IN THE FIELD

Student Perspectives on Community Food Systems Engagement

AUTHORED BY STUDENTS OF THE COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS MINOR
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INTRODUCTION

What is a Community Food System?

Who are the actors who have planted, nurtured, harvested, packaged, transported, and ultimately handed your food to you? And why do you choose the foods you eat? These complex questions become easier to answer in a community food systems model. Under this community-oriented model, the environmental, economic, social, cultural, and personal attributes of food and eating are incorporated into a food system that aligns with community values and priorities. Much like a community is comprised of many forms of capital, a community food system results from the intersection of several agents and social movements surrounding our food and eating ways.

Among the values community food systems typically ascribe to or strive to realize through specialized, intentional attention are: respect for laborers, consumers, and the environment within the context of community. In every focus, the food system must be equitable, just, and dignifying for it to sustain and empower its community.

About the Minor and Practicum

The Community Food Systems Minor is based in the Department of Development Sociology in the Cornell University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. As students enrolled in the minor, we seek to understand and grapple with issues in the modern day food system, such that we can develop our capacity to build sustainable community food systems. The minor consists of two main, integrated components: coursework and an engaged learning requirement, primarily a summer practicum, where students take courses on local food systems through social, ethical, ecological, and agricultural perspectives and collaborate with organizational partners to apply such knowledge into a real-world community context.

Across three countries and six organizations, we participated in our practicums hoping to learn from and contribute to socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable food systems. Over the summer, we all worked with these partners for ten weeks, learning, practicing, and growing as a cohort. Throughout our practicum experience, we were also required to complete weekly-reflection assignments and weekly, full-group check-ins with our mentor, Tess Pendergrast, and peers completing the practicum. The check-ins were designed to help us integrate our practicum experiences and learning with our classroom-based studies as well as help us process our experiences more broadly in the context of our personal and professional learning goals and understanding of the world more generally. These discussions were also a chance for us to also learn about other aspects of the food system that we were not in direct contact with, since we were based in vastly different spaces and working with unique missions and scopes of work.
About the Book: Form and Purpose

This book, *In the Field: Student Perspectives on Community Food Systems Engagement* is the culmination of our practicum experiences over the summer in 2018. We have collected key moments which we felt were most memorable and meaningful in our understanding of and engagement in our respective community spaces, in hopes of shedding light on the realities of college students’ experiences in food systems work and changemaking as a whole.

From the dairy farms of Upstate NY and the bustling streets of Hong Kong to nutrition classrooms in Ithaca and community gardens in Chicago, we shared varied experiences as well as moments of similarity. We have chosen to orient and record our experiences through the process of narrative inquiry, using a storytelling-based strategy to look back on moments where we experienced particular emotions—intrigue, anger, conflict, motivation...

Using this narrative framework, we have each written stories presented in four sections of this book: Weeds, Seeds, Roots, and Sprouts. Each of these sections, as illustrated by their titles, feature moments from our summer practicums in which we felt frustrated, confused, inspired, grounded, or hopeful.

This book does not and cannot cover the entirety of our experiences; however, we hope that it represents a part of our work that will benefit future CFS Minor practicum cohorts and other students. Through our stories, we hope to inspire and offer a glimpse of the challenging yet rewarding realities of this work to the future generations of Community Food Systems changemakers. Here is a quote that our capstone instructor shared with us earlier in the semester:

*Where does a story begin? The fiction is that they do, and end, rather than that the stuff of story is just a cup of water scooped from the sea and poured back into it...*

—Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*  
I. Prosopagnosia

(A cognitive disorder of face perception in which there is an inability to recognize familiar faces, including one’s own face.)

The pressures of being a Cornell student.
There are many different faces to food insecurity.
I am a chameleon, constantly changing, because context is everything.
Most times my facade is a mirage, an exoskeleton, flexible but protective of the vulnerable contents of my being. When I’m at Cornell, there are days when I forget to eat because of the stress. When I eat sleep for dinner. Even on days where I’m worthy enough to eat, I still feel guilty. When it feels like Cornell is chewing me up, being swallowed, dissolved, broken down.

When I’m sitting at the dining table eating a cold, seasoning-less meal, I feel guilty. The thought of food, of constantly eating the same thing in the dining hall makes me nauseous. When your stomach is filled with insecurities, it’s hard to make room for sustenance.

What is a meal? It should be something sacred. A bonding moment in the human experience. But at Cornell everything is a competition. The competitive nature of everything. Makes it hard to form genuine relationships or bonds. They’re artificial like processed food. It’s hard to form genuine connections. Maybe we’re starving for connection as much as we’re starving for nutrition. How can I study, or think, or retain information, if the only sustenance I have is the words on these pages, not friendship, or love, or even food itself.

We’re looking for the most convenient option. Like fast food or top ramen and kraft mac and cheese—to us college students, this is our filet mignon and caviar, the best we can get in the midst of the undergraduate paradigm. The starvation before the gluttony. Your friends are the ones you have the most classes with, the ones you share the same race and class with. The ones who are applying to the same internships as you. An echo chamber. Institutionally constructed because Ezra dictates my relationships as much as he does the curriculum.

“How do you eat an elephant?”… One bite at a time.
But what if you don’t have a big enough knife?
What if you’re vegan?
That’s Cornell in a nutshell, for low-income minority students, Cornell is the elephant, and we’re all just trying to get through the meal, some with more tools than others.

— MARQUAN JONES
II. THE MACHINE

Input…Output
All in…All out

An object in motion will stay in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. Matter and energy cannot be created or destroyed in an isolated system. I am isolated, I don’t matter, I’m expendable, expending energy and moving nowhere. The Treadmill of production. Routine, movements of muscle memory, one movement blends into the next, one day becomes another. Do you know how it feels to be a machine with consciousness? A walking contradiction.

As an athlete, I don’t eat for taste, I eat because I know I have to, be strong, be fast, be mechanical. I don’t remember the last time I tasted my food. Like truly tasted it, feeling the food between my teeth, the flavors blossoming on my tongue. I haven’t savored my food in a long time.

When you go so long without eating, it feels like your stomach is shriveled up or small, you can’t bring yourself to eat enough. This is a physiological and psychological phenomenon.

I think I read that in a textbook somewhere.

— MARQUAN JONES
Elizabeth Couse ’19

Elizabeth Couse grew up in Binghamton, New York, raised with an emphasis on community building from a politically involved family. Growing up, she had little connection to her food or knowledge of what it meant to grow food. She began to gain an interest in the food system through her own personal health journey and going vegan in high school. In coming to Cornell and engaging with the Ithaca community, she was inspired by the strong local food and farming community here. She majors in International Agriculture & Rural Development with minors in Community Food Systems and Education. Elizabeth’s passions lie at the intersection of food, sustainability, and social justice, and she has traveled extensively, working with local food communities around the world. She has her 72-hour permaculture design certificate and believes wholeheartedly in the power of community food systems to heal the world. She interned at the Youth Farm Project for her summer practicum as their Youth Coordinator, helping teens to find their role in creating an equitable food system.

The Youth Farm Project (YFP) is a farm and food justice organization located just outside of Ithaca, NY. YFP’s mission is to encourage justice from the ground up through youth education with an anti-racist organizing lens. They achieve this mission through their many programs including the Fresh Snack Program, providing Ithaca city schools with nutritious local healthy snacks, the Healthy Food for All CSA, a weekly mobile market in food insecure areas, and many field trips with local schools and groups. A core part of YFP’s work is the Summer Program, bringing together youth from diverse social and economic backgrounds to study the injustices within the existing food system. This program creates a job experience for the youth that exemplifies what it means to work together, learn leadership and communication skills, and of course, learn to grow food for the Ithaca community. YFP helps the community to connect to the land and each other, learn sustainable farming practices, and engage young people as agents of change in building an equitable food system.
Giulia DiMarino ’19

Giulia is from Greenfield, a small city in western Massachusetts. Her major is Biology and Society in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. During her childhood and time at Cornell, she has developed a passion for food and all of its facets; she has always been fascinated by the ability to express using cuisine, but is continuing to learn and appreciate its role in community, culture, and autonomy.

In the summer before her senior year, Giulia was an intern for the Cornell Farmworker Program. This organization advocates for farmworkers. The Program’s goals are to ensure safe and positive workplace conditions, and protect the legal and social statuses of farmworkers and their families. Her work centered around transcribing and translating interviews in addition to assisting at community events, such as legal clinics and workshops. She anticipates applying and building upon what she has learned through cooking with her father, her studies at Cornell, and her summer internship in both her career and the rest of her life.

Hannah Fuller ’19

Hannah Fuller grew up in Portland, Oregon, gardening in her backyard with her dad and enjoying cooking with her family. She is a double major in Plant Sciences and International Agriculture & Rural Development, with a concentration in Urban Agriculture. She has worked in community garden development, cooperative extension and garden-based education. She is passionate about creating a more sustainable and equitable food system through open dialogue and rethinking conventional notions of how our food system works. She spent the summer of 2019 on her Community Food Systems practicum as a College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Global Fellow with the Tata Cornell Institute for Agriculture and Nutrition (TCI).

The Tata Cornell Institute is a long-term research initiative based in Ithaca, New York on Cornell’s campus with satellite locations in Mumbai and Delhi and multiple field research sites across rural India. Their work focuses on “the design and evaluation of innovative interventions linking
agriculture, food systems, human nutrition, and poverty in India." Hannah worked as part of a team implementing OFSP (Orange Flesh Sweet Potato), as a nutrition intervention for Vitamin A deficiency. Her project focused on interviewing farmers about what influences their decision making.

**Marquan Jones ’20**

Marquan is deeply motivated by his lived experiences in Chicago and the work of the Black Panther Party. Specifically, the work of the late Fred Hampton inspires him, as this native Chicagoan did powerful work in food justice, among other things, for Black folks in the city. Living in a food desert galvanized him to study Development Sociology at Cornell. He situates his studies within the reality of his own community. Poetry is how he expresses himself because he believes that the ink of a scholar is more powerful than the blood of a martyr. It allows him to step down from the ivory tower, and form a bridge between people of different backgrounds. Through poetry, he is able to disseminate often inaccessible academic ideas to a broader audience. In addition to poetry, he is passionate about fashion and theater. He loves to express himself through creative outlets, as he feels that this provides balance to his life as a student athlete and member of the Cornell Varsity Football team. Food insecurity is one of his predominant passions because he feels as though food is central to many issues on a global scale. One cannot be educated if they are not satiated, food allows for people to reach their full potential. As such, he wants to use food justice as a vehicle to equity.

Proviso Partners for Health is a community-driven, multi-sector coalition promoting community health, health equity, and transformational systems change in the Proviso communities of Maywood, Bellwood, Broadview, and Melrose Park. It consists of multiple community and social partners, including colleges within Loyola University Chicago. Marquan worked as a Project Director for PP4H primarily with programming through the Giving Garden. The Giving Garden is part of the Food Justice Hub which supports and strengthens the local food system through urban gardening, farm stands, and Veggie Rx, and strives to increase the supply of and demand for fresh, locally grown, high quality produce. The Veggie Rx program is a no-cost fresh produce distribution program serving local families in partnership with Loyola health clinics. Through these programs and the Food Justice Hub as a whole, PP4H seeks to cultivate health equity and community economic business development.
Nicole Lee ’20

Nicole grew up in Hong Kong, studying Sociology at the College of Arts & Sciences with minors in Business and Community Food Systems. As a born-and-raised city kid, her first time on a dairy farm during a class field trip at Cornell completely transformed the way she perceives and consumes food. Subsequently, Nicole was drawn to the Community Food Systems program out of a passion to learn more about the greater global food narrative and eventually influence the various systemic issues in her own Hong Kong community. In the past few years, Nicole has worked for various food organizations on and off campus, including Farmers’ Market at Cornell, Anabel’s Grocery, and Food Angel Hong Kong. In the summer of 2018, Nicole worked at Green Monday and its commercial branch, Green Common. Green Monday is a social enterprise based in Hong Kong that promotes and provides solutions to “green, healthy, and sustainable” living, with an emphasis on plant-based food.

Green Monday focuses on environmental advocacy in schools and local organizations, as well as building partnerships with restaurants and corporations to increase the number of vegetarian options in the local dining scene. Its commercial arm, Green Common, includes plant-based grocery stores, restaurants, wholesale distribution networks, and investment in start-ups that promote sustainability and healthy living. Recently, Green Monday also launched Omnipork—a minced “pork” substitute made with peas, rice, soy, and mushrooms. Nicole’s responsibilities at Green Monday centered upon the launch of an online platform, that includes an online shop, personalized shopping features, nutritional calculators, recipes and community forums—all in the spirit of making “green living” educational and accessible. She assisted in data organization and entry of product attributes, as well as led a team of interns to complete a marketing launch strategy.

Noelle LaDue ’19

Noelle grew up in New York’s Hudson Valley, and really didn’t spend much time working with food or agriculture until coming to Cornell and taking a plant science class, Plants and People during her freshman year. As a Development
Sociology major, this complemented her introduction to the social sciences and she realized what an encompassing role food plays in our lives. The next summer she was a manager at Dilmun Hill student farm, and continued taking agriculture and sociology classes, and being involved in food systems discussions on campus as a representative of Dilmun Hill. Realizing that there are so many aspects to the food system, she continued to learn more about agriculture for her practicum in 2017, and worked for a plant breeding professor here at Cornell, Dr. Michael Mazourek. Since the practicum, she has worked with Dr. Rachel Bezner Kerr in the Development Sociology Department and the organization Soils, Food, and Healthy Communities in Malawi, and conducted research with the Cornell Farmworker Program.

Dr. Michael Mazourek’s research lab at Cornell in Plant Breeding and Genetics works on vegetable crops, including organic vegetables. The description on his website describes how he works to “serve grower needs through improving disease and insect resistance as well as flavor in agroecologically based production systems.” This mission involves working with vegetable farmers, both locally and across the country, to develop creative new varieties. Noelle’s field work with the lab introduced her all aspects of the process of plant breeding through daily work in the field and greenhouse.

Maya Chang Matunis ’20

Maya is from Brooklyn, New York and comes from a family of public artists and activists. She studies Development Sociology and Community Food Systems and is passionate about applying her studies to the world around her through writing, art, and community organizing.

This summer, Maya interned with the Cornell Farmworker Program where she was exposed to the complexities and injustices of industrialized dairy production in Upstate New York.

The dairy industry, like all branches of the agricultural sector, is deeply imbedded within a web of conflicting interests. The Cornell Farmworker Program centers the experiences of the men and women on whom this industry depends, elevating the voices which are often overshadowed by corporate interest. She spent the summer engaging with unauthorized farmworkers and their families, assisting with legal workshops and consulate visits as well as conducting interviews to inform the development of extension materials. She hopes to continue this work and to grow in her understanding of the institutional and interpersonal relationships that underlie food and culture.
Lindsey McMahon ’19

Lindsey grew up on her family's second-generation dairy farm in Petersburg, NY. She majors in International Agriculture and Rural Development with a concentration in economic and social development and is pursuing a triple minor in animal science, development sociology and community food systems. Lindsey has worked and studied across a multitude of agriculture and food sectors, providing her with a broad macro-level systems approach to thinking about issues and solutions pertaining to food and farming. This past summer she interned with the organization Capital Roots working on the “Squash Hunger” initiative that recovers and redistributes fresh food to homeless shelters, soup kitchens and food pantries.

Capital Roots is a non-governmental organization that works to reduce the impact of poor nutrition on public health in New York's Capital Region by organizing community gardens, providing healthy food access, offering nutritional and horticultural education for all ages and coordinating urban greening programs. Their vision of the future is one where people and communities of the Capital Region have access to fresh, healthy, affordable food and green spaces.

Amari Sealey ’19

Amari is from Bed Stuy, in the heart of Brooklyn, NY. She grew up as a second-generation descendent of Trinidadian-American immigrants. Coming from a culture where food was centric, she always saw the value in cooking, growing and protecting the earth. She studies Global and Public Health Sciences with minors in Community Food Systems and Human Development. While she always knew and understood the importance of food, it wasn't until college that she started learning about factors that affect the food system and its structure. Learning about racial disparities, climate change and growing techniques really put the food she was eating daily, into perspective and inspired her to want to do more in her own life and in the lives of others.

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County is a multi-faceted organization working on issues in agriculture, nutrition, energy and more. The mission is to improve communities and people's lives through initiatives that put experience and research to work. Educators in the various
departments connect people to resources, put research into practice and build communities throughout Tompkins County.

**Caroline Sheridan ’20**

Caroline was raised in a small town in Westchester, New York. She studies Animal Science and Community Food Systems in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and she plans to go to Veterinary School after graduating from Cornell. Growing up, Caroline did not know much about food systems. She was first introduced to farming when she joined a local 4H chapter during high school. Since then, she has welcomed every opportunity to learn more about where her food comes from and how she can eat more sustainably. Caroline spent this past summer interning at Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture in Pocantico Hills, New York.

Stone Barns is a nonprofit organization built on land that once belonged to John D. Rockefeller. In 2004, they opened to the public and have spent the past 15 years engaging with the community to educate consumers about the food system. The center welcomes visitors for tours, hosts classes for high school students, holds public events like sheep shearings, and accepts young apprentices to train as future farmers. Stone Barns also has an on-site partner restaurant, Blue Hill at Stone Barns, that serves local, seasonal dishes using ingredients harvested from the farm. The center’s overall mission to reinvent the food system revolves around innovation and education. Caroline’s position as an intern mostly involved manual labor: she worked in the fields shadowing the farmers.

**Tamsin Smith ’17**

Tamsin grew up in Cortland, New York, just outside of Ithaca. She graduated from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences in December 2017. She majored in Biology and Society, with minors in Community Food Systems and Infectious Disease Biology.

For her Community Food Systems Minor practicum experience, she worked in the Soils, Foods, and Healthy Communities project. She loved working in rural communities in Malawi and combining her interests in microbiology, nutrition, and healthcare.
Roots can be shallow or deep. They can exist as a solitary unit or an entire entangled network. They hold a plant steadfast and absorb the elements necessary to grow strong. Even when a plant might be seemingly dying, its roots can be healthy and resilient allowing for a recovery that makes the plant fiercer than ever. Like in plants, roots anchor people at their core to the things most significant in their lives. They provide people direction in life, remind them of why they are who they are, and ground them to a cause, mission, or specific ideas. Our roots shape our values, personalities and decision-making every day. They serve as a sense of gravity in our lives that guides us through the many chapters we endure as humans. But above all else, they keep us tied to the people, places, and ideas we cherish most and cradle closest to our hearts.
We are not separate from the environment. Poetry is the possibility of language, just as farming is the possibility of growth.

Shared meals with familial ties Familiar to both the famished and the favored. Anecdotes as an antidote to passiveness. If you know better you do better.

Support, stability Groundedness Standing on the shoulders, Like roots in the ground Our ancestors hold us firm To the past And in the present

Feet planted on this earth We’re rooted in the human experience.

—— MARQUAN JONES
We spent weeks preparing for the summer program to start, preparing the fields and preparing our curriculum. Not having much prior experience with high school kids, I was pretty nervous to meet them all. On the first day, we saw them walking up the hill from the bus stop and they slowly and awkwardly shuffled into the barn, taking their seats in a circle. There were a few standout chatty kids, but most were quite shy for the first few days. I noticed Daniel on the first day, he had a sweet smile and quiet demeanor. He didn’t really talk at all but would express himself through his glances and expressions. As the first few days went by, Daniel eventually started to come out of his shell.

Daniel grew up in the Bronx and moved to Ithaca last year. He lives with his guardian who signed him up for the summer program. Daniel loves basketball. His whole world is basketball and he doesn’t like Ithaca because people here take basketball a lot less seriously than they do in the Bronx, according to him. He had absolutely no interest in farming at the beginning of the summer and it was very far out of his comfort zone. He’s a funny and sarcastic kid and likes to joke a lot. After hours weeding the fields, he would make comments like, “where I’m from people don’t do stuff like this.”

We did an exercise at the farm called “Step In.” One of the staff would read a list of statements like, “step in if you identify as a person of color,” “step in if you identify as Caucasian.” The questions become increasingly intense as the game goes on, ending with statements like, “step in if you’ve felt self conscious about your body” or “step in if you have been a victim of racial discrimination.” It was still the beginning of the summer when we did this and most of the kids were noticeably uncomfortable and I could tell that Daniel wasn’t into it. One statement read, “step in if you have ever lost a parent.” At first, I was the only one to step in and after a moment of hesitation, so did Daniel. We ended the game with, “step in if you feel loved.” Daniel was the only person in our group of about 30 people to not step in. Those two moments stand out so much to me and made me take particular notice of and care for his growth throughout the program.

As days went on, Daniel’s disdain for the outdoor physical work of farming grew and his comfort with us, the staff, meant that his rude and disrespectful comments increased. The teens work in crews of about 6 people who are their team for the summer. Daniel’s negative attitude began to take a toll on his crew and he would frequently opt out of farming work and take long water breaks, sitting in the barn while everyone else worked. He also began to make some enemies out of the other staff. Through his struggles in the summer program, I always felt like an ally to him. We just clicked from day one and I think that since I was a lot younger than the other staff, he
felt safe talking to me. When the other staff would voice concerns over his behavior and attitude, I would defend him and I gained a large feeling of empathy for him.

One day, which was particularly hot and hard for everyone, Daniel left his water bottle in a pathway while planting some herbs. One of the staff members, Emma, kicked his bottle out of the way while she was walking. For some reason, this really set Daniel off and it turned into a whole situation. He freaked out and threw a temper tantrum. Emma was trying to communicate with him but he refused to speak to her, acting in a very disrespectful manner. In Daniel’s life, he has had to develop this guard to feel safe in the world. I don't think that he has had many adults or people in his life who have made him feel loved and accepted. His guard is always up and his first instinct is to lash out. After this incident, we all were extra cognizant of his place in the summer program and how we could help him move forward.

His crew was still really struggling to find cohesion while all of the other crews had become close friends. We decided to go to one of Daniel’s basketball games one day after work and bring all of his crew. This was one of my favorite memories from the whole summer. We had so much fun and it was so great seeing Daniel excel at this sport and be in a place where he felt so comfortable. His team won the game that night and he was smiling ear to ear. We all had a group hug and that small gesture of attending his game changed his attitude and his whole crew’s culture for the rest of the summer.

It taught me the importance of showing love through small acts and the ability of the Youth Farm to give a space to kids where they can feel safe and supported. Daniel ended up being a key member of the group through the summer, leading everyone till the end. He continued to work at the farm even after the summer program was over and is currently in an after school program hosted by YFP for young boys of color. At points throughout the summer, we even considered kicking him out of the program, so seeing his immense change has been incredibly inspiring.

This summer, I learned more about farming and improved my knowledge of the food system, but more importantly, I learned about people, community, and social change. One of my favorite moments from the whole summer was during a staff meeting when Dan, a key leader in YFP since its founding, said, “You have to remember... we’re not growing vegetables. We’re growing people.” He went on to say, “You know it’s called the Youth Farm Project, but what it really is, is the Youth Farm School.” Dan’s insights into the core of the organization helped me understand why they do everything that they do and how YFP approaches the summer youth program. The most rewarding part of my summer practicum experience was developing personal relationships with the teens and watching them learn and grow.
It was the crack of dawn. I woke up with the sun as I would if I had to work on the farm that morning. Mornings off were a rare delicacy. I suppose a normal 20 year old would have taken advantage of such time to sleep, but I had food on my mind as I often always did. So much of my academic work at school focused on international food systems and the implications of globalization. That summer, I explored the opposite dimension: community development and local sustainability. People have become so disconnected from their food in more ways than one. I worked on the farm and sowed in the garden trying to make sense of local production and unpack what food really meant to me. To feel the soil, wet and heavy, rich with nutrients and history, was a therapy unlike any other. To taste food grown and nurtured by myself ensued this sense of joy and pride that was more powerful than anything I’d ever known.

When I was a little girl, my mother and grandmother made everything from scratch. Their specialty was baked goods of every sort. Baking was a source of generational connect and traditional knowledge that I cherished. Some recipes were quick and others took time, patience, trial and error.

In the soft morning light I put a pot of coffee on and began to remove various pans from their cabinet homes. The smell of coffee wafted through the air awakening my mind and body. I entered the garage, turned the light on, took a breath and lifted the dusty heavy dutchoven pot from its shelf. It was too big and much too heavy to fit comfortably anywhere in the house, but today I needed heavy-duty help. It was donut day.

I removed the milk pail from the refrigerator. I poured fresh farm milk, ice cold, into a pan with the thick separated cream on the top spilling out last with a splash. I heated the milk slowly, stirring occasionally. Small bubbles fought their way to the surface, popping on the thick film that formed. I added vinegar and sat back as the magic happened. Slowly but surely curd began to form. I tied cheesecloth around a colander, removed the milk from the stove and slowly poured the mixture through the cloth. The thin whey slipped through, leaving only the thick curd behind to be chilled in the refrigerator.

Dough time. Flour, baking soda, salt and more. Before I knew it I was dusted head to toe in white and the kitchen transformed into an airy cloud. As my mother always says, I never have been the neatest baker. I cubed chilled butter into the smallest squares I could manage without slicing my fingers. Using my pastry cutter I blended the butter into the dry ingredients until course crumbs began to form. I added yeast to milk and sugar and watched like a little girl in awe as the chemical reaction took place, the yeast fizzed, and dissolved. Egg and vanilla combined to create a smooth base. I added the crumb mixture gradually with each additional scoop.
resulting in a brief white flume before settling into the egg. Thick sticky dough took form and the hook of the mixer began to struggle more and more to twirl around and around.

I sunk my hands into the dough. It was cold and soft, squishy and smooth, like sinking your hands into wet sand caressed by the ocean water. I plopped the mass onto the counter top, returning to scrape the sides of the bowl, removing every morsel of dough possible. I swaddled the dough in plastic wrap making sure it had room to grow. It would need time to chill and expand.

I removed the solid curd from the refrigerator. I dipped my finger in, scooping chilled cheese into my mouth: an explosion of smooth, fresh creaminess. I spooned the cheese into a bowl, adding powdered sugar, salt, heavy cream and vanilla. Folding the sweet ingredients into the tart cheese, the thick mixture began to thin. Once more, I dipped my finger in. This time the same smooth fresh sensation, but oh so sweet. My taste buds danced around my mouth savoring every drop of mascarpone.

I wiped down the heavy pot and filled it with oil. It was fry time. I removed the dough from the refrigerator. The plastic disks nearly doubled in size. I sprinkled flour across the counter with the joy of a child throwing confetti at a birthday party. I unwrapped the dough and plopped it on the counter. Using my mother's white marble rolling pin I smoothed it out little by little, feeling the weight of the stone press and stretch the soft dough.

I checked the thermometer in the oil. Perfect. I took a mason jar out of the cabinet, floured the rim, and began to cut the dough into heavy disks. I carefully dropped them into the boiling oil careful not to splash myself or crowd the dough. Within seconds the dough was puffed up and golden brown. I removed the donuts from the oil giving them a brief moment to cool, and then rolled them in powdered sugar. The hot oil on the surface of the dough reacted with the sugar creating a sweet glaze. I repeated this process over and over until I had just enough dough remaining for a few small donut holes.

I gazed at the counter, beaming with pride. Every inch covered with a pan, bowl or perfect golden donut, and the best part hadn’t even come. I filled one piping bag with the mascarpone, the other with my mother's raspberry jam from last season. I carefully made a small slit in the sides of the donuts like a surgeon performing an operation. I eased the tip of the piping bag into the dough and gave a gentle squeeze, filling the soft dough with either jam or cream.

When all was said and done I was covered in oil, flour, sugar, cheese and who knows what else, but I didn’t care. I had created something passed down generation to generation. In that moment I was connected to relatives long gone. Cooking and baking have this power about them: the power to create history and extend knowledge far into the abyss of time. To consume something transformed from its raw pure form into a delicious treat by your own hands gives food a completely different flavor. It evokes a sensation of
pride and love, of nostalgia and a sort of inner peace. I shared those donuts with people far and wide, gaining so much joy from the smile it put on people's faces. Food is transformative and powerful in so many ways, but above all, it is unifying. It is a universal language that brings people of all walks of life together.

**NICOLE**

**Ingredient List**

There was a team-wide meeting on the top floor of our office building. Everyone was going to be there: from interns to managers to directors. It was a two-hour ordeal, in which the founder of Green Monday walked the whole team through updates in the first half of 2018. The interns all carried pencils and notebooks and went up with the rest of the team, past the tall, glass sliding doors and high-speed elevators. Walking out of the lifts on the top floor, we were immediately welcomed by a bright meeting room with almost 100 chairs lined up next to a breathtaking view of the expansive Hong Kong skyline. The chairs faced a projector screen with a white background and the Green Monday logo.

We were each handed a cup of dairy-free, oat milk ice cream—a treat from the boss and waited for the presentation to begin. Minutes later, David, founder and CEO, welcomed everyone and jumped right into his speech. He walked through ten highlight-worthy projects under the organization, including the launch of a plant-based egg substitute (by American food technology start-up, JUST) in Hong Kong, a partnership with the Hong Kong International Airport, new product releases, the Omnipork (a plant-based pork substitute) launch, distribution at various city-wide supermarket chains, and appearances in global media coverage.

With each new slide, it seemed as if Green Monday was infiltrating a new area in the city. Supermarkets, restaurants, schools, airports, food start-ups, research labs... David emphasized that we were involved in “disrupting the food system”—creating meaningful change in Hong Kong and the Asian sphere. I felt excited and optimistic, but I wondered whether anyone was being left behind, what was being prioritized, and who was missing in this whole network of change. To me, it seemed almost too good to be true. I finished my ice cream, walked back to my desk. I was ready to “disrupt the food system” and ready to save the world.

But that day, all of the work on hand was the “intern” tasks and projects. My team was building an all-new online platform for customers to shop a wide range of plant-based products from their homes, and we were tasked with translating ingredient labels and data entry for the hundreds of products in the store. We had to enter different product attributes into a massive shared spreadsheet, and we each were in charge of 25 translations per day.
We went to the store, took pictures of the products’ original ingredients lists, uploaded them onto the cloud, transcribed them to fit Hong Kong food labelling guidelines, and translated them all into Chinese.

For days we copied and pasted, searching through Google for different ingredient names—pea protein isolate, methylcellulose, sorghum flour, expeller-pressed canola oil... We researched whether soy lecithin was an allergen and looked up the names of acidity regulator E260. Amidst the flying clicks and cursors, I stared into the vast unfilled spaces in the spreadsheet. Boxes waiting to be filled with ingredients, places of origin, allergen information.

So how was this copying and pasting changing the food system? How was translating names and numbers from the packaging to the blank spaces in front of me a form of “disruption”? I am a Cornell student, I thought to myself. I’m supposed to use my knowledge and education to change the world. I should be engaging in my community, applying what I’ve learned into a real-world context. How does translating “beet juice” into Chinese make anything better?

As we started to fill in the empty spaces with text, checks, and numbers, I started to get a lot of questions from other interns. They knew I was a vegetarian, and that I was familiar with English and American culture because I studied in the US.

“What’s the difference between vegan and vegetarianism?”
“How do you prepare quinoa?”
“What’s the deal with kale?”

I was in a different space. Not Ithaca, NY, where kale can be found in the local co-op or weekly farmers market. I was in Hong Kong, my home—a community with a whole food system unto its own. Kale and quinoa are novelty. Acai bowls are unheard of. I kept getting these questions throughout the week about cooking terms, new ingredients, and superfoods. I was asked how to pronounce certain brands and products, and at times I wondered if I was even giving the right answer.

When I got home that night, I thought about the question: “What does it mean to disrupt the food system?” In my urban community, the idea of “sustainable food” is almost nowhere to be seen. While I am no expert by any means, I felt an urge to change that. How? Perhaps by simply sharing all I know about the food with others. Answer questions about kale. Talk about why I eat what I eat. Be generous, but also humble and grateful—that I have a sense of belonging and cultural experiences in two drastically different spaces with their own unique sets of relationships and communities. Perhaps all it takes is to sit around a table with fellow Hongkongers and translate food labels—one ingredient at a time.
GIULIA

Milk Money

It's been almost two weeks since I visited a dairy farm and inhaled the foulest air that's ever been forced into my body; only now have I overcome that experience and am guardedly rolling my shopping cart into the dairy aisle. No matter my love for cheese and ice cream, up until now I couldn't bring myself to acknowledge the food whose production takes place and results in that atmosphere.

I'm trying not to picture the milking room, with manure caked on the walls, somehow even reaching up to the 20-foot ceiling. The door that was camouflaged by the indiscriminate splatter. I can't believe I touched that doorknob. More so, I can't believe that behind that door was a space thought worthy of housing people. But in the mere moment we crossed the threshold between the shit-stained job and refreshing home, all I could feel was relief.

A couple interns and I accompanied our boss in an interview with one of the dairy farm’s employees, a boy named Luis, who looked to be about fourteen but insisted he was eighteen. Then admitted sixteen. He shared with us how he traveled, from Guatemala, to Mexico, to the United States. He told us about his first job, at a well-paying and comfortable vineyard, but he left to be with his father, who had been working for this dairy operation. Sure, the hours were longer, the pay lower, and the work harder, but really the most important benefit was attachment. However, his father was in deportation proceedings at that very moment. Luis told us that he planned to stay in the US for a little while longer, a couple more years, just enough time to save some money. My boss accepted his answer but afterwards made clear that she was skeptical; much of Luis’ situation was out of his control. Depending on his age, he may qualify for a guardian and legal status in the US, allowing him to stay longer. But how does a young boy plan around his father’s deportation? The interview had to also serve as one of the only chances to inform him, with great sensitivity, of his options.

He tells us about his typical week: getting up at 4 in the morning, working up to thirteen-hour days, and calling his seven-hour shifts “rest days.”

I didn't know how to process hearing a child reveal his devotion to his father, his only connection, knowing he will soon lose him. Carrying a job that is beyond full-time. And living in an unwelcoming town, in an apartment that is only separated from livestock by a wall of shit.
Shivering in front of the frigid milk display, I’m faced with an unexpected source of dread: that I have to actually make a decision. I would normally choose my milk by fat-content, all while trying to incorporate as many buzz-words as I feel I can afford. Should I be only looking at organic in the first place? Does that mean fewer chemicals that can be inhaled and wafted through the crack under Luis’ and others’ front door? What does a cow being “pasture-raised” mean for the people raising it?

I could just give up, settle for soy milk that denatures into grainy fibers in my coffee. Or I could buy the organic, pasture-raised milk from happy cows and hope that happiness extends to the working and living conditions on the farm. But this line of thought parallels the paradigm I’ve always had surrounding food: there are levels of “healthiness” and “goodness” that correspond to price, and that there is a virtue in sacrificing money for these qualities, rather than, for instance, taste. But my choice in milk has no effect on labor conditions of the dairy industry. Paying more for milk lets me have “better” milk and misguides my money and time spent researching companies; other than that, it accomplishes nothing. Choosing the most expensive milk neither reflects the labor practices behind it nor reduces the impact of the most over-working and noxious dairy farm.

Having realized that my personal preference has no societal value, I feel the burden of guilt is lifted as I choose the milk that fits into my price range, knowing that any additional money and energy is more effective in addressing systemic issues rather than what’s put on my shelf in the fridge at home. My sense of futility is also lifted, as I’ve found meaning to the hours I’ve spent transcribing interviews and stories, eventually including Luis’.

I think back to our farm visit and the requests we heard from employees; clean uniforms, paid benefits, and the chance for a man to invite his daughter to stay, whom he otherwise rarely sees. Although fulfilling these on their own does nothing to change the larger problems that conflict with a sustainable and fair food system, they do improve the experiences and livelihoods of the workers on one small farm. Luis’ transcription alone will go far in providing awareness of systemic problems, and alleviating those affecting him. His story will be read by an immigration attorney, to determine his eligibility for special immigration status. His account will be studied by a fellow intern to extract data for research regarding wages, hours, and trends in migration. And his experience will go to my boss, who identifies additional resources that he and his coworkers would benefit from, and who will then address them with his employer, helping to overcome the hurdles in their asymmetrical power dynamic.

It’s easy to point to the ways that seemingly immovable trends in the larger food system impact individuals. But when the goal of addressing these trends is to enhance the rights and wellbeing of the many human agents in the food system, activists must reconcile the disconnect between saving capitalism and empowering a person.
I don’t mind vegans, I just don’t like the annoying ones,” declared Phil, the livestock manager, sounding slightly surprised after hearing my confession: I am a vegan, so I don’t eat much of the food that is produced at this farm.

We were in a cool room in the small, yellow barn closest to the Stone Barns entrance. A couple of steps down the hall was the slaughter room, where the livestock met their fate. Our current task was not particularly exciting—we were sticking labels to the plastic bags that would package duck to be sold in the market—but we passed the time with occasional small talk. Phil was a precise man. Every now and then, he would scold me for not sticking the labels on straight, or demand that I use a template so that every bag looked the same. Though he was not much older than I, I viewed him as a strong authority figure, and was slightly intimidated by him. Later that afternoon, Phil ordered me to pluck the feathers off of slaughtered ducks. I knew they had planned the day’s agenda long before I showed up that morning, but I could not stop myself from wondering if he found some irony in assigning me this task.

When I first arrived at Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, I was braced for the worst. I was prepared if someone asked me to assist in a slaughter—or, as my supervisor so delicately called it, a “harvest”—and I was ready to see livestock crammed into small pens with insufficient water. Thankfully, this picture could not have been further from the truth. The animals were free to roam in vast pastures, were fed large buckets of grain and leftover greens, eggs, and cheese from the on-site restaurant, and were hosed down with cool water on exceptionally hot days. Though I was relieved to see that the livestock seemed genuinely happy, I still struggled with the concept of interning at an animal production farm. I was uncomfortable to think that the work I was doing directly resulted in the consumption of animals. My love for animals is an essential part of who I am, so I found it challenging to justify to myself why I was helping to prepare them for slaughter. I respect Stone Barns’ mission to change the food system, but I hate that reducing meat consumption is not part of that mission.

I loved farming at Stone Barns. I loved spending my days outside in the sun, bottle-feeding lambs, picking fresh blackberries, and riding in the bed of a pickup truck. I loved learning about the operations that build a functional and successful organic farm. Despite my admiration for the organization, I felt like a hypocrite working there. I had spent the last two years avoiding meat, dairy, and eggs at all costs, but here I was packing duck for the market. Was I betraying my core values by taking this job?

The reality of the situation is that I will always have reservations about working on a livestock farm, even though I adore farming. The other reality is that people are always going to eat meat. I could throw out statistics about
the ways in which meat harms our environment and our health, but that would not achieve anything (and would make me one of the “annoying vegans”). Working at Stone Barns did not make me a hypocrite, in fact, it did quite the opposite. I was supporting a farm that cares about animal welfare, strives to provide the best care and conditions possible for its animals, and minimizes its impact on the planet. Animals are always going to be harvested, but I can support places that make sure they live the best lives possible before that time.

MARQUAN

Tethered

The first time I learned about Fred Hampton, it was because they named the pool in my community after him, and people started telling stories of the revolution. For me, a 16 year old boy, hearing these stories about a man who was only a couple years older than me—putting his city on his back, death around the corner, having had the audacity to be black and proud and intelligent and galvanizing—I was inspired.

At that age, in high school, I felt like Hampton’s story had been erased. It was in none of my textbooks, none of my history classes. School was where they were supposed to teach me—I felt like I was being robbed of this knowledge, of my history. And it made me angry, because the first time I learned that Abraham Lincoln didn’t actually care about the slaves was in AP US History, from a white man. And yet, this was just a peek at the truth I had never known. Because this white teacher, no matter how kind hearted or how much he wanted to help, couldn’t explain my history to me better than the people who are history, who live that history.

Having been awakened, in a sense, I went out to the older people in my community to uncover the truth, and made it my priority to uncover that truth for other people. To act as a lighthouse for others.

Fred Hampton was assassinated by the Chicago Police Department, COINTELPRO, around the corner from my house. And while I can never meet him, I did meet Hampton’s brother. He passed away a couple of years ago, but before that, he saw me perform my poetry. It truly changed my life.

Here was a living, breathing manifestation of the Black Freedom Struggle sitting in the audience. A tangible representation of how much I could do but also of the fear of what exactly could happen to me. Fred Hampton said “you can kill a revolutionary but you can’t kill the revolution.” At some point, I realized that all my role models have been murdered. It makes me wonder what I’m aspiring to become, to leave behind. Is my love for my community and for my people worth dying for? Is the blood of a martyr more important than the ink of a scholar? I don’t know. There is a place for both. I believe that Fred Hampton made the ultimate sacrifice so that I
don’t have to. When you die, you don’t control your narrative anymore. That is what I fear—my legacy being twisted, my autonomy being taken away.

I went off to college with a certain mindset. I feel like a lot of people in my shoes, successful people from disadvantaged communities, are constantly talking about leaving, but not about coming back. I’ve always wanted to leave to come back. Unlike some of my peers, my studies at Cornell have not driven me overseas to solve someone else’s problems, but instead strengthened my tether to home, to solve the problems that are a part of my own reality. My academic path deepened my connection to my community in a way that I don’t often see in others, as I see so many other people leave their homes behind in search of other challenges to face.

There is certain knowledge and experience that I’ve had that no one else in my community has had, leaving me in an in-between space, not quite an insider, but not an outsider either. I chose Chicago, my home, for my Community Food Systems practicum because I didn’t want to take my knowledge elsewhere, I wanted to give it back to the place that raised me, to people who know where I’ve been. No one understands a community like someone who calls it home.

There is a kind of primal narrative about where I come from—one that talks about savages, who don’t have a civilized way of being, weighed down by structural barriers and institutional racism. Yet, there is still hope. There is still a sense of community. There are still people doing important work. I’m not better than my community or the people who made me who I am, I just have more opportunities. I want to amplify their voices, not drown them out. To help shape the foundation, not build the house alone.
The whole reason I study what I study is because I watched my granddad plant a garden in my backyard, having taken with him his way of knowing from rural Mississippi and integrating it into his Chicago life. There is something so beautiful about that, so honest. Making something from nothing, carving out a square of our small Chicago yard to grow bell peppers and jalapeños and tomatoes, battling urban predators and the challenges of the Chicago climate. Supplementing our diets with fresh produce, and our income with food stamps.

I remember going on vacation to visit my grandmother, my dad’s mom, in rural Mississippi. She lived in this little town in the Delta, and I remember just being there and understanding the role that it played in history, in promoting resilience in the working class, in fighting for workers rights, in the fight for civil rights. Back then, people understood that as the beginning of a long term war. The fight for civil rights was just one battle that had to be won.

And yet, in my grandmother’s kitchen, I’d been renouncing the foods of my grandparents, I wouldn’t eat pig feet, collard greens with neck bones, hog head cheese and crackers, chitterlings... As if they weren’t a critical component of my ancestor’s lives. I’ve adopted this self hate, the same way that society turns its nose up at my culture’s food, so do I. How can I critique my family for things they’ve done to survive? My people have always been able to make something from nothing, given the scraps and making delicacies out of trash. Now they’re telling us to recycle, when we were given their scraps and made into compost bins. Because black bodies have always been biodegradable.

For black people, there is a certain connotation of bondage that comes with farming. People think about the enslavement of our ancestors, saying, “We already had slavery why would we farm if we don’t have to?” But it wasn’t the farming that was the problem, it wasn’t the fault of the land. It was the brutality of the oppressors.

Working at the urban farm this summer, I didn’t feel brutality. I felt love. There was a point of realization that I didn’t have to do this. When I get tired I can take a break, I have access to a virtually unlimited amount of water, and there is even a speaker for us to entertain ourselves with music. When I think about the tremendous amount of privilege that I have to choose to do this type of work—it’s humbling. Pruning tomatoes and weeding the garden on my hands and knees in dirt—this work is hard, but it’s optional for me. Oftentimes we tend to romanticize the laborious nature of farm work without being brutally honest about how hard it actually is. The people who tend to do this work look like me, share my identity. But Black agrarianism started far before slavery, back in Africa, such a potent part of the lives of my ancestors that, when faced with capture and slave ships, they took the time to braid seeds into their hair. These agricultural practices I’m learning, they come from my ancestors, from black and brown and indigenous peoples. In that moment, hands in the dirt, music playing, sweat on my brow, I felt like I was living through my ancestors. And it was liberating.
seeds

From the surface, one might look at an empty field and see nothing, when in reality, there is a whole bed of seeds beneath waiting to sprout. These stories explore our experiences before we sprouted, moments feeling stuck or not knowing how to move forward. These times may be lacking sunlight, feeling like we are still beneath the ground. While success is most likely ahead, these are moments before we have reached our fullest potential, waiting to break the surface.
SEEDS

We quantify the worth of the environment only by what can be extracted by mankind.

The land was the scene of the crime
Both witness and victim
Mother Earth crying
trying to find
a way to undo the trauma

We lack clarity,
we can’t see through the greed
those who need
can’t proceed.
Like a seed in need
We recede
The soil supersedes
All of us
We are stuck.
Disconnected.

We fail to see that the Earth is reciprocal
Every kingdom is royal
Every genus genius
Every phylum seeking asylum

These seeds,
Encapsulated emancipated potential
Encompassing the past and the future simultaneously
A promise to our progeny
The fertilization of civilization
A potent prophecy

Time lapse before we relapse
we can’t relax
we must coalesce

Gravity, pulling us down
waiting for the breakthrough
Like legumes,
leave room for symbiosis

We can’t grow alone.

— Marquan Jones
Breakfast today was Century Egg Congee—rice porridge with traditional preserved egg. These are not your ordinary eggs: they look like something that might have come out of a witch's cauldron or a dinosaur egg. The “whites” are clear, dark brown, and jelly-like; yolks are dark grey and smooth. My mom made sure to not put the traditional lean pork this time: she’s starting to get the hang of cooking for a 3+ year vegetarian.

I hopped on the double-decker bus: number 22 from the Waterloo Road bus stop. I waved my Octopus Card on the card reader—4.0 HKD. I passed by the expansive old Kai Tak airport redevelopment site, towering government housing estates, neighbourhood supermarkets with semi-translucent, high quality photos of bananas, meat, and eggs covering the store window. Commercial, residential, industrial—these spaces were so packed together they felt indistinct.

The bus reached Wang Chiu Road, or affectionately known among locals as “Takeout Street,” and I hopped off. I passed by my favourite vegetarian shop—sticky rice filled with puff pastry and pickled vegetables. Simmering “Leung Cha” Herbal Tea—familiarly bitter. Savoury Tea Eggs: soy sauce and spices. Sandwiched in between was the Maserati Car Dealership. The fruit stall: whirring juicers. Perfect Japanese peaches, New Zealand Kiwis, Vietnamese dragon fruit. Prices scribbled on cardboard—red for country of origin, black for fruit name. Breads individually wrapped in plastic packaging in the Circle K convenience next door. I crossed the street—long lines in 7/11: bright white lights and their classic orange, green, and white striped logo towered over the steaming noodles, fish balls, siu mai, and Hong Kong style milk tea. Customers rushed out with containers, lids, straws, and neatly-tied plastic bags. More plastic-wrapped bread.

I reached the office building. The Starbucks line was particularly long today. I walked through the automatic glass doors of our office, greeted the cheery receptionist, said the obligatory “jou sun”’s (good morning) to my managers, and settled into my little cubicle.

After a few hours of work, it was time for lunch, and the cheery voice of my boss emerged: “We’re taking you to Green Common today for lunch—save your appetite!” Green Common is the “plant-based concept store” which consists of a deli/restaurant and mini market that offers almost 100% plant-based options.

Before we arrived for lunch, I did not know what to expect despite having worked on the menu and products for the last few weeks. The space was lit with bright lights and pastel blue walls painted along the sides of the restaurant. Shelves upon shelves of plant-based products. Quotes and messages sprawled along the pillars and walls in clean, neat, white font.
Other than local Chinese-style vegetarian restaurants, I had never been to a place where I could eat anything and everything on the menu. No more asking for the vegetarian option. No more salads. No more vegetables and rice. There was no green leaf or “V”-symbol next to any item. Almost all the items were traditionally meat dishes. As someone who used to love Chicken Rice, I decided to give that a try. The other interns, none of whom were vegetarian, decided that they wanted to try the egg rice bowl, the burger, and the “pork” chop. How does one make scrambled eggs out of beans? Pork without pork? We were all curious to find out.

Trying and sharing each other’s food is common in Hong Kong. When our food arrived, we immediately took bites out of each intern’s dish. The moment was filled with confusion, excitement, intrigue, and disbelief. Comments were made on each dish.

“This burger smells just like the real thing! If you told me this was meat, I would probably believe you!”

“What is this pork chop? Are you sure this isn’t real? This is just like the one my mom makes!”

“The sauce on this chicken is insane—it’s 100% the real deal.”

Then came the comments on the eggs:

“They look just like real scrambled eggs!” “They got the texture right, that’s for sure.” “This combination is great, but where’s the egg-y flavour?” Everyone nodded in agreement.

The plant-based egg used in the dish was called JUST Egg—developed by an American food-tech start-up using mung bean protein as the key ingredient. I thought about all the science and resources needed to create such a product as JUST Egg.

In Hong Kong, there is a strong emphasis on the particular smell and flavour of eggs in addition to getting the right consistency. It is like we are looking for an “egg fragrance,” which is essentially how “eggy” the dish tastes. For example, a lot of people are loyal to imported eggs of a certain origin for their yolk colour, stronger flavor, and better “egg fragrance.”

I wondered how “egg fragrance” fit into this new technological invention. This feeling or flavour we could get for breakfast at a local Hong Kong-style café—soft and fluffy scrambled eggs smeread on top of thick-cut, buttery toast—was not quite achieved. But out of the bubbling reactions to the textures, tastes, and “egg-fragrance” of JUST Egg, however, came a comment from a fellow intern: “If I could afford this, and I could order this at McDonald’s, I’d totally get it.”

JUST Egg might not be a complete substitute for any scrambled egg dish, but it could be. Of course, taste matters immensely in any Hongkonger’s palate, but experiencing this plant-based egg with people in my local community challenged my assumptions that Hong Kong people’s diets were simply driven by taste and habit. People pick what is good for their wallet, but if given the option, people are willing to try new things, to eat what is better for both the body and the environment. Not doing so was
just too easy. In fact, for my fellow interns, working at Green Common had allowed them to understand the widespread impacts of the food system and meat consumption.

In my pre-departure reflections, I observed the “meat culture” as a symbolic barrier in the local appetite:

Symbolically, (1) Hong Kong as an urban environment enables far cognitive distance between the consumer and their food, as the general public is not exposed to alternative living habits; (2) the traditional Chinese mindset and the particular importance of food culture among the general population conflicts with values of plant-based eating and minimizing consumption. For example, preparing more meat dishes or abundant quantities of food is significant when it comes to celebrations such as weddings. The symbolic meaning of consumption and social prestige through food and other lifestyle habits thus conflicts with sustainable food system approaches like slow food or eliminating meat from diets.

However, I realized that Hongkongers do not turn to more sustainable food options not because they are stuck in some ancient traditional Chinese mindset. Rather, (1) there is not a space that exposes the scope and realities of the food system, and (2) Hong Kong as an urban space enables convenience and affordability to take first priority—there simply aren’t enough available options! While there are certain aspects of culture and tradition that influence high levels of meat consumption as well as the wide gap between food production and consumption, the reaction to JUST Egg added a brand-new dimension to the bigger picture. It is hard to blame consumers on eating too much meat when that’s their best option. While JUST Egg did not compare, if given the option at a reasonable price, people would eat it.

Take “Takeout Street” for example: more than twenty restaurants and food shops lined up alongside one another, separated by narrow building entrances, car dealerships, and newspaper stalls. The places with the longest lines during lunch time were restaurants with the “biggest bang for their buck”: inexpensive and big portions, typically meat on a big bowl of rice, noodles, or pasta. Never sandwiches. What was interesting to me, however, was the popularity of the vegetarian shop: everyday, they would sell out of their lunchboxes—stir-fried dish or stew, white rice, and soup—by 1:30pm.

How could this vegetarian shop (in the midst of a lot of competition around them) consistently sell out if people are culturally inclined towards meat-centered meals? If meat were so culturally important, how could vegetarian lunch boxes out-sell the neighbouring restaurant so soon?

These thoughts circled in my head as we finished up our food. As we wrapped up and walked away from the pastel blue walls, I noticed the bright, neon white sign on the wall: “Taste the Future.” Right next to it, “Make Change Happen. Make Green Common.”
“¡Hola! ¿Como esta? ¿Cuantas copias necesita?” I said, my voice higher and brighter than normal in an attempt to sound friendly. These words had exited my mouth so many times in the last two hours that they had started sounding strained and unreal. As repetitive as it was, I was relieved to have a script to stick to; if anybody in the line tried to engage me any further in Spanish, I would have to struggle to give a half-formed reply using the grammar and syntax of a toddler. Feeling useless is not something that my university education has prepared me very well for, but this job was proving to be a very effective crash course. “¿Dos? Un momento, por favor.”

I retreated into the back room of the church with two Guatemalan passports and three birth certificates. Lift the top of the scanner, place the document on the glass, close the top, press a few buttons, make sure the format is right, and print. It took about five minutes on average to finish the job, at which point I returned the original documents and the scans to the owner, took a quick breath, and repeated the script with the next weary person in line.

The scanning room was like a vacuum, strangely devoid of the intense sound, heat, and anxiety of the rest of the Guatemalan consulate. I could just make out the sound of Mary Jo delivering the “Know Your Rights” workshop in the main room over the din of people waiting to meet with the consulate employees about their passports and other official matters. Back here, I felt like a bellboy while my coworkers were out in the trenches. Part of me had started to notice a pattern; whenever there were papers to be organized or emails to be sent or whenever there was a small child in sight, everybody’s eyes lowered and it was assumed that I would take care of it. I looked at my reflection in the scanner glass. Asian, female. Presumably neat, organized, agreeable, and good with kids. I shook the idea out of my head and kicked myself for being so childish. These documents had to be scanned, and somebody had to do it. However possible, I had to recognize that the monotony of this task was related to the larger goal of the day—to help people renew their documentation to prepare for an uncertain future. My stomach turned thinking about my own selfish need for validation, for confirmation that my contribution mattered. It was just that, back here, I had too much time to think.

When we arrived at the church early that morning, a line of 100 or more people had already formed, and through the window, I could still see it snaking across the lawn. A few held young children in their arms or in bassinets, some were slumped against the brick of the building, seeking shade from the relentless midsummer sun and sipping lukewarm water from the dixie cups we had passed out earlier. It struck me that this was probably
the only day off this week that many of these folks would get. Suddenly, the goosebumps forming on my arms as a result of the blasting air conditioning felt especially cruel.

“¡Hola! ¿Cómo está? ¿Cuántas copias necesita?”, I asked again, this time to a boy with an acne-scarred face and an earring wearing a Packers t-shirt. I smiled at him and retreated to the back room; as I smoothed out the thin, crumpled sheet of paper on the glass, I glanced down at it quickly. Fecha de nacimiento: el 6 de diciembre, 1999. We had been born on the same day, exactly one year apart. As I gathered up the printed copies, I entertained the idea of making some comment about this to him but quickly brushed it away. Would he think I was making fun of him? My Spanish was probably too halting to even get the point across. I thought of all the stupid barriers standing between me and this person, this other young, vulnerable, unformed human being. I would never know him, but we would celebrate our birthdays together, a world apart. It was something like looking out at the line on the lawn through the thick glass window in the scanning room. I took a moment with his birth certificate, holding it like a small bird in my goosebumpy hands, before taking a deep breath, smiling, and calling out for the next in line.

MARQUAN

The Pedagogy of Humility

Food justice isn’t just a vocabulary word for me. It isn’t something I found on the pages of a textbook or in the confines of the classroom—it’s life, it’s reality. Cornell amplified my passion to solve the problems facing my community, but academia was never my inspiration, home was. Ideas about food justice and food sovereignty were imbedded in my reality, even when I didn’t yet have the skills to name them. Whether it be a dirt-stained palm or an ink-stained finger, food justice has always existed for me in ways it may not have for others. It evolves in my life as I explore both what my experiences mean for my academic pursuits, as well as the future of my community and our society. A Cornell education isn’t going to give me the key to solve the world’s problems on its own, but it is a step in that direction. This summer, I found myself challenging the way that we, in our Ivy League context, value experiences, and value individuals.

Christopher Epps is someone that many of my peers wouldn’t feel as though had anything to offer their education, someone who has multiple felonies and no college degree. But this man has taught me immensely about the value of community care and connection, about self-love and personal growth. He is an urban farmer by trade, acting as the farm manager for the Giving Garden in my hometown, and someone with whom I worked closely throughout my practicum.
I was first introduced to Chris through text message while I was on campus. This experience interacting with him really made me realize the ways in which I interact with people based on my surroundings. I was initially very formal, very focused on respectability politics and very much looking at the world through my Cornell lens. I was trying to be cognizant and accommodating of potential power dynamics, and understanding that my relationships in many spaces at Cornell involve a strong degree of formality and distance between me and others. However, the first day meeting him back home, I knew that I didn’t have to be or act or seem a certain way with him. He was welcoming and excited to have me, and at first he didn’t really understand Cornell and its reputation. Just me being in college was impressive to him, and he repeatedly told me how much I inspired him. But, in reality he didn’t understand how much he inspired me. There’s a lot you can learn without formal education. I never felt like I knew more than him. Cornell has always been the vehicle, but I’m the driver.

Hearing his story about being formerly incarcerated and spending a lot of his life in prison, I realized many things. Dr. Hatchet, our boss, helped him turn his life around after he got out—she saw something in him. She sponsored him and allowed him to become a master urban farmer by trade. In that story, he showed me that all it really takes is one person to believe in you. Now, he trains people how to start their own urban farm and gardens and he’s constantly bettering himself. He’s so insatiable, and humble and hungry. He appreciated every opportunity given to him—he never stops and while that’s admirable, it’s a trade off because he’s prone to burning out.

He talked to me about how he goes to these meetings with Dr. Hatchet, and while people think he’s qualified to be there, he often feels like he doesn’t know what they’re talking about. He’s at the table to make some big decision, and it’s so daunting. Imposter syndrome isn’t something you ever outgrow. And yet, he rises to the occasion, and he learns. The connection between us was immediate; I felt like I had known him for years. What I’ve been going through at Cornell, the imposter syndrome we both share, he was authentic with me and I could be myself with him. It wasn’t what I expected, I thought that my experience at the farm would be white washed and corporate, but Chris surprised me.

One of the most powerful lessons that Chris taught me is that you can only do what you can do. You can’t do everything, you can’t know everything. If you’re doing your best you can’t fault yourself for not doing more. Going into the internship, I thought I was going to harvest something, but we planted seeds, and that’s fine. And you know what, I’m okay with that.
GIULIA

Data Entry

I finally let myself look at the clock on my computer screen. It’s 1:22, which means I have another eighteen minutes until the break I’ve given myself from scrolling through intake forms. I’ve been using these forms from a legal clinic to make a contact sheet, which involves turning people’s stories into names, addresses, and phone numbers. I read about a woman, copy phone number, date of birth, employer, search the farm she works at to verify the name and spelling, search the address to find the county. I keep skimming to pick out her date of entry. She has two kids and has an H-2A visa, and I fill in two more boxes. Husband was detained, and she’s asking for legal assistance for him. I record her name and information, and it joins my list of hundreds of granules of data just like it. Her information isn’t for us to further assess her request for assistance. It isn’t for us to follow-up and reach her with more guidance. It’s just a database.

It’s 1:25. Fifteen minutes left. I can probably do five more contacts. Even if I just finish those before 1:40, I’ll still take a break.


During a legal clinic a month and a half before, a couple of us interns were relegated to doing arts and crafts with children while their parents waited to speak with attorneys for legal guidance. The clinic took place in a rural town in upstate New York. We were all packed into the echo-filled cafeteria of the town’s middle school, one of the few legal sanctuaries from border patrol. The room was overpowering, scattered with colorful sheets of felt and construction paper, whose trimmings were shed over every inch of the linoleum floor. Marker ink was smeared on every table surface as well as every tiny hand.

Fabiola was the quietest and seemed the least exhausting to be around. She was also one of the youngest, certainly the smallest, about six years old. First I braided her long, brown hair since she was too shy to do anything else with me. Then she warmed up a bit, and we played tic-tac-toe. I was letting her win, and she always laughed in my face while connecting her little line of X’s. Once she knew I was intellectually inferior, she grew tired of playing, but it also became easier to make her smile. We colored together, and she asked for help making a Father’s Day card, reminding me that Father’s Day was that Sunday; I’d need to call my dad.

After we’d run out of things to draw, she asked me if I’d seen her dad. I hadn’t. I realized that she’d been alone for a couple hours, making me wonder what her dad needed from the attorneys that was taking so long. We played and drew a bit more and eventually joined the other kids who had been waiting long, impatiently, for their parents. I was waiting too because I wanted to pack up and go home.
Fabiola was one of the last of the kids waiting to get picked up. It was after the cafeteria had been emptied of activities. We scrubbed as much of the ink as we could off the tables, before giving up and stacking them neatly against the walls. We could have stayed in the cafeteria, but the room was now uncomfortably hollow. So we waited in the hallway outside the rooms used by the attorneys. Her dad came out of the farthest room down the hall, and she ran into his arms. She forgot her hat, so I followed behind her, smiled and handed it to her father, who smiled back, and then they left. He seemed cheerful, so maybe everything was all right. I felt relieved thinking about the three of us each getting to go home after a long day.

But now I'm seeing I was the only one that got to put that day behind me. At least until this moment. I read that Fabiola's dad is seeking legal help for his pending court date. The attorney advises him to make a voluntary departure in the next few months before his hearing. He wants his daughter to stay here with her mom.

I fill in Fabiola's dad's information, and scroll up and down the spreadsheet, looking at all the names. I'm feeling overwhelmingly helpless and restless. How long have I spent on this spreadsheet? Before I hated the tedium of this task, but now I hate it for its misdirection. I try to imagine a positive impact, some series of events where adding Fabiola's father to this list does more than turn him into a data point. But I've got nothing. Yes, this database does assist its constituents: to contact those interested in future workshops and clinics. But in the moment I'm stuck on Fabiola and her father, frozen in a day from weeks ago. Will he be allowed to remain in the US long enough to be notified of the next workshop? Will the next legal clinic offer him a previously unknown solution? I can't imagine so. His case seems closed before it even begins. Even so, there's nothing I can do besides move on to the next name.

HANNAH

Ants

I spent most of my time in Uttar Pradesh with Shaktikar. He was a young, newly married man from a village just outside of Pharenda, which is where our main NGO office was located. He was clean shaven, shy, and always wore a crisp, dark blue shirt.

The roads from the bright pink office building were dusty and loud—cows mingled with rickshaws and the street shimmered with humidity amongst the shouting and horns. When we left Pharenda on our way to different villages
the road quickly changed from asphalt to bumpy dirt roads.

I hadn’t thought the language barrier would be so strong, but instead everything was unfamiliar, and I had no one to turn to for comfort. I felt alone even in a crowded place. Shaktikar was assigned to bring me around because he had the strongest English skills of any of the agriculture extension agents. He was quiet and we couldn’t have full-blown conversations, but we tried.

We would talk about fruits and vegetables: “*Try this, we call it blackberry.*” “*This grows on the tree? Our blackberries grow on a bush,*” I would respond.

Or plants: “*We have trees with needles where I’m from.*”

Or we’d talk about how interviews had gone: “*Was that good?*” “*Yes, that was good.*” I would reassure him.

One day during a chai break I caught him practicing English vocabulary with an app on his phone—my heart soared. We were both trying our best to get to know each other despite the language barrier, even if things felt awkward or impossible at times.

We spent each day driving to different villages on the dusty dirt road. There was always some awkward hand motioning to each other before I would jump on the back of his motorcycle. It’s more maneuverable with only one person, so he would make sure it was all turned around and ready to go before I got on. One day he was turning the motorcycle around and we’re ready to head back home. It was late in the afternoon and the sun had warmed the valley to peak levels. I was hungry and tired after refusing kind offers of food I didn’t recognize and water that made me sick. He turned the motorcycle around under a small tree and paused, so I thought he was ready for me to get on, but after I got settled and clipped on my helmet, he said “off.” I jumped off and worried that I’d misunderstood his hand motions. Instead, he took the motorcycle and wheeled it all around the wide open area and around a tree. I watched, confused, until he motioned for me to get back on. I looked down at the original dusty area where we were going to go through, not seeing what he was avoiding while wheeling the motorcycle around. I looked closer, and there, a small line of ants was following each other to the little tree. I paused watching the ants work. I realized that Shaktikar made both of us get off the bike and wheeled it all around just to save the lives of a few ants. I thought how crazy that was, thinking back to how many times I’d mindlessly squashed ants in my backyard as a kid.

I spent a lot of my time in India trying to understand how the caste system worked, and how it affected people’s lives. How many more people in India are vegetarian and how they thought about animal life differently. I was constantly trying to understand the people I worked with, why they did and why, and what they cared about. In that moment, I looked at the ants and understood something about Shaktikar’s values. I felt like I knew more about who he was and I felt less isolated. We rode home on the dusty roads and I wasn’t tired anymore, I looked forward to the next day of awkward conversations.
The biggest challenge this summer was handling group dynamics among the teens as well as their relationships with us as the staff. The 19 teens were separated into three crews, each crew with 2 peer leaders. On top of the natural drama in group work, especially among young adults, long days on the farm, intense summer heat, and hard physical work really heightened this. Throughout the summer, we took many steps to try to ensure cohesion and a strong sense of community on the farm. For the most part, we all flowed together and had a lot of fun, but there were some standout moments of chaos. There were two kids specifically, whose enthusiasm and open mindedness were lacking all summer. They were friends from before the summer and made no effort to branch out and meet new people, refused to participate in games and activities, and had a general disrespect when talking to any of the staff.

Towards the end of the summer, after some unspoken frustrations in crews led to very low morale one week, we all had a great learning moment. We decided to have a farm party after work one day. We made lots of beautiful food from the farm, set up a slip and slide, had a bonfire and smores, and even got a local musician to come to the farm. While the party was by no means mandatory, it was definitely expected that everyone would come. And in the previous few days, everyone mentioned affirming excited words about the night. The day of the party, there were some fights in the crews as well as some moody teens who brought a negative feeling to the group. Unfortunately, about half of them ended up leaving before the party. For those of us who stayed, we had an amazing time. It was so much fun and they even wanted to stay at the farm and camp out for the night.

On top of the low morale of the group, the next day we were supposed to go on a field trip but had to cancel because of torrential downpour. While visiting the Multicultural Resource Center in Ithaca as our plan B, the two kids with the lack of enthusiasm, were complaining with only negative things coming out of their mouths. Ann, who is brilliant and always knows just the right things to say and do with the group, began to speak about the whole group dynamics and party from the night before. She said, “This is a very important life lesson that you should all know. Believe it or not, your absence in any given space holds just as much space as your presence.” It was the perfect thing to say—harsh yet so true. Her words had a big impact on the group. We spent the afternoon work shopping crew and group dynamics through an exercise called Straight Talk. Everyone got to share their honest feelings and we resolved a lot of issues. The kids even asked if we could plan another group activity outside the farm, so the next day we had a group trip to Purity after work. Every single kid showed up, even the two less enthusiastic ones, and it was such a happy moment.
weeds

The following stories explore the messy, complicated moments of our practicum experiences, moments of conflict and tension held both externally and internally. Like weeds, these experiences may have temporarily blocked out the sun, competing with our aspirations for change and hope for a better future. However, it is important to also understand these stories as ones of possibility and growth. Reflecting on the tensions we experienced provides us with the opportunity to learn from them, allowing us to pull out the weeds to give way for new growth.
We treat them like pests,
but a pest isn’t a pest in its own eyes
pests aren’t pests to pests
weeds aren’t weeds to weeds
it’s all about perception

Our hearts translucent, our souls opaque
humanity dissolved into the soil,
dampened by the sweat
of migrant workers
their sweat salty enough to feed the soil,
but not sweet enough to eat its fruits.

Struggling to breathe on arable land
How ironic
Migrant workers learning to work in environments that
aren’t conducive to work
policies are like pesticides for migrant workers,
treating them like an invasive species
How iconic
as if they could invade this stolen land

an anchor for each acre,
indigenous bodies,
sinking beneath the surface
but keeping everyone else afloat
star spangled battered bodies
blistering in the sun.

— MARQUAN JONES
I had been warned beforehand that when you arrive on a dairy farm, you should never plug your nose. Dairy etiquette 101: never hint that anything about the operation smells out of the ordinary. The scent of a farm is not foreign to me, and I am generally a keen actress, able to politely breathe through my mouth until the first opportunity to gasp for fresh air. The smell of this barn, however, was different.

Actually, I felt the scent more than smelled it, like acid being poured through my nasal canal and down into my throat, traveling through my nervous system until it was steeped in every corner of my body. It’s always a shock when your senses overlap in this way, when a smell becomes a feeling or a sound mixes with sight. Something about the smell of pesticide being sprayed in the barn was so abrasive that it shocked my system, made tears well in my eyes and the hairs on my arms stand up, made me feel like I was going to faint. When the urge to vomit cleared, I looked around, trying to find Benjamin, the worker who was supposed to be cleaning the milking machines. Mary Jo had told me to take his photo as he worked, that we needed some pictures to document the trip. The only thing I could think as I tapped the button on my phone to snap the photo was that he was able to smile for a picture, let alone work for hours, breathing in the air that my body was violently rejecting. Maybe, I thought, you get used to this kind of thing.

I was relieved that the meeting was going to be conducted in the open air rather than inside the barn. I told Benjamin he could follow me in my faltering, self-conscious Spanish, and he nodded. We walked out together to the field and sat in the grass, him with his coworkers and me with mine, separated by our respective bosses. Somebody drove up, delivered pizza, and drove away. I wiped the thick pizza grease from my fingers in the grass and shared a cautious smile with one of the farm workers, a young man who was probably fourteen or fifteen, when I caught him doing the same. The pizza delivery guy had forgotten to bring napkins, evidently.

Mary Jo started the meeting in Spanish by thanking the workers for participating in another Cornell Farmworker Program meeting. These are my interns, Maya, Giulia, Jesus. We are going to be continuing some of the conversations we had the last time about the laundry machine and other concerns, like the uniforms. Also, Mouse has some things she wants to let you know.
Mouse, the appropriately named farmowner, was sitting on her hands in the grass, her small, sunburnt face alternating between complete, startled openness with her mouth and eyes stretched as wide as they could go, and pinched scrutiny. In her bright pink t-shirt and denim cutoffs caked in dirt, she looked like a kid who had been outside climbing trees all day. I couldn't stop thinking about what Mary Jo had said on the ride over to the farm from campus. Look around, this is what “going under” looks like. This is a place where workers don't have beds. In a year or two, Mouse will probably have to sell, and she's scared.

Although I am a city girl at first glance, I have spent quite a great deal of my life on farms. My father was raised on 400 acres of land in Southern Pennsylvania, and every summer of my childhood was spent there, eating sour cherries from heavy branches and swimming in the warm, murky pond. I dug potatoes in the sun and stripped husks from colorful ears of Indian corn, learned to drive a tractor before a car. Farm life to me has always been tranquil and still and a refuge from the world.

I am disturbed by how privileged and naive this image is. As a child, I thought all farmers were like my grandfather and all food was lovingly and leisurely harvested. I thought that all families returned home every weekend, their trunks weighed down with fresh vegetables, meat, and milk. I thought that farming was the most noble and rewarding job in the world, and I couldn't wait until it was my turn to do it. I had never seen what “going under” looked like.

With the taste of pesticide still on my tongue, I wanted somebody to be angry at. I looked at Mouse, her huge eyes averting the gaze of everybody else in the circle. She was admiring the delicate purple and white flowers that are scattered across the meadow. I wondered if she ever felt the same way that I did as a little girl eating sour cherries on the farm. I wondered if she couldn't wait to be a farmer like her dad and granddad before her. I swallowed hard.

Mary Jo led the meeting, switching between Spanish and English, shifting her body to the face the top of the hill, where the workers sat, to the bottom of the hill, where Mouse and her niece Amanda sat. The washer and dryer still aren’t working (why didn’t you tell me before, says Mouse? We did, says Benjamin), the crew needs more uniforms (you don't need two uniforms every day, says Mouse, I can’t work in these dirty clothes, says Benjamin), Amanda is going to join the team and help supervise operations (hola, says Amanda). My Spanish is pretty lousy, but my ability to pick up on exasperation and frustration is astute. I studied the crew; the fifteen-year-old boy still absentmindedly wiping his hands on the grass.

The meeting is long, and we keep circling back to the same arguments. Mary Jo ends the conversation before I feel that we have really made any progress, but I stay quiet. I don't have the words in Spanish or in English to offer any solutions.

As the group walked away, I noticed that the greasy pizza box was still on the ground and doubled back to pick it up. When I looked to the
top of the hill, I could see that Mouse had wrapped her arms around Benjamin, who was standing stiffly in her embrace, patting her back lightly. Awkwardness permeated the air like an abrasive pesticide. When she finally pulled away, she stooped over and picked a small purple and white flower, and then tucked it into Benjamin’s uniform pocket. Well, I thought, if he can’t get a clean uniform, at least he can have a decorated one. I started up to the top of the hill.

CAROLINE

Family Meal

Each Thursday at 4:00 p.m., everyone at Stone Barns gathers at the Hayloft for Family Meal. The early dinner is always packed, from farmers and apprentices; to chefs; to the well-dressed executives who clearly never step foot in the fields. The Hayloft during Family Meal reminds me of my middle school cafeteria: rows of long tables fill the room and the seating groups represent a clear divide amongst the staff. I had never been to Family Meal, and if it were up to me, I would not have gone because I did not consider myself part of the “family.” But my supervisor, Shannon, had asked that all of the interns introduce themselves to the Stone Barns team. The night before, I quickly compiled a slideshow of photos I had taken during the first two weeks of my internship to play behind me while I spoke.

When Shannon told me about the presentation, she described it as a “small” event that would be in front of “just a few” board members. Therefore, I did not think much of it. It sounded very casual, and I could handle that. So, when the livestock manager dropped me off at the hayloft—fifteen minutes late and covered in mud—and I walked into a room of at least one hundred attendees, I was a little surprised. I took my seat next to the other interns and asked what I had missed. “Not much,” they informed me: an intern from Harvard was the first to talk about her project, and she was wrapping up when I arrived. Shannon approached me and whispered that I would be presenting next, if I was ready. I had been in the room for all of two minutes by that point, and was nowhere close to ready, but I reluctantly agreed anyway.

I stood up in front of the crowd and had barely said three words before one of the chefs shouted for me to speak up. Embarrassed, I stepped forward and raised my voice, asking if he could hear me now. He said “no.” I continued walking forward until I stood in the middle of the room, when it dawned on me that he was joking. Not off to a great start, I thought. I forced out a laugh and continued, searching the room for the familiar faces of my supervisors. I discussed the departments I rotated between at the farm: a day in crops, a day in the grazing program, and a day in livestock. As I tried to think of more to talk about, I remembered that I was the only intern who did not have a central project. There was another intern who tested the farm’s
water, and one who identified the types of grass on the land. These projects all served a purpose to Stone Barns, whereas I felt like a deadweight—perhaps they had felt obligated to accept me because of their relationship with Cornell University (Blue Hill at Stone Barns’ head chef Dan Barber has worked closely with Cornell’s Michael Mazourek). I thought back to the time one of the managers ordered me to throw away trash that he had dropped. My biggest fear at that moment was that I would soon be asked to go on coffee runs or make copies for my supervisors. I understand that interns are never viewed as equals, but I had at least hoped for some real responsibilities. I could try to convince myself that an extra hand is always useful, that assisting in the day-to-day operations makes things easier for everyone, and that I was an asset, but the truth of the matter boiled down to one thing: my internship did not seem to provoke change. I did not bring this up during my presentation.

I dove into the details about the purpose of my minor, and how Stone Barns related to my studies. Community Food Systems is exactly what it sounds like—I study how the production, nutritional value, environmental impact, and accessibility of food can be improved in all types of communities, regardless of socioeconomic status. The ideal food system, I explained, guarantees that everyone has access to culturally appropriate, nutrient dense, fresh foods. My mind conjured up another bitter truth. Although Stone Barns stands behind this model of a food system in theory, in practice it provides food for some of the wealthiest Americans in the country. The five-star onsite partner restaurant, Blue Hill, charges over $250 per person for dinner, and the marketplace is patronized by affluent Westchester residents. In my mind, Stone Barns appeared to be the opposite of accessible. Of course, these business ventures provide the farm with the capital it needs to experiment with new, more efficient equipment, and I appreciate that the center reaches out to people who may not know much about problems with the food system. Nevertheless, I could not help but feel that these contributions were minor in comparison. Again, I did not voice these thoughts aloud.

Since I had no real objective at Stone Barns, my presentation lasted only about three minutes; it felt awkward and aimless. Once finished, I sat down and stared at the plates of pasta sitting on the table. I hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and I did not have time to grab food before I spoke, but I had no appetite. I remembered how eager I was to start my internship, and now it seemed I was just naïve. In my heart, I knew that Stone Barns was not to blame for the conflicts I had thought about. Reforming the food system is a nuanced, complex affair and the employees at Stone Barns provide nothing short of their best efforts. And compared to the farmers, I was an inexperienced, simple college student; an intern who still had a lot to learn. I tried to use these explanations to lift my spirits, but it didn’t help. As soon as Shannon dismissed us, I headed straight to my car and drove home in silence.

I’d be remiss if I did not clarify that this experience did not define the entirety of my time at Stone Barns. It took me a while to find my place at
the farm, and it took me even longer to comprehend how complicated it is to address every problem with our food system. I have nothing but praise for Stone Barns for trying to solve an issue that so many others ignore, and I am beyond grateful for all that I learned from the farmers, who were kind and encouraging. Family Meal was not the first time I struggled with my role at Stone Barns and it certainly was not the last. Even so, I can think of few things I would change about my practicum. While frustrating at times, the difficulties I faced throughout the summer only enhanced my learning experience. I walked away from Stone Barns with new knowledge about farming and a stronger desire to join the food revolution.

HANNAH

Sarees

Our first night in Pharenda I was eager to see the market in the rural town. We were staying in a big house full of other women who worked for the NGO. It isn’t common for single women in rural India to live without their families, so we all lived together. There were two kitchens in the house and my cointern and I shared one with Payal and Monica. We shared all of our meals with them and the four of us quickly became close, watching Harry Potter and eating cookies in Payal’s room after long days in the field.

We had a vision of a large square full of farmers selling produce and spices and overflowing bags of grain, like the farmers markets that we knew in the US with some Indian flair. Unlike what we expected, the “market” was just a series of streets in the main part of town lined with farmers displaying piles of produce on blankets at the edge of the crowded streets. We followed Monica and watched as she asked farmers for the price of green beans, felt papayas for their quality and asked about banana varieties. We wore our loose cotton pants and Chacos, the unspoken uniform of American women in India. Monica was taller than most of the male vendors and worked as an agricultural extension agent so she knew what to ask. Watching her shop was its own cultural experience. After we filled our cloth bags with mangoes and gourds and other local veggies, we started our short walk home. As we passed into an alleyway, Monica tossed back her long hair and laughed. She said the farmers were charging her more today for vegetables as she pointed at me: the blond curly haired girl who couldn’t hide how white she was, even under a big pink scarf. We spent the rest of the walk home laughing, but we never went to the market with Monica again. Instead, she would go on her way home from work and buy us cheap groceries and we were grateful.

About halfway through our month-long stay in Pharenda, Payal caught typhoid in a village and had to go home to Delhi for treatment. That same week, Monica fell sick and went home to the mountains to be with her family. That left Christa and me with Kiran, the woman who cleaned the
house and had been cooking food for the four of us. She was barely four feet tall but was so capable and warm to us. On the one hand, having someone to cook our food was luxurious and wonderfully convenient—we dedicated more time to our work and she made us amazing Indian food. On the other hand, neither Christa nor I had ever experienced having a cook and Kiran spoke no English other than “yes,” “no,” “water” and “good,” and we definitely didn’t speak any Bhojpuri. For the next few days we would look up pictures of vegetables on Google Images and show them to Kiran so she could purchase them for us at the market. This led to a lot of funny hand-motions, jokes and bonding with Kiran, despite the language barrier. We gave her money for the market and she made us delicious meals—life without Monica and Payal was more lonely, but we were well taken care of.

One Saturday, Kiran didn’t come to make us breakfast in the morning. Christa and I ate Corn Flakes for breakfast that we purchased on a weekend trip to a larger town and assumed that Kiran had taken the day off. Maybe we hadn’t communicated well enough with her that we’d be in town this Saturday. There were plenty of vegetables and a couple of eggs so we made lunch and dinner for ourselves and had a nice day. The next day, Kiran was absent again. The vegetables were running low, and the Corn Flakes started to taste stale. We didn’t know how to get to the market. We hadn’t been since that first day with Monica—honestly I wasn’t even sure where it was. On Monday morning we started to get worried about Kiran but we knew we would see her at the NGO office, where she also worked. On Monday morning, Kiran wasn’t at the office and everyone seemed hushed. We weren’t sure who to ask or what was appropriate, but I approached Silka—she also lived in the big house with us and spoke the best English on my team.

Over the weekend Kiran’s mother was hit by a train. Her saree had caught on the train tracks and she fell. She wasn’t able to get back up in time, the train hit her and she died. She had been collecting flowers on the side of the tracks. Although signs said a train was coming most people in that area don’t take the signs very seriously. On Monday evening Silka brought me to the market with her and I bought lots of vegetables. She is a stern woman who wouldn’t let them charge me more and that night Christa and I made a large dinner of American style food with Indian vegetables. I was giddy to be cooking again, but I missed our silly hand motions with Kiran and her cooking that exploded with spices. Everyday on our way to the villages to do fieldwork we would cross the same train tracks where her mother fell. Sometimes a train would come and a bar would lower telling us not to pass, but every time people would ignore it—duking under and leaning their motorcycles to the side to pass under the bar. Women would lift up their sarees to avoid tripping as they walked across. I couldn’t help but wonder if they were lifting them high enough. When we returned to Delhi, Christa and I gushed at the convenience of Women Only cars on the Metro. We were surrounded by women in bright kurtas and sarees. I felt safe in those Women Only cars, but as I marveled at the beautiful colors and patterns, I couldn’t help but think back to Kiran’s mother. I wondered about
the saree that made her trip. I wondered if she’d been wearing pants and Chacos if she wouldn’t have had to worry as much about tripping.

AMARI

A Buried Treasure

It was my first day on the job, collecting data for small-holder farmers, in the surrounding area of Ithaca. I pranced in the office with my denim cutoffs and my umbrella in hand to find my coworkers eyes glued to glowing white screens in gray clutter. I had no idea what to expect when I signed up for this job but new experiences, right? My boss had a meeting with all of us earlier in the day to give us our assignments and walk us through the logistics of the technology. With my eyes wide, I attentively took notes on what he was saying, as not miss any parts of the process. I was anxious because I am always hyper aware of my race in all white spaces. My assumptions were that almost all farmers are white men that come from rural areas and support politicians like Donald Trump. My boss said "...and Amari you have ‘Buried Treasures Farm’." I nodded and awaited when I would come face to face with people who I knew didn’t look like be and who I thought would look down on me. I drove to the farmer's market alone and searched all of the stalls for a sign that said 'Buried Treasures' but I couldn't find anything. I walked up and down until I came across a small stall nestled between a winery and a photographer selling her prints, with a small wooden sign overhead that said just that. I introduced myself as the CCE intern that works with Matt and how I would be collecting data for them in order to increase their revenue. I was greeted by a tall white woman with translucent eyes and her 19-year-old daughter who looked just like her. They introduced themselves and instantly asked me about my involvement with the project and CCE, about what I do in school and proceeded to tell me a little bit about their operation. The mother said her name was Mary and that she started farming when she met her husband Doug. She explained that she is actually a city girl that comes from the Boston area. She had never farmed a day in her life, or even had a garden when she was growing up. When she met Doug, however, everything changed. He had gardened a lot when he was younger and his grandfather once owned a plot of land that he used to do some small scale farming on. Doug had been a microbiologist for years and even taught at the university level but decided that he wanted a deeper connection with the earth and to get his hands dirty, so he quit and became a farmer. After buying their land, and having their daughter, they turned this subsistence farming into a career and started selling at markets, offering CSAs and even doing some wholesale distribution. While their farm is a small scale operation in Groton, they have an abundance of organic produce that they grow and sell to the community.
After talking to the mother for some time, I got to talk to her daughter Rachel for a bit. I learned a lot about a life that is completely different from mine. As the child of two farmers, she grew up learning how to plant, take care of and harvest a slew of organic vegetables and fruit. All her life she has been homeschooled, even if that meant teaching herself most of the time because her parents were busy. An exceptionally smart girl, that takes all the initiative to do her schoolwork on her own, even when her parents have slacked off on giving her academic attention. Rachel described to me that she loves to do outdoor activities, some of which include skinning woodchucks, foresting for edible plants or using her books to identify plants in the wild. We sat and talked a lot about her activities, which were so different from mine that I had so many questions. She probably thought I was such a city girl that knew nothing about wildlife. She would have been right. We sat and she told me all about the process for skinning woodchucks, tanning the leather and sewing it into goods. As I stood and listened I never felt like what I looked like mattered. I was just a human learning from another human's experiences. Too often I feel as though I put up a guard because of preconceived notions about a group of people. However, in this instance I was proven wrong about who farmers are, what they look like or what they are interested in.

Anyway, we continued on throughout the day getting to know each other and learning more about the purpose of the research project. I explained that the point of the project was to increase small-holder farmer revenue by collecting data on what they sold, how much they sold, and at what time business was the busiest. This would give us the tools to analyze the data to give recommendations on further steps. By collecting data on what they sell at different times we can see, for example, if snap peas are selling more at 11 am and dropping off for the rest of the day and what we can proactively do to prevent that sort of decline. Recommendations would include maybe rearranging the stall, allowing people to sample items like that or dropping the price a little during those hours. With multiple markets' data for any specific farm we can give even bigger recommendations like moving their produce into wholesale distribution or coming to the Ithaca farmer's market more days in a week. After explaining all of this to Mary and Rachel, they were elated. It was as if this was a prayer they were just waiting to get answered. They immediately saw the value in collecting this formative research because they could directly see how it could help them in the future. I was ecstatic because my boss hadn't had the same luck with other farmers at the same market. I thought to myself: ‘this is going to be a good summer’.
Sprouts, the first emerging part of the plant, visible from up above, finally get to see the sun and grow toward her. Still attached to its origin, it’s making its own way, by growing up and out for all to see. These stories show off our unique experiences with moving past the surface and starting to see the world that lay beyond. Full of rays of sunshine, and water to grow, we, like plants continued our journeys with grappling with how our small experiences in the food system related to the big picture. These are stories of inspiration, deep thought and optimism for a better tomorrow. Stories that keep us chasing the sun and hoping that we have enough water for tomorrow.
Primary succession,  
We’ve been through the fire  
After everything has been scorched we are the first  
species to emerge from the ashes  
Replenished evergreen and still growing  
Aspirations to reaching the sun  
So we stand erect  
Chin up  
Toes in the ground  
Scapulas retracted  

We the sprouts  
Grounded  
grown from the rock and from the ash.  
Ashes to ashes  
seed to sprout  

Yet we still do not bear fruit  
We walk barefoot  
No matter the conditions  
Because this work is painful  
But rewarding  
Not romanticized, practical  
Never neutral  
Because love is not apathetic  

Anything worth fighting for isn’t easy  

This book is unfinished  
This poem is unfinished  
We are all still growing  
Constantly  
Through dry seasons, low rain, and murky skies  
Resilient  
Budding  
Exuberant growth  

We are both the instructors and the instructed  
The teachers and the taught  
The masters of our fates  
The cultivated crops  

I’m learning that _________  
I’m learning that _________  
I’m learning that _________  

— MARQUAN JONES
The Return

When you leave your community, you start to notice things differently when you come back. As a Cornell student, upstate NY often seems like another world, hours away but it might as well be years. I don’t go home as often as I would like. Plane tickets are expensive, and the train is twelve hours. But when I do go home, I feel like something is always changing—my brother’s voice gets deeper, my sister gets taller, but the community stay the same. The abandoned houses across the street from my middle school are still there. The police still no where to be seen. The drug addicts who have been failed by the system still loiter on the corners, still homeless, still addicted. The old lady on my block still mows her lawn every week—it's amazing how she can keep something so beautiful in an ugly place. She is surrounded by litter, and broken glass and shattered promises, but her lawn is still just as manicured as her smile. As white as our oppression, or snow. In the Chicago blistering cold.

There is no better manifestation of love than to nurture the land, to grow food, to take away the weeds that can harm your crops. There is something active about this love, something tangible, concrete. It feels good, to care for these organisms, and it’s devastating when you fail them. During the process of watering, weeding and pruning, I felt liberated. I felt one with nature, existing in a microcosm of how life should be or used to be, because I am in the city here. This farm is on a main street—cars drive by, you hear sirens, honks of car horns, screeching of brakes, distant bass coming from car speakers, faint echoes of the high school band. And yet, this is natural. It is up to us to accommodate and adapt, because a skyscraper is to man as a spiderweb is to a spider. That is to say, a spiderweb is just as natural as the buildings because it is human nature to create these things. Thus, urban farming is just as legitimate as farming in a rural context because the soil is still the soil and the earth is still the earth.

My community is 21 blocks. 2.3 square miles—how can we be so close to poverty and so close to wealth at the same time? Every day when I was in middle school I walked past abandoned houses, but I think that as long as there are still buildings standing something new can be created. I saw signs proclaiming “Imagine a new future,” been there for years, tattered and falling down, projects supposedly in the works. But seeing that progress is not being made evokes a visceral emotion in me. They call communities like mine the projects, but why do they call them projects? People drive through my community but they don’t invest in it, we’re the first stop on the highway, not a place to stay. The biggest business is the hospital, but even that is predicated on sickness. I want to see progress, growth, I want to put love into my community and create a space, a place to practice freedom, a force for liberation.

In a community of people practicing learned helplessness, I see hope.
These parts of my community, the ugly, the scorned, the skin tone grass, broken glass, and class divisions, I feel driven, motivated. But as a kid I knew I couldn't do anything but prepare myself to do things in the future.

But I'm not a kid anymore. Now, I can do. And yet, I know that this idealistic kid in me feels fulfilled but not satiated. There's so much more to do. But the kid didn't really understand the world, not the way I do now. He had a vision for what the world could be but it was romanticized because pessimism is what he saw, and reality is what he lives now. Over time, I've learned that I have to understand the feasibility of all of these things. All I can do is my part. That's all anyone can ask of me. And you know what, that doesn't make me feel as overwhelmed as it used to.

LINDSEY

Wellington’s Herbs and Spices

I had worked at Capital Roots for roughly a week. Up until that day work was 9 to 5 like most jobs are. However, that day I had to be at the office by 7 am. I awoke early, brushed my teeth, tied up my hair, put on old clothes and brewed some coffee. I packed my bag complete with water and lunch, and lastly before walking out the door put on my work boots. The morning air was cool and heavy with dew. The sun was barely up, casting a soft morning glow of yellow orange and pink across the landscape. It shone bright turning the grass and trees into slick glittering sheets. I climbed into my car and started the morning drive to the office.

I was working on a produce recovery project with the organization that summer. Most of the produce was donated at the office or picked up at farms by us, but as the growing season was picking up we were getting more and more calls to glean at farms. I had never done a gleaning let alone even heard the word. I had no idea what to expect from the day ahead, but was excited.

I arrived at the office at 7 sharp. Everyone was already there, loading the van with stacks of plastic bins. I climbed into the passenger side of the van and off we went. Driving was my boss, Cheryl. Cheryl is a young woman who had graduated from Cornell fairly recently and then continued on to
obtain a masters in the United Kingdom. She was inspirational in all that she
did, which was a lot. She had big dreams and a soft heart for the people in
the world who need and deserve it. In the back of the van was my co-intern
Kaitlin, a rising senior in a public health program at a local college. Kaitlin
may be the sweetest person I’d ever met, always volunteering to help with
whatever people need and bringing in baked goods or fresh food to share
with the office nearly every day.

We arrived at Wellington’s Herbs and Spices a little after 8. Pulling in
the driveway, we passed the most beautiful sign, with flowers spread around
the farm name written in delicate letters. I was confused where the farm
was. Where were the rows of greenhouses? Where were the plowed fields?
Surely if it was a farm with excess produce for us to take it would be of a
bigger scale. Maybe we just had not yet arrived at the real farm site.

We pulled up next to what appeared to be a barn red house from the
road. Above the door was another painted sign reading “Antique Shop.”
What type of farm was this? Before we even got out of the van a tall black
man exited the door. He had on a hat that looked as if it might disintegrate
on his head before our eyes, sunglasses shielding his eyes, and clothes
patterned with different substances clearly from working with the earth.
But what stuck out most was his striking smile. His name was Frederick
Wellington and he was the owner of the operation. He introduced himself
to us in an accent, greeted Cheryl warmly as she was clearly a friend, and
asked her to drive behind him to where we would be picking. As soon as we
circled around the house the landscape opened up like an oyster exposing
rolling hills and a breathtaking view of the distant lake from far above.

We drove for a mere five minutes pulling up to an extremely tiny green-
house. I couldn’t believe this is where we would be getting the produce. We
hopped out of the van, Frederick opened the door and we stopped in our
tracks. Inside was the Garden of Eden. The soil was not visible from where
we stood, only a sea of green laid upon our eyes. Plants spiraled up the walls
and up grates lined in the middle of the greenhouse for support. Where do
we even step? The looks on our faces brought clear joy to Fredrick whose
smile grew even larger and let out a light chuckle at our surprise.

We stood outside the greenhouse chatting a bit as he asked us ques-
tions about ourselves, and directed what we could take and couldn’t. He
emphasized how difficult it was to not step on anything as everything was
planted very close to one another. As soon as he heard I was from a farm he
immediately chose me to be the person to do the harvesting.

He entered first. Carefully instructing me to place every footstep
precisely where he had placed his. Luckily, I have the worst balance in the
history of balance making this challenge exponentially greater. Frederick
emphasized the ecology of the greenhouse, how they intercrop plants that
work well together and disperse various crops throughout the greenhouse.
Nothing grows in a straight neat line or is planted in a row together. I had
never seen a garden flourish more. He bent down slowly, careful not to lose
his balance and touched a beautiful bell pepper plant, the leaves slick and
shiny, the white flowers small but beautiful. He smiled and looked back at me, still wearing his sunglasses, and said that these were the prized possession. He instructed where to step, what to cut, and how to pass it to him so as not to bruise or rip what we picked. He was gentle in his instruction, but also stern as to what I should be doing.

When we finished harvesting I exited the greenhouse after him, the sweat pouring off of me. It was late morning by now and the greenhouse was like a sauna. I felt as though I had been cooking in a pot of vegetable stew. The air was hot outside, yet felt like the arctic in comparison to the steamy greenhouse.

Frederick instructed that we had one more greenhouse to go to. I was relieved upon arrival to see that some employees were in the greenhouse already harvesting for us. As they harvested meticulously, Cheryl and Kaitlin packed the bins, leaving Frederick and myself to talk. Never had I had such an intellectually rich conversation with a farmer I had just met.

The workers that he employed were of Burmese descent and had fled from the country due to ethnic and religious persecution. He spoke to me of their hardship and their stories and their dear friendship to him. As an immigrant himself, he highlighted that people like himself and his employees have to stick together in this country. Frederick, over many years, was able to obtain a PhD in something like traditional medicine. He was not specific in what the degree was or where it was obtained. He was so wrapped up in his storytelling and I so intrigued by it that interrupting with questions was no concern of mine. He talked extensively of his methodology on using plant based medicine and a proper diet to combat illness and told me of his many books and papers he had written over the years yet never published. I was star-struck as he went on to discuss the challenges of changing people’s mindsets regarding their diets, farming, and the roles of people of color in the food system. The conversation seemed to go on for hours though in reality it was brief.

When the greenhouse was harvested we returned to the antique shop where Frederick bid us a casual farewell and his wife, Carolyn, exited the shop greeting Cheryl, obviously a friend, with a huge bear hug and a kiss on the cheek. I realized later that I had never actually seen Fredrick’s eyes that day. She welcomed us inside for some of her famous sweet tea. Walking into the shop was like entering a quaint cottage in the Italian countryside. Big pieces of furniture created rows in the shop, each one peppered with smaller antiques all clearly so delicate and stunning. Tea saucers, telephones, china dolls, jewelry and more all glittering in the light catching your eye wherever you turned. From the ceiling hung a network of bunched hydrangeas drying for market. It felt like the sky was falling from above, showering me in beautiful dried blossoms.

I knew that the farm produced fresh vegetables, but was still confused where the herbs and spices part of their name came from. Carolyn grabbed Kaitlin and my attention with a smile waving for us to come around the corner. A wall of bagged spices and teas opened up upon our eyes. My mouth
must have been wide open or my face full of surprise because Carolyn began explaining with a little laugh about the original business. They started growing, drying and processing their own herbs for sale. Then they began importing various tea blends with which Carolyn mixed and matched to create her own recipes. The business was unique and wildly successful. She explained to me that years and years ago her and Frederick left their corporate lives in New York City to delve into the blocks upon which the people they had become were built. That fact gave me a sense of hope.

A small sunroom was around the opposite corner with delicate tables covered in lace cloth with candles and fresh flowers in the middle of each, an old school black and white tiled floor and a counter with a small kitchen. She asked us to take a seat and served us all this sweet, cold, coconut tea. It was amazing. Words can't truly describe the taste. We all sat and chatted about different dimensions of life in that beautiful room overlooking that gorgeous view sipping our tea completely content with the life we lived in that moment.

We strolled through the shop for a bit before leaving. We said our goodbyes, climbed into the van, and drove away with minds at ease, bodies at peace and a vehicle full of delicious fresh food. Driving back to the office, I knew those interactions would stick with me for a lifetime. It was so refreshing meeting people who transformed their lives over and over in various chapters to achieve their dreams. And even more so, combatting the dominant paradigm of agriculture and practicing their lives in a way that they wish to see the whole world one day live. I left that day feeling so hopeful, so at peace, and above all utterly inspired.

**CAROLINE**

**Carrots**

Every Monday morning at 9:00 a.m. sharp, I reported to the small field behind the main visitor building and courtyard to work the day in the crops department. Spending days in the field reminded me why so many Westchester residents chose to dedicate their days off to Stone Barns—the hills were lined with rows of colorful flowers; the highest point of the vegetable field provided a spectacular view of the old, ivy-covered stone silo; and, though the space was filled with roaming animals, the air felt fresh and clean. Still, out of the three departments I rotated between, working in crops had to be my least favorite. I enjoyed the views, but some days our tasks were a little too tedious. This was one of those days.

We had just finished uninstalling the drip irrigation system from a bed of harvested crops when the crops manager, a tall and enthusiastic man named Jason, informed us of our next mission: weeding carrots. Judging from the reactions of the apprentices I was working with, this was *not* something to be happy about—and I quickly learned why. Carrots, especially
when grown organically, are exceedingly difficult to manage. They must be monitored closely to minimize weed growth, or weeds might take over the entire bed. Apparently, these carrots had been badly neglected, so the bed was a mess. Bunches of leafy weeds smothered the young carrots, and it was our duty to save them. By hand.

Though it was only mid-morning when I began, the weather was already sweltering. I alternated between plunging my hands into the dirt to grasp the weed from its root and wiping away the sweat that dripped into my eyes. Because the weeds were so dense, the apprentices and interns ended up working unusually close to one another, and I could overhear bits and pieces of others’ conversations.

"On, like, a real farm, these beds would just be scrapped," one of the apprentices said casually. His name was Austin, and he always drank out of a mason jar and wore straw hats. The other apprentices let out a few chuckles and nodded their heads in agreement. He continued, explaining that bigger farms don’t have the manpower or the time to weed all those carrots, one-by-one. The words flowed out of his mouth so easily and thoughtlessly, but they caught me by surprise. Stone Barns isn’t a real farm?

I did not stay much longer to hear the rest of the conversation. For the most part, I got to pick where I spent my hours and I usually devoted the least amount of time to crops, simply because the work was mundane and exhausting. However, well into that evening Austin’s words weighed on my mind. If Stone Barns was not a “real farm,” why bother showing up every morning? Why did I think working here would make a difference?

I thought about Austin’s remark throughout that day, and many times again for the rest of the summer. I thought about the people who use their free time to visit Stone Barns. I thought about the educational opportunities Stone Barns provides for visitors, children, college students, and young aspiring farmers. I thought about the quote on the main page of the Stone Barns website, “Our food system is in trouble. Help us fix it.” Soon, I realized that Austin was right—Stone Barns isn’t a real farm: it’s actually much more than a farm.
It was the first day of what would feel like an eternity of nutrition lessons with youth from Ithaca and the surrounding regions. Would I be good at this? Would my messages stick? Will they trust what I have to say? Is nutrition education even effective? How does what I’m doing now help or hurt the goal of advancing toward a sustainable food system? With all of these questions ruminating in my head, I walked into the air conditioned teaching kitchen of the Cornell Cooperative Extension office, already an improvement from the thick steamy air outside. Two of my co-workers were already there setting up the room for our lesson. As they collected knives, cutting boards, recipes, and measuring cups, I started to orient myself around the room. Gazing up at all of the pots and pans hanging from walls, hundreds of miscellaneous, spoons, measuring cups, graters and the like, all thrown together in disorganized shelves and buckets. Reading over the recipe and lesson plan, I started to unload the ingredients from my two reusable Wegmans bags onto the two prep tables in the front of the room. At that moment, 20 7th and 8th grade students barged into the room and it wasn’t so quiet anymore. As my team and I scrambled to get all the materials ready, the room erupted with laughter, sounds and 20 sets of bright eyes watching our every move. My heart started to beat faster. How would I get them to quiet down? Listen to me? I ignored them to gather my thoughts, read over the lesson and made sure that I had everything to be prepared. I disappeared into the backroom with my coworkers to assure that we were on the same page. We emerged ready with a semi-rehearsed script. I opened up the class with “Ok quiet down everyone, we are going to start a lesson about nutrition, but before we start can anyone tell me what they know about nutrition?” The room was silent. Awkward really. I waited, and waited. Until my co-workers said something to the effect of “well can anyone tell me what it means to eat healthy?” Again silence. Until I forced myself into saying “well you’re in the right place, because today we are going to learn about what it means to eat the rainbow and how we can do that in our everyday lives.” I paused for a few seconds before starting a quick icebreaker game about fruits and vegetables. The kids paired up and placed different pictures of vegetables on their heads. The goal was to guess the vegetable on your own head by asking your partner yes or no questions. After the game, I went around and asked kids if they had ever tried some of the vegetables they had to guess. I watched intently as a short portly 7th grader with an avocado taped to his head pinched his face and crossed his arms. He refused ask anymore questions. His partner, a little boy with glasses too big for his face and a spiky hair tried to get him to ask about color,
The boy wouldn’t budge, until I came over and asked, have you ever had a fruit that is green inside with a brown bumpy skin?" He shook his head. It amazed me. I couldn't subject him to this kind of embarrassment and distress anymore. I pulled the adhesive off of his forehead and showed him the card. I asked if he had ever heard of an avocado, or seen one maybe and he nodded, seemingly just to get me out of his face. I took the hint.

This wasn't the only time this happened over the course of the summer. Each time I was more comfortable with the possibility that some kids hadn't had beets, avocado or even spinach.

Going back to the lesson, I asked the question "why is it important to eat a variety of colors everyday?" Surprisingly, a few students raised their hands and responded, “to keep you healthy” and to "grow." Both sound answers, until a girl raised her hand and said that it was important because each color gives us different nutrients that we need and by eating a variety we will get all the nutrients we need. As I would learn throughout the summer, most kids didn't think about this fact, which made me appreciate her insight even more.

As I went into some of the science behind eating the rainbow, I started to see eyes drop, faces leaning on outstretched elbows and few whispers from the back of the room. They didn’t care anymore so I knew I had to fast forward to the fun part. Heads picked back up off of the table as I inched towards the prep tables and explained our cooking activity for the day. On the prep table I picked up a large chef's knife, a red pepper and started to demonstrate safe cutting techniques for vegetables. Bearcrawling along the length of the pepper, I sliced thin, long slices and put them aside. I did this for the carrots, and broccoli as well. Excited faces waited in anticipation for their turn and for the fried rice that was to come.

TAMSIN

Wanda

We got back in the middle of preparations for another recipe day. I squished into a white hospital truck with five other staff members. Again, I had the front seat. On the way, there were a lot of jokes and laughs. It was only my second day in Malawi, but I was already irritated at my inability to pick up the language. I could barely distinguish words. Makora was repeated a lot; I was supposed to respond makora when someone asked me how I was. After twenty minutes of constant bouncing, we arrived at Kabwanda. All I could see as I got out of the car was a small rectangular building. There was a circle of women singing and dancing as our car pulled next to the building. The women in the hospital team jumped out and joined them. They sang a
song that I recognized from the day before. The name Carasso jumped out at me; Carasso is one of the organizations that funds SFHC in Ekwendeni. The women walked around in a circle, clapping and singing the Carasso song. I watched for a minute, but was ushered over to a seat. The MAFFA team called the villagers to the porch of the community building, where there were rows of benches. The women and their children filled the rows. There were four men, who took chairs adjacent to them. To my embarrassment, I sat in front of everyone, next to Webster, one of the coordinators of the MAFFA team. To divert attention, I appeared to pay rapt attention to Webster as he introduced the lesson. I could only wave when he introduced me as Tam. I sat for the rest of the lesson as Webster talked about gender and nutrition. Thankfully, another MAFFA member whispered the translations in my ear.

After the group lesson were cooking demonstrations. While Webster talked, several women had been preparing food around the back of the building. There was a lot of food to cook: donuts made of sweet potato, cassava, beans, and soy, soy milk, soup of tomatoes and onions, fried squash blossoms and pumpkin leaves, a stew of meat. I was happily watching the recipes come together, listening to the women singing the Carasso song, when Webster motioned for me to join him to the side. He led me to a room in the building. It was full of the men from the lesson. In the middle of them, Maria stood with a yellow chicken in her arms. “These are the chiefs of the village. They are very grateful to you for visiting them, and they want you to have this chicken,” she told me. She quickly handed the chicken to me. It took me a minute to process that I was being gifted a chicken; for a moment, I could just stare in bewilderment at the bird in my arms. I stumbled out many thanks—in English—and was met with smiles all around the room. The chiefs all shook my hand and told me taonga, thank you. We took pictures with me, the villagers, and the chicken. I was completely overwhelmed. I had not expected a gift. I did nothing in the villages, just watched. If anything, I should have been thanking the chiefs for letting me visit their village. I named the chicken, Wanda, after the village. As soon as I announced and Webster translated, they erupted into laughter. I explained that I was very grateful for the gift, and I was showing my appreciation by naming her. Webster told me that this was the only chicken with a name in all of Malawi. I stroked her, my special Wanda. Thankfully, Webster and Maria had planned what to do with Wanda. I was anxious about taking her back to the guesthouse. There were chickens around, but I didn’t know the protocol. Was it okay to ask someone to care for your chicken? Webster solved my dilemma and took Wanda back to his house. He gave me updates on her. A few weeks after, he told me that she had started to lay eggs and I felt irrationally proud. My friends asked about her, and it amused the hospital staff to hear me ask about Wanda. It became a running joke. I had Webster promise to keep her until she could no longer lay eggs, but it didn’t stop him from teasing me about eating her. Wanda went to the car while we
finished the recipe day. She seemed undeterred by the floor and sat quietly. I asked anxiously about cracking a window for her, but no one seemed particularly concerned. I still checked on her regularly, just to be sure. By then, it was nearly four and the food was almost finished. After all of the demonstrations and workshops had concluded, our team piled back into the cars and made our way along the bumpy mountain road. They dropped me off at my guest house and I said my farewells to Wanda.

This day is important for me because it was the beginning of my exposure to many elements of Malawian culture. Though it was only my first week in country, I could even find changes in my attitude towards animals and meat. In the United States, I had experimented several times with veganism. It is a diet that I mostly adopted each semester while I cooked for myself, for reasons of health, convenience, and cost. I had always been more persuaded by the arguments of nutrition and health than arguments about the ethics of eating animals. But in the US, the animal aspect of my meat was never something I had to directly confront. I have never been to the Midwest and seen the meat farms for myself. I have not spent time in a butcher shop. The meat in the US is sold in neat, white packages. The animal aspect is completely removed. In Malawi, animals were everywhere. As soon as I stepped outside my guest house in the morning, I saw chickens. Chickens were everywhere: along the roads, in yards, in the markets. A similar story for goats, which made their way through trading centers and cities easily. Cows were regularly ushered by the roads. In the markets, sides of beef and goat hung from windows. There were no concerns about cutting into a side of beef. Malawians also did not treat animals the way I did in the United States. Having a pet dog that has a name and lives inside a house was unheard of. I would tell people about my dog and they would laugh at me, a typical American. Many people were shocked that I had pictures of my two dogs on my phone, but none of my siblings. Animals were not given sentimental value. They were treated practically. No one I met in Malawi would even consider putting the life of an animal above a person’s. This practical attitude made it easier for me to see meat being consumed.

NOELLE

Making Connections

Joining the workforce the summer before my senior year of high school prompted yet more questions and lines of thought. I worked in a shoe store in the outlet mall in my town. I often thought about how the shoes had been made, where they had been made, and who made them. My coworkers and manager did not seem to know or care at all. They seemed most interested in the politics of the workplace, it was a small staff and plenty of gossip circulated. I think that this is true for many workplaces where the employees
do not have an emotional stake in the nature of the work, but view it as their means of survival rather than mission in life. After experiencing this, I realized that I wanted something different for myself, and knew that I was lucky to have the opportunity to come to Cornell and learn whatever I wanted. I knew that I wanted to feel that I was contributing to an overall mission, when there are so many things that could be done to improve communities. This is appealing not just because community-oriented work is some kind of noble occupation, but because if I feel truly motivated and fulfilled by it, be it food systems work or some other type of work focused on improving community well-being.

This was part of the motivation to work on the student farm two summers ago. I wanted to know what it meant to grow food, what it felt like to distribute the literal fruits of my labor to people and know that it was feeding them well. I had just finished my first year of sociology and plant-science courses, thinking that plant sciences was a great way to fulfill the biology requirements that I had to do anyway.

As a Dilmun Hill manager, I learned just how much labor it takes to grow even a small amount of food, and how much land is needed. Learning these basic aspects gave me an appreciation for the production of so many other things that we consume every day. My experience was nothing like that of so many farmworkers. I was able to essentially set my own hours, and take as much time as I wanted to learn how to practice growing food in the
most sustainable way. Obviously there were some time pressures, but the structure was designed to be about learning, and the structure of the CSA model every week provided a needed framework. Our method of growing was highly inefficient and not a realistically feasible method for the future of agriculture, due to use of hand tools and labor intensive practices; however that statement is part of what thinking about the food system is all about. Having this baseline of food production experience allows comparison to conventional methods, and grounded my reading and classes in something.

I came to be involved in my practicum experience in an interesting way. I ended up working for Professor Mazourek’s plant breeding lab due to a connection with him through an independent study. He is a sponsor of Dilmun Hill, and as a student manager I was a liaison between Mazourek and the farm. He was leasing some land for the farm to use, so that we could experiment with growing on a wholesale scale. A condition of the lease was that I would, as Wholesale Production Manager, participate in the establishment of a potential class based on small-scale organic agriculture hands-on experience, open to students interested in pursuing something like this. It became a fall semester informal class, where we would meet once a week, and harvest whatever was ready. As we would harvest, we would discuss that particular crop and implications for growing it. For example, we discussed potential diseases, pests, and sensitivities to heat and cold. We would also discuss a potential framework for a new class that would incorporate growing and ideally, cooking with the vegetables grown by the students.

My initial work with Dilmun Hill is what I would describe as what solidified the desire to work in food systems moving forward. It developed that curiosity into an interest that I continue to pursue years later, and I credit the Community Food Systems minor with helping to push me further through my journey of food systems work thus far.

My practicum was as part of the field crew for Professor Mazourek, and it was exciting to move into a research capacity rather than general production. For the first time I learned about the actual process of plant breeding, the intense volume at which growing happens, and the experience of working the land with two different main purposes, resources, and workplace structure provided an ideal way to forward my own thinking about food systems work.

Looking ahead, thinking about the type of breeding that we were doing that summer is exciting because it feels like the forward boundary of innovation in that field. Understanding the way that plant breeding is done with culinary goals in mind is invaluable, and left me with a deeper appreciation for the relationship between the earth and the creative things that people do with its fruits.

My story is an expanded version of a reflection journal entry from 2017, so it is quite “raw” in some ways and I hope it shows how participating in this program broadened the way that I think about the world through food.
AFTERWORD

We are honored to be the first cohort of students in the Community Food Systems Minor with the funding and support to compile our collection of stories. This compilation voices more than the details of each of our summer practicum experiences. These moments have influenced how we define ourselves individually as young adults, what we choose to fight for and represent, and where we are headed toward in the future.

These experiences and the creation of this book had their challenges and limitations. It is in these areas of difficulty that we were able to learn and grow far more than any easy work would have allowed us. That being said, initiating this project for the first time has left us with some moments of frustration and uncertainty as to where to begin and what direction to head with no existing example for us to build our own project from.

Time came to be the largest limitation throughout our experiences. The practicums our cohort engaged in lasted merely ten weeks. This was not an adequate amount of time to fully integrate ourselves into the communities we were working in or understand the capacity of the organizations we were coordinating with. In many cases, projects working with communities take years to undergo simply due to the true period of time needed to become a part of the area you’re engaging with. However, we recognize that these constraints were unavoidable and commonly experienced by professionals engaged in these kinds of projects.

Working with communities is an intense process. The people who are dedicated to community development are often those who have either grown up or worked in these areas for extended periods of time. They are devoted, passionate individuals who hold their work very close to their hearts. For some, working with people and organizations with these sentiments was inspirational and enhanced the practicum experience. For others,
this intensity was intimidating and took time to adjust to. Additionally, some of the areas of the food system that our cohort worked in were sensitive subjects that were difficult to cope with.

Ultimately, this is a book about community engagement, and we are incredibly grateful for this opportunity to “memorialize” our experiences with financial support from Engaged Cornell. Through this minor and practicum, we were fortunate enough to apply what we have learned in the classroom and collaborate with stakeholders beyond the Cornell community. Part of being a Cornellian is to give back and generate real, meaningful social impacts around the world. This program made us think critically about the humility and responsibility that comes with service and engagement, and we strongly believe that future generations of not only this minor, but the student community at Cornell will be able to dive into opportunities like this.

This minor has taught each of us different things about the world and ourselves. Something that it has undeniably shown us all, however, is the incredible power that community and human connection holds in creating life-long relationships and impactful change for the betterment of this world. The experiences we have had the honor of engaging in through this minor are ones that will stick with us forever as we each move forward in this complex world.

Who are the actors who have planted, nurtured, harvested, packaged, transported, and ultimately handed your food to you? Why do you choose the foods you eat? We hope that our narratives have inspired you to answer these questions within your own community, and that in doing so you may one day write your own stories about the powerful people, places, and food with which you interact.
For a description of Cornell’s Community Food Systems minor, visit http://communityfoodsystems.cals.cornell.edu