these themes of work, meaning, practice and identity. I will take a moment now to explain the conceptual framework and applied philosophy of this work on intersectional identities.

### **Intersectional Identity Theory: A Non-Additive Approach to Methodology and Analysis**

Although Susan's experience is powerful, why does it matter to consider intersectional identities and relational practices of gathering wild edibles? The analytical structure and

methodological guide for this research is intersectional identity theory. I will elaborate in greater detail the complexity and applications of this theory to gatherers of wild edibles in the methods article itself, but a basic introduction to the history of the theory terminology and how it permeate all elements of this research process follows.

Intersectional identity theory, or more commonly phrased, intersectionality, was first employed as a way of referring to the complex identities of individuals within the legal system. The phrase was coined in the 1989 by Kimberle' Williams Crenshaw in an attempt to parse a recognition of the oppressive marginalization occurring under the guise of objectivity and neutrality of the legal system and in anti-racist and feminist work (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Collins, 1993, 1998, Nash 2008). The challenge posed to qualitative researchers then was "how to ask questions about experiences that are intersecting, interdependent, and mutually constitutive, without resorting, even inadvertently, to an additive approach," (Bowleg 2008, 314). An additive approach regards an individual's experiences as separate, independent, and summative (Collins 1995; Cuadraz and Uttal 1999; Bowleg 2008). Instead, intersectionality insists that the points of intersection are where the complexity of one's identity is housed.

Intersectionality recognizes that systems of power and oppression are mutually constructed, which goes beyond the assumption that social hierarchies exist (Bowleg 2008, Collins 1998) and allows an examination of the complex, interdependencies of certain identities. Lisa Bowleg provides the example of Black Lesbian Women and how intersectionality best approaches an accurate depiction: "[T]he additive (e.g., Black + Lesbian + Woman) versus intersectional (e.g., Black Lesbian Woman) assumption inherent in measurement and qualitative and quantitative data analyses contradicts the

central tenet of intersectionality: social identities and inequality are inter- dependent for groups such as Black lesbians, not mutually exclusive” (Bowleg 2008, 312).

Since its initiation, some scholars have come to call intersectionality a “traveling theory” meaning that it may be applied to a variety of disciplines, methods, and research trajectories (Christensen & Jensen 2012, Knapp 2005). Another more critical way of approaching a similar trait of intersectionality can be found in some scholar’s criticism that there is no inherent methodological practice to intersectional theory, so it lacks applicability to the research process outside of analysis (Bowleg 2008, Nash 2008, Simien, 2007; Valentine, 2007; Grabham et al., 2009, MacKinnon 2013, Cho et al 2013). Nonetheless, authors cited here have taken up the charge of debating the validity of this notion.

Embodied practice, participant observation, semi structured interviews, and “active” interview styles are most common among methods that employ intersectionality. Through my research, I employed these methods, continually reinfusing the process with the fundamentals of intersectionality. It is through this process that I believe many existing methods use intersectionality without directly naming it. This may lead to some of the above assumptions about intersectionality’s inability to take method form. Here I present a thought map of sorts in an effort to depict connections between epistemology, methodology, method, and theory all foregrounded by intersectional approaches:

(1) Through a discussion of transformative world view and critical ethnographic methodologies I have established that the pursuit of this research tie in elements of social justice.

(2) Social justice perspectives rely on the assumption that society filters power through



systems of privilege and oppression (Creswell 2013). In keeping with the social constructivist viewpoint which along with the transformative viewpoint, I have established as a foundational world view of this research,

(3) Privilege and oppression are determined by socially constructed categories that funnel individuals into varying social locations (Creswell 2013).

(4) These social locations determine the degree to which an individual possesses privilege in social systems or is oppressed by those social systems. Thus,

(5) Power is tied to the identities that one holds within this system. Now, while there are myriad epistemological theories that relate to defining “power,” I take these world views as my epistemological approach grounded in a multicultural feminist approach.

Therefore,

(6) When discussing the creation of identities in relation to power within social systems, we must consider these frameworks to build an ontological system whereby, “...our understanding of difference [creates] a situation in which hitherto marginalized groups can name themselves, speak for themselves, and participate in defining the terms of interaction, a situation in which we can construct an understanding of the world that is sensitive to difference,” (Hartsock 1990, 158). By engaging in participant informed and determined active methods I have incorporated these insights into the acquisition of all data, including the ability for participants to name their own identities in their own words and specify the terms by which they are referred in the research. Finally,

(7) Through the description of an intersectional approach I have supplied, one can indicate connections between the foundational concepts of this research’s stated epistemological foundations, methodological approach, methods employed and analysis

conducted. “Intersectionality critiques can offer rich insights into the unconscious workings of power in interpretive practices... intersectionality entails thinking about social reality as multidimensional, lived identities as intertwined, and systems of oppression as meshed and mutually constitutive,” (May 2014, 96). So,

(8) The very ideas of social categories and identities may be constituted initially through an intersectional approach, leading us back to (1) with a definition of critical ethnography as transformative, social constructivist epistemologies, which in this research, are informed by and created from an intersectional understanding of identity work.

In sum, I believe it is possible that the complication with defining an intersectional methodology is linked to an inability to really pin down the borders of an intersectional approach. As can be witnessed in the thought map above, intersectionality may be applied to every part of the process – from the understanding of the way identities are constructed and reconstructed, to the way a researcher empowers a participant to craft identities on their own terms. Feminist scholar and geographer, Vivian May, addresses the contributions of intersectionality at different levels of the research process. In her epistemological approach and design, she argues that intersectional approaches provide further consideration to the ontological conceptions of the process “including disparities in cognitive authority, imbalances in historical memory, and inequities of rhetorical space,” (May 2014, 97). She elaborates on the contribution of intersectionality to methods, modeling, and coding process, suggesting that an intersectional approach, “entails shifting critical energies toward considering material contexts and epistemic structures by asking questions... and by referencing larger social contexts for answers...

Intersectional approaches to issues of repetition would thus approach acts of repetition as having potential meaningfulness beyond “easy” explanations,” (May 2014, 105).

Though it is has now been made clear the applicability of intersectionality across the research process, this is not to assert that intersectionality is without critique. In an effort to avoid the “et cetera” that plagues much intersectional feminist work (as in race, class, gender, *etc*) and to acknowledge that there is a risk of essentializing identities whenever an attempt at categorization, or a critique of it, is involved in scholarly analysis, I work from the standpoint of intracategorical complexity analysis, (as opposed to inter- or anti- categorial complexity) developed in an attempt to divide the approaches to doing intersectional research into more organized camps (Nash 2008).

“[I]ntracategorical analyses attend to the dangers of categorization, yet do not necessarily reject the categories themselves. Instead, scholars working in this tradition problematize the exclusionary repercussions of the act of categorization and use multiply marginalized subjects’ experiences as ways of demonstrating the inadequacy of categories,” (Nash 2008, 5).

Though I have presented the discussion above with the intent to position and legitimize intersectionality as a methodology and as analytical structure, I resist the apparent imperative of defining it so. I do not believe it does this research any favor to become caught up in exactly where intersectionality fits, but instead to illustrate through the fieldwork and analysis where it *has* fit. Indeed, the distinction between theory and method has caused a ripple in many academic arguments around similar themes, but intersectionality resists this differentiation – the theory is the method is the theory. “In terms of the theory-versus-method debate, the dismissal or privileging of one over the

other raises important questions and considerations and is sometimes counterproductive. It is as counterproductive as the disciplinary turf battles that erupt over fieldwork or which field is more “deeply” ethnographic,” (Madison 2013, 21). Here, we may identify yet another connection for intersectionality – to transdisciplinary scholarship that attempts to bridge and grow from, rather than distinguish and separate, elements of research.

*Critical, Intersectional, Transdisciplinary Food Systems Inquiry*

It is important to reiterate the connections between the philosophical underpinnings, methodological approach, and methods, and how they all complement this work as critical, intersectional, transdisciplinary food systems inquiry. In the sections above, I have elaborated on each of these elements and how they each provide a framework from which my research has grown. I will now take a moment to connect these elements to one another, and to tie them to Food Systems, the field in which I am pursuing my degree.

These elements relate to and complement one another through a shared consideration of systems. As I’ve noted above, ethnographic research, and critical ethnographies especially, rely on a critique of social systems of power. Intersectional work similarly is concerned with the interweave of identities and the impacts of those same systems of power on the individual. Transdisciplinary work is predicated upon addressing an issue of importance beyond the academy, and the reach of the research outputs. Likewise, Food Systems, as a transdisciplinary field of academics, is concerned with the same issues and outputs. Food Systems is a title indicative of this connection,

though a precise vision of what is meant by the topics, term, or field “food systems” has been debated.

In search of an agreeable definition of food systems, one finds themselves inundated with derivatives of the term. Often scholars add a word to the beginning of the term in an effort to specify which sector, scale, or issue they mean to address. This leads to distinctions such as *community* food systems (Hinrichs & Lyson 2007; Born & Purcell 2006), *local* food systems (Chase & Grubinger 2014; Feegan 2007; Hinrichs 2000), *alternative* and *conventional* food systems (Alkon 2013; Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman 2012; Mount 2012; Hinrichs 2000; Kloppenburg et al. 2000) and many, many others. Taking these multitudinous variations into account, I choose instead to refer to Clair Hinrich’s suggestion that, instead of attempting to create one clear definition of food systems, we instead, “forge [a] commitment to ongoing critical reflection about this term and the interplay of goals that shape it, as well as the tensions between them,” (Hinrichs 2010 in Blay-Palmer 2016, 17)

The critical dialogue that Hinrich’s refers to is the bridge to critical ethnographic methodologies that my research makes. As I’ve discussed above, this research is concerned with the social, thus the connection to ethnography. Anthropologist and professor of Performance Studies, Soyini Madison, explains some basic distinctions for critical ethnography: “critical ethnography begins with and ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived*<sup>6</sup> domain... the

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<sup>6</sup> Author’s emphasis

researcher feels and ethical obligation to make a contribution toward changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity,” (Madison 2012, 5).

Intersectionality works from similar foundations whereby social and political systems of power work to suppress some and privilege others. These are the same systems that Madison refers to as processes of unfairness or injustice. Given this shared language, adopted also by Hinrichs’ application of the critical to food systems inquiry, intersectionality may be considered a screen through which a researcher might filter critical ethnographic methods. It is from this framework that I have built my research to satisfy the requirements, but also the ethical and theoretical aims, of a critical, intersectional, transdisciplinary, food systems project.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As a researcher dedicated to doing work with justice oriented ends, there are several ethical considerations that I have taken into account. These considerations apply to the research planning process, but also to the active time, collecting data, data analysis and follow-up. I have also made some decisions that impact my behavior after the research is complete. The reason for such caution is that, by employing critical ethnographic methods focused on intersectional identities, there is a good possibility that the interactions I have with participants will have lasting impacts. “The practice of actually doing critical ethnographic research involves more than simply looking at culture with a jaundiced eye. It also requires that we attend to the various dimensions of topic selection, data acquisition, interpretation, and discourse to look for ways to move beyond the conventional ways of observation and narrative,” (Thomas 1993, 47).

If I intended to demonstrate some ways one's practice as a gatherer is connected to their intersectional identities, I am asking my participants to share with me very intimate details of their lives – those that have shaped or are shaping the way they walk through the world. I must take great care to be open to a variety of experiences, and to not impart my opinions of their experience or practice.

*Openness, reflexivity, and positionality*

What does this look like in practice? I have already discussed the importance of the methods used in data collection. I specifically opted to adopt these method styles because of their openness and participant led process. Again, the unencumbered time I willingly spent on these fieldwalks and kitchen interviews allowed participants to flow from one topic to the next and to get to know me as a researcher, but also as a fellow gatherer and human with my own complex intersectional identities, which I will elaborate on momentarily. By remaining supportive and open during participant interactions, I assisted in creating a space where participants became comfortable sharing details they may not have otherwise. This is why, I believe, my data is so rich and full of narrative experience.

This openness was not as simple as asking open-ended questions and listening to the answers. I felt first-hand the sentiments of critical geographer Farhana Sultana as she describes the difficult task of negotiating openness in international ethnographic fieldwork: “such fluidity and openness in the research process is not always easy to enact or maintain, especially when inserted into multiple scales of power relations and institutional affiliations, time/budget constraints, and distances (physical, emotional, philosophical, political),” (Sultana 2007, 380). Due to my commitment to speaking with

a diverse sample of participants, I was put in a variety of positions with my social power being relative to that of my participant. In all cases, though I was the researcher and they the participant, I was coming to them for their story. *I needed them*. I also needed their honesty. This was difficult in two ways: (1) with some participants, I found myself feeling insecure in my abilities to ask questions that mattered to the participant (in cases where the participant considered themselves to be professionals at their practice of foraging or who were very forthcoming with their technical knowledge of wild edibles), or to not be bullied by participants who draw on their identities that provide them with privilege (such as maleness and physical stamina during fieldwalks), and (2) with other participants, I felt the weight of my identities that afforded me with social privileges (such as my U.S. citizenship, whiteness, and higher level academic education). These realities shifted constantly during the fieldwork with any given participant as more about the participant's identity and practice was revealed, I found myself having to work either more or less consciously to retain that openness. Farhana supports this complicated navigation between researcher and participant: "positionality and subjectivity are tempered both spatially and temporally, and are unstable and not fixed. Dynamics change with context, and the insider-outsider boundary gets blurred," (Sultana 2007, 382).

Above, Sultana draws on language from within feminist and critical methodologies that I have applied to this research. Positionality in this research context refers to my ability as researcher to define my own identities and to *position* myself in relation to the work and participants. "Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects," (Madison 2011, 8). I come to this research



privileged by my identities as a white, documented U.S. citizen who is generally able-bodied and pursuing an advanced degree through formal academic institutions. I am oppressed socially by my identities as a queer, female, lower-middle-class student. As described above, these identities intersect to create the filter through which I experience the world and am impacted by social, political, economic and environmental systems.

These experiences contribute to my ability to produce unbiased research and to achieve openness to the experiences and identities of my research participants. To address these issues, I employ a tactic commonly understood as reflexivity, or turning back to view ourselves as part of, not a part from these identities and their relation to our research (Madison 2011, Thomas 1993). “When we turn back, we are accountable for our own moral responsibility relative to representation and interpretation. We begin to ask ourselves, What are we going to do with the research, and who ultimately will benefit? Who gives us the authority to make claims about where we have been?

How will our work make a difference in people’s lives?” (Madison 2011, 8).

By engaging with these questions and conditions, I present here an example of this critical ethnographic approach that incorporates intersectional approaches to methods development and analysis.

### *Safety and follow-up*

Due to the fact that my fieldwork would require me to spend large amounts of time in potentially rural or vacant areas with individuals who were by all accounts strangers, I took a variety of steps to ensure my safety, and to hold myself accountable to

my participants concerns that may have mirrored my own. By using the snowball method for initial participant location, I was almost never encountering a person who was not linked to another individual whom I had some social relationship to previously. In several cases, a participant was a friend-of-a-friend of a key informant. By having these thin but existent connections through key informants, I was put to ease that I would not encounter someone who was entirely random, and the participants had the same benefit.

Additionally, I secured meeting times and location via email or text so that there was a record of my whereabouts. I informed no less than two individuals (friends or family) of my planned meetings and contacted them immediately after returning from meeting with the participant. Upon meeting with the participant I presented identification. At the onset I secured verbal consent to record and verbal consent to participate in this research study.

Since part of the practice of gathering wild edibles involves locating the items and hoping that other gatherers have not found “your spot,” I was often invited to locations that gatherers felt some unofficial ownership of. Being conscious of the possibility that some gatherers can be territorial about their harvesting locations, I developed a clause to my research agreement to this effect. I stated that I would not return to gather from any location on private land that was identified through the fieldwork for this research. This ensured that a participant could take me to a harvesting location and know that they were not “giving away a spot.” While most gatherers who participated in this research responded that they were not concerned about me returning to harvest in these locations, I believe that this clause allowed the gatherers to focus on the journey and their narratives

more so than the potential outcomes of giving away a location they feel is secret or lucrative in terms of harvest.

Finally, I took precautions with regard to participant confidentiality. Due to the intimate nature of discussions about one's experiences, I wanted the participants to feel as though they could share details that would help to construct their intersectional identities without fear of incrimination, or be ostracized. I addressed this by providing pseudonyms for all participants, with the exception of two who requested that their given names be used. These pseudonyms are used in all elements of this research, audio recordings, written notes, tables, and all other aspects of this thesis. One participant requested that they be allowed to choose their own pseudonym because they felt their name, as a title, implied a certain identity (in this case, gender representation) so they were allowed to select their own pseudonym. I have elaborated in this instance in the article below.

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# **An Exploration of Intersectional Identity and Practices of Gatherers of Wild Edibles in Vermont**

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## **Abstract**

*As wild edibles gain in popularity on restaurant menus, and as they are increasingly collected as a form of recreation, so too has research on contemporary foragers. This work has been conducted in many disciplines. Through an exploration of gatherers in Vermont, I examine the relationships between practice and identity. By employing Intersectionality through feminist ethnographic methods, this research recognizes the complex, intersections of individual's identities that challenge a more simplified, additive approach to definitions of race, class, gender and the myriad identities that inform one's experience of privilege and oppression. As prior scholarship has established, people from diverse ethnicities, genders, religions, class affiliations, rural and urban livelihoods, and ages gather wild edibles. This thesis draws connections between the intersectional identities of gatherers and the diversity of their gathering practices.*

*This article includes a discussion of how intersectionality may be applied and employed as analytical theory and as methodological foundation to better approach connections between identity and practice. Key questions driving the analysis are: what are the intersectional identities of gatherers of wild edibles in Vermont, and to what extent are these intersectional identities informing, or informed by, harvest and post-harvest practices? This research contributes to scholarship on foragers from a qualitative methodological perspective and attempts to support the body of literature on intersectionality as methodology as well as research that focuses on the connections between people, practice, and wild foods.*

**Keywords:** intersectionality, foraging, wild edibles, identity, practice

## **“Don’t Tell Them I Eat Weeds,”: An Introduction**

“Come here, down here, and we will talk.” I was being led down a short path to a water’s edge where Noella<sup>7</sup>, a middle-aged, New American, woman of Burundi ethnicity living in Burlington Vermont, was going to talk with me about gathering wild edibles around her community garden plot. It was a warm, late summer day and I was lucky to have

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<sup>7</sup> Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants except where noted. Every effort has been made by the researcher to retain the meaning that some individuals connect to their names. In some cases, the research participant chose their own pseudonym to retain a connection they felt was important to the discussion of their identity. In most cases, a pseudonym was assigned by the researcher.



happened upon Noella and to have noticed her picking Lamb's Quarters growing wild alongside other crops that were clearly cultivated. I walked up to her and introduced myself, and let her know that I recognized her from a recent community garden event at which I had been working and she attending. Her face was friendly and inviting, with a smile and she was polite to this person whom she may or may not have actually recognized.

I told her that I saw her picking the Lamb's Quarters, a plant that grows in nearly any condition and that many people would call a weed. In an effort to build rapport, I told her that I had farmer friends who used to intentionally grow Lambs Quarters to sell because they enjoyed it so much, but they stopped because no one purchased it at market. I let her know that I was doing research, writing my thesis on wild foods and people who gather them. She smiled again, almost with a laugh, perhaps at me, as I asked her what she was planning to do with the plant, then she ushered me down the path.

She still had a fist full of the leafy green plant as she asked me why I thought she was not just pulling weeds. I told her that she seemed to be more careful with the thin stalks than I thought someone who wanted to destroy the plant would have been. Noella said she loved having a community garden plot because it gave her space for her and her husband to grow food for themselves and their children. I asked her more about the Lamb's Quarters: How does she cook them? How did she know they were good to eat? Where is she from? Are there traditional recipes that would use this plant? Noella was quiet. I was being overwhelming perhaps. Then she said, "I asked you down here because I don't know if I'm supposed to pick these. I don't want them to think I eat weeds. When you write, don't tell them I eat weeds."

### **Gathering Wild Edibles in the United States: A Review of Literature**

Noella's practice of gathering wild edibles is not uncommon. Gathering wild edibles and other non-timber forest products (NTFP), sometimes referred to as specialty forest products (SFP), is common throughout the world. While literature on foraging is relatively limited, the global scholarship on gathering wild edibles, heritage, and peasant practices exists and is published across many disciplines. We see contributions from a global historical perspective on gathering as a traditional practice (Menendez-Baceta 2012, Linares 2016, Turner et. al. 2011), as well as contemporary work concerning wild foods gathering and cuisine, nutrition, well-being, and agriculture (Biscotti and Pieroni, 2015; Łuczaj et al 2012 and 2016; Arranz-Otaegui et. al. 2016, Martin et. al. 2005, Kang et. al. 2013). The focus of this research is on contemporary gatherers in Vermont, thus, I draw on existing literature that is primarily concerned with the practice of gathering wild edibles in the United States. What follows is a review of literature on contemporary gathering practices in the United States.

Literature on contemporary gathering in the United States is primarily published from ecological, geographical, and forest management disciplines. McLain et. al. (2012) provides an annotated bibliography exhibiting work on both urban and rural gatherers. Themes present across the literature within that work support a breadth of gathering practices, a variety of NTFP, and the importance of gathering to many different types of

individuals (McLain 2012). Emery et. al. published one of the first works to profile contemporary gatherers of NTFP across parts of the southern and eastern U.S. (Emery et. al. 2002). This study, funded by the U.S. Forest Service, compiled profiles of gatherers including the types of SFP they collect, post-harvest practices (edible, decorative, medicinal, utilitarian, etc) the values they associate with those SFP, and other elements of their practice (2002). The demographics of gatherers and practices of gathering, including the rate at which gathering occurs, is the focus of Robbins, Emery, and Rice's article, *Gathering in Thoreau's backyard: nontimber forest product harvesting as practice* (2007). Here, Robbins makes a distinction between the practice of gathering NTFP, and the gatherers of NTFP. This study is consistent with others as Robbins remarks: "simply put, wild plants are normal parts of many people's lives," (Robbins 2007).

The approach taken in Robbins' work is mirrored in a good deal of literature on gathering from natural resources, forestry, and ecosystems services perspectives. These studies are largely motivated by the NTFP being harvested, and the practices of harvesting in as far as those practices impact forest composition, policy and planning. For example, McLain et. al. focuses one study on the potentially positive impacts of foraging on urban ecosystems (2013). Through quantitative data collected on the number of species harvested, frequencies and locations of harvest, this study adds to the work that catalogs NTFP harvested in four urban U.S. cities (2013). Additionally, McLain uses semi-structured interviews with gatherers in on location to examine meaning, knowledge sharing and values attached to the practice of gathering wild edibles in order to better understand the urban forestry planning implications of gathering NTFP (2013). McLain is frequently cited on the subject of gathering NTFP from varied perspectives from urban forestry and edible landscapes through gleaning projects in Seattle (McLain et. al. 2012), to the role foragers may take in urban greenspace planning (McLain et. al. 2014).

Other approaches to the study of gathering NTFP have been taken through political and human ecology in urban spaces in particular. Hurley et. al. discusses the sustainability aspects of gathering by using GIS combined with qualitative interviews examining popularity of edible NTFP and changing social and economic climate in and around Mt. Pleasant North Carolina (2015). Additional work by Hurley examines NTFP harvesting practices related to basket weaving and cultural, economic and ecological sustainability (Hurley PT and Halfacre 2011; Hurley et. al 2008). Emery and Pierce predate this work by complicating the relationship, validity, and relevance of subsistence practices, including gathering, to forest policy, (2004). Here, the authors challenge the notion that subsistence practices have no place in contemporary behavior, and are indicative of systems failures when individuals and societies do participate in these actions, (2004). They draw on traditional and contemporary subsistence practices as examples of the ways in which humans interact with forests and find, "[t]he social, cultural, and psychological benefits of subsistence activities are prized in addition to their direct material contributions," (Emery and Pierce 2004, 983). Their study challenges the political ecological segregation of spaces of recreation, economic, and social value.

This represents a shift in the ways scholars are writing about gathering and those who participate in the practice, from forest management implications, to interfacing critically with the humans at the helm of the practice. Access, belonging, and values are being examined as integral elements of the practice of gathering NTFP. Moral decisions made by gatherers about where they harvest is the focus of Charnley's work in and around Seattle, Washington (Charnley, et.al. in-review, presented March 2016). Charnley's work focused on the moral decisions that underpin harvesting practices in three main areas: parks, yards and pedestrian rights of way, (11). She finds that foragers develop a voluntary "code of conduct" that help to determine their access to harvestable NTFP (35).

A recent conference paper for the Society of Applied Anthropologists, presented by Rebecca McLain, highlighted new work on the ethical decisions gatherers make regarding stewardship as part of harvesting practices, also set in Seattle (Poe, et. al. presentation by McLain March, 2016). Here, McLain presented the co-authored paper on the informal and formal stewardship practices of gatherers and the ways in which those practices may be beneficial to the efforts made by forest services and formal stewardship personnel (2016). In the paper, Poe writes: "Although it is unlikely that any one individual forager's actions will have a significant positive impact on urban forest ecosystem structures and functions, in aggregate, foragers' everyday informal stewardship can both supplement and complement the work carried out by formal stewardship groups and the Parks Department's professional staff," (Poe, et. al., presented by McLain, 2016, 22).

Poe's work on urban foraging and belonging draws connections between practice, place, and plants (2014). Through "relational ecologies of belonging," (905) she employs foraging as a lens through which connections between place and species and practice are illuminated. Poe proposes: "cultural identities, connections to place, and environmental practices are embedded in people's everyday relationships with nature, urban, or otherwise," (904). Due to the implications of political geographies, and more-than-human conceptions of space, Poe's work is highly influential to this study.

This article is the result of ethnographic field work with gatherers of wild edibles in Vermont, USA, between 2015 and 2016. Some literature has situated scholarly work on gathering SFP and NTFS in New England and Vermont. Four profiles in Emery's 2002 study explained above highlighted several gatherers from Vermont (34, 37, 39, 42). Pierce addresses gathering practices of individuals living in Vermont using ethnographic data collection methods (2014). He finds that foragers cite a variety of reason for engaging with the harvest of wild edibles, and that shifts in economic landscapes and livelihoods in Vermont may result in some changes to the harvest and post-harvest practices in this area (2014).

Through this review of current literature, the literature shows that gatherers of wild edibles are as diverse as the plants and fungi they harvest. Scholarship has begun to address the contemporary forager in relation to their physical and economic considerations of gathering, and the ethics, moral judgements, and social constructions of

practice that are attached to harvest and post-harvest practices. It is from this notion that I propose research into intersecting identities of those who collect wild edibles which may help elucidate the practices of gathering wild edibles in relation to those gathering. While values, morals, and ethics of foragers have been topics of research there are still omissions. Even the literature that accomplishes accurate and compelling profiles of foragers lacks the explicit connection between the identities of those who gather and their practice of gathering. Poe et al.'s work (Poe et. al. 2014) comes the closest, by ascertaining a connection between who people are, and how they practice the gathering of wild edibles.

By shifting focus from ecological impacts of harvest, species sustainability, and forest policy, toward the gatherers, their intersectional identities, and the relational practices of harvesting wild edibles, this research will fill a gap left by current work. By explicitly linking practice and intersectional identities of gatherers, this research illuminates the ways in which practice and identity are mutually informative. In what follows, I will provide an overview of intersectional identity theory, better known as intersectionality, which I have employed here, and its application stemming from the broader feminist ethnographic methodology approach. It is specifically the cumulative intersections of identities held by gatherers of wild edibles that is unique to the analysis in this research. This approach allows for a more accurate depiction of gatherers' identities, the ways they experience power and oppression relatively, and the ways these experiences inform and are informed by their gathering practices.

After a discussion of intersectionality literature, I explain the methods by which I collected the stories of gatherers of wild edibles in Vermont and the analysis I have used to connect identity, practice, and place to structures of power, privilege and opportunity. I weave the narratives of gatherers who have participated in this research with my analysis to show connection and, at times reciprocal relationships, between the participant's intersecting identities and their practice of gathering wild edibles. In this article I explore this question: what are the intersectional identities of gatherers of wild edibles in Vermont and in what ways do these intersectional identities and gathering practices inform one another?

### **Intersectional Identity, Place and Practice: A Preview of Analysis**

During my interaction with Noella I had gotten ahead of myself with my questions, and I was certain I had offended her, certainly not what I had intended to do. I told her that I did not have any intention of telling anyone that she "eats weeds", and explained the confidentiality associated with her participation in my research again. Our exchange went on for a while longer, as she shared a bit more, and we made our way back up to her garden plot. I thanked her for her time and for the ideas she shared about cooking greens.

Later, as I examined my notes from my conversation with Noella, I realized what the miscommunication had been. While I pressed to learn more about how she learned to harvest Lamb's Quarters and what African dishes she was preparing with them, she was

worried that she would be stigmatized if one of her fellow gardeners caught her picking weeds as if she had planted them. Noella is a refugee, who had had to work very hard to get to that garden plot in Burlington Vermont where she grows food with her family. “I didn’t have place to grow food,” Noella said, explaining that she works hard every day to meet the cultural food needs of her family through a variety of food access practices. “We don’t have the things we used to eat, some we do, but not many,” Noella adds. Land resources on which New Americans grow some of these culturally significant crops is made possible by an increasing number of programs, mainly through the University of Vermont Extension programming. The Center for Sustainable Agriculture drives programs such as the New American Farmer Project, focused on food security, enterprise development, and cultural awareness<sup>8</sup>. Community partners such as New Farms for New Americans and Association for Africans Living in Vermont (AALV) provide advocacy and assistance in many areas of need to New American families resettling in Vermont.

While knowledge of food procurement resources and access to land for New American growers may contribute to food security for many New American families, Noella brings up a concern not always addressed: some of the food resources available to New Americans enable culturally significant food resources, but not all of this food is available in stores and pantries, nor are the seeds that would enable farmers to grow these crops. In Noella’s case, she gathers Lambs Quarters because she finds cultural significance in the food. It is the practice, though, that presents the point of discomfort.

To Noella, being caught “eating weeds” would transgress a boundary that is too socially dangerous to approach. Transgressing boundaries, sometimes referred to as border crossing, acts as a metaphor for social norms, often applied to identity and behavior, that are designed to create and sustain ordered archetypes of human action and systems of power, (Anzaldúa 1987, Ewing 1998). “The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy,” (Anzaldúa 1987, preface).

Further explanation of this metaphor draws a connection between social expectation, identity, and practice, “social borders frequently become salient around such lines as sexual orientation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, dress, politics, food, or taste,” (Rosaldo 1993, 207). My relative experience is the opposite of Noella’s: while I brag to my friends about the edible flowers I picked from my yard and the mushrooms I collect from the woods, Noella is worried that eating things that one did not plant to later harvest and eat will set her apart from other New Americans who have assimilated *properly* by adopting behaviors that do not condone eating plants that grow wild. There are real social dangers in transgressing borders, though, “we should not impose our

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<sup>8</sup> See the New American Farmer Project page through the Center for Sustainable Agriculture website at [www.uvm.edu/sustainableagriculture](http://www.uvm.edu/sustainableagriculture).

categories on other people's lives because they probably do not apply, at least without serious revision," (Rosaldo 1993, 26).

The complexity of Noella's experience is rooted in the intersection of her identities as woman, New American, and Burundian. A short analysis of this intersection allows one to surmise that Noella is drawn to the harvest of Lamb's Quarters through a nostalgic value of particular foods preparation for her children: "I think of home, my children... it is familiar for my family." She holds this plant, called *Imigombe* in her native language, up as a reminder to herself and to her family of the place from where they come. It is a way for Noella to connect her New American identity to her Burundian heritage through her traditionally gendered role, where women cook for their family. Because Noella identifies as a Burundian, New American, woman, the harvest and preparation of *Imigombe* takes on a new set of meanings that are unique and her own.

### **Methodological Considerations**

Why might it be valuable to derive meaning from identity? Why attempt to draw connections between identity and practice? What could social location, power and oppression have to do with gathering wild foods? In this section I attempt to unpack the driving analytical structure and methodological guide for this research: intersectional identity theory.

Intersectional identity theory, or more accurately phrased: intersectionality, was first employed as a way of referring to the complex identities of individuals within the legal system. The phrase originated in 1989 by Kimberle' Williams Crenshaw in an attempt to parse a recognition of the oppressive marginalization occurring under the guise of objectivity and neutrality of the legal system and in anti-racist and feminist work (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Collins, 1993, 1998, Nash 2008). The challenge posed to qualitative researchers then was "how to ask questions about experiences that are intersecting, interdependent, and mutually constitutive, without resorting, even inadvertently, to an additive approach," (Bowleg 2008).

This additive approach refers to here regards an individual's experiences as separate, siloed, and summative (Collins 1995; Cuadraz and Uttal 1999; Weber and Parra-Medina 2003 Bowleg 2008). Instead, intersectionality insists that the points of intersection are where the complexity of one's identity is housed. Intersectionality recognizes that systems of power and oppression are mutually constructed, which goes beyond the assumption that social hierarchies exist (Bowleg 2008, Collins 1998) and allows an examination of the complex, interdependencies of certain identities. Lisa Bowleg provides the example of Black Lesbian Women and how intersectionality best approaches an accurate depiction: "[T]he additive (e.g., Black + Lesbian + Woman) versus intersectional (e.g., Black Lesbian Woman) assumption inherent in measurement and qualitative and quantitative data analyses contradicts the central tenet of intersectionality: social identities and inequality are inter-dependent for groups such as Black lesbians, not mutually exclusive" (Bowleg 2008, 312).

Since its initiation, some scholars have come to call intersectionality a “traveling theory” meaning that it may be applied to a variety of disciplines, methods, and research trajectories (Christinensen and Jensen 2012, Knapp 2005, Hill Collins 2015). Another more critical way of approaching a similar trait of intersectionality can be found in some scholars’ criticism that there is no inherent methodological practice to intersectional theory, so it lacks applicability to the research process outside of analysis (Bowleg 2008, Nash 2008, Simien, 2007; Valentine, 2007; Grabham et al., 2009, MacKinnon 2013, Cho et al 2013). Nonetheless, authors cited here have taken up the charge of debating the validity of this notion.

Individuals identify in an array of complex ways. Commonly, race, class and gender are categories by which scholars and activists house types of identities, but there are far more by which one may identify (Nash 2008, Bowleg 2008, McCall 2005). Other identities such as age, sexual orientation, documentation status, religious affiliation, and physical ability are employed to assist in an individual’s way of expressing their experience of power or oppression relative to other identities. There are also nuanced identities that do not necessarily imply a power relationship, but work to affix meaning to a person when employed. These social identities are sometimes tied to a job, or a set of practices that an individual partakes in such as mother, educator, steward, doctor that inform an individual’s behavior due to the identity. Identities are complex, vary from individual to individual, and impact the ways in which individuals experience the world and others around them.

### *Diagramming Intersectional Identities*

Through the adoption of the language of intersectionality, feminist scholars and critical race theorists have led the charge to more directly address the importance of intersections between an individual’s myriad identities (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Saba Mahmood, a cultural anthropologist and political theorist, addresses the intersections of religion, gender, and politics, by focusing on Islamic women feminist and the complexity of their intersectional identities (Mahmood 2011). Gloria E. Anzaldúa addressed intersections of race, sexuality, gender, and class through a queer, feminist, Chicana cultural theorist lens (Anzaldúa 1987). By engaging with intersectionality, these identities are not isolated from one another: “Intersectionality fills out the Venn diagrams at points of overlap where convergence has been neglected, training its sights where vectors of inequality intersect at crossroads that have previously been at best sped through,” (MacKinnon 2013).

The following are examples of the Venn diagrams MacKinnon references here. The practice of acknowledging an individual’s identities as separate challenges the base framework discussed above. The argument is, at its core, that no one identity impacts or is impacted by any other identity more or less than the others. Said differently: we are always all our identities, no matter which action or interaction attempts to call out one over the others. This is what makes MacKinnon’s verbal illustration a complicated one

for intersectional identity diagramming, nevertheless, scholars have attempted to visualize her point.

Dr. Joanna Anneke Rummens presents what may be the most thorough exploration into the diagramming of intersectional identities, however she does so without an explicit acknowledgement of the theoretical background of intersectionality (Rummens 2003). Rummens does acknowledge that “[g]reater attention must be given to the plurality of identities operative within a particular cultural and/or societal context,” and that “a more multi-dimensional intersectional approach,” would assist in demystifying the intersections of identities within a single individual (Rummens 2003, 11).

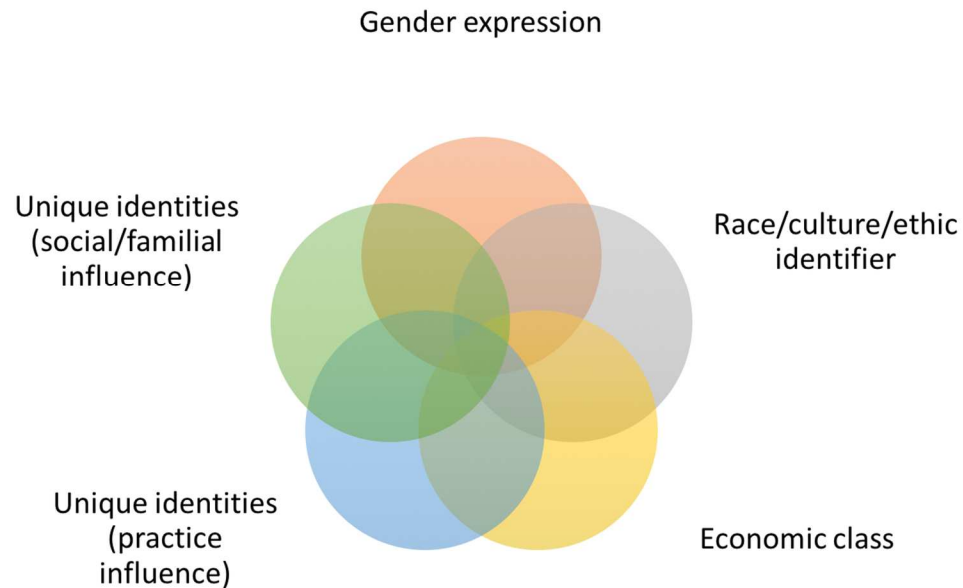
I draw inspiration from Rummens’ organization of “intersecting identities” as separate from differently organized diagrams such as the “radial approach”, “centrifugal approach”, “overlapping identities” or “stacking identities” to (Rummens 2003, 14-15). Diagramming identities using any of these other models infers a hierarchy of identity, which I’ve previously established as counterintuitive to intersectional identity theory. Further, an intersectional identities diagram may be used to acknowledge the impact of nuanced identities that are not included in the traditional race, class and gender analysis, but still play an important role in defining oneself. This model also allows for the inclusion of practice and its role in identity formation and distinction. This point is explored through the diagrams for each participant in this article.

#### *A Basic Diagram of Intersectional Identities of Gatherers of Wild Edibles in Vermont*

The participants in this research self-identified, meaning that they defined the identities recalled in this article without my language. In some instances, the identities came about in conversation without prompt or questions, and in other instances I asked a participant to clarify how they identified regarding their gender, economic class, race or ethnicity.

I draw from these emergent categories to define a basic diagram for use in depicting the intersections of identities of the participants in my research. Though this Venn diagram acts as a basic structure, participant specific diagrams can be seen within the subsections that address the participant directly.





*Figure 2: Basic Intersectional Identity categories of Gatherers of Wild Edibles in Vermont*

### **Methods: Flexible Time, Season, and Practice Sensitive Approaches to Data Collection**

This article draws primarily on data collected over a year, during two seasons of wild edibles harvest in autumn and early winter 2015 and spring/summer 2016. Participants were found through three varied key informants, followed by the snowball method to reach twelve participants total. In order to address key elements of intersectionality and its applicability to this type of analysis and methodological research, the narratives highlighted here are representative of common themes and approach found across fieldwork with these twelve participants.

I employed methods of embodied practice, participant observation, semi structured interviews, and “active” interview styles. I have found these methods to be particularly useful in approaching qualitative work through intersectionality. Other scholars of feminist qualitative work and critical race theory have concurred with similar connections between qualitative methods and intersectionality (Syed 2010, Shields 2008, MacKinnon 2013, Cho et al 2013). I accompanied gatherers on field walks where they searched for wild edibles, joined them in their kitchens and participated in processing wild foods, and in some cases, was invited to dine with gatherers in their homes on wild foods they had previously harvested and prepared. Spending ample, unstructured time, noting gatherer’s interactions with their natural and build environments through their physical movements

across landscapes, and participant observations of gatherers with the wild edibles themselves, resulted in rich collections of unique and relational experiences based in the interplay of gather identities and their practices (Poe 2014).

These methods of inquiry lend to an ideal infusion of intersectionality with the study of human practice, as Poe's (2014) ethnographic study on gatherers in Seattle insists: "the practice [of gathering wild edibles] became a moral and political act constituting and constituted by a relational understanding of belonging," (Poe 2014 p.914). In this article, the methods and analysis employed will respond to Patricia Hill Collins' question on the complexity of intersectional methodology: "When it comes to intersectionality and methodology, the core question concerns how intersectionality can be conceptualized within a particular research design that is attentive to the contradictions that characterize intersectional knowledge projects and that makes a good faith effort to deploy appropriate theories and methods in the face of such uncertainty," (Hill Collins 2015, 13).

In an effort to avoid the "et cetera" that plagues much intersectional feminist work (as in race, class, gender, *etc*) (Nash 2008, Bowleg 2008, McCall 2005) and to acknowledge that there is a risk of essentializing identities whenever an attempt at categorization, or a critique of it, is involved in scholarly analysis, (Nash 2008, Bowleg 2008, Rodó-de-Zárate 2013, Harper 2011, McCall 2005) I work from the standpoint of intracategorical complexity analysis, (as opposed to inter- or anti- categorical complexity) developed by Leslie McCall (2005), in an attempt to divide the approaches to doing intersectional research into more organized camps. "[I]ntracategorical analyses attend to the dangers of categorization, yet do not necessarily reject the categories themselves. Instead, scholars working in this tradition problematize the exclusionary repercussions of the act of categorization and use multiply marginalized subjects' experiences as ways of demonstrating the inadequacy of categories," (Nash 2008, 5). In the narratives that follow, I will elaborate on the different ways research participants developed and expressed identities, and how their self-assigned, intersectional identities provide an expansion of the common race, class and gender analysis. I will also draw connections to their practice of gathering wild edibles and how their practice has come to inform certain identities, and has come to be informed by them.

Each method has been employed thoughtfully, in order to best collect a broad range of data, from speech intonation and body language, to interactions with the natural surroundings and memories of specific experiences related to collecting wild edibles. Research on interview methods that incorporate walking, or other tasks alongside semi-structured questions and conversation have proven to be effective tools in qualitative ethnography (Onwuegbuzie 2010, Carpiano 2009, Myers 2010.) The impacts of some of these methodological choices will be elaborated on within the analysis and discussion of my research with gatherers that follow.

### **Why Vermont?**

Data collection for this research took place within the state boundaries of Vermont, situated between the Adirondack Mountains of New York, and the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The Green Mountain State provided an ideal landscape over which two seasons of fieldwalks with gatherers of wild edibles were recorded.

Vermont includes both rural and urban areas, wooded forests and river valleys which are ideal for the growth of many wild, edible plants and fungi. New England and other eastern states has been the focus of other scholarly work on the gathering of non-timber forest products (NTFP), sometimes referred to as special forest products (SFP)(Pierce 2014, McLain 2012, Emery 2014 & 2002, Robbins 2007). Within some of these studies Vermont residents have been part of this scholarly work (Emery 2014, 2002). Here, I hone in on gatherers of what I am calling wild edibles in Vermont. Throughout this article, the term wild edibles refers to plants and fungi harvested specifically for their culinary value in human consumption, as opposed to primarily decorative, medicinal or spiritual values. Some items occupy more than one category, but this research is limited to items harvested primarily for eating or for selling to eat.

The location is key as well. A survey of individuals residing in Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire with a sample size  $n = 1650$ , found that over one quarter (26.3%) of the population participated in gathering, (Robbins 2007). A USDA multifunctionality survey of 80 landowners along the Vermont side of Lake Champlain watershed, selected randomly, shows 32% of respondents answered “yes” when asked if they forage wild edibles for medicinal purposes (Morse, et.al. 2014) from their properties. In an informal survey of community gardeners in Burlington, Vermont conducted in September, 2014, some respondents indicated that they had foraged for wild edibles around the various community garden sites (BACG 2014). Simply put, because of its varied landscape and the body of research already accomplished on New England gatherers, many of whom reside in the state (Emery 2014, 2002), further research into the gatherers of Vermont is warranted.

### **Gatherers of Wild Edibles in Vermont: An Exploration of Practice and Identity**

I remembered meeting Nova Kim and Les Hook<sup>9</sup> a year before our meeting explicitly for this research. They led a section of a course on food systems that I was co-instructing for undergraduate and graduate students in Vermont. The lesson they led was on wild edibles, homesteading, and pastoral, place-based foodways. Kim and Hook guided the class through the wooded property of an affiliated faculty member pointing out different wild edibles and providing context for the wild food dinner we would all enjoy later that evening.

Before my meeting with Kim and Hook I recalled the caution that I was advised to take when referring to their practice. It is a reputation that precedes them somewhat, so Kim knew exactly what I was getting at when I paused our conversation early and asked to

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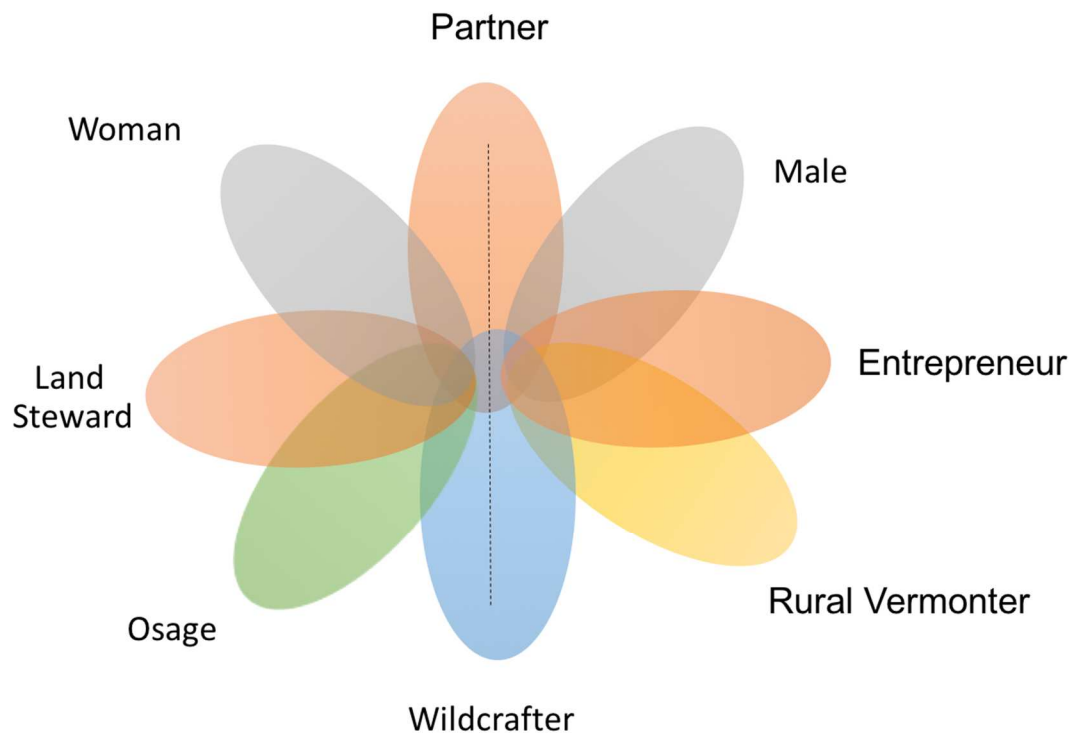
<sup>9</sup> These participants requested their real names be used throughout this research.

address language. “You want to talk about the “f” word?” Kim asks provocatively, referring to the word *forager*, a title that to her, denotes this pejorative reference. “It does make a difference. Words matter, words have meaning,” Kim and Hook emphatically identify as wildcrafters, not foragers. For their reasoning, Kim draws on her understanding of the etymology of the term “forager,” which involves a critique of work is considered unskilled. “There’re a lot of good collectors who have never heard themselves referred to as anything but foragers. It doesn’t mean they’re not a good collector, doesn’t mean they’re not conscientious. But there’s got to be a differentiating factor between those who collect correctly and those who do not,” Kim explains. “It’s the difference between hunting and poaching,” Hook adds.

I have shared this narrative because it presents an interesting switch from Noella’s narrative, which leads this article. Kim and Hook have placed considerable amounts of their identities on this particular title, wildcrafter, that is indicative of a particular practice and ethos. Hook and Kim are professional wildcrafters who have run their own wild foods business, a wild foods CSA, led educational wildcrafting tours, presented at international conferences on their craft, and have been featured in scholarly work regarding gatherers of wild edibles (Emery 2003). Throughout our conversation, they recounted interactions with various news outlets, specialty food magazines and popular literature through which they have tightly controlled the way they, and their practice of wildcrafting, is depicted through the language used. While their *practice* may be influenced by their intersectional *identities*, which is addressed later in this paper, this example illustrates one way in which Hook and Kim’s *identity* is informed by their *practice*. Hook and Kim’s identity as wildcrafters became more than simply harvesting wild edibles (see Fig. 2). Through the development of their identity as wildcrafters, their practice has become a political act through which their identity is reinforced (Poe 2014).

The idea that words have meaning and are loaded with power is related to this research on identity (Fairclough 2013). Throughout my fieldwork with gatherers of wild edibles, participants referred to themselves as foragers, gatherers, and wildcrafters. They referred to their practice as foraging, gathering, collecting, and wildcrafting. In this research I use the words “practice of gathering wild edibles” and “gatherer of wild edibles” in order to specify the parameters of the research.

For example, many individuals participated in gathering plants and fungi for medicinal, spiritual, or decorative purposes. Due to my research from a food systems perspective, I chose to include only those whose practice included gathering wild edibles. Further inquiry into the connections between intersectional identities and gatherers of other NTFP and SFP would no doubt product a rich and interesting analysis, but is beyond the scope of this research.

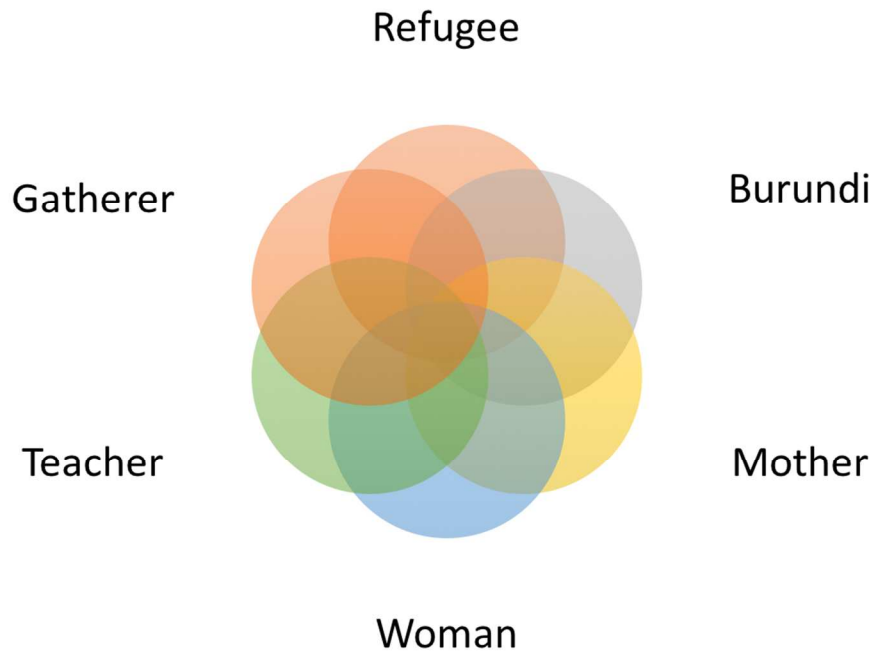


*Figure 3: Diagram of Intersectional Identities of Nova Kim & Les Hook*

In the following section I will recount the intersectional identities of the participants in this research. I will then draw connections between their intersectional identities and their practices of gathering wild edibles. Through these connections, I will illuminate the ways in which we might look at identity and practice as mutually informative, adding to the scholarly discussion on intersectionality and identity.

*Language, Power, and Identity Definition*

Kim and Hook’s identity as wildcrafters is informed by their practice of gathering wild edibles however, each of them have their own unique intersectional identities that bring them to the practice individually. There are some similarities between Noella’s feelings of secrecy around her gathering wild edibles and Kim’s relationship to wild foods growing up. Kim is one third Osage Native American, a heritage that was known to her growing up. She said her family moved to Wyoming when she was young to avoid being grouped racially with other Osage living in the area. Once they moved, her behavior was expected to change to assimilate to her new environment, away from other Native Americans. “You could hunt and trap and things because that’s what any good ol’ boy would do, but you didn’t pick wild foods,” Kim said. It was not that she grew up without the knowledge of wild edibles but without participating in the practice of collecting them.



*Figure 4: Diagram of Intersectional Identities of Noella*

She was expressly forbidden from doing so because her ability to assimilate into white culture would be compromised.

Similarly, Noella’s fear of my outing her as a collector of wild edibles draws on the same racialized fear of nonconformity that Kim has recounted here. Gathering for both of these women had become a political statement linked to their identities and expectations of assimilation. By gathering wild edibles, they not only risk the possibility of being caught collecting, but also of having their identities “othered” by those who see their practice of gathering wild edibles as a transgressive act. This experience is consistent with other studies that have included narratives of refugee and immigrant gatherers (Poe 2014, 908). Poe, et. al. explains the significance of harvesting wild edibles particularly to those who self-identify as refugees or immigrants: “Culturally specific plant and mushroom [harvesting] practices produced a sense of belonging in ways that were frequently mobilized and enacted through cultural difference and identity. Differentiated foraging practices and species preferences reflected social and historical contingencies that privileged certain relationships between people, plants, and mushrooms in the city,” (Poe 2014, 907). For Kim, returning to these practices after having grown up explicitly abandoning them has provided a way to reconnect to her heritage. For Noella, the current struggle with the expectations of her new surroundings in the United States are impacted by the cultural significance of her gathering practice.

The fear of the Other is real and is impressed upon all aspects of identity. With any assertion of an identity, there is at least one “other” that is defined in relation to it. The foundations of Otherness and what or who creates those boundaries has been debated, but a prevailing theory is that the social power of the colonizer has crafted Otherness in relation to the colonizer's original, similar to marginalization in relation to the center (Hartsock 1990, hooks 2000). However, these differences defined by those in power are imposed upon those who are oppressed. It is from this concern that we must challenge the borders of Otherness. This is where Noella and Nova's acts of gathering and wildcrafting constitute radical acts of transgression that instigate power through their identities as gatherers.

### *Identity, Practice, and Place for a Wildcrafter*

Kim's partner connects with his wild edibles practice differently. Hook self-identifies as a rural Vermonter, and an entrepreneur. He grew up in a family of ginseng harvesters which he said gave him the ability to view the landscape differently. “It's all about noticing what sticks out as different,” Hook added, as he handed me a four-leaf clover he found and picked just moments before our discussion began. Through his upbringing in rural Vermont, Hook learned how to survey the landscape for ginseng and other valuable plants and fungi in order to live off the land. Later, after partnering with Kim, the couple started a tree business that drew on Hook's knowledge of saplings and allowed the couple to make a living harvesting ornamental trees before they were widely available at garden supply and landscape stores. Hook's identity is deeply tied to his connections to rural Vermont. His identity as a wildcrafter, as opposed to forager, by his definition, is due in large part to the respect and knowledge gained through his rural upbringing, led by his father's example. “He was a very intelligent farmer... he tracked he collected ginseng, fished... when my father died the whole culture started to die too. Everybody would stop by and talk to him on the porch, but he saw things changing,” Hook said.

The changes that Hook's father noted were part of a change in Vermont's human landscape that occurred with the advent of modernity that swept the United States in its early years between 1865 and 1915 (Searls 2006). Vermont was faced with decisions regarding industrial capitalism and how the state, and people, fit into that model. Kim recounts, “people came in to take advantage of the localized labor. At some point it became shameful to go pick your own food.” Historian and social scientist, Paul Searls, gives an account of what he calls “two Vermonts,” in his book by the same name (2006). As settlers made their way to Vermont, some stayed in the hills and others moved toward flatter land. The communities that subsequently formed were comprised of a variety of skilled tradespeople and businesspeople whose employment helped to create part of the sustained version of what a Vermonter holds dear: hard work, state pride, and a winning landscape (Searls 2006). *Downhillers* held values more consistent with the expanding American middle and upper-middle class while *uphillers* remained true to what they considered to be “Vermont” values (Searls 2006, 34).

The connection to place through the practice of gathering wild edibles has been noted in previous research (Poe 2014, Emery 2014). The connection between practice and place is uniquely apparent in Hook's case because of his rural Vermont upbringing. Poe examines place-making and the relationships of belonging that are tied to the practice of gathering wild edibles in her work with foragers in Seattle: "Many foragers spoke of how, through foraging, they had created a deeper, more intimate knowledge of the city with layered meanings built up over time, something we ourselves also experienced. Active relating, moving, and engaging (not simply being) with plants, mushrooms, and spaces in the city were therefore essential processes through which foragers came to belong" (Poe 2014, 910).

### *Maleness, Wilderness, and Practice*

Additionally, Hook's maleness contributes to his rural experience and wildcrafting practice. Environmental historian William Cronon provides some abiding constructions of gendered nature and wilderness in the United States. This image begins with that of the frontier as westward expansion introduced an abundance of Anglo-Saxon pioneers on the landscape. "Wilderness came to embody the national frontier myth, standing for the wild freedom of America's past" (Cronon 1996, 78). This rugged individualism provides the very rock on which the American patriotism is built, but it is however, only intended for males: "The mythic frontier individualist was almost always masculine in gender: here, in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be," (Cronon 1996, 78). Hook's relationship to his father influenced his interests and behavior growing up. His reverence for this male role model reinforced some of Hook's conceptions about gender and nature. Hook never expressed concern for how his gathering behavior would be viewed, or that he should hide his practice for any reason. This confidence is mirrored in the other participants in this research who self-identified as male and white or Caucasian. While class and other economic identities varied, those who identified as male and white or Caucasian all expressed a confidence in their gathering practice. This could perhaps be linked to socially acceptable behaviors that govern certain behaviors based on gender norms, but it is complicated by the rural/urban dynamic.

Hook's connection to his practice is inextricably linked to his identity as a wildcrafting, rural, male, Vermonter. This is to say, if any one of Hook's identities was different, the relationship to his practice of gathering wild edibles may also be altered. Here I employ Ingold's use of the term *taskscape* to link the relationship between practice and sociality (Ingold 2000). This term is applicable because Hook, and every other person, does not exist outside of a social sphere, nor do his tasks, or practices, take place without social influence: "Every task takes its meaning from its position within an ensemble of tasks, performed in series or in parallel, and usually by many people working together," (Ingold 2000, 195). Ingold's taskscape further links conceptions similar to those employed in intersectionality to the sociality of practice: "...one of the outstanding features of human technical practices lies in their embeddedness in the current of sociality. It is to the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking, that I refer by the concept of taskscape,"



(Ingold 2000, 195). Due to his specific intersections of rural Vermonter maleness and the code of ethics implied by his identity-through-practice as wildcrafter, Hook has developed a specific relationship to the practice of gathering wild edibles that is unique to him.

### *Intra-categorical Intersectionality*

Highlighted by the narratives above, identity and practice are at times interwoven, it is not enough to implicate one as the cause or effect of the other. Just as intersectionality implicates all single identities of an individual at once to create a new, differently imagined identity, in some cases the practice and the identity have become one with, and due to the other. This is a good place to interject once more McCall's delineation of categories of intersectionality. By employing an intra-categorical approach to intersectionality I have acknowledged that separated categories exist (male, white, rural, New American, etc.) inasmuch as they have been constructed to serve the purpose of social categorization. Social construction of identity into binary terms has been challenged by countless scholars, most notably Judith Butler in the highly-cited work *Gender Trouble* (1990). Traditional binary viewpoints have been complicated by the inclusion of queer ecologists' research on the complexity of sexuality and gender performance in nature. (Bell 2010, Butler 1990, Little and Panelli 2003, Haraway 2003, Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010). By acknowledging the power of lexicon that these traditional categories hold, one can move from common assumptions about those who choose or are placed in said categories, into a critique of those categories. Simply, by acknowledging the social existence of identity categories we may begin to critique the use of them as fixed, universal concepts and begin viewing them as constructions of social power and oppression. Intersectionality is particularly well equipped as an analytical tool to examine the ability for identity categories to support or transgress the definitions of any one category. The next participant I will highlight takes a particularly political approach to their own intersectional identity and practice as a gatherer of wild edibles.

### *Queering Practice; Queering Identities*

Just outside of a bustling arts town in southern Vermont I met River, who identifies as queer, genderfluid, and mixed [race]/brown, and who prefers the use of pronouns "they" and "them" when referring to themselves. After I explained that each research participant would be assigned a pseudonym, River asked if they could choose their own name in order to insure that the name used to refer to them in this research would reflect the gender non-conformance they prefer. This is an example of the ways in which identity may be crafted to meet certain needs or expectations, rather than being permanently static or universal.

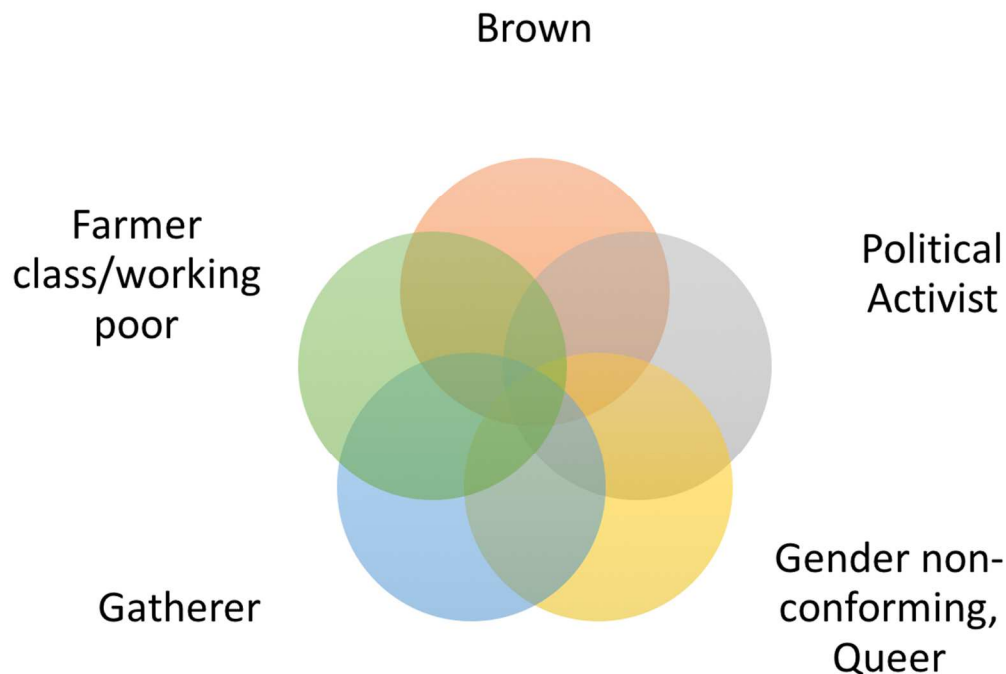


Figure 5: Diagram of Intersectional Identities of River

River’s principles go beyond their gender identity. “I think we spend way too much money on food that doesn’t nourish our bodies,” River states as we begin a discussion about food procurement. “I mean, I get probably half of my food from a dumpster, except in the middle of summer when I harvest what I grow, and that’s perfectly good food that would be trashed if there weren’t people like me willing to defy the expectations of society and where we’re *supposed to get food*<sup>10</sup>,” they said. River connected food procured from a dumpster to wild edibles saying, “we’re not *supposed to eat any of it*,” insinuating that instead, one is perhaps “supposed to” purchase food in a more conventional fashion, like from a grocery store, instead of otherwise procuring or foraging it.

During our fieldwalk, River made many assertions about the politics embedded in their practice, as well as their intersectional identity. Unlike many of the other participants, River seemed well-versed and eager to discuss the connections between their intersectional identity and their practice of gathering wild edibles. They drew parallels between transgressing categorical boundaries of gender and sexuality as outlined above, and transgressing capitalistic means of food procurement. When asked how they feel about their practice of gathering they responded that foraging wild edibles is, “the queerest way to get food I can think of.” While this response was meant to be slightly tongue-in-cheek, River’s assessment is linked to the experiences of other gatherers. They draw upon the idea that to queer an object or idea means to problematize the dominant

<sup>10</sup> Italics added to indicate the participants spoken emphasis.

notions upon which that thing or idea is understood (Honeychurch 1996). Here, River has drawn connections between the way they've challenged, or queered, binary gender understandings through their gender-non-conforming identity and sexuality, and the challenge that gathering wild edibles poses to the understandings of what counts as food and what does not. River has queered the understanding of what counts as food through their understand of their intersecting identities as queer and genderqueer (identities relative to their sexuality and their gender performance respectively.) This queering of food is precisely the problematic, socially constructed distinction that created the dilemma for Noella during our encounter, and that created the contentious upbringing devoid of wildcrafting for Kim. Due to the assumption that "food" is linked to the practice by which it is procured, the practice of gathering wild edibles is looked down upon across all three of these participants' experiences. Ultimately, the practice of gathering wild edibles is used as a means of empowerment through a reconfiguration of meanings impacted by the participant's intersectional identities. Through this critique we can see that the practice of gathering wild edibles has taken on an intimately political connection to identify and is perhaps subject to similar social constructions of acceptability.

River furthered their critique of broader food systems by complicating their identity as a mixed/ brown farmer. "I'm reclaiming the land that many brown folks are too scared to work because it brings up history that they don't want to touch, it adds to the brown-skinned, queer visibility that is essential to our survival," River says. They see being queer and mixed race/brown as a defiant act. River's intersectional identities and practice demonstrate a cogent and conscious interweave of identity and practice.

### **Concluding Thoughts and Opportunities for Further Inquiry**

In this article I have examined identity and how the intersections of identities within an individual lead to a different construction of identity based in a critique of privilege and oppression. I have explored the ways in which these intersectional identities manifest within the practices of gatherers of wild edibles in Vermont. The values, ethics and meaning affixed to the practice is explored here through intersectionality as well. Additionally, in some cases, practice has come to form a new identity that intersects with other constructed identities to create a unique experience. I have addressed some of the ways in which practices of gathering wild edibles are relatively impacted by and impactful of other socio-political dynamics (Emery et. al. 2002). Through these intersections of identities and practices, this work depicts a mutually informative relational penchant between participants and practice.

Various scholarly explorations of land and humans, place and practice, address critiques of nature and culture. To situate gatherers, one must shift the way one perceives nature to be separate from the human cultural practice of gathering wild edibles. In her essay, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Others* (2003), Donna Haraway introduces the term natureculture. Haraway references ethnographer Marilyn Strathern's aversion to conceptions of nature and culture as being opposites or

categorically universal in the first place (Haraway 2003). Strathern, Haraway suggests, is not an ethnographer of one or the other, but of “patterns within which the players are neither wholes nor parts,” (Haraway 2003, 8). This concept of natureculture is applicable to the relationship between identity, practice, and even food, that has been examined throughout this research. The terms are neither binary nor oppositional but instead, socially constructed valuations of and on one another. Working from Haraway’s natureculture concept, the research I presented here works under the assumption, ‘that the very idea of nature itself is not natural; nature is cultural’ (Bell 2010).

### *Future Directions for transdisciplinary research*

Each of the participants in this research warrants their own article elucidating the complexities and relationships between identities and practices. Collaborative work is paramount to transdisciplinary research. With the benefit of transdisciplinary methods and analysis, this work could reach further audiences in disciplines currently touching on similar concepts, but doing so from an academic silo.

Further transdisciplinary work on this topic might instigate collaboration between researchers, the forest service and parks departments to inform reactions to harvesting on city and state owned lands. As in the case of Noella, parks department employees may not have a working understanding of the cultural significance harvesting wild edibles has to Noella and other refugee populations. However, with communication and collaborative work, intersectional identity theories will help to inform policy, and enhance the relationship between marginalized groups and institutions of power.

This research reflects the intersectional yearnings of transdisciplinary scholarly work that address true concerns of Food Systems as a discipline. In this article, I have connected work from Women and Gender Studies, Geography, Food Systems, Natural Resources, Anthropology, and Critical Race Theory. By drawing on transdisciplinary approaches to intersectionality, I have been granted permission by these research participants to witness the structures of power intrinsically linked to social identities –

- Queer-Brown-gender non-conformer-farmer
- Osage-foodie-wife-land steward
- Rural Vermonter-male-entrepreneur-partner
- Burundian-refugee-mother-teacher

and their practices that enable further identities, rife with the truths that our power and oppressions come not only from who we are, but also from what we do –

- Farmer-political activist-forager
- sage-steward-wildcrafter
- teacher-mother-“weed-eater”

This article reflects the conversations taking place within Food Systems programs, and programs of similar title, in that this research examines systems of power that are woven into the fabric of our identities, and the core of our daily practices. Much as the inquiry into ecological systems requires the consideration of social, economic and biological structures, this research examines political systems through ecological, social, and economic structures. The collection of wild edibles allows a medium for this theoretical conversation on practice and identity to take shape, and intersectionality is the lens through which one may view it.

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## CONCLUSION

This concludes my research on the exploration of the intersectional identities of gatherers of wild edibles in Vermont. Through this project I have illuminated the connections between critical, intersectional, transdisciplinary, food systems research. I believe this project is an example of the possibilities that exist within the academy for theoretical work that is both grounded in theory, and applicable to a wide range of disciplines and sectors. I've explicated the important of collaboration within a transdisciplinary project, but what might that look like for this research?

This work contributes directly to the growing literature on human interaction with nature, specifically by way of gathering wild edibles. Natural resources as a field of academic study, works closely with local, state, and national governmental systems, such as the forest service, to better understand human environment interactions. I believe this research has direct applicability to those working in this field who aim to understand how intersectional identity, social systems of power, and practice are intertwined.

There is also a relationship between the contents and perspectives I address in this research and the emerging interest in the academy through the field of cultural ecosystems services. While I have not drawn on scholarly work from this field for this research, I believe there are shared interest and motives between this research and work published in cultural ecosystems services fields.

Directly, there are opportunities for this work to be applied to sectors in Vermont concerned with land management, such as Parks and Recreation departments, and the Forest Service. These institutions concern themselves to a great degree with natural and biological processes, and to conservation of environmental spaces for the enjoyment of

the public and the preservation of ecologically significant land areas and waterways. There is growing support, however, as demonstrated by those cited herein who work both in the academic sphere doing research based in the human experience and for these institutions, that human identity and cultural significance is becoming more a part of the way land and water is preserved, conserved, and regulated. I would like to see my research used to educate sectors outside of academia on the importance of socio-political systems of power, of which they and their institutions are a part, and the impacts of land management on marginalized communities. I have address some of the ways in which research on foragers has supported efforts of sustainability within parks departments. I would like to see more of this dialogue.

As a thesis completed in pursuit of a Masters degree in Food Systems, I am compelled to highlight the importance of this work to this intrepid academic field. Through a focus on wild edibles, I have illuminated the ways in which food procurement can be both creative, entrepreneurial, culturally significant, and survivalist. Through an exploration of intersectional identities, I have created support for the body of scholarship on gatherers that depicts practitioners of this food acquisition technique as diverse as the items they collect. This research also draws connections between land and food and highlights the importance of place to edibles and eating. Food is an experience tied up in the sociopolitical, economic, and environmental systems that surround it. My research sheds light on a lesser considered element of access – the means of procurement and the power of practice and identity. In line with other work on defining food, this research may be used to implore the questions, what is food? what does mean culturally, socially? and what practices help to define these terms?

I am delighted to present this work on behalf of the participants who made it possible. I hope that the next steps with this research will prove the importance of intersectionality across academic and popular sectors. I challenge the reader to consider their own practices related to the food they consume and their interactions with the processes that bring that food to their mouths. Perhaps, this will instigate self-exploration and will help to illuminate their own intersectional identities as they may be related to their own practices of food procurement, preparation and consumption. Perhaps it will get some people outside, where they may look down at the plants and fungi and wonder if their identities include that of a gatherer of wild edibles.

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