

Exploring Karen Experiences of Urban Agriculture in Ottawa: The
Importance of Place-Making, Agriculture and Cultural Identity

by

Meaghan Kenny

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ABSTRACT

Situated within the field of political ecology broadly, theorizing about social nature more specifically, and drawing on qualitative methods including PhotoVoice, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, this thesis is an extended case study exploring the complex issues and processes pertaining to urban agriculture as practiced by Karen refugees in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. The Karen – many of whom are skilled farmers – first came to Canada (from the Thai/Burmese border) under refugee status in 2006, after enduring decades of persecution and ongoing acts of ethnic cleansing. More specifically, this paper will address the following question: What socio-cultural, economic, political and ecological benefits do practices of urban agriculture foster amongst Karen refugees in Ottawa? The results describe the transformative power of people-place relationships and highlight the need for more inclusive, just and democratic land-use management policies that are cognizant of the diverse skills and (in some cases) agrarian roots of immigrant sub-populations.

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The time, resources, support, and encouragement offered by everyone involved in K’Nyaw Si is exemplar of the ways a farm can provide fertile ground for building bridges, sharing knowledge, and cultivating relationships between people and place.

**EXPLORING KAREN EXPERIENCES OF URBAN AGRICULTURE IN
OTTAWA: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE-MAKING, AGRICULTURE AND
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CHAPTER ONE: SUBSTANTIVE CONTEXT

Section 1.1: Introduction

Ottawa is currently home to approximately 300 resettled Karen refugees from the Thai-Burma border camps. The Karen are a distinct ethnic group, part of a larger linguistic group called the Karenni. The Karen have suffered persecution and human rights atrocities at the hands of the Burmese military government (also known as the Tatmadaw or the Burmese Junta). The Karen people are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Burma. The Karen have been persecuted by the Junta for decades, along with many other ethnic minority groups in Burma. The reasons for their persecution are layered. Since the early 1960's, the Junta has set policies to wipe out any ethnic opposition groups that are struggling to assert their own identities and cultures. The Karen people have suffered atrocious human rights violations and have lived in fear for decades at the hands of the Junta. Over the last two decades, there has been an increasing outflow of refugees and migrants, including men, women and children, to both neighbouring and third countries (Smith, 2002).

Currently, there are nine refugee camps in Thailand on the Burmese border. The Karen comprise the majority of the ethnic minorities living in the Thai camps. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Royal Thai Government commenced a large-scale resettlement of Burmese refugees in 2006. The UNHCR identified the 13,000 individuals in need of priority resettlement. Priority resettlement is reserved for those who have suffered "severe persecution, including torture, imprisonment, forced labour, the burning of villages and forced relocation in their homeland" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2006). Resettlement is

identified as an instrument of international protection as it guarantees the legal and physical protection of refugees, thus preserving their human rights. Refugee camps can restrict mobility, enforce idleness, and perpetuate dependency on humanitarian assistance – placing the lives of many on indefinite hold (ibid).

A group of the Karen arrived in Ottawa after the Canadian government announced in 2006 that they would begin the resettlement of 3,000 Karen refugees. The number of Karen refugees to be resettled has increased to 3,900 since 2006 (CIC, 2006). After decades of living in refugee camps, the first 806 Karen people arrived in Canada from the Mae La Oon camp in Thailand, and were sent to different cities including Ottawa, Toronto, and Hamilton.

Important questions arise with regards to integration and refugee resettlement, for example: What happens to individuals and families after migration and resettlement – where do they live, how do they live, and what challenges do they face? More specifically, how are these challenges varied depending on the host country, the country of origin, and the reasons for migration? In the case of the Karen farmers, how does a large group of people with primarily rural, agrarian roots, having lived in refugee camps and the jungle for over a decade, settle into a developed, urban area? What aspects of cultural identity and home can be transferred and re-worked, to ensure a degree of cultural continuity?

This research will provide an ethnographic case study of the resettled Karen people of Burma in Ottawa. It will highlight the cultural, material, and practical aspects of identity that the Karen have sought to retain and rework, specifically focusing on their agrarian roots. Access to the Karen community in Ottawa was secured through

partnership with key community organizations, such as the Karen Learning, Education and Opportunities (KLEO) Support Group.

The Karen have relied on farming for their subsistence and livelihood, even as they moved from their villages to the refugee camps. Coleen Scott, director of KLEO, has worked with the Karen in Ottawa, Burma, and Thailand for the last 8 years. She is considered a respected insider and is called Pi (grandmother) by the Karen in Ottawa. According to Scott, “to be Karen is to farm.” However, for the most part, these cultural assets and aspects of their identity lie dormant in Ottawa, as the Karen have had no outlet to express their extensive agrarian knowledge, skills and culture.

This research involves an extended case study of the lived experiences of Karen refugees in Ottawa, Ontario as they seek access to land to grow food and practice aspects of their cultural identity. Within the field of human geography broadly, and political ecology more specifically, I have found a rich theoretical framework and corresponding qualitative methodologies that have enabled a critical exploration of the complex issues and processes pertaining to alternative food systems such as urban agriculture. This research seeks primarily to address the following question: *What socio-cultural, economic, political and ecological benefits does the practice of urban agriculture foster amongst the Karen people in Ottawa?* More specific sub-questions include:

- 1) *How and why do the Karen participate in urban agriculture?*
- 2) *How do the Karen discursively construct nature and how might these various constructions inform new policies for socially just and ecologically sustainable urban food systems?*
- 3) *How are the experiences of the Karen in Ottawa shaped and influenced by urban agriculture?*

- 4) *What role(s) does urban agriculture play in promoting food justice for the Karen population in Ottawa?*
- 5) *How does creating a sense of place, urban agriculture and cultural identity relate?*

This research is important for a myriad of reasons. First, in North America, there are more people living in urban areas today than in rural areas. Furthermore, rural populations are decreasing as people move out of rural communities into urban and suburban areas. The increased movement of people is producing a global phenomenon of urbanization and “cities in both hemispheres are often considered distinct sites of heightened social, political and economic diversity, conflict and transformation” (Bedore, 2010). Plus, changing population dynamics are increasingly influencing patterns of urban agriculture in Ottawa.

Population dynamics in Ottawa have changed significantly over the last 40 years. In the 1960’s, the federal government of Canada changed immigration laws and policies in an effort to eliminate racial discrimination. In 1971, for the first time in Canadian history, the majority of those immigrating to Canada were of non-European ancestry and this has been the case every year since the change in laws (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2011). As a result, Canadian cities are increasingly becoming places shaped and informed by multiple worldviews and diverse cultural perspectives. A singular or dualistic approach to policy does not adequately represent the multiplicity of voices in Canadian cities such as Ottawa. There is a need for a more representative and inclusive approach to decision making in Ottawa, especially around urban and peri-urban land use.

A multiplicity of cultures has increasingly been noted in the urban food landscape. In preliminary research conducted during my 4th year honours thesis (2009), participants in Ottawa urban agricultural projects specifically noted the significant changing population dynamics in community and allotment gardens. Urban agriculture should be encouraged for newly immigrated people in order to achieve a number of social and economic benefits (Graham & Connell, 2006; Hoffman et al., 2007; Kurtz, 2001; Saldivar-Tanaka & Krasny, 2004; Schmelzkopf, 1995; Wakefield, 2011; Warner & Hansi, 1987).

As an adaptive strategy to migration, people seek out ways to retain, rework and express their cultural identities as they move (either by choice, or by force of circumstance) to new countries and cities. Urban agriculture provides an arena for citizens to perform aspects of their cultural identity by growing foods that may be unavailable in urban markets, by engaging in agricultural practices that have been passed on through generations, by networking with others that share common cultural identities, and by experiencing nature connectedness (amongst other anticipated benefits) (Head et al., 2004; Kimber, 2004; Klindienst, 2006; Wakefield, 2011).

There is a growing body of scholarly literature focused on agriculture in the Global South. Koc et al. (2005) published “Agropolis” a report promoting the importance of urban agriculture in the Global South countries and highlighting case studies such as: urban livestock adoption in Khogoro, Cote d’Ivoire (Barry, 2005); the gender dimensions of urban open-space cultivation in Harare, Zimbabwe (Gabel, 2005); urban agriculture and local sustainable development in Rosario, Argentina (Spiaggi, 2005); amongst others. Cuba’s agricultural innovation system is a lead example of the transformative power of

urban agriculture (Leitgeb et al., 2011; Febles-González 2011). Urban agriculture in the Global South has been linked to concepts such as food security (Crush et al., 2011), feminist political ecology (Hovorka, 2006), and food sovereignty – born out of the *Via Campesina* peasant movement (Rosset 2008; Patel, 2009; Torrez, 2011). The Global South and Global North contexts differ; however, there are shared concepts, values and experiences between contexts.

Scholarly literature on urban agriculture in large North American cities encompasses a number of topics including (but not limited too): food security issues of marginalized communities, urban sustainability (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000; Alaimo et al., 2008; Wakefield, 2007), citizenship and democracy (Glover, 2004, 2005), local food (Blay-Palmer, 2010) and cultural heritage (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004) especially in large cities such as Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, New York, and Toronto (to name a few). In Detroit, urban agriculture has been used to combat urban blight, overcome poverty and food insecurity, and promote education on nutrition (Pothukuchi, 2004; Colasanti et al., 2012). However, there is much less literature focused on mid-sized Canadian cities such as Ottawa, Ontario. Ottawa provides an ideal site for an exploration, and extended case study, on access to land for growing food.

Currently, there is a paucity of data on urban food production in Ottawa, much less exploring that topic through a very specific cultural lens, making it an ideal research site. There is a growing, dynamic population of urban growers, operating in a multitude of capacities throughout Ottawa (and at its peri-urban edge), and a number of local food networks that are working to establish innovative projects throughout the city.

Finally, Ottawa has great potential to establish a large urban agricultural community and network due to the amount of green space in the city (most notably, the National Capital Commission's Greenbelt that consists of approximately 20,000 hectares of forest, farmland, and open greenspace). In fact, due to amalgamation, Ottawa covers the largest area of any Canadian city, and the most agricultural land contained within its formal boundary. This research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on urban agriculture in North America by exploring the motivations of the resettled Karen refugee population, in Ottawa, across a range of urban agricultural contexts in Ottawa, Ontario.

The following sections will elaborate on the context of the case study, including: a descriptive site review of Ottawa, Ontario; and a literature review of urban agriculture, food justice, place and the Karen. This substantive context will set the stage for the case study and highlight the specific gaps in the literature that this research seeks to fill.

Chapter 2 will lay down the theoretical foundation. This research is grounded in theories of political ecology, social nature, place, culture and identity – all core concepts within the discipline of human geography. These theories will be woven throughout the methodology and analysis, as it evolves. The theoretical foundation informs the methodological approach which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 will elaborate on methodologies used to build upon the theoretical foundation and the methods used to apply them. More specifically, this chapter will detail an extended case study approach, participatory action research, visual methodologies, and the concept of praxis – application of theory. Chapter 3 will also delineate the corresponding methods, including: informal and formal meetings,

workshops, focus groups, and interviews; participation in gardening and farming; and PhotoVoice. Furthermore, Chapter 3 will allow for an examination of ethical tensions that arose throughout the research process.

Chapter 4 will provide a detailed narrative of the extended case study, including an examination of the Karen peoples' political struggle to assert their rights as an autonomous group; some of the main challenges associated with immigrating to Canada (especially under refugee status) and how these apply to the Karen people; and the farm project that was lost and found again. Themes of place, culture, and identity will act as categories of analysis throughout this chapter. The focus of this chapter is to highlight the different ways that agriculture contributes to the creation of a sense of place and how this might influence the acculturation process for the Karen. The benefits and barriers to practicing urban agriculture in relation to place-making are explored through PhotoVoice results – producing a narrative that is not only rich and thought provoking, but also grounded in theory. The analysis woven throughout the narrative reveals an unexpected theme of emotion – a theme that is at the forefront of contemporary social geographical research.

Chapter 5 will provide an analysis of political ecology, social nature and cultural identity. This analysis will specifically look at nature discourses used by the City of Ottawa and the National Capital Commission in the construction of Ottawa's Greenbelt and how the responses from the Karen might contribute to a more inclusive and dynamic construction of nature and greenspace uses.

Chapter 6 will conclude with a discussion of the key findings and revisit the methodological constraints experienced during the research process. Furthermore, there

are prescriptive policy recommendations regarding land-use management in the Nation's Capital. The final section will identify future lines of inquiry that were presented in the research process but were not addressed due to the parameters of this specific project.

Section 1.2: Site Analysis

This section will provide a more detailed context of Ottawa and why it provides an ideal research site. Approximately 300 of the Karen refugees were resettled in Ottawa. Since their resettlement in Ottawa, many of the Karen have been seeking a place they where they can not only grow food, but also escape from the urban environment. Ottawa is an ideal and unique city to conduct this research because of the changing population demographics and the abundance of greenspace – specifically a key green feature, the Greenbelt – in close proximity to Ottawa's urban core and satellite cities. The proximity of the Greenbelt to the city means that it is accessible by way of the transit system and cycling. This is significant for the Karen, other resettled refugees, and individuals living in low-income households who may not have access to a personal vehicle.

In the year 2000, Ottawa was forced to enter into agreements with 11 surrounding municipalities to create the amalgamated city of Ottawa. The amalgamation meant that Ottawa became one of the most expansive cities in the country, covering 2,790.22 square kilometres. However, while Ottawa may be the largest city in terms of square kilometres, its population is still small in comparison to other major Canadian cities such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Ottawa has a population of 883,391 and a population density of 316 people per square kilometre. This is, in part, due to the outward growth of housing developments and the incorporation of rural townships into the amalgamated city of

Ottawa. Ottawa benefits from an abundance of green space including: parks, rivers, and woodlands. This ready access to nature contributes to a high quality of life for residents. In the 1950's, the city's green space became the defining element of Ottawa when the National Capital Commission (a crown corporation) bounded the urban area with a 20,000 ha Greenbelt (SENES, 2010).

The Greenbelt, managed by the National Capital Commission (NCC), has been a source of pride and unity for Ottawa residents. Originally conceived by architect and planner Jacques Greber as a means to not only contain and mould the expanding urban capital, but also reserve land for future public and private institutions. Much of the land that comprises the Greenbelt was privately owned farmland before it was forcibly expropriated under the Ontario Expropriations Act, approximately 50 years ago.¹ Many farmers took the fight to keep their lands to court (*Munro v. National Capital Commission*, 1966). Unfortunately, their fight proved futile and the NCC set the expropriation price of the farms. For example, some farms of 200 acres or more were bought for only \$200,000. Farmers were permitted to stay on the land; however, it was leased back to them. Many farmers abandoned their centuries-old farms and relocated further outside the city limits – effectively increasing the distance between agriculture and the city.

By 1966, the Greenbelt land purchases were complete. At this time, an increasing population was accommodated by the outward expansion of housing and commercial

¹ My familiarity and understanding of the forced expropriations are informed and influenced by my family connections. A farm belonging to my grandparents and great grandparents was expropriated in the 1960's. However, my grandparents stayed on the farm, leasing it back from the NCC. I grew up playing and working on this farm until my grandparents passed on. The farm is now leased by a neighboring family and is still functioning – although, the buildings are in great disrepair.

developments. In effect, the Greenbelt did not contain growth, and “leapfrog” development took place as early as the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Satellite cities such as Kanata, Nepean and Orleans leapfrogged the Greenbelt (Amati and Taylor, 2010). In the years that followed, parcels of expropriated farmland in the Greenbelt were declared surplus (Woodburn Estate v. National Capital Commission, 2001; Amati and Taylor, 2010). When the original farmers (specifically, the Woodburn family) tried to purchase the surplus land back from the NCC, they were denied the opportunity. Furthermore, the NCC sold portions of the land for upwards of \$7 million dollars (Woodburn Estate v. National Capital Commission, 2001). Farmers discovered that the price for their land far exceeded the original, imposed expropriation price – further prohibiting them from buying back their land. The rural land was re-zoned for commercial purposes and leased to large-scale corporations (such as big box retail outlets and gas stations) who could afford the leasing cost and sold to housing and road developers. Ironically, some of the land that was expropriated as a means to create a buffer against urban sprawl now accommodates it (Gordon & Scott, 2008).

Today, approximately one-third of NCC-owned land is leased to tenants for farming, municipal recreation facilities and federal institutions such as Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) and Bell Northern Research (CEDRO). The NCC has changed their approach to Greenbelt management in the last two decades to accommodate an increasing population, to meet demands of affordable housing, and to provide service corridors in a larger metropolitan context (Amati and Taylor, 2010; Gordon and Scott, 2008). A strong state intervention has ensured the implementation and

retention of the greenbelt against urban sprawl. However, today, the aims of the NCC are much more layered, as Amati and Taylor (2010) elaborate:

The aims of land management are drawn from a number of objectives, which may be more important than merely urban containment. The conservation of near-urban (model) agricultural land and natural heritage in the emerging discourse over sustainability are very important. Finally, attention to public perception and the ongoing marketing of the greenbelt concept keep the dialogue alive about what the greenbelt means to people and how it serves their values and interests (p. 149).

The Greenbelt was originally seen as a physical separation between urban and rural land uses, people and functions. Today, the Greenbelt is a connecting feature between the urban core, satellite cities and peri-urban areas of Ottawa. The NCC's aim is to preserve the rural cultural heritage, conserve ecologically sensitive zones, and create recreational space that is accessible for Ottawa residents.

In the 1990's, the NCC conducted the first Greenbelt assessment since its completion. Federal lands are purportedly to be reserved for parks and pathways, land preservation, and essential greenspaces/corridors for flora and fauna. The Greenbelt still contains functioning farms. However, the farming population is aging and many farm buildings within the Greenbelt are degrading beyond repair (Caldwell and Temple, 2009). Furthermore, the agricultural lands in the Greenbelt that are actively being farmed are located outside the urban limits – further distancing food production from the city core. In order to maintain a vibrant rural cultural heritage within the Greenbelt, it is necessary to breathe new life into the local farm and food system.

The NCC recently began reviewing their 1996 Greenbelt Master Plan. The review process included a series of public and stakeholder consultations. The review

process included researching and evaluating existing conditions in the Greenbelt, and developing a 50-year vision and plan for future land-use management (SENES, 2010). The review included an independent, in-depth research project focusing specifically on the agricultural sector and “identifying actions that would encourage the appropriate evolution of agriculture in Canada’s Capital Greenbelt” (Caldwell and Temple, 2009 p. i). The Greenbelt is unique due to its proximity to urban settlements and holds the potential to showcase rural Canada within the Capital region (Ibid).

Canadian farmers continue to struggle with the current trends and challenges associated with conventional agriculture. These trends include globalization broadly, and the resulting effects of the cost-price squeeze, urbanization, changing rural demographics and environmental change more specifically (ibid). Ottawa Greenbelt farmers are not immune to these trends and often face increased pressures due to their proximity to urban developments.

Globalization of the agricultural sector has made it difficult for small- and medium-sized farms to compete with large-scale farms (Caldwell and Temple, 2009). In fact, the price of food is not increasing at the same rate as operating costs. Operating costs for conventional farm production have increased significantly with the price of fuel and oil-based inputs (notably, fertilizer and pesticides). Farmers are being forced to become more efficient and use modes of production that are ecologically unsustainable in the long term. Increasing petrochemical-based inputs, and relying on monoculture crops degrades soil, reduces biodiversity and decreases agricultural resilience (Weis, 2007; IAASTD, 2008; Holt-Gimenez and Kenfield, 2008; Busch, 2009). Larger farms have

more potential to earn profits sufficient to cover their expenses. However, Ottawa has a greater number of small- and medium-sized farms than the rest of Ontario. According to Caldwell and Temple, Greenbelt farmers specifically felt the effects of the cost-price squeeze. As a coping strategy, many Greenbelt farmers have off-farm jobs to cover their expenses and ensure an adequate income (ibid).

Urbanization is especially significant for Greenbelt farmers. Greenbelt farmers rent rather than own their land; therefore, they are unable to sell their land. The NCC stewards, manages, and conserves the Greenbelt land. An increasing population and urbanization “still threatens farmland due to development pressure from neighbouring cities, and it is the role of the National Capital Commission rather than the farmers themselves to make decisions around farmland preservation” (ibid p. 17). These developments can result in significant fragmentation of Greenbelt land, including prime farmland – and ultimately, this loss of land is permanent (ibid). In this regard, Ottawa region farmland is being lost at a rapid rate. The Ottawa region lost 10.7% of its farmland and experienced a 24% decrease in the number of farms since the 1980’s (ibid).

Changing rural demographics in the Greenbelt and Ottawa region could result in a loss of farms and farmland. The average age of farmers in the Ottawa region is 54.7, and the number of farmers under the age of 35 continues to decrease (ibid). Ottawa may lose its characteristic rural and agricultural sector without a renewed interest in farming (and the necessary financial, political, and operational supports for new farmers).

Alternative farming is a trend that has gained ground in response to the negative trends affecting farms and farmland in Canada. Examples of alternative agriculture

include: organic agriculture, permaculture, biodynamic agriculture, urban agriculture, community shared agriculture, and sustainable agriculture. Alternative farming represents a positive trend with the potential to diversify the agricultural sector and overcome, if not change, the negative trends associated with conventional and industrial agriculture. Organizations, individuals, and different levels of government have taken initiatives to address concerns associated with industrial agriculture such as: democracy, human rights, socio-ecological health, genetic engineering, food sovereignty, food security, and justice. Ottawa has a strong network of organizations and individuals that practice and support alternative agriculture, including (but not limited to): the Canadian Organic Growers (COG) Ottawa Chapter, Just Food Ottawa, Hidden Harvest, and Permaculture Ottawa. Many of these organizations work to support small- and medium-sized farms, to advance more sustainable agricultural practices, to connect producers with consumers, and to promote local food production and consumption.

There is great potential in Ottawa's Greenbelt to reduce the risks facing farmers and to incorporate more alternative farming practices. For example, Just Food Ottawa has been working diligently to build a partnership with the NCC in order to establish their headquarters, incubator farm, and demonstration farm on agriculturally zoned Greenbelt land. Just Food Ottawa fosters sustainable, local and just food systems in the Ottawa foodshed (Ballamingie & Walker, 2013). The organization serves as an umbrella for various activities, including coordination of a number of local food-related programs such as Savour Ottawa, and the Ottawa Community Garden Network.

Just Food Ottawa is of particular interest for the purpose of this project, as they are seeking to develop partnerships with community organizations for their sustainable and local food hub program. The research goals for the Karen farm project align with those of Just Food's mandate and the goals of the local food hub (shown in Figure 1.1). Of particular interest is the emphasis on marginalized populations in Ottawa.

Ballamingie and Walker (2013) describe the details of Just Food's proposal for a local food hub located on agriculturally-zoned Greenbelt land with the following:

The food hub project is intended to demonstrate best practices in sustainable, economically-viable, and locally-adapted agriculture. Just Food envisions the site as a place where people can learn to grow food sustainably on many different scales, from household production, to market gardening and commercially-viable farming... The target population includes urban and/or rural youth who did not grow up on a farm, second generation farmers, second careerists (a strategic objective, given demographic trends), and new Canadians (in particular, those with a farming background but who need mentorship to grow in a Canadian climate) (p. 532).

Establishing a partnership between the KLEO and Just Food's local food hub project has the potential to: 1) highlight the benefits of urban agriculture, specifically for resettled refugees such as the Karen; 2) gain access to farm land for the Karen on a scale that is appropriate for the type of farming they practice, and; 3) propose more inclusive land management policies – specifically to include the voices of a more diverse range of food producers and consumers in the Ottawa area. A formal proposal (written by myself with review and approval from KLEO) was submitted to Just Food Ottawa in order to develop a community partnership and gain access to a plot of land for the Karen to farm.

- To enhance ongoing access to healthful food, for everyone in the Ottawa region.
- To increase access to locally, ethically, ecologically grown, harvested, raised, and processed food for all
- To support the localization of the food system in partnership with existing and new food providers, producers, processors, etc.
- To nourish partnerships between and amongst individuals, community organizations and others across the food system. In particular, we work to serve the interests of:
 - Eaters, with an emphasis on people marginalized by poverty and/or other factors* and;
 - Rural and urban food providers.
- To develop, link, promote and support local food and food-related initiatives (including health, agriculture, environmental sustainability, social justice, youth, climate change, and biodiversity initiatives, amongst others) in the Ottawa region.
- To act as a community food hub, actively engaging individuals and communities in working and creating a space where people can build knowledge and skills related to food.
- To engage the broader community and decision-makers in food issues, in order to promote linkages between all partners in the food chain, from field to table.
- To produce public information and educational materials on food issues.

Figure 1.1: Just Food’s mandate (Just Food Ottawa 2010-2013).

Section 1.3: Delineation of Key Terms

The research question and sub-questions seek to address issues related to urban agriculture, food security/insecurity and food justice, and place, place-making and identity. This section will explore and delineate these key terms, since they will act as analytical categories throughout the thesis.

Urban Agriculture

As mentioned earlier, this action research project focuses on (and instigates) an urban agriculture project in partnership with Just Food Ottawa and KLEO. This alternative agriculture practice has been chosen because it takes place in an urban system where there is easy access to public transit, community support and services, and other producers and consumers. This section will provide a definition of urban agriculture, and briefly discuss the corresponding benefits and limitations highlighted in the literature.

There is a growing body of scholarly literature that deals explicitly with urban agriculture (UA). UA can be defined simply as “the growing of plants and the raising of animals within and around cities” (Van Veenhuizen, 2006), or it can be defined more broadly to encompass its numerous aspects. The definition will vary slightly depending on the particular geographic context in which urban agriculture is taking place (e.g. the Global North or Global South). Most comprehensive definitions describe UA as the growing, processing, and distributing of food and non-food plant and tree crops, as well as the raising of livestock, for household consumption or for the urban market, both within and on the fringe of an urban area (Van Veenhuizen, 2006; Mougeot, 2000). UA draws upon resources, services, and products found in, and in close proximity to, the urban area, and in turn, has the potential to generate resources (such as green space, microclimates, and compost), services (such as catering, recreation, and therapy), and products (such as flowers, fresh produce, poultry, dairy, and honey) largely for this urban area (Mougeot. 2000).

Furthermore, UA is practiced in the unique ecology and economy of cities, making it very distinct from rural agricultural systems. The practice of UA involves a

complex set of interactions between and amongst elements within a given urban environment (and its unique population). For example, producers in the urban food system enjoy more direct links with urban consumers (due to proximity) (Van Veenhuizen 2006).

There are various forms and scales of UA depending on differing urban contexts. Based on literature and preliminary research, immigrant groups seem to participate in the following forms of UA: community gardens, allotment gardens, lawn/yard gardens, small plot intensive gardens, and urban gleaning. The following paragraphs will provide a brief description of these forms of UA.

Perhaps the most common and widely known forms of UA include community and allotment gardens. The Community Garden Network (CGN) of Ottawa (2010) defines a community garden as:

[...] a collection of garden plots in an urban, suburban or rural setting, which provides residents with access to land for gardening. Community gardens beautify previously barren or unused land. Run by members of the community, they are a place where neighbours can meet and work together to care for the garden while growing fruits, vegetables, flowers, and herbs (p. 3).

Furthermore, a community garden can be thought of as an inclusive public space and can act as a place where bridges can be formed inter-generationally, cross-culturally, economically and between the social and natural realms.

In contrast, allotment gardens focus less on fostering a sense of community and are usually City-sponsored projects. In a stricter sense, allotment and community gardens can be differentiated as follows: an allotment garden is a collection of plots which are cultivated individually in contrast to a community garden which is intended as a single

piece of land cultivated by a collective. However, the current trend is for community gardens to be divided into individual plots, much in the same way as allotment gardens. Often, a community garden will retain a food plot that is for communal use or for charity. An allotment garden is not necessarily the project of a collective, but rather a parcel of land sectioned into pieces to registered members; however, in fairness, this does not preclude a sense of community amongst its members. The distinction between allotment and community gardens remains nebulous at best. It is estimated that there are approximately 18,000 community gardens in the United States and Canada (American Community Gardening Association, n.d.). According to Kortright and Wakefield (2010), Toronto has over 125 community gardens and 13 City-run allotment gardens. Ottawa has 31 community gardens and 2 City-run allotment gardens. In fact, both Toronto and Ottawa have waiting lists for their community gardens – demonstrating the high demand for access to space for urban agriculture. Ottawa has a lower population density than Toronto, and a relative abundance of green space. Therefore, there is great potential for Ottawa to expand the plots available to the Community Garden Network and other, various forms of urban agriculture.

Many urban gardeners grow household food on private lots. Home food production can occur on a small scale, with a few containers for herbs and tomatoes, or it can be done quite intensively with full-scale food garden oasis in front yards and/or back yards. Kortright and Wakefield (2010) examined how informal household food production contributes to community food security in Toronto. Their data results, based on the motivations of gardeners, identified four types of gardens: the cook's garden, the

teaching garden, the environmental garden and the hobby garden. The most interesting garden for the purpose of this study is the hobby garden:

These gardeners took pleasure in the process of planting and caring for the food plants as well as harvesting... Though their focus was more on the process of growing food and the plants themselves rather than the production of large quantities of food, these gardeners were among the largest producers of food, particularly of vegetables, encountered in the study. They also tended to share food with others, since unlike many other respondents they did not consciously limit what they grew to what the household could consume. For these gardeners, growing food was often also a way to connect to their past and cultural identity (p.45).

It is the sense of fulfillment, and a connection to cultural identity that is valued by the hobby gardeners. Furthermore, all the hobby gardeners identified in this study were born outside Canada, and each grew up farming. As anticipated, the Karen farmers draw a similar sense of fulfillment from growing and sharing food, as well as connecting to their unique heritage and cultural identity.

Similar to household gardening, yardsharing or farm sharing are other forms of urban agriculture. Yardsharing is when a private homeowner, renter or leaser voluntarily shares yard space, either with community groups or individuals, in the front, back or vacant yard of a property. Yard sharing is typically based on local social networks, with arrangements made individually among gardeners and property owners (Blake & Cloutier-Fisher, 2009). Often, an arrangement is made where gardeners are provided space to grow and the owner of the land receives a portion of the produce. Blake & Cloutier-Fisher (2009) illuminate how yard garden sharing projects can produce reciprocity between people and place in at least two ways:

First, the act of establishing a backyard garden creates an opportunity for social connection as the landowner and the gardener come together in a particular location, a yard, with the common goal of sharing garden space and ultimately sharing the food produced within that shared space. (p. 798)

Similarly, farm sharing can take place on a larger scale, on a bigger property, perhaps within or on the urban limits. Yard and farm sharing foster the diffusion and sharing of knowledge, food, and resources, and in so doing, build social capital. Dale (2001, pp 179-180) provides the following comprehensive definition of social capital, incorporating perspectives from various leading authors:

The shared knowledge, understandings, and patterns of interaction that people bring to any productive activity (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1993). It also refers to the organizations, structures, and social relations that people build up independently of the state or large corporations (Roseland 1999). It contributes to stronger community fabric and, often as a by-product of other activities, builds bonds of information, trust, and interpersonal solidarity (Coleman 1990). It also encompasses such features of social organization as networks, norms, and trust – features that increase a society’s productive potential (Putnam 1993).

In preliminary research, I discovered that the resettled Karen had been farming 3 acres of arable land shared with them by Roger Stone of Stittsville. Chapter 2 will elaborate on the farm sharing story. Developing partnerships with Just Food and local farmers increases opportunities for social capital amongst the Karen farmers in Ottawa, and builds upon their previous experiences of farm sharing.

Food grown in the city is not, necessarily, thought of as a common phenomenon. For many, agriculture (like nature) “belongs” outside of city limits. City green spaces are often maintained in an orderly, manicured fashion, largely for aesthetic purposes. The scarce fruit trees found in the city have been bred to produce beautiful, fragrant blossoms but largely unpalatable and inedible fruit. The masses of urbanites that venture outside

the city limits to harvest their own vegetables (e.g., freshly picked asparagus) and pick their own fruit (e.g., apples, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries) highlights the agrarian desire for a deeper and more direct connection to their source of food (Nordahl, 2009). The few urban trees that produce edible fruit or nuts (such as apple, and black walnut) tend to be overlooked because of the common thought that no food in the city can be edible. Furthermore, there are a plethora of edible wild flowers that are often perceived as weeds. However, there are groups of people who glean the urban landscape for food that is overlooked or would normally fall to the ground and rot (or more likely, get scavenged by animals). In the Global North, Edwards & Mercer (2007) describe gleaning as a political statement against the wasteful, consumerist, inequitable food system. I anticipate that most gleaning taking place in Ottawa is not politically motivated but rather multifunctional.

Hidden Harvest, an Ottawa-based organization, teaches about edible landscapes and puts overlooked, local, urban, and edible food (found among fruit and nut trees) to use (Hidden Harvest, 2012). Hidden Harvest registers trees on homeowners and public properties to make them available for harvesting. Furthermore, they sell fruit and nut bearing trees with aims to create the largest urban edible landscape in Eastern Canada. Hidden Harvest is motivated to increase food security, address climate change, and promote a food-tree friendly culture in the city by removing challenges such as harvesting and planting food-bearing trees (Hidden Harvest, 2012). It is likely that gleaning employed by the Karen is done for other valued purposes such as: cultural, recreational, and social. If so, then perhaps Ottawa planners can learn how to implement safe, accessible and healthy ways for urban dwellers to glean the city landscape.

Growing edible and accessible flowers, fruit and nut trees, edible walls (Pendola, 2009), and garden produce throughout urban public spaces is a form of urban agriculture that is gaining momentum, especially with the rising costs of fresh produce. Providing an edible landscape for gleaning can also help reduce food insecurity and promote food justice in the city.

Food: Security, Justice, Sovereignty

The concept of food system is used, in different contexts, to describe the who (recognising that food issues linked to the exertion of power by different actors within the system), how, why, and what in relation to the food we eat (Tansey and Worsley 2008).

Using the term food system implies that there is an interconnection/a network of actors that determines access or lack of access to food today. According to Tansey and Worsley (2008, p. 2) the food system approach links three different aspects of life:

- Biological: the living processes used to produce food and their ecological sustainability.
- Economic and political: the power and control that different groups exert over the different parts of the system.
- Social and cultural: the personal relations, community values and cultural traditions that affect people's use of food.

Food systems locally and globally can offer insight into social and economic influences since they are largely run and controlled by large economic institutions in wealthy and powerful countries (ibid.). In large agribusiness, respect for biological and socio-cultural aspects of food systems is often ignored in favour of the bottom line. As a result, there is growing concern for food security in light of multiple, converging threats (climate change, peak oil, economic uncertainty, loss of biodiversity). Moreover, the current

global food system has a deleterious impact on the ecological, economic and social realms locally, regionally and internationally. Inter-governmental agro-food policy decisions, neoliberalism, and environmental factors have historically and presently contributed to the decline of small farm holders and increased food insecurity for the worlds poor (Holtz-Gimenez, 2009; Westman, 2000). Growing public awareness of and resistance to the industrial agri-food complex has given rise and political convergence towards movements such as agro-ecology, land reform, food justice, and food sovereignty (Holtz-Gimenez, 2009). The purpose of this research is not to address all aspects contributing to food insecurity, but rather to shed light on the role UA plays in addressing issues of food justice.

The definition of food security provided by the Ottawa Food Security Group is probably the most comprehensive and appropriate for the purpose of this study. The Ottawa Food Security Group, in collaboration with the City of Ottawa's People Service Department (2001), defines food security and insecurity as follows:

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs, as well as to culturally acceptable food preferences for an active and healthy life. As well, foods are produced as locally as possible, and their production and distribution are environmentally, politically, socially and economically just (Food Security Group, 2000). People do not have food security when access to food is limited or uncertain because: food is not affordable; income is low; transport is lacking; food distribution is inadequate; or choice is inadequate.

Food sovereignty is a concept and movement born out of resistance to the neoliberal strategies and the global expansion of the capitalist agrifood complex. Food sovereignty is originally a peasant movement defined, in 1996 by the international peasant federation, La Via Campesina, as "people's right to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced

through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (Declaration of Nyéléni, 2007). Food sovereignty is a concept that addresses food insecurity issues by proposing democratic control over food systems – placing decision-making power with the people not the corporate monopolies (Holtz-Gimenez 2009). Furthermore, food sovereignty performs multiple functions including applying agroecological management practices – affectively increasing environmental and economic resiliency (ibid.). Food sovereignty is a concept that is, mostly, associated with the Global South peasant farmers, rural women’s, and indigenous people’s organizations. However, the concept is gaining new ground in the Global North as smallholder farmers, first nations, and urban growers struggle to maintain their land, practices, and values in an industry dominated by large-scale industrial farming. The values of food sovereignty can be applied in both Global South and Global North contexts as people in both hemispheres experience the challenges of food insecurity and inadequate food systems.

There is a plethora of literature on food security in both the Global North and South. However, there are significant gaps in the literature that fail to address the links between the processes and relationships that create food insecurity within different spatial and temporal contexts. The concept of food justice can provide an “explicit critique of the global food system, and a theoretical framing of local initiatives as both the practice of democracy and as a means of de-linking from the corporate global food system” (Wekerle, 2004, p. 379). The food justice frame focuses on the need for systematic changes, engaging political and policy processes, and addressing issues of collective mobilization (Wekerle, 2004; Levkoe, 2006; Bedore, 2010). Furthermore, using a food

justice model can provide a relevant lens to understand the transformative potential of UA. Levkoe (2006) suggests that a food justice model can be used to promote civic awareness around democracy, rights discourse, and transformative individual and collective learning. The food justice model provides a relevant lens through which to examine this research – in order to understand potentially transformative benefits of UA for immigrant sub-communities such as the Karen.

Jarosz (2011) argues that a more ethically informed agricultural food system is required to overcome the destruction of industrial agriculture and challenge “the processes of privatization, unfettered capital accumulation, competition and discourses of personal responsibility for inequality and poverty, which construct individuals as neoliberal subjects” (p. 308). Authors of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge Science, Technology and Development (IAASTD) report argue that in order to meet these goals, it must be understood that increasing agricultural productivity must be done in a way that is *ecologically diverse, sustainable, and combines a variety of knowledges* (McIntyre et al., 2009). To achieve this, the authors emphasize the importance of bringing farmers back into the decision-making process, and taking a complex and holistic approach to development (IAASTD, 2008). This approach requires investment in all areas of the political, social, cultural and institutional lives of farmers and communities (McIntyre et al., 2009). Values included in this model, as necessary for success, include: food security, environmental sustainability, equity, health and nutrition and traditional and local knowledge-based innovation (Ibid). These approaches could be applied on a large scale, addressing the global food system, and/or they could be applied

on a local scale. In Ottawa, there are many farmers that do not get heard; yet they have valuable knowledge to share.

As the nation's capital, Ottawa is particularly concerned with maintaining the values of multiculturalism and the rural heritage. There are many newly arriving and long-established immigrant sub-populations with strong agrarian roots that could contribute to the knowledge sharing, greenspace planning, and food producing required to build local, sustainable, resilient food systems. However, many immigrant sub-populations, especially resettled refugees like the Karen, often remain invisible and voiceless in the conversations needed to create food secure cities. The results from this research project provide a narrative and discussion, combining literature and images that will render visible Ottawa's multi-cultural farmers. Furthermore, I make recommendations to policymakers on how provide a more inclusive approach to greenspace management.

Finally, scholarly literature on the alternative food movement has largely been grounded on the need to challenge unsustainable global food systems, and on the need for more accessible, nutritious, and affordable food for citizens. This has increased the supply and demand for value-added products with certification such as sustainable, organic, and fair-trade. Certification can lead to more personable relationships, and a shorter supply chain. However, as DeLind (2006, p. 123) argues some value-added and niche-market productions such as "organic" are being transformed, with growing popularity, "into a large-scale, long distance, and often monocultural industry." DeLind (2006) further argues that terms such as local, organic and sustainable get pitted against

one another as though they were mutually exclusive and not produced from specific cultural and ecological contexts.

[...]original attention paid to scale and context, to sufficiency and particularity, has largely been overridden as organic products and markets replace flexible sets of ecologically sensitive processes and an associated way of life (p. 123).

Eventually, these agro-ecology values are produced as commodities and they are purchased as people fall into patterns of self-interest. Delind (2006) posits that people become known for their “capacity to act as the receptacles of abstracted and detached values realized as product” (p. 124). In order to create a lasting local, organic food movement that avoids appropriation and reconfiguration by market-based corporate establishments, there needs to be greater balance between economic orientation and more ecological and cultural understandings of people in place (ibid). Currently, local food is defined by food miles and boundaries. Delind calls for a more engaged connection to the places and people local food comes from, opposed to the creation of lifestyles through purchasing and consuming local foods. Building local food systems, such as urban agriculture, within and in close proximity to cities, provides a more accessible opportunity for people to physically engage in the cultural and material aspects of local food places.

Place, Place-Making, and Identity

This section will discuss the concept of place. Place is ubiquitous in the vocabulary and conceptual thinking of human geography. In the early 1990’s, the concepts of people, place and region were identified as the broad concepts comprising human geography

(Kobayashi, 2010). This marked an era in geography moving away from the descriptive, nostalgic, and objective accounts of place towards a more subjective, analytical and political examination of place, identity and processes. Since then, scholars continue to re-evaluate what place means and how it relates to space and identity. Place is a key concept for this research because of its importance to the immigrant experience. This section will describe the concept of place in geography and how it relates to mobility and migration.

Early conceptual writers of place and identity, such as Yi-Fu Tuan, reminded geographers that people live in worlds of meaning rather than geometric spaces (Tuan, 1974, 1977). Tuan's poetic writing withdrew from key geographical concepts such as scale. Instead, he has argued that place is created and maintained through 'fields of care' (1977) that result from people's emotional attachment. Almost 40 years later, the idea of care (and a corresponding ethics of care and responsibility) (Lawson, 2007) is emerging as a contemporary concept and approach in human geography.

Places are comprised of meaning, material and practice. However, these elements that comprise place are not fixed. Places are processes continuously and iteratively being shaped by meaning, material and practice – they are all linked. Creswell (2009) explains:

The sense we get of a place is heavily dependent on practice and, particularly, the reiteration of practice on a regular basis. Space becomes a place when it is used and lived. Experience is at the heart of what place means. (p. 170)

All meanings are open to counter meanings; material can be destroyed, rebuilt and given new meaning; practices and meanings change in different material settings (and vice

versa). Creswell (2009) explains further: “the material topography of place is made by people doing things according to the meanings they might wish a place to evoke” (p. 170). Conceptualizing place in this way is key to understanding the meaning that the Karen might inscribe by practicing farming, and having a physical place to farm. Consequently, their practices will make significant changes to the land, and inscribe new meaning to the place they farm.

However, most individuals only build places on a small scale. Place is often constructed by those with the power to do so – the power to produce and control the material fabric of a place, inscribe the material with text and meaning and determine the mode of conduct or practice in that place. Moreover, relationships of power play a continuous role in the construction of place. When starting an account of the role of place in social life, Harvey (1993) wrote that “the first step down the road is to insist that place in whatever guise, is like space and time, a social construct. The only interesting question that can be asked is, by what social process(es) is place constructed?” (Harvey, 1993, p.5).

Similarly, Doreen Massey discusses the processes and relationships that produce place. Massey argues that places are actively constituted by mobility. The movement of people, entities, commodities, and ideas suggests that places are neither clearly bounded, nor rooted or homogenous, but rather, produced through connections to the rest of the world. Massey’s (1994) ‘global sense of place’ is more about routes than roots. Massey argues for a progressive sense of place that is adequate to this era of time-space compression. Massey explains time-space compression as follows: “Time-space compression refers to movement and communication across space, to the geographical

stretching-out of social relations, and to our experience of all this” (p. 147). She further argues that our degrees of mobility are not solely determined by capital flows but also by race, gender, class, ethnicity and other social divisions. Time-space compression experience needs differentiating socially. An individual’s mobility and experiences in a place are determined by time-space compression, intersectionality, and relationships of power. Massey explains relationships of power with the following:

Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (p. 149)

Massey calls this power geometry. However, this does not preclude a personal sense of agency.

Individuals have the power to resist dominance, social processes and predisposed determining factors, to varying degrees and with varying results. Oakes (1997) describes place as being composed of both “meaningful identity and immediate agency” (p. 510). It is agency that allows individuals and groups to overcome the imagined abstractions of a bounded nation or region. Oakes proposes that meaningful action is not delimited to territory but is derived from linkages across space and time. Like Massey’s power geometry, Oakes argues that meaningful action makes place a dynamic web rather than a specific site or location. For Oakes, place becomes “the geographical expression of the interactions between individual action and abstract historical process” (p. 510). Creating a sense of place can disrupt the entanglements of power that produce relationships of disparity, vulnerability, and marginality. Massey (2000) argues for a reordering of the

spatialities of power through practices that are “more egalitarian, less exploitive, and more mutually enabling” (Massey, 2000, p. 285).

Place, culture, identity and home – and their iterative interplay – are intrinsically spatial and political. Blunt (2005) reviews the recent cultural geographical research on home (and this theme in relation to broader debates about and the entangled nature of materiality, embodiment, transnationality, and human and nonhuman agency). Home is not necessarily a private space separate and distinct from public politics. In the case of forced migration, what was once thought of as home is forever changed physically and imaginatively. Creating a home becomes intensely political from everyday private practices and to interfaces with the wider world (Blunt, 2005).

As a transnational, marginalized and often vulnerable group, refugees offer deep and perceptive insights into place. Their perspective reflects forward and backward on the material and metaphorical realms of their respective life journeys (Munt, 2012). Processes of refugee transnationalism will provide a specific lens through which to view the concept of place. Transnationalism can be understood as a process through which “immigrants and refugees forge and maintain multi-stranded social relations that link together their places of origin and places of settlement” (Basch et al., 1994, p. 7). Refugee transnationalism (Nolin, 2006; Sherrell and Hyndman, 2006) differs from immigrant and transnational migrant labour research insofar as a refugee’s experience is one of *forced* migration – “distinct expressions of such social fields across international borders among refugees: those who did not choose the conditions of their departure” (Hyndman, 2010, p. 445). Understanding the ways in which resettled refugees or forced

migrants experience place through power relations that are gendered and racialized can deepen our understanding of the transformative power of place-making.

There have been numerous studies on the transnationalism and cultural identity of Karen refugees in the Thai-Burma camps (Brees, 2010; Dudley, 2011; Grundy-Warr & Wong, 2002; Lee, 2012), of internally displaced persons still living in Burma borderlands (Bodeker and Neumann, 2012; Malseed, 2008), and of Karen living in villages in Northern Thailand (Odochao, 2006). However, there has been little research conducted on refugee resettlement in third countries – a contribution this study can make to the geographical concept of place.

Refugee resettlement from the Thai-Burma border camps constitutes the world's largest resettlement program (Sciortino & Pupuing, 2009). There are 12 receiving countries accepting ethnic minority refugees from the Thai-Burma camps and countless organizations providing services on the ground in Thailand and in resettlement countries. Despite the large-scale international organizing, and financing of resettlement, there is a paucity of research on how successful resettlement programs have been at providing integration and fostering independence (Harkins, 2012). Harkins (2012) addresses this gap by conducting an ethnographic study of the Karen community in St. Paul, Minnesota, United States.

This research seeks to link alternative food systems, place-making and assertions of Karen cultural identity. A broad survey of the literature revealed that place-making, food and the Karen culture have been linked in varied contexts. For forced migrants, displacement alters their experience and connection with the territorially bound notion of place, objects and people (Dudley, 2011). Tran (2000) argued that one of the hardest

things for the Karen, residing in refugee camps, is the lack of purpose or sense of self-worth that they would typically derive from having a place to call home:

Home was a place where they were free to work their farmlands, where they were free to go about their daily life with a sense of purpose... Here in the camps they have nothing to do and they are not allowed to work. They idle around all day and wait to go home. Many of them have been waiting for five and up to ten years. (p. 34)

Dudley (2011) examines the everyday cultural practices enacted by Karenni refugees living indefinitely in camps along the Thai-Burma border – with an emphasis on the production and consumption of food and textiles.

Attempting to feel ‘at home’ is part of coming to terms with everyday life within the refugee camps, and together with seeking to make sense of the traumatic displacement processes that preceded that life, it is an essentially cultural process: an attempt to give meaning to experience... Karenni and other refugees work hard and creatively to maintain a sense of continuity with the past, with ‘home’ and with whom they perceive themselves to be (pp. 743, 746).

Furthermore, productive activity, such as food-making, helps establish a sense of having some control. Planting, growing and gathering food means adapting to one’s environment. This kind of active involvement and control enhances refugees’ sense of self-worth and autonomy – especially due to the specific restrictions refugees face, and the foreign nature of the locality in which they now live (Dudley, 2011).

The Karen refugees, resettled in Ottawa, have been seeking ways to create a sense of place through farming – consequently, overcoming some of the social and material-cultural discontinuities between their life in Burma and now in Canada.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research can be broadly situated within the field of political ecology. Section 2.1 will begin with a brief description of political ecology in general, and the specific concepts within political ecology that will be drawn upon. As a result, this section on political ecology represents only a partial view of the complex genealogy, multiplicity of issues, and diversity of positions within this mode of theorizing. Finally, it will discuss how political ecology relates to both urban agriculture and the case study. Section 2.2 provides a review of social nature and how it will act as a lens to explore the Karen farmers perception of nature and relation to their surrounding ecology – informing public policy towards more democratic approach to public land-use management.

Section 2.1: Political Ecology

Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) defined political ecology in their foundational text as follows: “the phrase political ecology combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources and also within classes and groups within society itself” (p. 17). This coupling of political economy and cultural ecology has been applied and developed through various disciplines including geography, anthropology, political science and biology. Within geography, it can be used to examine the concept of power as a “social relation built on the asymmetrical distribution of resources and risks and locate power in the interactions among, and the processes that constitute, people, places, and resources” (Paulson et al., 2003, p. 205).

Political ecology is an interdisciplinary arena that evolved over the past two decades, and is theorized from a range of disciplinary perspectives (including, but not limited to): geography, political science, anthropology and philosophy of science (Paulson et al., 2005). Scholars of political ecology have challenged “dominant interpretations of the causes of environmental degradation and contested prevalent prescriptions for responding to such problems” (p. 17). Political ecology, as a conceptual framework, seeks to “strengthen the ability to account for the dialectical processes through which humans appropriate, contest and manipulate the world around them, and to understand and act on the ecological and social impacts of those processes” (Paulson et al., 2003, p. 210). Political ecology can provide a relevant lens in exploring the workings of power on multiple scales in the context of Ottawa urban agriculture.

In alignment with this conceptual framework, and recognizing that ecological resources are shaped, negotiated, controlled, and dialectically manipulated by a politics of power, this research seeks to: 1) understand the regulatory processes through which agricultural land, in Ottawa’s urban periphery, is controlled; 2) determine the social, ecological and political benefits that urban agriculture can provide for resettled refugees; and, 3) negotiate a place for the Karen farmers to grow food. This type of research involves multiple stakeholders in both the academic, governmental and non-governmental realms. Political ecology provides an appropriate platform to conduct this research and engage multiple stakeholders.

Similar to the experiences of past political ecology scholars, I draw from and utilize my various positions as a student, participant, volunteer, and professional to build a project that is informed by the close involvement of various stakeholders. A brief and

favourite description of political ecology is given by Rocheleau (2008): “political ecology (PE) is rooted in a combination of critical perspectives and the hard won insights distilled from field work” (p. 716). Rocheleau’s own discovery of political ecology in 1985 allowed her the freedom of not needing to “choose between academic, practical and policy roles”, instead, she allowed herself “to combine these perspectives, even if sometimes it meant alternating the voice and changing the foregrounded versus backgrounded elements according to the purpose and audience of a given publication” (p. 717). One of the benefits of engaging political ecology as a conceptual framework is that it requires the research to be embedded in fieldwork with a variety of actors (Blaikie 2008). This can prove to be difficult, given time and funding constraints. Working within these constraints, research can often involve a hastily conducted case study. However, as Blaikie (2008) argues, the “‘embeddedness’ of many political ecology case studies can be a virtue that provides insights into diverse, local and subjective worlds” (p. 768). It is this embeddedness, focus, and insight that enable research that is rich in narrative, authenticity, evidence, and action.

Political ecology provides the critical theoretical base to work with a diverse range of engaged people *inside* and *outside* the academy, and in doing so, “open[s] opportunities for learning and appreciating multiple truths, findings, and listening to marginalized voices and representing them to both formal and informal networks in the policy process” (p. 769). Indeed, the approach adopted for this research – inspired by political ecology theorists – has involved multiple stakeholders in the academic, not-for-profit, charitable, non-governmental, and civil society realms. In fact, this research owes much of its success to the rich connections provided by networking and engaging these

diverse realms. As a result, this research has practical, policy-oriented, personal, and tangible outcomes that are linked through various formal and informal networks. Urban agriculture projects provide fertile ground to apply theories in political ecology as they are, often, formed through formal and informal networks of stakeholders, and are often built upon a political platform of either food justice or food security.

Political ecology lends a critical eye when exploring the state of our current food system. Conventional or industrial agriculture (often characterized by large-scale monoculture with high chemical inputs and high yields to maximize economic gain) inflicts a very serious toll on the biophysical environment – including on both human and non-human organisms. Research over the last two decades has demonstrated how large-scale industrial farming has degraded our water, soil and air quality and quantity. Furthermore, conventional, large scale, industrial agriculture pushes small-scale biodiverse agriculture to the brink of extinction (Blay-Palmer, 2010; McMichael, 2007; Weis, 2007). Furthermore, governmental policy often supports large-scale farming over small-scale – exacerbating the struggle to maintain operations (Andrée, 2009). A flux of interest in alternative, small-scale agriculture has provided an on-the-ground partial response to the damage caused by large agribusiness. There is growing concern regarding the intensive chemical inputs required for large agri-business. History has shown the detrimental effects, to environments and species, of long-term exposure and bioaccumulation of chemicals engineered for large-scale agriculture. There is a growing citizen concern for healthy minds, bodies and environments in relation to the food we eat. In response to this concern there is a greater demand for produce that is traceable, local, organic and economically and socially just.

Furthermore, the conventional agri-food system has become concentrated to rural areas and decision-making power is increasingly becoming more centralised. The expansion of big box stores and large supermarkets in North America dictates what farmers produce and what they will be paid (Andrée, 2009). Large-scale farms are subsidized by government and research and development institutions focusing on biotechnology to maintain the high input/output model of industrial agriculture. Indeed, the large-scale industrial agriculture model is in the interests of multinational biotech industries and high-level government officials (Ishii-Eitman, 2008) that perpetuate a capitalist control over the production of nature (Eaton, 2011). All agricultural labour appropriates and re-produces nature. However, it is the types of nature, social relationships, and socio-ecological relationships produced that differ between a capitalist industrial model of agriculture and the small-scale agricultural enterprise (be it a family business, farm share, farm coop, or urban farm). Drawing on the work of Goodman et al. (1987) and Boyd et al. (2001), Eaton (2011) argues that

... nature itself is refashioned in order to allow for increasing capitalist control. Through conventional breeding and/or genetic engineering the very biology of plants and animals has been reshaped so as to minimize the effects of seasonality, shorten the time needed for a crop or animal to reach maturity, and strip the capacity for farmers to reproduce plants gratis in the fields (p. 248).

Small-scale farmers and peasant workers are often excluded from decision-making processes and are subject to laws, policies and rules that prohibit them from competing in a market dominated by large-scale agribusinesses. The growing disconnect between consumers, producers, and policymakers leaves little room for public participation in decision making processes (Travaline and Hunold, 2010). Increasingly, consumers are

becoming aware of the detrimental effects of the global food system – and increasingly interested in local, horizontal and more visible relationships between consumers and producers. What is needed is a food policy that supports this growing interest and demand in alternative food networks.

There are many different forms and concepts of alternative agriculture such as: organic, certified organic, natural, biodynamic and/or small-scale intensive farming; permaculture; community and allotment gardening; yardsharing; gleaning; and family farming, among others. Many of these forms of agriculture have been examined using a political ecology lens. Specifically, these different forms of agriculture have been understood through the lens of gender (Hovorka 2006; Jarosz 2011; Rocheleau et al. 1996; Shiva, 1989), race (Guthman, 2018; Mandell, 2009; Minkoff-Zern 2012; Morales, 2011), culture (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Kimber, 2004; Lawson, 2007; Mougeot, 2005), class (Frayne, 2005; Pendola, 2009), mental and physical health (Blake and Cloutier-Fisher, 2009; Parr, 2007), sustainability (Knight and Riggs, 2010; Lovell, 2010; Spiaggi, 2005; Zeemering, 2009), climate change and environmental degradation (Edwards and Mercer, 2007; McMichael, 2009; Mougeot, 2005). Furthermore, the documenting of small-scale agricultural projects, community movements, and alternative food initiatives is now on the agenda of policy makers and local governments. In Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, projects have been organized to enhance and nurture the myriad benefits provided by alternative agriculture – linking politics to food production. Alternatively, Guthman (2008) provides a striking critique that the wave of alternative food politics and practices only creates more neoliberal subjects of production and consumption. Furthermore, Guthman proffers a critique of the whiteness embedded

in North American alternative food movements. Specifically, Guthman examines those projects that stem from a White, privileged desire to engage in food security work that parallels missionary type work that enrolls people of color in particular set of food practices – and consequently lacks resonance with the communities they are trying to aid (Guthman, 2008). Guthman argues that many food security projects operate under the assumption that lack of access, cost and knowledge are the primary barriers to healthful eating. Alternatively, Guthman argues that it is market failure and structural inequality that causes food deserts and areas of extreme poverty. Furthermore, the term “food desert” is problematized as Guthman explains:

In this context, it is also worth remarking on the language of ‘food deserts’ which, like the ‘dark continent’ is itself layered with colonial codings, evoking images of places beyond repair separated from the processes that make them seem so (p. 432).

It is important to keep Guthman’s critique of alternative food movements (and their encoded Whiteness) present throughout the duration of the Karen farm project. I have examined my own position as a White, middle-class, female, student and advocate of alternative food movements. The research for this thesis was built upon a horizontal partnership with the Karen farmers for the purpose of understanding their needs and paying careful attention to what is important to them in a farm project. More significantly, throughout the research process, I have asked the Karen if they want a place to farm – is a farm beneficial for the Karen or am I projecting my own ideas, hopes, and set of food practices onto this research project? The work for this research project may shy away from the attempts of others to dismantle the global neoliberal system. However, the positive outcomes and benefits are significant for the Karen. Furthermore, the data from this research enriches the discussion on food politics by showcasing a few

voices from a larger demographic of resettled refugees and immigrant groups who have built a farm project that is representative of their own, culturally specific, set of food practices. Much of the literature that supports food justice projects is missing data that highlights the benefits and alternative discourses of immigrant and refugee communities in Canada. By understanding the perspectives of the Karen farmers on nature, food, and the city, this piece of literature and photos add to a knowledge base – linking food and politics.

Alternative forms of agriculture, such as urban agriculture, have both political and ecological implications. These forms of agriculture have the ability to transform ecologically degraded environments into spaces of biodiversity and corridors of greenspace. Jarosz (2011, p. 310) argues that “alternative agriculture as a set of practices and as a larger social movement has allowed a less competitive and less individualistic ideology to emerge that is related to a growing global ecological awareness.” Urban agriculture can provide spaces of social networking, democratic negotiating (Glover et al., 2005, 2004; Levkoe, 2006), and intergenerational learning (Libman, 2007; Mayer-Smith et al., 2007). Urban agriculture fosters political, ecological, and social change – changes that resettled refugees, such as the Karen, can benefit from as active participants.

Political ecology provides a lens through which to understand two aspects of this research. First, since urban greenspace is dialectically and materially controlled by governmental organizations, such as the NCC and the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), and the interests of developers, those with alternative views of how the greenspace can be used (such as the Karen farmers, Just Food Ottawa, and Hidden Harvest, to name a few) must negotiate to access and alter how land (especially land that is already zoned as

agricultural) can be used to benefit socio-ecological systems. Often, private interests trump public ones in Ontario urban design planning. The OMB's appeal process is largely driven by lawyers instead of planners (who may be more attuned to the building needs and practices of a city). Full consideration is given to the private rights of citizens and their discomfort with new developments; however, the OMB often favors the design plans of developers in the context of larger public interest (Kumar, 2005). Keeping land zoned for agricultural purposes and gaining access to that land is a constant negotiation over whose interests and values count.

Second, resettled refugees with strong agrarian roots are often socially marginalized – excluded from accessing productive greenspace when they are placed in an urban system. Notably, this population is typically: assigned housing; reliant on public transportation (thus limiting their access to greenspace); funnelled into low-wage jobs unsuitable for their skillset; silenced due to language barriers; and lacking access to social services. Moreover, refugee status coupled with being a visual minority can produce infantilizing effects (Berry, 2001; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2003; Gans, 2009; Pottie et al., 2004; Yakushko et al., 2011). The common thread between these two aspects is that of access and dialectics. Often, those with the power to dialectically construct how greenspace is used can systematically determine who has access to the space. Whose knowledge counts in the construction of greenspace and who has access to greenspace?

Political ecology has always been grounded in a class analysis and has since expanded to include a more comprehensive social theory allowing for an analysis of multiple, layered dimensions of identity (Paulson et al., 2005). Recent research has

focused on the political, specifically examining indigenous rights and territorial autonomy (Beckett & Motto, 1996; Jones, 1995), gender roles (Gezon, 2002; Mackenzie, 1995; Rocheleau, 2008; Shiva, 1989), development processes informed by movements (such as sustainable development and conservation) for social and environmental justice (Bryant, 2002; Zimmerer, 2000) in North America. The research mentioned above is often focused on specific groups of people who are living in their native country. However, there is much less research explicitly relating political ecology to the lived experiences of immigrant and resettled refugee populations.

My own approach to political ecology is participatory and practical – aimed at social change and alternative development. Rocheleau (2008, p. 723) explains this approach further:

Within political ecology, common property resource management, and alternative development, scholar-practitioners have developed an applied, practical political ecology. They have entered into experimental forms of critical and applied research in search of more democratic and effective models of collaboration with social movements, NGOs and grassroots groups.

This practical approach to political ecology allows me to fulfill and utilize various roles – moving from participant observation to more participatory democracy in action. This approach incorporates both a critique of current systems and a working network of alternative producers and consumers (ibid). Building partnerships between different organizations, such as Just Food Ottawa and KLEO, to enable a Karen farm project is a way to harness practical political ecology and to demonstrate that many alternative economies and worlds are both possible and practical (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Rocheleau, 2008).

Finally, political ecology applies a lens of non-neutrality – central to this research project. I intend to acknowledge the politics, emotions, and normative stances produced throughout the research process. Blaikie (1985, p.1) wrote the following in his book, *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*:

... it is not a neutral book. It takes sides and argues a position because soil erosion *is* a political-economic issue, and even a position of so-called neutrality rests upon partisan assumptions. (emphasis in original).

Early work in the field of political ecology was often criticized for lacking a political edge (Blaikie, 2008; Forsyth, 2008). However, scholars engaging within this mode of theorizing over the last 3 decades have contributed to the evolution of political ecology and have worked to reconcile many of its criticisms. In aligning with a political ecology framework, I intend to be as transparent as possible with my position (as a graduate student) and intentions (to advance a knowledge base of urban agriculture and socio-ecology and to assist the Karen in accessing land for farming). To be transparent, the research does take sides and is positioned to benefit the author (by graduating with a Masters degree), the participants (by gaining access to land to grow food), and the partners such as Just Food and KLEO (by assisting these organizations to fulfill their respective mandates, and by providing critical research and analysis). Aside from individual gains, this research will provide a piece of literature that is useful for organizations seeking to influence urban agricultural land-use management policies and immigration integration services.

The following section will discuss the concept of social nature, the contemporary edge of political ecology. This section will define and highlight key components of social nature that informs this research. Specifically, how nature discourses influence

Political ecology theorists such as Escobar (1996) suggest that the social construction of nature does not mean we refute that nature does not exist but that it is discursively and practically constructed.

Section 2.2: Social Nature

This research is informed by theories of social nature as a means to explore how populations relate to their surrounding ecologies. Of particular interest are the various ways that the Karen urban farmers in Ottawa perceive nature and how these multiple perspectives might inform public policy towards a more just, inclusive, and democratic approach to public land-use management.

The society-nature dichotomy is lodged in western thought and assumes that nature or natural entities are unalterable givens and that society must be understood as separate from nature (Castree, 2001). Social nature theorists work to transcend this dichotomy and render visible the discursive constructions that create dualisms such as society-nature. Castree explains (2001, p. 5) the two axioms that inform social nature theory:

Social Nature takes two things to be axiomatic. The first is that nature has never been simply ‘natural’ – whether it’s ‘wilderness,’ resources, ‘natural hazards,’ or even the human body. Rather, it is *intrinsically* social, in different ways, at different levels, and with a multitude of serious implications. Second, the all-too-common habit of talking of nature ‘in itself,’ as a domain which is by definition nonsocial and unchanging, can lead not only to confusion but also the perpetuation of power and inequality in the wider world.

These axioms refer to the way that social actors discursively, practically, and materially construct nature – responding to limitations of Marxist views of first and second nature,

seeing it instead as a dynamic and ongoing process of change, rather than a lineal one. Social nature can thus be described as a post-structuralist concept insofar as it seeks to examine the role of discourse in the construction of social reality – treating language as a constitutive of social reality (Escobar, 1996). This is not to preclude the agency of individual entities to contribute to or shape the material and practical elements of a preconceived nature as in Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1999). Demerit (2002) would argue that social nature (and the social construction of nature) as a concept is problematic in the way that it reduces that which exists bounded by nature to a social construction and that there is too much ambiguity around the metaphor of nature as a social construction. However, drawing upon social nature as a concept, I intend to use it to acknowledge the power that social actors have to shape nature through dialectical and material practices and to highlight that some actors have more power than others to do so.

Discursive constructions of nature represent the values or ideas of the person or group proposing them. Often, constructions of nature exclude or silence alternative ideas of nature, with varying consequences (Castree, 2005). Governmental representatives play a disproportionate role in shaping society-nature relationships, and they tend to construct nature in very technocratic ways (Harrison and Burgess, 1994). Nature is, ultimately, social and there is no “singular, objective knowledge of nature, only particular, socially constituted knowledges in the plural” (Castree, 2005, p. 10). Thus, the way in which society reconstitutes nature should be informed by various perspectives, understandings and knowledges of nature. Broadly, Castree (2001) asks: “What kinds of nature – or more properly natures, in the plural do we want for what kind of future?” (p. 19). Nature, historically, has been seen as non-social and non-human, leading to other

dualisms organizing our thoughts, such as rural-urban, city-country, wilderness-civilization (Castree, 2001). It is important to understand that nature is the places where people “live, work and play” (Alkon, 2008, p. 272). Different constructions of nature such as the conservationist construction of nature can often prohibit an interaction with nature that is based on subsistence and socio-ecological practices (Castree, 2004).

Different dialectical constructions of nature have been used strategically to advance the agenda of one group over another. Often, these constructions of nature are built on the western normative belief that the natural realm is separate from the social realm. For example, a construction of nature in both the environmental and geographical disciplines is the preservationist nature. The preservationist nature takes the stance that nature is wild and pristine. This stance further argues that pristine nature is inherently valuable and should be protected and conserved. This provides a platform from which conservationists and preservationists can argue for the protection of large expanses of ecosystems. The global trend in preservation has led to the protection of biological hotspots and dynamic ecosystems.

However, problems arise when large expanses of ecosystems are conserved at the cost of removing, silencing and destroying the livelihoods of those who depend on them. Previously, research in this field has focused on the rights of local peoples in the Global South to remain on their traditional territory and to autonomously determine how the territory is to be used (Blaikie, 2000; Guthman, 1997). Discourses of environmental management and sustainable development have been co-opted in order to indoctrinate the most remote communities into the world capitalist economy by reframing local contexts as resources to be managed (Escobar, 1996). In China, a people-versus-parks issue has

been ongoing since the government has increased the number of its nature reserves from 38 to 1,227 between 1978 and 2000 (Xu and Jim, 2003). Often, local peoples are perceived as destructive to their environments due to their agricultural or livelihood practices.

The conservationist myth is that nature is separated from people, and nature's integrity will be compromised if people are present (Wells and Brandon, 1992). However, researchers have provided counter arguments, insisting that, often, local people are stewards of the land they depend on and, alternatively, those who wish to manipulate the environment for economic gain are the real destructive element. I intend on exploring the NCC's conservationist approach to land-use management in the city and to highlight alternative nature dialectics. Bringing to the foreground alternative nature concepts can assist in a policy that is more inclusive to local people and organizations that are seeking land access to grow food and to transcend the nature-culture and urban-rural dualism.

The urban-rural dualism will be analyzed as a sub-category of the society-nature dichotomy. The rural concept is often understood in opposition to urban centers in both spatial and social terms (Figueiredo, 2008). Historically, urban development has been associated with civilization and thus, conceptualized as separate from nature. The term "rural" has been associated with country, wildness, nature, agriculture, and in all cases, a corresponding absence of civilization. The term rural has also been seen as a bridge between an imagined wildness and the urban. The rural can be constructed as a tamed nature – a place that is romanticized as ideal living and a more accessible escape from the burdens of urban dwelling. Cudworth provides an analytical table (see below in Table

2.1 on page 50) of the various narratives associated with the constructions of wilderness, rural, and urban.

<i>Table 2.1 Narratives of Place and Space</i>		
<i>Wild</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>
Unmodified/less modified Nature-centred/biocentric	Regulated/managed human-centred production of food	Human construction Human-centred production and consumption of goods and services
Untamed Dangerous Scientifically interesting Requiring preservation	Tamed nature Safe Technological testing Plant/animal pests need to be controlled	Controlled nature Interesting/deviant High technology Human pests need to be controlled anti-social behaviour
Limited human habitation multivariate flora and fauna	Small human populations dense domestic animal populations	Densely populated/overcrowded
Infinite variety/or barren wilderness	Homogenous	Human diversity, eclecticism and toleration of difference
Unpredictable human/non- Semi-predictable interactions	Semi-predictable interactions human populations between humanity, plants, animals, soil, weather, etc.	Semi-predictable interactions between humans and technology
The savage/‘the noble savage’	Unsophisticated individual, poor peasant or good neighbour, clean living	Sophisticated individual, educated, wealthy or the sexually/morally deviant, poor, etc.
Examples: Yosemite National Park, Antarctica, uncharted outer space	Examples: ‘The English village’ wine-growing areas of France, Argentina, Bulgaria, etc., the feedlots of the American Midwest	Examples: New York, Tokyo, Bombay

Note: Adapted from Environment and Society, p. 117, by Erika Cudworth, 2003,
London: Routledge.

In this context, the rural is seen as more “wholesome, spiritually rewarding and ‘natural’ than urban life” (Cudworth, 2003, p.118). These associations and separations are ironic because urban civilizations are primarily (though not exclusively) sustained by outputs from rural agricultural societies and urban influences are a certainty in rural areas.

Doolittle (2004, p. 392) argues that the so-called natural environment is not only “urban as well as rural... it is also our homes. Indeed it is our homes, and our homes are it.”

Doolittle discusses the evolution of the home garden and the separation between nature and society. He proffers that gardens are geographical manifestations of the human-environment interactions that mirror the human condition – transcending time, culture, environment/nature, gender, and thought (Doolittle, 2004). Head et al. (2004; 2006) similarly uses backyard gardens of migrant groups (Macedonian, Vietnamese, and British), in Australia’s Sydney Basin Bioregion, as a way to examine cross-cultural understandings of nature and environment. In many cases, the production of food in the backyard is a continuation of the patterns from their homeland. However, there are many people in an urban system without access to backyards to grow food, herbs and other plants. Who then gets access to urban ecological resources and where are these resources located?

The urban-rural interface is an iterative and inseparable system. The perpetuation of two seemingly opposite forces – urban concentration and sprawl – in mid-size Global North cities challenges urban planners to incorporate greenspace and nature into their designs – raising questions concerning the role of greenspace in the city. There is no precise definition of what urban nature constitutes since the concept of nature, itself, is highly varied and subjective. In a recent study planning for urban nature in Stockholm,

Uggla (2012) highlights two typologies of nature that are contradictory: 1) the biologically diverse expanses of wild nature; and, 2) a manicured recreational park nature. The types of values that various people assign to nature influence these typologies. Some groups value nature for environmental reasons and others for the benefits that humans derive from nature interaction. Uggla (2012) determined that the differing views of various groups still retain that nature, in the city, is to be tolerated if it improves the lives of citizens and their living conditions. These desired, ambiguous, and problematic typologies raise questions concerning whose values and interests count in the construction of nature?

Finally, environmental justice is a concept that falls under the umbrella of social nature and political ecology. Much of the environmental justice literature has focused on the close relation between the residential communities of marginalized people, failing infrastructure, toxic environments, and the right to greenspace. More recently, researchers have raised concerns around limited access to natural resources – a common injustice for marginalized urban populations (Heynen, 2006). The task now is to argue a similarly strong case for the seemingly mundane and ordinary accounts of socio-ecological injustice such as lack of access to greenspaces and different kinds of urban nature (Whitehead, 2009; Dooling, 2009). Bickerstaff et al. (2009, p. 594) suggests that “engagement with novel theoretical approaches for understanding socio-ecological (in)justice raises questions about how we conceptualize nature, the city, the subject and various facets of justice, including rights and responsibilities.” Exploring the experiences of the Karen as they seek access to land for food production highlights the various ways that urban nature is constructed, and outline an alternative politics built on concepts of

social nature and political ecology and a “space of contestation for those who have no name or no place” (Swyngedouw, 2009, p. 601). Moreover, this work challenges conceptions of urban space rooted in private property, as the Karen are seeking land to farm on a collective basis.

The following chapter explains the methodological approach and corresponding methods used to explore and answer the research questions.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES AND METHODS

This chapter outlines and elaborates on the various methodological approaches and the corresponding methods used to conduct this research. An in-depth review of literature pertaining to urban agriculture, immigration, resettled refugees, place, cultural identity, and the Karen people provided the much needed background information required to narrow the scope of the research, develop parameters, and choose specific methodologies. The methodologies and methods were chosen specifically for the sensitive and unique nature of the case study and anticipated results. Section 3.1 defines and describes the case study approach as a methodology and the specific attributes of case study research that are anticipated to be the most relevant for this research. Section 3.2 defines and describes participatory action research (PAR) and the various methods that correspond with PAR. Section 3.3 explains visual methodologies and how they relate to this research project – including the corresponding method of PhotoVoice. Section 3.4 elaborates on community-based research methodology and methods. Finally, section 3.5 describes anticipated ethical tensions and considerations.

3.1 Extended Case Study Research

The participant group for this research project was narrowed to a single ethnic group of resettled refugees from Burma, now living in Ottawa. The research group is small (11 participants including 6 growers, 3 family members of growers, and 2 volunteers with the Karen Learning Education Opportunities [KLEO] support group); however, the results,

story, and overall outcome of the project is anything but small. Case studies involve an “intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units” (Gerring, 2004, p. 342). However, it is important not to conflate sample size with the quality of the research. Case study research is used to study the in-depth nuances and contextual influences of a single instance or a small number of instances. It is for this reason that a case study approach is applied. More specifically, the extended case study method is used to provide accounts of real events and struggles taking place over space and time – describing what participants are doing rather than what they should be doing by becoming an active participant in the study (Burawoy, 1998). Burawoy explains the difference between the positive approach and the extended/reflexive approach to case study methodology:

[the extended case study] deploys participant observation to locate everyday life in its extralocal and historical context. The extended case method emulates a reflexive model of science that takes as its premise the intersubjectivity of scientist and subject of study. Reflexive science valorizes intervention, process, structuration, and theory reconstruction. It is the Siamese twin of positive science that proscribes reactivity, but upholds reliability, replicability, and representativeness. Positive science, exemplified by survey research, works on the principle of the separation between scientists and the subjects they examine. Positive science is limited by “context effects” (interview, respondent, field, and situational effects) while reflexive science is limited by “power effects” (domination, silencing, objectification, and normalization) (p. 1).

Historically, in ethnographic case studies, researchers would limit their involvement with their study group or subject – studying from an assumed outside or objective position. It was assumed that limiting the affect of the researcher on the research group produced a set of results that is representative, true, and positive – the positive approach (Burawoy, 1998). Researchers would adhere to a rigid set of data

collection procedures with limited participation or participation by proximity in order to isolate themselves from the results – exemplified by the survey research method (a method of measurement based on the systematic collection of a sample from members of a population, often using a structured questionnaire) (Beltrán, 2011). Burawoy (1998, p. 5) explains the positive approach as follows: “We try to avoid affecting the situation we study, standardize the collection of data, bracket external conditions, and make sure our sample is representative.” However, survey research and the rigid scientific model are limited insofar as they can lack context, dialogue, reflexivity, and rapport. Furthermore, the researcher transgresses their own principles as there is always an influential and inescapable connection between the researcher, the participant and broader social relations. Burawoy suggests an alternative reflexive model of science, reflexive understanding and a reflexive way of doing research to reconcile the context effects (intervention, process, structuration and restructuration) and power effects (age, gender, race, and positionality). The reflexive model is one “that embraces not detachment but engagement as the road to knowledge. Premised upon our own participation in the world we study, reflexive science deploys multiple dialogues to reach explanations of empirical phenomena” (ibid p. 7). The reflexive model of an extended case study embraces participation, involvement, authentic dialogue, and reflexivity on power relations (ibid). This often requires a mix of qualitative methods. In Harkins’ (2012) case study of resettled Karen in Minnesota, participatory research techniques were used to complement semi-structured interviews. Guiding principles of respect, inclusivity, and flexibility informed Harkins approach and permeated the methods. Harkins’ use of these principles is exemplary of the embeddedness of the researcher within the community that is being

studied. Harkins not only embraces but also seeks to develop the research *with* the participants and *within* the community – as opposed to being an isolated outsider collecting data. The methods I employ follow similar guiding principles and make use of a mix of appropriate qualitative methods suitable to the project.

One of the guiding philosophies of extended case study research is that the study of one manifestation of a case is valuable on its own without specific regard for how the case may manifest in other places or times. Gerring (2007, p. 1) proffers: “sometimes, in-depth knowledge of an individual example is more helpful than fleeting knowledge about a larger number of examples.” In this way, case studies can be used to better understand a concrete problem and focus attention to resolving it. In the case of the Karen in Ottawa, the immediate policy problem was to find access to land to grow food in order to apply their agrarian knowledge and skills. From an academic perspective, case studies are an excellent way to develop, compare, and problematize explanatory theoretical concepts. As previously mentioned, the extended case study approach evolved as a reflexive way to reconcile the positivist approach (Burawoy, 1998) and the large cross-case analysis often used to extrapolate and standardize theoretical models that may not, necessarily, apply to certain cases of a similar nature. For example, the term “refugee” is often referred to as a homogenous group in federal immigration programs. Consequentially, the various theories and policies developed to “treat” problems associated with refugee programs and assist refugees are standardized. Harkins (2012) argues that certain resettled refugee groups, such as the Karen, require specific or more tailored support services due their exceptionally protracted stay in the Thai refugee camps (some almost 20 years). The extended case study methodology can be used to determine

what to research, how to research it and to what advantage the research can be used. For the purpose of this research, I draw on guiding theoretical concepts such as social nature and political ecology, to see if they apply to the case study. Case study research, by its nature, tends to vary and case studies are often used to research phenomena that have not yet been explored in depth. I anticipate that the data will reveal other explanatory concepts – to assist with the development of grounded theory.

Case studies and comparative cross-case studies are often perceived as opposing methodological approaches. However, researchers may do both, and arguably should do both, in order to gain evidence for the case study (Gerring, 2007). Doing a case study implies that preliminary cross-case research is conducted to narrow the scope of the case study and to identify how the chosen case study is situated in comparison to other case studies (extreme, contradictory, etc.). Dunn (2010) speaks of the benefits of comparative studies when comparing the impact of transnationalism of the same cultural group in different places or on different cultural groups in the same place. Often, when there is little research conducted for a specific case study, comparative studies can offer useful insights into how similar phenomena are manifest in different contexts.

In my original thesis proposal, I outlined a project that would compare the experiences of various immigrant groups participating in urban agriculture in various contexts in Ottawa. However, the scope for this project was narrowed to a single case study, following preliminary research to identify potential research participants. The Karen people residing in Ottawa were identified as being potential partners in building a project that would not only be mutually beneficial but also provide a story that is rich in personal narrative and grounded in theory.

3.1.2 Methods for an Extended Case Study

Historically, ethnographic research was conducted using a rigid set of data collection protocols aimed at limiting involvement in the study group or subject. This was assumed to deliver robust and representative results. However, an extended case study embraces, intervention, involvement and participation. A non-positivist approach to data collection will be used based on the following principles Harkins (2012) applies in his work with the St. Paul, Minnesota, Karen population:

- Respect. Listening, learning from and respecting local intellectual capabilities.
- Inclusiveness. Enhanced sensitivity to inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups within the study target population.
- Flexibility. Allowing the community itself to largely dictate the course of the research through applying the sampling technique of snowballing. (p. 187)

As mentioned previously, the extended case study method is not based on the assumption that the research is outside space and time. Rather, it starts with dialogue between social scientists and the people with whom we work, study, and participate. It also starts with the academic study of theory and the personal narratives of the participant group. Using food justice, social nature and political ecology as a theoretical launching pad, and research conducted during my honours thesis, I knew that I wanted to locate and work with new Canadians and newly arrived immigrants practicing urban agriculture.

Identifying the Case Study and Research Participants:

In my initial scoping stage I identified various immigrant groups (through snowball sampling and internet searches), practicing different forms of urban agriculture, among

them, the Karen refugees from Burma. I was informed that there was a group of Karen people farming a yard share in the peri-urban outskirts of Stittsville, Ontario (approximately 40 minutes from Ottawa's urban core). A personal associate who had previously worked with Coleen Scott, Director of KLEO, shared his contact information with me. I contacted Coleen Scott via e-mail and submitted a research proposal to her in hopes of developing a community partnership and contact with the Karen resettled in Ottawa. At this time (May 2011), I applied for ethics approval with the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. Coleen approved the proposal and we had our first official meeting in June 2011 to discuss recruitment of participants, research design, and project development.

During our first official meeting, Coleen revealed that the Karen had lost their yard share farm in March 2011, with very short notice. In other words, they were without a place to farm. Coleen informed me that the study could go forward if we visited some of the Karen who grew food in their backyards. However, there was only one family that had a house with a backyard big enough to accommodate a garden. I conducted an interview with Pi (an elderly woman) and Naw, (Pi's daughter) who grew food in their backyard. Coleen suggested that I meet some of the other farmers living in Ottawa without space to grow food. Coleen introduced me to Shar Lah La and Kloy Htoo (a married couple) who were trying to grow herbs in pots in a very shaded area. The Karen farmers were discouraged and any attempts to grow food or herbs in pots in their inner city homes were disappointing. It was at this point that it was decided that the Karen farmers needed a place to farm, and I would work with KLEO in order to establish a place for them to do so. While helping to establish the farm project, I conducted a series

of in-depth interviews focusing on perspectives on farming, nature, and city-life. Continued engagement and participatory observation for the case study was conducted through my volunteer work with KLEO. I attended and worked at their cultural events, meetings, and fundraising events. Participating as a volunteer was essential for developing rapport with the community and the farm participants, and for gaining a deeper understanding of the Karen people, their forced migration, and their hopes for the future.

Interviews:

This research employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews to provide deeper understanding of the images chosen for the PhotoVoice project, to supplement gaps in the literature review, and to provide a deeper understanding of the issues and experiences of participants – with a view, ultimately, to glean rich and relevant primary data.

According to Berry (1999), in-depth interviewing, "...is a type of interview which researchers use to elicit information in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view or situation; it can also be used to explore interesting areas for further investigation." In-depth interviewing enables the researcher to establish a rapport with the interviewee. Establishing a rapport can be achieved by demonstrating respect for the interviewees' opinions, supporting their feelings and acknowledging their responses (Berry, 1999). Often, this can be shown by the researchers' tone of voice, expressions and gestures (Berry, 1999).

A series of 6 in-depth interviews were conducted with the farmers to provide a deep and rich understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences in urban agriculture. Another 3 interviews were conducted with the eldest children of the farmers

and 1 interview with the husband of Naw. A final two interviews were conducted with members of KLEO who work closely with the Karen farming families. Interviews were approximately an hour in length. The interviewer aimed to keep interviews under an hour with possibility of follow-up at a later date. The farming participants were the main participants in the PhotoVoice project – identifying images that were most important and representative of their situation and story. In the spirit of PAR, the interview questions were developed based on the series of formal and informal meetings held with the Karen – identifying needs, barriers and potential possibilities with having access to land to grow food. The interviews will add personal narrative to specific photos allowing the research to gain further insights into the significance of the photos of individual participants.

The interviews and participatory observation is supplemented by an in-depth literature review of the long Burmese political history, civil war and persecution of ethnic minorities. The time and dedication devoted to this literature review is meant to provide a deeper understanding of the Karen people, their culture, their worldview (which is varied by individual, religion, and sub-culture) and perspectives. The literature review is further complemented by the participatory process.

PhotoVoice, and participatory action research (PAR) will be other methods for engaging with participants and collecting data – explained in Sections 3.3 and 3, respectively. These methods correspond with other methodologies (Visual and PAR) informing this research.

3.2 Participatory Action and Community-Based Research Methodologies

As the title suggests, this methodology is both participatory and action-oriented. As mentioned earlier, this type of research attempts to break down the barriers and power effects created by titles and roles such as researcher and researched. The participatory component of PAR is employed because there is a mutual understanding and concern from all participants (including the researcher) for a need for change. Participatory research involves a focus on the needs of the participants and a cooperative inquiry into how to effect social change. The action is working together in horizontal partnership and implementing changes that often (and ideally) manifest in tangible outcomes, emancipatory personal growth, and social transformation (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2007). PAR often involves examining the lived experiences of people who are affected by an issue. The participatory nature of the research seeks to bring about empowering benefits. This methodology and philosophy can be largely attributed to the groundbreaking popular educator, Paulo Freire, and his work with the disempowered and impoverished residents in *favelas* (slums) of Brazil in the 1960's and 1970's. Freire developed community-based research processes to support people's participation in knowledge production and social transformation. Freire (1994) maintained that:

Hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice. As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become a historical concreteness. That is why there is no hope in sheer hopefulness. The hoped for is not attained by dint of raw hoping. Just to hope is to hope in vain. (p. 2)

Freire's work informs community-based and participatory research methodologies to compel social change through action. Ultimately, this work can be situated within the field of praxis (i.e., the application of theory), and seeks to advance policies and practices

for greater inclusivity and cultural sensitivity in land use management that are theoretically informed. However, instead of working in the Global South, I attempt to use his philosophy and approach by engaging with disempowered, seemingly invisible, and the largely forgotten resettled Karen refugees in Ottawa, by developing partnerships among community-based programs working towards similar goals.

PAR challenges mainstream research traditions in the social and environmental sciences. Traditional research assumes that knowledge is produced exclusively within formal academic institutions, and often “presupposes an objective reality that can be measured, analysed and predicted by suitably qualified individuals” (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 9). Within a traditional positivist research paradigm, the researcher attempts to discover new knowledge by describing some form of reality or truth through an objective or dispassionate approach. Furthermore, conventional research is usually done *on* people, assuming people to be the subjects of study – a very dehumanizing approach. This approach produces a singular and narrow view or knowledge with little to no tangible benefits to the “subjects” being studied (Cameron & Gibson, 2005). Traditional research has been critiqued for amounting to no more than data mining – extracting the information that is needed to meet the demands of the research – and then leaving, giving little in return.

In contrast to this approach, PAR claims co-operative knowledge creation and action *through* and *for* progressive social transformation. Savin-Baden and Wimpenny (2007) describe how PAR processes “can be used to improve local situations through valuing discourses from a broad range of intellectual origins” (p. 333). PAR recognises

a plurality of knowledge(s) in a variety of institutions and locations. PAR can be thought of as a continuum, rather than an either/or proposition (Ballamingie, 2006, p. 74).

There are a number of purposes that PAR seeks to fulfill. The purposes are iterative, action-oriented, and philosophical. First, this approach seeks to generate knowledge that will inform action (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2007). Furthermore, generating knowledge should be conducted *with* people, opposed to doing research *on* people. Savin-Baden and Wimpenny (2007, p. 333) proposes that:

...this approach challenges the notion that legitimate knowledge lies only with the privileged experts and their dominant knowledge. Instead, PAR asserts that knowledge should be developed in collaboration with local expert knowledge and the voices of the 'knowers.'

Thus, those who are directly affected by the research problem are involved in the research process, action, reflection, and collective investigation (Gaventa & Cornwall 2001; Savin Baden & Wimpenny, 2007). Participants are considered co-researchers, and principle actors in moving the research forward as members of a project with shared objectives and decision-making powers (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2007).

Second, this research aims to develop a consciousness-raising project that is at once practical, reflective and emancipatory. By developing and implementing the research questions, methods, analysis, and action in a collaborative manner, the researcher and the research participants seek to raise critical consciousness and promote change in their lives (Kidd & Kral, 2005). Ideally, the results and changes will be in the direction and control of the research participants – promoting and encouraging empowered decision making over time. This leads to the final purpose – to view PAR as something that is in a state of becoming.

The methods and modes of action for PAR are developed over time – a challenge to the researcher that has to meet certain academic requirements and time constraints. However, an authentic and successful PAR project requires time and ongoing commitment. It is of the utmost importance that a PAR project is successful insofar as it fulfills the goals of establishing a sound project and partnerships, while remaining attentive to the balance of power for those involved in research. PAR needs to be viewed as a sustainable continuation - the project does not end once the research goals are achieved. The project is truly successful if it can survive and flourish after the research goals have been achieved. Pain and Francis (2003, p. 46) explain the importance of engagement beyond the research goals in the following:

The defining characteristic of participatory research is not so much the methods and techniques employed, but the degree of engagement of participants within and beyond the research encounter. Participatory approaches did not originate as a methodology for research, but as a process by which communities can work towards change. When employed or adapted as a means of research, many would point to the importance of retaining this fundamental principle.

The ultimate purpose of this project is not data extraction. The purpose is to create transformative personal growth, social change and tangible outcomes over time and space – and control of those outcomes are in the hands of the participants who built the project. Furthermore, I strive to ensure that the project and partnerships have staying power and continue to play an active role after the academic research goals have been met. The tangible outcome in this case is access to land for cultivation purposes for the Karen, specifically, those with agrarian backgrounds, who lack resources and are living in a city. The social change is discussed throughout the following chapters. The outcomes of the research project have had significant impacts for each individual involved such as

improved mental and physical well-being, a sense of empowerment, independence, autonomy, and safety. More broadly, I hope to contribute to the growing awareness and knowledge of this unique ethnic group, the struggles they have endured and the persecution that it is still happening in Burma.

A major principle of PAR is that the research is informed by reflective consultation throughout the research process. This research followed the principles of PAR by: 1) working and talking with the Karen farmers to understand their current situation with regards to food security; 2) identifying the benefits of having access to land for UA; 3) reflecting on how these benefits enrich the lives of the participants. The consultations and reflections informed and influenced the development of the research project and questions. The collaboration revealed that the Karen (with the help of Coleen Scott) were in search of land access for cultivation purposes. Further consultations identified the needs of the Karen which I codified into themes such as: scale (how much land do they want to cultivate), material-cultural outcomes (what and how do they want grow), cultural identity (what does it mean to have a place to practice their skills and knowledge), food security (what challenges do they face in navigating the urban food system), marginalization (how do they describe their current living circumstances in Canada). Based on the discussions and consultations the research questions and formal research instruments (interview questions) were developed. Moreover, specific research methodologies and methods were identified to fit the unique situation and needs of the Karen. PAR principles guided the consultation and development of the project, and consultation with the Karen iteratively reinforced and influenced the course of action and methods deployed.

The *action* part of PAR often seeks to address, challenge and/or change social structures and relationships so that marginality (in its various guises) may be overcome. Usually, this can involve “working with a community to develop a comprehensive knowledge of the current situation and then developing people’s capacity for organised and collective political action that responds to this knowledge” (Cameron et al. 2004, p. 319). This research will strive for action by: providing a tangible piece of work (literature and images) and potentially, a continuing discussion, amongst marginalized groups, on the need for an inclusive approach to land-use management in the city of Ottawa. This research hopes to collaboratively build rich, first-hand accounts of the multiple lived experiences of the Karen farmers.

Community-Based Research

Community-based research (CBR) also seeks to work horizontally with community to solve a problem. CBR and PAR share many of the same principles and values –making the methodologies and corresponding methods an ideal match. However, CBR, specifically, works with established community organizations and to engage people to (re)establish power and control in their own lives and to realize their power as a member of a collective community. This is particularly important for the Karen, as building partnerships and networks with other community organizations can be mutually beneficial as they seek access to land to grow food. Furthermore, building relationships with other community organizations may reduce the isolation and marginalization presently experienced by the Karen. Fundamentally, like PAR, CBR strives to reduce or eliminate formal boundaries between the traditional roles played by the researcher and

the researched (Taylor et al., 2002). Participants “may assume a variety of roles and responsibilities in the research and the action process” (ibid, p. 4). One of the primary goals is to build the research *with* a community. The purpose is to produce research that is reflexive, representational, and applicable to real world challenges. For the purpose of this case study and project, the goal is to build bridges between community organizations such as KLEO and Just Food, and their respective members, to create meaningful relationships of reciprocity, knowledge sharing, and mobilization.

CBR attempts to reconcile previously mentioned criticisms of traditional research approaches by valuing the knowledge and personal narratives of diverse stakeholders. If a research project is supposed to contribute to society and social change, then it needs to be “agreed upon, recognized, and respected for what it is, not dismissed for what it is not” (Ommer et al. 2008, p. 40). In order to produce a research project that is accepted and embraced by all members of the relevant community – a significant task – then the information, understanding, and knowledge of community organization leaders, non-academics as well as academics must be recognized and valued.

Working with community organizations such as Just Food Ottawa, the Community Gardening Network of Ottawa, and KLEO will both inform the research, and ensure that it is useful, inclusive, and representational of both the Karen and the community partners’ needs. Just Food is a grassroots, non-profit organization whose mission is to “work towards vibrant, just and sustainable food and farming systems in the Ottawa region.” Just Food seeks to advance community-based projects as part of fulfilling their mission. The organization solicits direction from community partners and members of the Just Food network (Just Food, 2007). First, I hope that members of Just

Food will provide advice on the research questions – how they might be further refined to provide a piece of research that is reflective of the participants’ needs. Second, I anticipate that Just Food will be a significant partner in gaining access to land and resources for farming. Finally, I anticipate that this research may provide a resource (literature and images) that can inform Just Food on potential best practices through which to assist Canadian immigrants to gain access to land and resources for UA practices in the city. The anticipated outcome of this research – a more informed understanding of the diverse benefits of urban agriculture and inclusive approaches to land-use management – align well with the goals of Just Food. This research does not, specifically, intend to advance all of Just Food’s goals, but hopes to inform the non-governmental organization on potential steps to better engage diverse members in the city.

3.2.1 PAR Methods

Implementing PAR methods involves a sincere engagement with community partners and research participants. Often, in community and participatory research, there are gatekeepers (usually insiders) that control access to a research group and resources. A gatekeeper makes final decisions, gives trusted advice, and can allow or block access to a research group (Saunders, 2006). It should be noted that there are significant communication barriers (such as language and technology) that restrict locating and talking with the Karen farmers. I met with Coleen Scott, KLEO Director, who is considered a gatekeeper as she is a primary contact for locating and communicating with the Ottawa Karen population. Furthermore, she is a primary informant and

knowledgeable of specific sensitivities that are necessary to understand before engaging with the Karen.

A series of informal meetings took place with potential Karen participants to begin establishing a rapport and relationship. During these meetings, I gained a deeper understanding of the needs of the Karen, the barriers they face, the hopes they may hold, and any questions or concerns they may have. From this point, we began to outline a plan of action and began to seek out other community partners who align with our mission to gain access to land for farming.

Working as a volunteer for KLEO and shadowing Scott on her daily meetings with various Karen families provided the entry point and connection to the Karen community (and thus to the research participants). Working with KLEO provided an opportunity to build a research project that is useful and relevant to the Karen people living in Ottawa. Initial data collection and scoping involved attending a number of community functions, meetings and fundraisers. I have had numerous informal meetings with the Karen participants in an effort to present myself as transparently as possible, to earn trust and to build rapport. I participated in backyard gardening with two Karen women – learning about some of the ways they grow produce, prepare meals, and beginning to understand what growing food means to them. I conducted an interview with two generations of these women who will be referred to as Pi (grandmother) and Naw (lady). Naw mostly translated for her mother. At a later date, I had an interview with Pi's son-in-law. The results of these interviews will be discussed in section 4.3. Unfortunately, many of the Karen people living in Ottawa do not have the luxury of a backyard in which to grow food. Thus, the need to find a space for more Karen to farm

(and for a potentially transformative project to emerge) presented itself for the first time. The following is the story of the first farm the Karen started, lost, and the inspiration for a new farm project.

The Stone Farm – New Beginnings

Coleen Scott, director of the Karen Learning and Education Organization (KLEO), has worked tirelessly since the arrival of the first group of Karen in 2006 to establish a place for the Karen to farm. Scott was first introduced to the Karen while traveling with her daughter in the hills of Northern Thailand. Scott's daughter was inspired to establish an educational assistance project for the Karen youth. Sadly, Scott's daughter passed away shortly after the project's inception. However, her passion for education and for helping others inspired Scott and the creation of KLEO. The Karen were offered a place to farm far outside the urban core. The offer came from Roger Stone who owned a large property that was idle at the time. He had heard the story of the farming Karen refugees and in May 2007, the Karen were given the use of a 3-acre field in rural Kanata. Roger Stone, and his wife Margaret, shared generously their land and hospitality. They welcomed the Karen to their farm, bought tools, cleared fields, and offered the use of their pool and storage areas.

The Karen farmers had a goal to provide food for their community, and they achieved that goal. They produced tomatoes, corn, coriander, lettuce, cabbage and hot chile peppers. They were able to sell surplus at various venues – three apartment buildings in Kanata, a restaurant, and the Carp Farmers' Market. The Karen students at

Woodroffe High School had a one-day sale of the harvested vegetables. Furthermore, much of the produce was donated to Bruce House, a local hospice.

The Karen were dedicated to their new farm and learned to bus to the limits of Kanata South (~40 minute trip) and walk the remainder of the distance to the farm. As Coleen explains:

The farm provided more than food for the Karen people, it was a place where the families could join together in the country, on the land, a place that gave them relief from unfamiliar city living. They had birthday parties for their children and meals together and were happy. The Karen Farm provided them with a sense of purpose, a sense that maybe they could succeed in this strange new land, it offered hope and renewed their pride (interview with Coleen Scott).

Unfortunately, in the spring of 2011, the Karen were advised by Mr. Stone that his property would be sold and the conditions of the sale required that no third party should be cultivating his land one year prior to acquisition. As a result, some of the Karen grew food in their backyards, if they had a backyard. Many could not find a space in the city on such short notice, as designated public space to grow food in Ottawa is limited. The Karen wanted to find a new piece of land for the 2012 growing season. The search was on for a new place to farm.

KLEO heard that there was a community garden being developed close to some of the farmer's homes. The meeting was attended by two of the farmers, Shar Lah La, her husband Kloy Htoo, me and Coleen Scott. A member of the community garden network was demonstrating to the community how to turn the soil and divide the plot. Immediately, Kloy Htoo, picked up the tools and turned the entire area (see Figure 3.1). It soon became evident that a community plot was going to be too small for the scale of farming that the Karen farmers desired (and were accustomed to).



Figure 3.1: Coleen Scott, Kloy Htoo, Shar Lah La, at a community garden plot.

As mentioned in the introduction, Just Food Ottawa was in their first year of establishing their headquarters on NCC land that is zoned for agricultural purposes. While I was working as a research assistant for Just Food, the project manager mentioned that a partnership between KLEO and Just Food might be fruitful for both parties. Kloy Htoo, Shar Lah La, and Coleen came to visit the farm at the end of May 2012 to assess whether or not this would be a good place to farm and grow food. Following the visit, a meeting was held at the home of Kloy Htoo and Shar Lah La with their eldest son (who served as translator), and another Karen farming family. A long discussion ensued

around: how farming would work at the Just Food farm site, where money for resources would come from, and most importantly, whether the Karen really did want to farm.

Yes, they did. The following day a formal proposal was submitted to and accepted by the director of Just Food Ottawa, Moe Garahan. Within days, Garahan had secured a land access permit for the Karen.

The Karen faced many challenges in starting the farm. To begin, the land was over grown with grasses and wildflowers and had not been tilled in a year. However, KLEO had purchased a rototiller for the Stittsville farm, which was still available for use. The rototiller was transported from Stittsville to the farm in Blackburn Hamlet and one of the Just Food volunteer farmers, Francis Kenny (my father), taught and demonstrated to Kloy Htoo how to use the rototiller. Kloy Htoo had never used a machine to work the land before. However, he learned quickly and tilled almost half an acre of land for planting (see Figure 3.2). This is one example of knowledge and skill sharing that takes place at the Karen farm. Two farmers, one from Canada and one from Burma communicated – overcoming significant linguistic barriers with exceptional patience – in order to share knowledge, work together, and build new social relationships. For the Karen, this was the beginning of the beneficial transformative effects of, not only farming, but the bridging social capital that is achieved through partnership development.



Figure 3.2: Kloy Htoo using the rototiller for the first time to turn the soil at K’Naw Si.

Throughout the 2012 growing season, there was a great deal of work to be done. The farmers started late in the planting season due to a number of reasons: 1) the unworked soil needed extra tilling, weeding, and preparing before planting could begin; 2) the farmers did not have access to the land until June (most farmers have their seed in the ground by May 24); and 3) we needed to find organic seeds and plants (Just Food is applying for organic certification and all inputs at the Just Food farm must be organic) late in the season. Due to the great amount of work to be done, asking the farmers to take pictures for a PhotoVoice project did not seem appropriate. In fact, as I was working the fields myself, I rarely had time to snap pictures. Furthermore, the Karen farmers are very

shy and although they were happy to talk about farming and nature, they did not feel comfortable telling their entire story through photos. To retain elements of the PhotoVoice method, the Karen farmers picked out images they liked from ones that Coleen or I took. Significant excerpts from the interviews are paired with the images they chose – often ones that included themselves working, friends helping or visiting, or their children exploring and learning. These images and interview results are interspersed throughout chapter 4 and 5. The visual methodology and PhotoVoice method were still important factors for the Karen to tell their story.

Visual methodologies and a corresponding method, PhotoVoice, will add richness to the project. PhotoVoice is often used as a method when doing PAR because it aligns with the collaborative principles of the methodology. The purpose of the visual component is to attempt another level of communication. Doing research when there are language barriers can prove to be difficult – often, there is a misinterpretation of an interview question or answer. By using images, I gained more in-depth perspectives, as the Karen dictated which images tell their story best, contributing to the collaborative production of knowledge inherent to this research project. The following section will elaborate on visual methodologies, in general, and the PhotoVoice method in particular.

3.3 Visual Methodologies

Using images, artefacts, diagrams, maps, film, and video has been and still is an essential part of doing geographic research – both in the physical and humanistic schools of geography. However, the way in which we use, manipulate, and see visual data has changed, significantly, over the last 50 years. Previous to feminist and postcolonial

scholarship, early research involving photographs and film often assumed, uncritically, that the images were capturing some ‘objective’ reality. Early work by researchers such as Susan Sontag (1977) soon problematized ‘the gaze’ and made visible the relationship between the observer and the observed, the knower and the known, the person behind the lens and the person in front (Harper, 1998; Lutz & Collins, 1993.).

Central to this research is the work of Gillian Rose (2001; 2003), and Sarah Pink (2001; 2006). Informed by anthropological theory, Pink (2001; 2006) speaks, specifically, to applying visual methods when doing ethnographic research. She discusses the emerging approaches that make reflexivity, collaboration, and new approaches to ethics in visual ethnography central to doing research – offering an implicit critique of earlier visual methods. Rose (2001; 2003) discusses visual methodologies from a geographic perspective, arguing that geography is a visual discipline. Rose (2003, p. 213) emphasizes the importance of understanding the “ways in which particular visualities structure certain kinds of geographical knowledges, knowledges – and thus visualities – that are always saturated with power relations.” Rose (2003) draws upon Foster (1988 p. ix) to explain the term “visuality” as “how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein”. Rose argues it is not solely the visuality contained in the image that must be understood but also how, when, where and by whom the imaged is displayed and viewed – for all these elements contain and produce hierarchies of power. Rose argues that the issue to be problematized is between the geographer and the referent in the image. Images often work to bestow authority over the content of the image. The geographer displaying the image appears to be the voice of the image, the truth-bearer. Moreover, photographs can

be thought of as discourses that reflect the interests of those in power. Thus, the researcher seeks to find a method that blurs the boundaries between researcher and researched, while acknowledging that they can never be completely eliminated. Invoking the work of feminist theorists, such as Fine (1994), I attempt to work the hyphen between ‘self’ and ‘other’ – between researcher and researched. This provides an opportunity for a dialogue between researcher and participant to “discuss what is, and is not, ‘happening between’, within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom, and with what consequence” (p. 135). To this end, a research technique known as PhotoVoice places the camera in the hands of the participant, giving them the power to represent their own understandings of and perspectives on nature (among other things).

3.3.1 PhotoVoice as Method

PhotoVoice emerged from the work of Wang and Burris (1997), who originally proposed the method in 1994. Their work is informed by the “theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and documentary photography and the work of community photographers and participatory educators to challenge assumptions about representation and documentary authorship” (p. 370). The authors draw inspiration from Freire’s methods of codification – the gathering of information in order to build up a picture (codify) of real situations and real people. Decodification is a process whereby the people begin to identify and highlight aspects of their situation and reflect critically upon them, thus gathering understanding (Freire, 1974). During our work together at the farm, the Karen and I discussed the difficulties accessing land in both Burma and Ottawa,

and the perception of the farmer in both countries. The Karen expressed that they have faced significant barriers to accessing land and growing food in the various contexts they have lived – as an ethnic minority facing persecution, as a refugee in a protracted liminal state, and as a resettled refugee in a third country (Canada). As the Karen understood and decoded their situation as forced migrants and landless farmers, they created the tools of transformation. Like Freire's methods, PhotoVoice enables people to think critically about their community, and to begin discussing the everyday social and political forces that influence their lives. In sum, PhotoVoice has proven to be an innovative research method with emancipatory potential.

PhotoVoice also draws inspiration from feminist theory and methodologies. Although Freire's work is critical to emancipatory, participatory methodologies, it is critiqued for silencing women and/or rendering them invisible (Wang & Burris, 1997). A feminist approach to research values the female, as well as the male voice, in visual methodologies (Mcintyre, 2003). PhotoVoice adopts a grassroots approach to photography and social action and provides cameras to those most disempowered. Wang (1997) describes PhotoVoice as:

... [a] process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. It entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for social action and change, in their own communities. It uses the immediacy of the visual image and accompanying stories to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise to create healthful public policy_(p. 369).

Notably, Wang argues that PhotoVoice has three main goals: 1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns; 2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion

of the photographs; and 3) to reach policy makers. PhotoVoice challenges assumptions about representation and documentary authorship and seeks to break down power relations that privilege the positionality of the individual behind the lens over that in front of the lens.

Karen farmers chose pictures of what is important to them about farming, nature and the project. With PhotoVoice the intention is to provide the researcher and participants with a deeper understanding and a more critical engagement with the various constructions of nature that either limit or produce access to urban agriculture. A series of follow-up, semi-structured, in-depth interviews will complement the PhotoVoice project.

3.5 Ethical Tensions and Considerations

In the social sciences broadly, and in geography more specifically, there is a recognized responsibility in conducting research and producing knowledge on larger social processes and with individual groups – in this case, the experiences of a group of resettled refugees who have escaped persecution, suffered human rights violations, and endured forced migration. Ethical considerations must be accounted for in all social practices, especially in the practice of producing academic work. For Herman et al. (1999) “ethics and research are both intensely personal and necessarily public. They are themselves composed of, and have an effect on, social relations” (p. 209). In particular, I hope to reconcile, as best I can, critiques of traditional research such as: unequal exchange of knowledge and the power dynamics that are implicit in the relationships between researcher and participant. A feminist critique and community-based approach is adopted to lend a critical eye to this research.

Community-based and feminist methodologies demand the recognition of certain ethical tensions implicit in the qualitative research process, including (but not limited to): positionality, reflexivity, transparency, accountability, reciprocity, and power imbalance (Reger, 2001). These components inform each other and provide an iterative, self-reflective process for ensuring they are continuously recognized. Furthermore, this values emotion as a crucial part of the research process (Reger, 2001; Sharp, 2009).

During the interview process and PhotoVoice project, the participant and the researcher may experience a range of (sometimes difficult) emotions. Recent feminist literature emphasizes that in accepting the researcher's subjectivity, emotions become a crucial (and inevitable) part of the research process (Reger, 2001; Sharp, 2009). The researchers' dismissal of emotions, in the pursuit of academic objectivity, can silence a voice with the potential to reveal important layers of a story. Reger (2001) argues: "emotions offer valuable insights into important social dynamics" (p. 605). However, if emotions experienced by the participant were traumatic or too uncomfortable that they wished to cease the interview, they were, of course, able do so at anytime. Also, I recorded and reflected on my own emotions, throughout the research process (Bondi 2003; 2005; Sharp, 2009).

While conducting research, it is necessary to be as transparent as possible with the participants. To this end, the objectives and final outcome of the research project will never be concealed. This research project seeks to provide a useful and informative piece of work that community organizations and advocates of urban agriculture and food justice can draw upon. Thus, it is important to seek permission from PhotoVoice

participants for their photos and narratives to be drawn upon by Just Food to purposefully influence policy decisions regarding land-use and urban agriculture in Ottawa.

Extended case study research has been the best fit as a methodology for this research project – allowing for in-depth understanding, building rapport, and developing a project that is rich in narrative and meaning. Each method chosen for data collection contributes to a case study that is rich in description and depth. The community-based research methodology built partnerships between organizations such as KLEO and Just Food Ottawa and providing the foundation to move forward with research that is both participatory and action oriented. The participatory action research methodology guided a project that is meaningful and beneficial to the Karen farmers and their families – providing opportunities to share their story, to gain access to land to grow food, and to work together for shared futures of hope, change, and health. The following chapter will provide a brief description of the history of persecution and civil war in Burma, an in-depth description of the challenges the Karen face after forced migration, and the transformative effects having access to land provides.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE KAREN PEOPLE, IMMIGRATION AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECTS OF FARMING

The movement of people, whether through migration (internationally or locally), transit systems, or cross-border commuting has become an increasingly significant topic of study in an age characterised by dense urban systems, air travel, and securitized border controls, particularly within the critical social sciences. Various networks of actors and broader socio-ecological processes influence increased flows of people. Flows of people shape and are shaped by policies, economies, ecologies, and societies. The purpose of this study is not to tease out all the intricacies, details and influences of human migration. Instead, this research intends to explore the experiences of a specific type of immigrant group – the resettled refugee, and more specifically the resettled Karen in Ottawa, Ontario. This exploration provides an in-depth look at some of the challenges that a Karen resettled refugee from an agrarian background might face in a Canadian mid-sized city such as Ottawa. Furthermore, this project highlights the benefits of having a place to call their own and a place to apply their skills and knowledge. Chapter 4 begins with a brief introduction to the Karen people and their history of persecution. For the purpose of this research, I felt it was extremely important to become deeply engaged with the political and cultural history of the Karen people in order to demonstrate a sincere understanding of how they came to be in Ottawa. Section 4.1 provides a socio-cultural and political background of the Karen people and the persecution they have suffered for decades. Section 4.2 discusses immigration in Canada and how it has changed over the last five decades and describes the additional challenges resettled refugees may face when migrating to Canada. Sections 4.3 and 4.4 weave together the results and

discussion of the transformative effects of this project. Section 4.3 focuses on the benefits of creating a sense of place, belonging, and self-worth. Section 4.4 focuses on the benefits of urban agriculture in relation to mental health.

4.1 The Karen People of Burma

Burma has suffered a history of violence and ethnic cleansing that has been relatively ignored by the world. What is even more unsettling is that the human rights atrocities continue to this day. In the late 1980s, the state of Burma's political unrest and violent repression of ethnic groups reached the media headlines of western society. However, the attention given by the United Nations and civil society was brief and the eyes of the world soon turned elsewhere again. The military junta in Burma has tightly controlled its international borders for decades – making it difficult for outsiders to give aid, intervene in situations of human rights violations or deliver messages of hope to those who remain in hiding or continue to suffer persecution. The following chapter will provide a brief introduction to the history and political situation of this multi-ethnic country.

Specifically, this chapter will provide an introduction to the Karen or K'Nyah (as they are called in their own language) ethnic group of Burma.

Burma is located at the crossroads of Asia (see Figure 4.1 on the following page) and thus is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world (Smith 1994). Over one hundred dialects, languages and cultures have been identified in Burma (Smith 1994, 2002). Over a span of 2000 years, people have migrated to Burma from neighbouring countries of China, India and Thailand, interacting with cultures along the way.

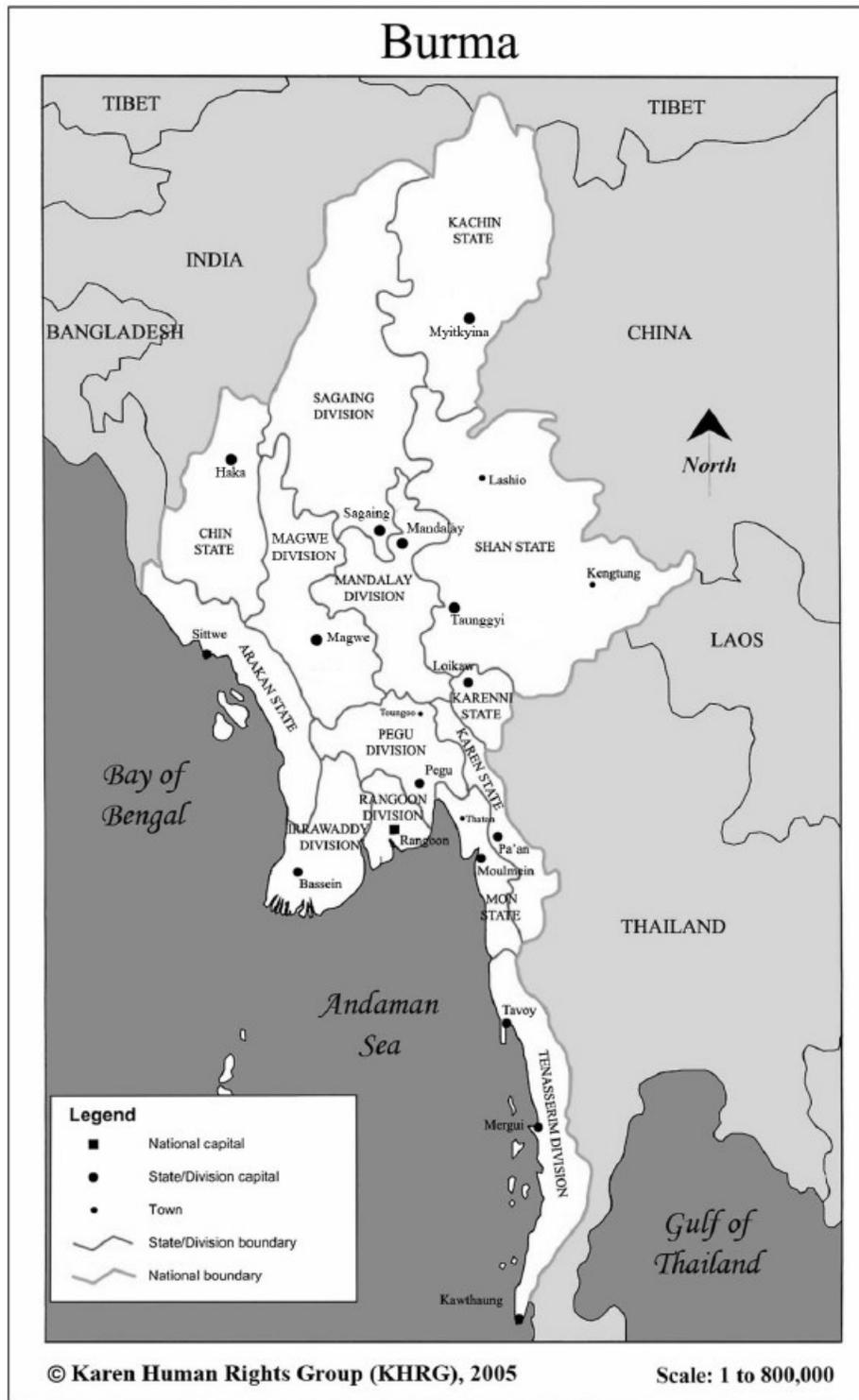


Figure 4.1: Burma is bordered by China, Laos, Thailand, Tibet, India, and Bangladesh.

Smith (2002, p. 6) describes this as a “pattern of cultural interchange and human habitation which, in many areas, resembles more a mosaic than a map of homogenous or easily separable territories.” However, there has been little-to-no attempt to take an accurate survey of the various ethnic groups in Burma since the British census in 1931 (Smith 1994). Disruption from World War II and the outbreak of civil wars in 1948 has played a major role in the uncertainty over population statistics. Further political and civil unrest since the time of Burma’s independence in 1948 has contributed to the lack of available information on the diverse ethnic groups of Burma (Smith 1994).² During the time between 1948 and 1962, western anthropologists and researchers collected information on ethnic diversity. Since the military took political power in 1962, few social scientists have been allowed through the Burmese borders or to venture outside the former capital of Burma, Yangon (Fink 2001). Major ethnic groups that have been included in politics and the territorial division of states include the Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Shan. This research will focus on the Karen ethnic group.

Burma was conquered and colonised by the British in 1863 and was incorporated into Britain’s Indian Empire and administered as a province of India until 1937. For many of the ethnic minority groups in Burma, the British presence meant liberation from the oppressive Burmese rule. The British maintained control by keeping the ethnic minorities in the hills divided from the Burmese people in the plains. The British employed the ethnic minorities in the hills. Many Karen were promoted to civil service posts and the colonial defence force (Fink 2001). For the majority of the Burmese people, the destruction of the Burmese monarchy and the disrespect shown towards

² For more on the political and cultural history of Burma during colonial rule see works by Martin Smith.

Burmese Buddhism represented a loss of national pride – leading to a growing independence movement.

The period before independence was fraught with armed conflict. Many young Burmese urban nationalists sought aid from Asian powers for military training and assistance in establishing an armed resistance, the Burmese Independence Army (BIA), to the British. In early 1941, student leader Aung San fled Burma, with twenty-nine colleagues, to receive military training by the Japanese. The BIA later invaded Burma with Japanese troops in late 1941. The Karen sided with the British against the Japanese and the BIA. However, with the help of the Japanese military the Burmese were able to push the British back to India. During this time, the BIA retaliated against the Karen for supporting the British.

During World War II, the Burmese Independence Army (BIA) was founded by Aung San with support from the Japanese. When Burma was occupied by the Japanese, the BIA carried out many atrocities against the Karen. In many Karen areas the BIA massacred entire Karen villages, and in Papun (Mutraw) District, Karen women were herded into camps where they were systematically raped by BIA soldiers (Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation, 2010, p. 9).

The horrors inflicted upon the Karen people have not been forgotten, and they became the cause of much fear and distrust instilled in future generations. The Japanese presence meant independence for the Burmese and a lifetime of persecution for the Karen.

However, the BIA soon realized that they had traded one ruling country for another. The Japanese took control of Burma and they “ruled Burma like a conquered territory and their secret police terrorized the local population” (Fink, 2001, p.21). The Burmese joined together under the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) working to drive the Japanese out. The British tried to reinstate colonial rule after the

Japanese left, but Burmese nationalists were organized and insistent on independence. The British could not easily enforce submission again and they handed over power in 1948 (Fink, 2001).

The British government insisted that the political status of the people in frontier areas be resolved. The new Burmese government wanted to join the frontier areas under a New Union of Burma. Ethnic minority leaders were reluctant to join the union as animosity remained between the central and outlying groups. Furthermore, many Burmese leaders saw themselves as superior to minorities and did not want to give in to their demands for territory and state control. The resentment between Burmese and the Karen would not easily be resolved.

Aung San, now a general and leader of the pre-independence executive council, saw a possible resolution by folding ethnic minorities into the Burmese military. General Aung San appointed a Karen leader as Commander-in-Chief of the new Burmese Army and selected other non-Burmese for high-ranking positions. He made diplomatic trips to visit ethnic leaders in the outlying areas and organized a multi-ethnic conference (the Panglong conference) to come up with a political structure that both ethnic minorities and Burmese could accept (Fink, 2001, Smith, 2002).

Four ethnic states were to be created with the writing of the constitution for a new union. The constitution was written quickly by an elected constituent assembly dominated by the AFPFL, under General Aung San. The constitution declared that the new Union of Burma was to be ruled by a democratically elected parliament and prime minister. Ethnic states would have their own state councils (Fink, 2001). However, there

was disagreement over the territorial boundaries of the Karen state and many Karen were opposed to the delineation. According to Fink:

...as the constitution drafting took place, groups of Karen, Karennis, Mons, Buddhist Arakanese, and Muslims in Arakan territory began preparing for armed struggle, while the leading Burmese politicians looked for more moderate ethnic representatives with whom they could forge agreements (p. 23).

Failure to acknowledge the demands of ethnic nationalities set the conditions for violence, civil and political unrest in the years to come (Fink, 2001).

Conflict arose at the time of independence when the agreed upon concept, developed by leader General Aung San, of a federal union was not realized. The federal union was to create ethnic states with full autonomy and right to self-determination (Fink, 2001). General Aung San's philosophy was "unity in diversity" (Smith, 1994). However, in 1947, General Aung San was assassinated by an ambitious politician hoping to gain power. The assassin was tried and executed the following year. Despite the loss of General Aung San, Burma became an independent nation in 1948 with the AFPL in power and Buddhist statesman, U Nu, leading them. Following Burma's independence in 1948, internal conflict has continued through three successive eras of government: parliamentary democracy from 1948-1962; military socialism from 1962-1988; and 'transitional' military rule from 1988 to present day (Smith, 2002). During the beginning of parliamentary democracy, hopes were high for the new democratic system, people felt they could speak freely and citizens could elect their own representatives. However, this peaceful time did not last long. Armed conflict arose between the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), the Karen National Union (KNU) and other insurgent ethnic groups.

Representative discussions over Karen state lines never took place and the government militia struck at the Karen with “apparently motiveless attacks” (Smith, 1991, p. 44). From these attacks emerged an uprising of Karen nationalists. The Karen National Union (KNU) forces pushed back the BIA, and at one stage, during this time, the authority of the first Prime Minister, U Nu, barely extended past Rangoon (capital of Burma). During this time, the Burmese Armed Forces, known as the Tatmadaw, were rebuilt by the military chief General Ne Win. As the armed forces grew in institutional strength, the KNU was pushed back from the villages they controlled. At this time, many senior officers in the BIA became critical of U Nu’s ability to “overcome factionalism in government and insurgency in the field” (Smith, 2002, p. 8). U Nu was assassinated and General Ne Win and his Tatmadaw took political power, employing military rule, in 1962 (Fink, 2001; Sakhong 2012; Smith, 2002).

General Ne Win deployed the Tatmadaw to implement and enforce a “national language policy”, the motto of which was “one voice, one blood, and one nation.” In reality, this was a campaign against ethnic minority groups and a platform for forced assimilation. This policy was thinly disguised under the “Burmese Way to Socialism” (BSW) programme. Sakhong (2012, p. 8) explains:

General Ne Win established the “Burma Socialist Program Party” (BSPP), and used the armed forces, known as Tatmadaw, as the nucleus of “nation-building” not only by building the Tatmadaw as a national institution and a state mechanism, but also by promoting members of the armed forces as the “the guardian of the people and protectors of the Union” (Selth, 2002, p. 37 as cited in Sakhong, 2012).

The Tatmadaw was firmly implemented and given the power to enforce nation-building strategies (that further threatened ethnic minorities, in particular, and cultural diversity in general). This powerful institution has been impossible to dislodge and has remained the

central power in Burma since 1962 with little hope for a future of democracy or autonomous rights for minorities.

Karen ethnic nationality of Burma has struggled for self-determination against its three pro-Burman military governments: the Burma Socialist Programme Party with General Ne Win at the helm (BSPP: 1962-88), the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC: 1988-97) and the State Peace Development Council (SPDC: 1997-present). The key apparatus controlled by these governments is the Tatmadaw – the Burmese Armed Forces. (Fong, 2008, p. 328)

Recently, ethnic minority rights have been further reduced and threatened with the newly implemented Border Guard Force (BGF). The BGF requires that Burma have one national army – giving the Tatmadaw greater control over ethnic armed groups.

The Karen are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Burma. The Junta has persecuted them for decades, along with many other ethnic minority groups in Burma. Reasons for their persecution are layered. As previously mentioned, since the early 1960s, the Junta has established policies to wipe out any ethnic opposition groups that struggle to assert their own identities and cultures. Mainly, the government has attempted to wipe out any ethnic minority that identifies as an autonomous nation. Many ethnic minority groups have suffered atrocious human rights violations at the hands of the Tatmadaw. The Karen, in particular, have suffered greatly. Their national union, the Karen National Union (KNU), is the only group that has not laid down arms against the BIA (Thawngmung, 2011; Gong, et al., 2011; Smith, 2005). In the early 1990s, the growing humanitarian emergency became impossible for the United Nations and the world to ignore. Over the last two decades, there has been an increasing outflow of refugees and migrants, including men, women and children, to both neighbouring countries and third countries (Smith, 2002).

The Karen, along with many other ethnic minority groups, are effectively at war for their rights to autonomy, self-determination, territorial lands and economy. Specifically, the inhabitants of the Karen state have been excluded from decisions affecting their lands and resources. Many of the Karen are farmers and weavers. The Karen rural lands are used for food and livelihoods. In order to gain control over these lands, the Burmese Junta have raided villages, burned crops and terrorized the Karen over the years. The current ruling Junta keeps strict control over the diverse Burmese ethnic groups, suppressing freedom of information, limiting access to the Internet, and using tactics such as disappearances, torture, systematic rape, and extrajudicial execution to deal with dissidents (Fong, 2008). From 1995 to 2003, the Tatmadaw forcefully relocated Karen from hundreds mountain villages and turned these areas into “free-fire zones” (military zones that are not restricted against the use of fire power) (Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation, 2010). The designation of the “free-fire zones” proved more a form of ethnic cleansing as villagers were ordered to relocate into defended settlements under government control and “anyone attempting to remain their homes risked being shot on sight” (Smith, 2002, p. 9). Ceasefire negotiations have been on and off since 2003. Recent ceasefire discussions have not produced an end to the persecution of the Karen. At times, the Junta has made it clear that Karen refugees in Thailand would not be able to return home safely (Core, 2009; Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation, 2010). In 2003, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began resettling Karen refugees in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Scandinavia. Military offensives are ongoing against the Karen and other

ethnic groups and it is unlikely that Burma or the Karen will see a genuine democracy in the near future (Core, 2009).

The military actions have increased the number of internally displaced Karen, and the flow of migrants to refugee camps in Thailand. Since the 1960s, all three military governments have employed the “Four Cuts Strategy” as an internal colonization process (Fong, 2008). The Four Cuts Strategy involves a severing of links between insurgents and their families. Specifically, the following four links that are cut: “food supplies, financial flow, intelligence gathering and capacity to recruit new soldiers” (ibid., p. 336). However, these cuts are violently employed against peaceful civilians as well as insurgents as a means to force the KNU to surrender. There are hundreds of thousands of forcefully relocated and internally displaced Karen living without access to proper nutrition, health care, and education (Grundy-Warr and Wong, 2002). A small number of Karen attempt to return to their crops in secret in order to provide for their families and villages. When returning to their croplands becomes too dangerous, the Karen forage from the jungle forest. When internally displaced people can no longer survive in Burma, they flee to neighbouring countries (these countries in turn face an increasing burden of support for refugees). The current refugee population in Thailand’s seven camps is approximately 150,000. However, these numbers are estimated to be much higher as many refugees enter Thailand undocumented, and are thus unaccounted for. The fleeing refugees are unable to return to their homeland as their lives and freedom are at risk (Fink 2001; Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny 2011; Smith, 1991; 2002; Wakeman and Tin 2009).

In 2006, the Canadian government announced that it would accept 3000 Karen refugees over a two-year period for re-settlement in Canada. In September 2006, the first

group of Karen refugees arrived in Ottawa. About 200 refugees settled in Ottawa and they have been working tirelessly to adapt to life in their new northern country. Adapting to life in Canada has been challenging as there are significant linguistic, educational, and more importantly, psychological barriers to overcome.

4.2 Immigration in Canada

Population dynamics in Ottawa in particular, and in Canada more broadly, have changed significantly over the last 50 years. In the 1960s, the federal government of Canada changed immigration laws and policies in an effort to mitigate racial discrimination by creating the points system (Kobayashi et al., 2012). The points system based entry into Canada on merit points instead previous exclusionary Acts. The first Canadian Immigration Act, in 1906, gave officials the power to arbitrarily determine who was suitable and who was not. Often, medical and character checks enforced at the border effectively gave power to officials to be exclusionary against any undesirable ethnic immigrants without declaring an official intent to discriminate – specifically, black immigrants, women suspected of immoral conduct and people who might be dangers to public health (Whitaker, 1991). In a post-World War II Canada, Prime Minister Mackenzie King was seeking to foster Canada’s growth by immigration. New immigrants were to meet the domestic labour shortage but not upset the balance of the Canadian labour market. Furthermore, to appease those who were against increasing immigration, King defended Canada’s right to “discriminate, stating that the racial and national balance of immigration would be regulated so as not to alter the fundamental character of the Canadian population” (Knowles, 2007, p. 163). Up until 1961, the

majority of immigrants to Canada were refugees or settlers from the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, Italy, and the Netherlands (Mohamoud, 2005). Others have argued that the immigration policy has always been selective – favouring men over women due to their potential contribution to economic upward mobility (Stasiulis and Jhappan, 1995). However, the 1967 amended immigration Act created an “open-door” period through a merit points system – facilitating increased flows of heterogeneous immigrants from diverse non-traditional source countries (Kobayashi et al., 2012).

By 1971, for the first time in Canadian history, the majority of those immigrating to Canada were of non-European ancestry and this has been the case every year since the change in laws (CIC, 2011). Prior to this, integration meant assimilation into a predominantly British model of society (Fries and Gingrich, 2010). This type of assimilation can also be seen in the United States with their ‘melting pot’ approach to integration. In Canada, with the adoption of new immigration policies (and resulting changes to the composition of the population), a multicultural context is threaded through national discourse – in policy and in practice. However, as Fries and Gingrich (2010) argue, the policy and practice of multiculturalism is incomplete. Where there have been achievements in social justice, “inequalities of incomes and opportunities remain structured into the operation of the Canadian economy and society” (ibid., p. 37). These inequalities lead to profound differences in the lived experiences of individuals from differing ethno-cultural backgrounds.

Over the years, various levels of government in Canada have implemented a wide range of integration and multicultural policies. However, many of those immigrating to Canada experience various forms of discrimination – either a result of ethno-racial

backgrounds, or difficult economic and housing markets (Teixera and Li, 2009). Teixeira and Li (2009) explain how:

...differential immigration admission policies, home country situations and migrant decisions have resulted in complex and heterogeneous international migrant flows, and they [immigrant and refugees] experience different challenges in job markets, economic realities, and local communities. (p. 222)

The diversity and complexity of policies, and various backgrounds of people immigrating to Canada, produce layers of challenges for outreach and integration.

Integration is a complex concept, and defining it has been the focus of many theorists (Berry, 1987; 1997; Dauvergne, 2007; Ives, 2007). In 1988, Canada adopted a multicultural identity (in contrast to the United States' 'melting pot' society). The 1988 *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, and related policies, provide a legal framework to guide federal activities and responsibilities, and identify a series of principles for achieving the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada (CIC 2012). CIC (2012) discusses and defines multiculturalism in the following excerpt:

Canadian multiculturalism is fundamental to our belief that all citizens are equal. Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and [can] have a sense of belonging. Acceptance gives Canadians a feeling of security and self-confidence, making them more open to, and accepting of, diverse cultures. The Canadian experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding, and discourages ghettoization, hatred, discrimination and violence.

Through multiculturalism, Canada recognizes the potential of all Canadians, encouraging them to integrate into their society and take an active part in its social, cultural, economic and political affairs.

The description does not specifically define what multiculturalism is but rather explains what the concept can provide: acceptance, security, self-confidence, cross-cultural

understanding, harmony, and protection from marginalization and racism. Furthermore, the description seems to imply that Canada is a place where ancestry or traditional culture, including skills and knowledge, are valued and encouraged. However, the lived experience of many immigrants, especially those who arrive as refugees, is very far from this imagined concept of multiculturalism. As Fieras (2009) argues, difference and diversity is understood, endorsed, and supported, but only to the extent that:

[...] all differences are equivalent in status, justified by need rather than by rights, subject to similar treatment, in compliance with laws and core values, consistent with Canada's self-proclaimed right to 'draw the line,' and commensurate with the principles of liberal universalism (a belief that what we have in common as rights-bearing individuals is more important than what divides us through group membership) (p. 84).

Many newly arriving immigrants face isolation, marginalization and discrimination (Bernhard et al., 2007; Carter and Vitiello, 2012; Yu et al., 2007). As in the experience of the Karen, variables such as age, gender, residence, economic status and level of education are critical for determining support. Often, it is the younger, affluent, well-educated, and urban immigrants that garner more approval and support (Fieras 2009). Furthermore, the training, traditional skills and knowledge of newly arriving immigrants and refugees (as in the case of the Karen) are often undervalued, unacknowledged, and, as a result, unused.

Government officials often select of immigrant candidates based on their potential to contribute to the Canadian economy or to be reunited with family. It has been assumed that those immigrating to Canada, via the government points system, have the skills, training, and social networks to achieve upward mobility. In other words, those who already have significant financial, familial and occupational security can more easily

attain social and economic status. However, as Gans (2009, p. 1659) elucidates, this is not always the case:

The main cause of immigrant downward mobility is occupational; newcomers often cannot resume old occupations or careers, and so are forced to take jobs of lower status than in their country of origin. Former professors become school teachers; doctors work as medical technicians; and managers wind up as sales persons or store owners. Nonetheless, lower-middle class, working class and even peasant newcomers can experience downward mobility as well; when men who were previously farmers must work as migrant laborers.

In particular, those without a social and economic security net to draw upon may experience downward mobility (Gans, 2009). Even those who were professionals in their country of origin may experience periods of downward mobility upon arrival in a host country until training has been upgraded. Unfortunately, those who do not have the social, educational and economic resources to support further training are often stuck in positions that do not draw upon their previous skills and knowledge. This is often the case for resettled refugees. The following section will discuss the added challenges faced by resettled refugees when immigrating to Canada.

4.2.1 Experiences of Resettled Refugees in Canada

The purpose of this section is to address how the process of refugee resettlement to a third country, such as Canada, creates an emotional geography of loss, and how re-establishing self-worth, through the application of specific skills and knowledge, can create a palimpsest of new experiences, memories, and identity.

Canada is continuously sought out as a place of refuge and resettlement.

However, there is a gap in our understanding of these newcomers' specific support needs

and resources, especially for those who have lived in a prolonged refugee situation (Dauvergne, 2007; Stewart et al., 2008). Often, immigrants can plan for their migration to Canada (and transition into Canadian culture), since the process typically takes time and resources. However, refugees who are fleeing persecution or transitioning from a protracted refugee situation to one of forced migration may not have the financial resources, documentation or language education to easily integrate into their new country (Stewart et al., 2008). Teixeira and Li (2009) describe a successful integration process that requires the attainment of several basic needs. Among these needs the most important include: “(a) access to affordable housing in a safe neighborhood in a welcoming city/community; (b) access to good education; (c) employment and an adequate level/source of income in the new society; and (d) successful social and cultural integration” (ibid., p. 222). These basic needs form the foundation necessary to achieve upward mobility. However, many newly arriving refugees and immigrants struggle to securely establish these basic needs.

A person or family, immigrating to a foreign country, faces significant barriers to achieving secure social and economic status, let alone upward mobility. Issues that are central to most resettled refugees, such as language proficiency, employment, education, health, and acculturation (Ives, 2007) have been significant for resettled Karen refugees as well. These barriers are often compounded by social and economic constraints acquired previous to immigrating to a new country. The federal government focuses its efforts on assisting resettled refugees to become independent participants in the economy. However, complex barriers often prohibit long-term economic stability and security for resettled refugees. Ives (2007, p. 54) argues “restrictive government policies regarding

foreign qualifications and language instruction in resettlement contribute to refugees being funneled into low-wage jobs or the public welfare system.” Refugees often struggle for economic *security*, challenging the notion of immigrant upward mobility. Many factors shape refugee experiences in resettlement and integration. Refugee research has described micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors contributing to the lived experiences of resettled refugees. Ives (2007, p. 56) elaborates further:

Micro factors shaping integration include acculturation and culture (including language and religion), employment, social support, and political perspectives. On the meso level, institutional settings such as resettlement and public welfare agencies, ethnic community organizations, religious congregations, and private for-profit entities provide formal resettlement assistance and resources. On a macro level, inherent in the refugee experience are systemic issues of discrimination and host-country context.

Refugees working through micro-, meso-, and macro-level challenges/barriers, evolve according to situational and human agency factors. These challenges could hinder or facilitate refugees’ participation in economic, social, cultural, and political domains – in other words integration.

Resettled refugees, many of whom have spent the majority of their lives residing in rural refugee camps, have very little access to elementary and secondary education. Access to education is further differentiated by age and gender (Scott). Many of the Karen elders who have resettled in Canada did not have access to education before being relocated to a refugee camp, and in fact, many are illiterate. Learning to read and write in Canada’s official languages – when one is illiterate in their own native language – is a significant challenge and often prohibits job security. Karen women and girls living in Thai refugee camps often do not have access to education beyond a grade six level. On

the other hand, boys can seek further educational training at Buddhist monasteries. Girls must travel long distances from their families and villages to seek out boarding residences in order to access higher education. Only a limited number of Karen women have this opportunity with the help of aid organizations, such as KLEO. Thus, many young Karen people struggle to reach the adequate grade level, for their age, in the Canadian education system.

Another significant barrier to achieving economic stability or upward mobility for resettled refugees is mental health. Many of the refugees who have resettled in Canada have experienced extreme violence and have suffered traumatic events. Pottie et al. (2004) elucidates the varying processes before, during, and after resettlement, that can put people at greater risk for emotional problems: “Refugees, many whom have experienced war, state-endorsed terror, and political persecution are at particularly high risk for mental health problems such as anxiety, stress, depression, and other emotional difficulties” (p. 102). Linguistic and cultural barriers, a significant socio-economic gap between the country of origin and the 3rd country, and previous trauma all exacerbate the difficulties and stress of resettlement. The Karen people who have resettled in Ottawa experience these same challenges. The younger generation has been able to adapt to life and acquire the English language as they are placed in the Canadian education system. The adults, often, rely on their children and the youth to translate for them. Middle-aged adults and elders have extreme difficulty integrating and providing for their families – causing significant stress, diminished self-worth, and mental health problems.

As previously mentioned, the Karen people have suffered persecution, human rights violations, trauma, and a protracted life of war and refugee camps. The Karen are mainly an agrarian people, they depend on their land for their livelihood. Everything has been taken from the Karen or they have left everything behind for fear of persecution and death. Based on extensive participation with the Karen and KLEO volunteers it is clear that the Karen people in Ottawa want to engage in meaningful work, to lead productive lives, and to live in peace. The last thing the Karen people want is to “eat the government’s money” (interview with Karen). Many of the Karen have worked hard in school, have secured minimum-wage jobs, and have found ways to work with their traditional skills and knowledge. The Karen women cater private dinners, offering the experience of traditional Karen meals. In addition to their agrarian roots, many of the Karen women are also master weavers: they do custom work, alterations, and create original designs. With the help of KLEO, the women occasionally showcase their work and skills at workshops. The Karen are also masters at farming. Both Karen women and Karen men participate in farming. Farming has been their subsistence and their livelihood from the hill-tribe villages to the refugee camps. Shar Kloy, the son of Kloy Htoo (one of the farmers at the Karen farm) affirmed this during an interview: “My mom and dad was a farmer, but uh, after we came to Thailand my mom had a job as a nurse sometimes on the weekend we have some farming, she did a lot of farming...the history is farmers, really good farmers, in Karen state all the Karen are farmers.” Having a place to farm, apply their skills and knowledge – land to call their own in an urban environment – means that their journey out of persecution and time spent in refugee camps was not in

vain. Finding such a place became the mission of this research project as data collection commenced.

4.3 Transformative Effect #1: A Sense of Belonging and Self-Worth

During resettlement to third countries, those who are migrating are given many labels such as: refugee, immigrant, and/or visible minority. To an extent, these labels can be beneficial in seeking assistance, social service provision, and governmental and non-governmental support. However, these labels can siphon individuals and groups into homogenous categories that are perceived as having a low socio-economic status and a low sense of social honour and status group (Fries and Gingrich 2010) – rendering them invisible rather than visible. The *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* implies that immigrants to Canada can live their culture, but they are oftentimes still viewed as being part of a minority group – a visible minority. Ironically, the culture, history, and identity of these individuals is erased and made invisible by their visible minority or refugee status. Very few Canadians are aware of the civil war in Burma, even fewer are aware that the Karen people have resettled in Ottawa and other Canadian cities. Building partnerships between KLEO and other private and/or non-profit organizations provides an opportunity for the Karen to tell their story, interact with other Canadians, and build new social relationships – rendering them visible.

The story of building new social relationships continued as we expanded our networks to gain basic farm resources. Once the land was tilled, we needed plants, seeds, fencing, tools and other material resources. With the help of Erin O'Manique, the (then) project manager for Just Food, we were able to extend our network of neighbouring organic farmers and producers willing to donate seeds, seedlings, and pots. *Notre Petite*

Ferme in Buckingham, Quebec, and Tom Marcantonio of the Canadian Organic Growers (COG) donated a significant number of seedlings for our first growing season. Still desperate for funding for hoses and fencing, I applied for an award with an organization called Awesome Ottawa that donates a thousand dollars every month to a project that is deemed “awesome.” The Karen farm project won the July 2012 award and a flurry of media attention came our way. Two local newspapers came to the farm to interview the four Karen farmers and CBC Radio’s *All in a Day* program featured the Karen farmers and the farm (see Figure 4.2, p. 108).

After all the interviews, Kloy Htoo expressed to me that he was happy to have attention for the Karen people, and for people to know their story. Shar Kloy, translating for his father, said:

... my father says he’s more like, he’s always happy to work as a farmer, and like to plant, and never go back, because he sees there are news reporters, and makes him feel better and more hope for the future...

It meant a great deal to the Karen farmers that Canadian people want to know about them, their people in Burma, and their farm here in Ottawa. The words “never go back” and “hope for the future” are of particular significance. Knowing that Kloy Htoo and Shar Lah La worry a great deal about the decisions they made for their family, it is incredible to hear them speak, openly, about the importance of their recognition as a distinct ethnic group and about being valued as a farmer. Having their skills recognized gives them hope for the future. Their hope is that someday they will have a farm of their own where they will live and work. They were beginning to feel a sense of importance again and a sense of visibility as individuals and as a nation.

The Karen farmers rarely speak of their past lives – of fleeing their villages and living in the refugee camps – because it is too difficult and they are afraid to say the wrong things. Fear of saying the wrong thing runs deep among the Karen elders. Furthermore, the human rights crimes they experienced took place in the camps as well as in their mountain villages in Burma. Rarely do the Karen people (especially the elders) travel alone – they are always in pairs or in a group. On numerous occasions in informal settings it was expressed that being in a safe place is most important. They will only go to a place if it is sure to be a safe place. On one specific day we set up a picnic tent in the trees as a shelter on rainy days. After the tent was set up, Kloy Htoo and Lar Htoo joked with me laughing and saying: “now when the soldiers come with their guns we can run and hide there.” It was one of the only times they mentioned the soldiers to me, and I was taken aback at the way they were laughing at their past lived reality. The only other time soldiers were mentioned was during the interview process. The question was about traditional farming in their home country; Shar Kloy translated the response from his father:

... he doesn't really want to talk about that, but the other thing is our history for my dad is really bad, because in Burma, Karen state, sometimes it's hard to get the land, sometimes you are farming on the farm, and then they face too many problems from the government, from the military...

(Kloy Htoo and son speaking to each other)

... he's more happier for farming here because in back home he doesn't have really the same time there, every time he wants to go, because sometimes the government military they don't care about the farmers, ya, more freedom here.

The reference about time was explained after the interview. It was explained later that “timing” for farming was difficult because they never knew when the military would be

patrolling their lands or burning their crops down to drive them out. In Burma, the farmers are considered to be very low in social rank, and not valued by the government. Now they understand that in Canada the farmers are valued because without farmers, there is no food.



Figure 4.2: Lar Htoo watering the plants, Coleen Scott, Day Htoo, Carrie (Shar Lah La and Kloy Htoo's daughter), CBC news reporter, Shar Lah La, Kloy Htoo, and Day Htoo's daughter.



Figure 4.3: Car full of seedling and plant donations from Notre Petite Ferme

Image 4.3 was chosen because the Karen farmers were so grateful for the donations from Notre Petite Ferme and Tom Marcantonio and the expanding network of farmers that want to support the Karen and share knowledge, skills, and resources.

Creating a sense of belonging is not only about creating a literal sense of a place, but also about belonging to an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991). Migrants create hybrid identities and hybrid cultures as they transition from one place to another and these are, furthermore, reworked through their gender, race, class, and age. The Karen can experience a number of contributing factors creating hybrid identities. They maintain their Karen culture through their language, practices, and religion. However, the Karen also identify with the identity of a refugee – being in place and placeless. Furthermore, the Karen exchange some of their cultural dress for North American clothing, they work

at jobs that offer no continuity with their previous farm work, the youth attend Canadian school and Karen school, and they replace their traditional food with inadequate substitutes. A sense of belonging to an imagined community is negotiated in specific material spaces. Specifically, the Karen farmers have created a sense of belonging by re-establishing farming in a peri-urban area that had been left idle for many years. The Karen farmers are not a part of the urban agricultural turn in present-day Ottawa. In this part of the greenbelt, farmers have returned to the land. However, this time the land is being cultivated by the Karen farmers – demonstrating, again, the point that migrants shape and are shaped by new places they live. As Creese (2005, p. 4) explains: “belonging is negotiated in everyday material practices and cultural imaginations, bordered diasporic spaces where ‘otherness’ and difference is often simultaneously transcended and recreated.”

Creating a sense of belonging also means knowing where you don’t belong. For the Karen they feel that Canada is now their home, and yet, at the same time, they feel as though they do not fully belong. The Karen farmers place a great deal of importance on having land – it establishes the base for their sense of place, especially in the city. Having land and a farm has provided them with a sense of belonging and home within Canada, within the farming community at Just Food. Having land to farm in Canada has also given them a sense of self-worth as farmers. When asked during an interview what is important to her about farming, Shar Lah La answered with the following: “I want my own land, I don’t have my own land, I really want to have a place I can farm. Here (Canada), I don’t have any land that is mine, ya, I really want that.” Shar Lah La knows that the land is not really hers but the work and knowledge that goes into the plants and

land is hers, and the produce is hers. In Figure 4.4 (p. 117) Shar Lah La is teaching Karen youth and KLEO volunteers about the history and ways of farming in the Karen state of Burma, the importance of farming for all people including the Karen. Since that interview, the group decided to change the name of the project from the Karen farm to K’Nyaw Si. K’Nyaw is the real name for the Karen people in their own language, and Si is the word for farm.



Figure 4.4: Shar Lah La is teaching Karen youth about traditional Karen farming and the importance of farming for the Karen people.



Figure 4.5: Kloy Htoo leading the Karen youth through the watering of the plants at K'naw Si

“All farming, he [Kloy Htoo] asked god, like, he asked god the right job for him because he always farming, and that’s what he wanted, and then he got it.”

Pi and Naw

Previous work in refugee and immigration studies revealed that the experiences during resettlement are often quite varied by generation and gender (Dyck and McLaren, 2004). Specifically, being a female elder in a resettled family that is struggling to integrate and make ends meet financially can be very stressful. Pi is approximately 73-years-old and lives with her daughters (Say Blu and Jenny), son-in-law (Htoo Kwee) and the children of Say Blu and Htoo Kwee . I will refer to Say Blu as Naw (this is the more formal title that I use to address a woman of new acquaintance). Naw, who is in her mid-30s, explains how difficult it was when they came to Canada. She talks about the challenges of not knowing the language (e.g., not knowing how to ask where to go to the bathroom, or how to travel on the bus). Naw tells me one story how she got lost taking the bus and decided to back track on foot from the direction of the bus. Naw walked along the Queensway for 20 minutes before the police picked her up and helped her. Pi and Naw are happy to be in Canada and free from the camps and persecution, however, it has taken them a long time to feel secure and at home. This is especially true for many women who immigrate to Canada. Women often enter Canada as dependent rather than independent immigrants, which can result in feelings of insecurity and social isolation (Creese 2001).

Pi and Naw take me out to their backyard, which has been transformed completely into a food garden (see Figure 4.8, p. 114). There are long beans, squash, edible flowers and plants, pumpkins, tomatoes, and eggplant. We work together in the garden before heading inside for the interview.



Figure 4.6: Naw and Pi working in the backyard food garden

Pi (translated by Naw): “I am a farmer, it is how I grew up. Farming help the family to eat. Give good food to the family.”

Growing food is how Pi contributes to the family. It gives her a sense of purpose and self worth. When interviewing Pi's son-in-law (Htoo Kwe), he said:

“... first step, she, I mean, about, her, is a, I see she has nothing to do, and no job, no work, because she is so old, and just lives in home... I just have uhh, actually, you know what? First time I have a grandpa and grandma too, but grandma is too weak to do that job, I look at how much they're going to be happy. As soon as possible she will be dead. She came in my family so I need to take care of her, so what should I do, what is the thing, she has no job, she needs to be staying at home, she will take care of the grandchild, my daughter, not all time. Does not fun for her all the time. I wanted to change her mind. Some day but before, we lived in apartment and we did not have room to grow, now I have transportation, we have a house, we have her own room, a car too! Ah! [She said] How about we grow something like that?

About the food I don't, I don't tell her anything, just she put what she want...

If you burn my house you will smell everything, because she like that food, you know, the same way you like pizza here, you love pizza right? For me pizza is hooooooo [very bad]. I like old food, ya like the food we used to eat back there, traditional! When they cook it, smell, I run away. I like to eat it! But I don't like to smell it.”

After our afternoon of gardening, food preparation and interviewing, I left with a bag of greens, eggplant and tomatoes. Securing a home with a backyard and a car gave Htoo Kwe and Naw a sense of belonging and sense of security for their family. It gave Htoo Kwe great joy to give his mother-in-law a piece of land for her to grow food – realizing the effect it would have on her. Figure 4.7 is an image of Pi who proudly works her garden (growing food that is familiar to the Karen) and provides a significant contribution to her family.



Figure 4.7: Pi in her backyard garden.

Naw translates for Pi: “she [Pi] does not sell her vegetables, it is not her way. She can not change her way of thinking because growing up food, there is not a lot of food, if you have lots you share.”

Traditional Food Knowledge

Finally, traditional food knowledge (TFK) is a significant part of an individual's culture and identity. According to Kwik (2008, p. 2):

TFK represents the collected wisdom of many generations of people who have learned to produce, prepare and pass on their skills in food provisioning. The work of these people (usually women) is often unrecognized and undocumented, and the opportunity for this informal sharing and education to increase personal skills and for health and community capacity can be lost.

TFK and the sharing of TFK can provide a sense of purpose, place, and belonging. When people migrate to a new country they are looking for ways to retain, rework, re-establish, and affirm their cultural identity and a create sense of belonging. Producing, preparing and sharing traditional food can facilitate exchange between newly arrived immigrants and their broader community (see Figure 4.8).

The results of the K'Nyaw Si project have been more than affirmative; they have proven to be transformative. Farming has given them hope for the future, a sense of self worth, and a sense of belonging to a broader farming and Canadian community. Furthermore, practicing agriculture in Ottawa links them across time and space to their lives in Burma – perhaps making their forced migration and journey less difficult. Access to land at the Just Food site has provided them with a place they can call their own and practice traditional K'Nyaw culture.



Figure 4.8: Shar Lah La at the K’Naw Si, the day that the CBC reporter came to interview the farmers. Shar Lah La wanted to show her traditional food. She served a traditional dish that is served at most celebrations.

Shar Lah La: “I want to feed you Karen food, I can teach you, I want to show you.”

4.4 Transformative Effect #2: Urban Agriculture and Mental Health

Section 4.3 discussed the transformative effects farming has had for the Karen, such as a sense of belonging, purpose, and self-worth. It was acknowledged that these effects are gender-specific and varied generationally. However, within the migration literature there is little research that examines the psychosocial stress and mental health impacts of resettlement on refugees. The lack of research can be attributed to, individuals disappearing under the homogenous moniker of “refugee.” Without the care of volunteer service providers for specific refugee groups, individuals arriving under the refugee status would disappear into the Canadian welfare system with very little support or aid. Tilbury (2007) argues that it is not necessarily migration that causes mental health problems, but rather all the associated factors pre- and post-migration that contribute to the emotional stress of migration. Furthermore, these factors are heightened in refugees who have experienced trauma and prolonged stress before or during immigration. There has been little research on how compromised mental health might jeopardize successful integration or on the preventative steps to alleviate the emotional stress of immigration. Profound transformative effects, such as mental health improvement were not originally anticipated as one of the outcomes of this project. However, mental health among research participants has significantly improved, and proved to be a recurring theme throughout the data collection process. Most of the responses pertaining to mental health were recorded during interviews with Coleen Scott and another volunteer support worker, Mindy. Shar Lah La also speaks of the health of her husband and Kloy Htoo offers his own feelings of being at the farm. The following is a response from volunteer support worker, Mindy:

... if he's [Kloy Htoo] involved in the expansion and growth [of the farm] it would give him such a marvellous purpose because they're very smart people, the people coming out of the camps were the best and the brightest, resourceful. Coleen and I have discussed how people are coming from other parts of the world and they are often given jobs that are absolutely unsuited to their skill set, the Karen are farmers and weavers among many other things they are hard working and smart and for Kloy and Shar Lah, to be back in their element is an ... observable plus in their psychology and their happiness and daily living because it's their right match, and um it's wonderful, its wonderful to see, they're smart, they have leadership skills, they are so dedicated and they laugh and say "oh, my plants are so small, that the gas it costs to come out here costs more than my plants are worth" and we laugh and we say "but just you wait" and uh, so they see the future, they see the commitment, they know that if they start seeds in the winter somehow they can grow plants, they'll have a heads up. I was surprised to see actually how large their daily effort is! I thought it was a little couple of rows, no, no it's wonderful. So we are hoping for rain. I was telling Kloy about the First Nations rain dances but ya it's just a really wonderful thing.

Mindy's response is representative of the individual care and attention that support and service providers can offer. Support providers like Mindy are working one-on-one with individuals – gaining an understanding of the specific health and mental health needs of resettled refugees. Mindy volunteers specifically with Kloy Htoo and Shar Lah La's family and has noted the observable transformation in their daily happiness and psychology. This insight represents a significant contribution to both migration studies and research pertaining to emotional geographies of care and responsibility (as mentioned in Chapter 1's review of the key term 'place' in geography). In Davidson and Milligan's (2004) work on embodiment of emotional geographies, the authors argue that the most "immediate and intimately felt geography is the body, the site of emotional experience and expression" (p. 523). The closest spatial scale is the body and this is where emotion *takes place*. Furthermore, these emotions are influenced by daily material practices, memories of time and place, and thoughts of what the future might hold materially (in terms of food, medicine, home, and land). Milligan and Wiles (2010) argues that care

and emotion involves interpersonal relationships but also people-place relationships. Providing care and support is spatial, it takes place, is practiced in place, and creates places that are charged with emotion and sentiment. It is important to recognize the ways care is spatially structured and practiced “emphasizing the intricacy and richness of spatiality and the relationship between place and well-being” (Milligan & Wiles, 2010, p. 738). Having a place to apply skills and knowledge has alleviated some of the negative stress and emotion that plagues Kloy Htoo and Shar Lah La.

Coleen Scott who has worked most intimately with the Karen and is considered a most respected insider had this to say during the interview:

... farming is in the Karen blood, a farmer is who the Karen are and when they come to Canada that's taken away from them, their self-esteem becomes less, they become depressed because they're not in their natural environment and many middle-aged men, um, find themselves very frustrated because they have lost part of their dignity and having the farm back, it gives them back their self-worth, their dignity and who they really are, so to come to a new country and be who you are and contribute to your new country you know makes them feel completely...if you saw Kloy Htoo before the farm you would see that his face was very different. And now he has the farm he knows he has a purpose here, he has a meaning to be here, he can do something with the skills that he has and they know so much about farming, and so to be able to come now and feel like they can be themselves in a new country and make a life.

Lived experience, in a specific place, can create powerful emotions. These emotions can draw in turn on previous experiences (perhaps felt in different times and places). The lived experience of Kloy Htoo at the farm had very powerful transformative emotional effects.



Figure 4.9: Kloy Htoo working his farm on a warm summer day

Shar Kloy translating for his father: “he’s so happy it kind of remind farming here of when he was a child the same as when he was a little boy and he go to the farm and he so happy, like he go back to his childhood [sic].”

Kloy Htoo is a man who has seen the face of war, has witnessed his village burned to the ground, has hidden his family in the jungle, has run in fear to make it to Thailand, has lived for over a decade in a refugee camp, has forcibly migrated as a refugee and has made the transition from a rural life to a Canadian, urban environment. For him to say that he feels like he has returned to his childhood by working on the farm affirms the significance of having a safe, free, place to do what he believes he is meant to do.



Figure 4.10: Kloy Htoo and Shar Lah La arriving at K’Naw Si laughing and joking with each other.

Shar Lah La: Here is better, better than the city, better than in the winter. Sometimes body is heavy, not so light, he wake up late, but he want to come to farm, you know sometime he not happy, and then you know sometime your body not too light and you feel so heavy to wake up, but he say after a little bit he want to go to the farm [sic].

Many times I asked the Karen farmers if they are happy at the farm and often times the answer was a practical one. For example, they would say that they are happy with this land, but they also note that the field next to theirs is better (and maybe they could move to that field next year?). They would say that they need more rain or there is too much rain, or that they need to start the plants earlier (they worry about their plants).

Depression is an emotional state and a common cause of ill health over the world (Hammarström et al., 2009). Depression is hard to define, as there are many symptoms

and manifestations associated with it. It is even harder to define depression across cultures. The western classification of depression and depressive symptoms does not always apply for minorities from other cultures. Many common symptoms of depression include: feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, marginality, lowering of mood, decrease in energy, decrease in activity, loss of interest in activities and other forms of somatization (bodily pain and distress, without the presence of physical signs or medical explanation, related to depression and patients with anxiety) (DSM IV 2000; Burton, 2003). According to Hammarström et al. (2009):

Symptoms and reactions to trauma are expressed and experienced differently in different cultures and can also vary between men and women. These disparities hamper the option of identifying a depressive state in men and women and in patients from different cultures.

Consequently, inability to identify depressive states in varying cultural minority groups, and across genders, may result in lack of care, treatment, or preventative measures. While emotion was rarely discussed explicitly, participants did indicate that they were happy to breathe fresh air and get exercise while working at the farm. Often, the Karen mentioned that they don't like being in the city and prefer to come to the farm. Furthermore, the Karen are quite accustomed to living collectively both in the Karen state of Burma and in the Thai refugee camps. In Ottawa, the Karen housing placement is more isolated and dispersed. Besides attending church masses and community events organized through KLEO, the farm provides an important collective sense in their lives. Many times their children expressed that their parents were happy to farm and that they were happy for them. The older children would tell me that they are happy that their parents have a place to go because without the farm they just stay at home all day and are not happy.

Research reveals that using simple categories in the English language such as happy or sad may limit the possible interpretive categories or variety in range of feelings (Tilbury 2007; Wierzbicka 1999). Shar Lah La's description of Kloy Htoo feeling heavy and not light may be a type of somatization associated with depression. Wierzbicka (1999) argued that, when doing research, we should avoid culture-specific analytical categories in our own language and "carefully listen to how people in different cultures talk about what they see and how they feel" (p. 275). Based on almost two years of participatory work and careful listening, I can only glean from the few lengthy conversations and interviews that working outdoors and growing food gave the Karen in this study a sense of purpose and made them feel "happy." They appear to feel good when they are all together at the farm, laughing, singing their songs in their language and joking with one another. There is an observable ease, joy, contentment and lightness in the demeanour of the farmers when they are at the farm that is not perceived in other settings. Thus, farming has had a positive transformative effect on the mental health of the Karen farmers in Ottawa. Having a place to call their own, to gather as a social group, to work, to have a sense of purpose, to live in an environment that is familiar, and to apply their skills and knowledge is important for the mental health for resettled refugees, especially those with agrarian roots. This case study only highlights the potential for further research in this field – linking land, place-making, forced migration, and mental health.

CHAPTER FIVE: EXPERIENCES OF THE KAREN: PRODUCING FOOD SECURITY, SOCIAL NATURE, AND POLYCULTURAL SPACES

Like many resettled refugees, the Karen people face a number of challenges navigating the food system (here food system refers to the local network of producers, grocers, garden networks, and products). Some of the most significant challenges for the Karen, upon arrival in Canada, involve daily routines that North Americans tend to take for granted such as: going to the grocery store and cooking dinner. Many of the Karen, having lived in a protracted refugee situation, have never been exposed to a modern, North American kitchen (much less modern kitchen appliances), they have never been to the grocery store, and they have never needed to navigate an urban system for access to food. Economic constraints, unfamiliar food choices, language barriers, and housing locations (causing a reliance on convenience store produce) have contributed to difficulties in accessing food that is healthy, nutritious and culturally appropriate. The Karen have learned to navigate Ottawa's food system, and manage a Canadian kitchen since their arrival in Ottawa with help from KLEO volunteers. However, their story and their daily struggles to locate and purchase food that is healthy and culturally appropriate is consistent with studies relating food insecurity and refugee populations (Dharod 2011; Hadley et al. 2007; Hadley & Sellen 2006; Sellen & Hadzibegovic, 2003). According to Dharod (2011, p. 83), "compared with the native population, immigrants and refugees in the United States may experience a high level of food insecurity due to relatively lower incomes and shifts in the food environment and diet-related practices upon arrival."

One of the major shifts in the food environment is the trend for fewer, larger stores located outside of city centres – typically at a distance from low-income

neighbourhoods (Dunkley et al., 2004). Access to supermarkets can be understood as an indicator for the quality of a food environment; supermarkets tend to provide a higher quality and wider variety of healthy food (Franco et al., 2008; Block & Kouba 2006). Neighbourhoods with higher incomes tend to have greater access to supermarkets, while poorer neighbourhoods (in which the residences of immigrant and refugee groups are disproportionately located) have access generally only to smaller grocery stores and/or convenience stores (Block & Kouba, 2006; Moore & Diez Roux, 2006). Smaller grocery and convenience stores often offer less fresh produce and supply items that are higher in saturated fats, carbohydrates, sugar, and sodium. Studies examining the presence of food deserts in Canadian cities have revealed mixed results with some cities, namely London, Ontario, experiencing food deserts in low-income neighbourhoods (Larsen & Gilliland, 2009). Two Montreal studies revealed contradictory results: one study suggested that food deserts were not prevalent within the urban landscape (Apparicio et al., 2007), and the other revealed that 40% of residents without an automobile had poor access to fresh produce (Bertrand, 2008). Bedore (2013) examines the historical geography of food retailing and capitalist urbanization in relation to the emergence of the food desert problem in Kingston's poorer neighbourhoods. Larsen and Gilliland (2009) conducted a study of a farmers' market introduced into London, Ontario's Old East neighbourhood food desert. Their study revealed that the farmers' market significantly increased the availability of healthy food and lowered overall food costs for households in the neighbourhood. The purpose of this section is to highlight the gaps in, and further enrich, the discussion on the relationship between food security, food environments, and economically vulnerable communities – specifically, resettled refugees such as the Karen.

Section 5.1: Food Security, Food System Challenges, and Food Justice for the Karen

The Karen case study provides evidence of the struggles that many resettled refugees face when navigating the food system. Food security and food justice add other dimensions to this nuanced and layered case study. Food security and food justice are used as analytical lenses to highlight the growing need for access to healthier, more culturally appropriate, and affordable food environments. During the interview process, the Karen were asked two questions relating to food security: 1) Do you face any challenges with conventional supermarkets? 2) If you could, how would you change the food system in Ottawa? (NB I attempted to explain that the food system refers to the current network of food grocers, producers, distributors and processors, and the policies that support the network). During the interview and translation process, these questions required some clarification and rewording into simpler terms. The term “food system”, especially, required the most clarification. It can be difficult for the Karen to imagine the entirety of the Canadian food system because they are used to simpler networks of producing, purchasing, and consuming food – more akin to a farmers’ market or farm gate sales. However, all 6 farmers interviewed said they had difficulty accessing supermarkets and 2 of their eldest children (charged with translating and assisting their parents in daily routines) expressed that grocery shopping is challenging both socially and economically. Scott and another support volunteer spoke of the difficulties the Karen faced, upon arrival, in navigating Ottawa’s food system and the support the Karen required in learning to use modern kitchen appliances. Furthermore, it was expressed that eating healthily is a challenge because the fresh produce that they require is very expensive for them. Neh, the son of Lar Htoo and Day Htoo, said that they stopped buying certain vegetables, like herbs,

because they were too expensive at the supermarket. Shar Lah La explained how confusing it was the first time she went to a grocery store in Canada. She said she didn't recognize the vegetables, and she didn't know how to read the prices and the signs. Scott describes the food adaptation and acculturation process for the Karen:

The Karen had never lived in urban areas before their arrival in Canada. After 5 years living in Canada, the Karen have adapted to our supermarkets. They substitute local produce for cooking their traditional foods. Yes, the traditional foods of the Karen people are often not available and are expensive (i.e., pumpkin leaves and flowers are very popular with Karen and Burmese). When the Karen were farming they could not grow enough to provide for this market.

The Karen have learned to adapt to their new food system. Their traditional produce is substituted with local produce, when it is affordable to do so. However, there is a sensory continuity that is missing in the touch, feel, and consistency of the local produce and the ways it is acquired. Dudley (2011, p. 747) explains that the refugee experiences can be further understood by examining the relationship between bodies and physical objects – of materiality, and exploring “what it *feels* like, bodily as well as emotionally, to transform the unfamiliar to the familiar.”

Some of the Karen families who have been here for a number of years are now in a position to purchase an automobile. However, it is often the eldest children who hold a driver's license, and the parents then become dependent on their children (or public transit) to get to the grocery store. Shar Lah La and her family live approximately 4 km from the closest supermarket. With a family of five children and two adults, it is long and difficult to walk and carry enough groceries for the family. There are two convenience stores located in closer proximity (approximately 2 km) than the supermarket. The weekly groceries are often substituted with goods from the

convenience store – the convenience store does not always have fresh produce and the prices are often higher than in the supermarket. All the farmers and their children have expressed that having a place to grow their produce has provided them with an abundance of fresh produce on a daily basis, for 5-6 months out of the year. Furthermore, the fresh produce they grow has been shared with other Karen families, sold within their church parish to recover operation costs and provide extra income, and sold at the farmers' gate stand located at the Just Food Farm headquarters. It should be noted that the farm location is far from the family homes. However, with the support of KLEO volunteers, the farmers' children, and good access to urban public transit, the Karen are able to spend entire days of the week at the Just Food Farm, working and preparing their produce for home, community, and sale.

When asked how they would change the food system if they could, the six Karen farmers all said that they would like to have a place to grow food that is closer to home, and that they would like to see more vegetable gardens throughout the city. Shar Lah La explains how different it is in her native country compared to Ottawa. She says that they have gardens for everything, including: fruit trees, herbs, vegetables, and medicinal herbs. Shar Lah La explains that she doesn't know how to purchase the medicine here or how to use it. She explains how, in her native country, certain plants are very important for Karen health and medicinal practice.

Simich et al. (2006) conducted a study with resettled refugees in Canada suffering from economic hardship. Simich et al. contribute to the growing discussion in refugee studies by relating economic hardship, mental health and food security. Simich et al. (2006, p.436) discovered that “distress was more strongly associated with economic

hardship than with expectations of life in Canada...economic hardship was only measured by worries about lack of money for food and medicine.” Having a place to grow traditional food and medicine can, potentially, alleviate some of the stress and economic hardship experienced by the Karen.

Furthermore, relieving some of the stress of food insecurity can have positive mental health outcomes. Drawing on a number of studies with resettled refugees, Hadley (2010, p. 401) reports that:

... the experience of food insecurity has been associated with a range of negative health outcomes, including poorer dietary intake and a higher prevalence of mental health symptoms and disorders (Chilton and Booth 2007; Cook and Frank 2008). Food insecurity may infuse an added dimension of uncertainty into the already stressful lives of individuals resettled in the United States.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, there are a number of ways that urban farming contributes to positive mental health for the Karen refugees. Relieving some of the stress of economic hardship and food insecurity is another way that urban farming can alleviate some of the burdens associated with resettling in a new country.

The Karen knowledge of medicinal plants and their uses can contribute to the growing knowledge base of holistic nutrition in Canada – linking their skills and knowledge to broader networks and further fostering a sense of purpose, sense of self-worth, and sense of value in their traditional practices. As an example, Shar Lah La and Lar Htoo are currently growing turmeric, ginger and a variety of other plants brought from Thailand and Burma for medicinal purposes.



Figure 5.1: Turmeric plant at the beginning of the growing season – important for Karen medicine and culture.



Figure 5.2: Shar Lah La is showing off her Karen plants. The leaves and flowers are used in soups and stews, mixed with curry and fish paste.

Lar Htoo, is especially interested in growing seeds that he brought from Thailand when he immigrated here. Lar Htoo takes great pride in his plant varieties, in his ability to grow them here in Canada, and in his ability to fulfill the demand for these plants within the Thai and Karen communities in Ottawa (see Figure 5.3, below).



Figure 5.3: Shar Lah La and Lar Htoo. They asked to have their picture taken here as they are using a traditional Karen knife to harvest plants they have grown from seeds they saved from Thailand.

Having a place to grow their traditional foods, medicines, and herbs contributes to the Karen farmers' food security by providing a wide range of healthy and culturally appropriate foods, reducing the amount of income they spend on fresh produce and medicine, and supplementing their income with farm gate, church, and restaurant sales. Furthermore, they contribute to food security in their neighbourhood by bringing fresh, accessible, and culturally appropriate produce, at a lower price than the supermarket, by

selling at their church, and by sharing with others in their community. It is important to note that the farmers still have to travel across the city in order to gain access to land to grow food on. The commute is long by public transit and the farmers are dependent on their children and volunteers to get them to the K'Nyaw Si. Urban agriculture provides significant benefits for the Karen farmers and their community. However, K'Nyaw Si is not meant to be portrayed as a romanticized farm escape from their low-income neighbourhood. The farm requires hard work and dedication. Furthermore, Kloy Htoo worries a great deal about how he will grow plants in a new country and if he will lose the land he has just been granted. Like many resettled refugees and immigrant communities, the Karen face significant barriers and challenges to accessing space to grow food (to be elaborated upon in Section 5.2). During my participation at the farm, the Karen farmers expressed many of their worries, especially those related to growing in an unfamiliar ecology and in a new social environment. The constraints that the Karen face are similar to those of other marginalized communities. Therefore, a food justice framework provides a relevant lens to view this research.

A food justice framework provides an analysis that problematizes food systems, and at times, alternative food systems, for marginalized communities of low-income and communities of colour (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). According to Werkele (2004, p. 379):

The food justice frame highlights the focus on systemic change and the necessity for engaging in political and policy processes as well as consciously addressing issues of movement mobilization and strategies. Theoretically, the food justice frame opens up linkages to a wider range of conceptual frameworks drawn from the literature on democracy, citizenship, social movements, and social and environmental justice.

A food justice framework not only documents local projects mobilization, self-provision, and resistance, but also: 1) observes the formation of networks, and partnerships that bridge issues and scales; and, 2) asks questions about the formulation of issues, strategies for reconciliation, and outcomes for change (Werkele, 2004). Furthermore, a food justice framework adopts a polycultural approach to alternative food systems that problematizes the predominantly white, middle-class character of the food movement (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). In an effort to challenge geographies of food insecurity, in a North American context, the food justice framework and the alternative food movement narrative needs to include the stories and support of low-income communities, and marginalized communities. Toronto's Field to Table program and warehouse is an example of linking farmers to anti-poverty movements through bypassing local supermarkets to distribute fresh produce to low-income residents (Werkele, 2004). Another Toronto program provides life-skills training to at-risk youth and low-income immigrant women (ibid).

The Karen farmers' work aligns with the food justice model by growing, producing, and selling food in a way that de-links from unsustainable, conventional agri-food systems. Furthermore, as resettled refugees, they are marginalized and invisible in the Ottawa food movement scene. More importantly, the Karen farmers provide food for themselves and their community "while imagining new ecological and social relationships" (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011, p. 5). Through food justice the Karen can create a local food system that meets both their food and cultural requirements.

The Karen farmers practice knowledge sharing and networking with local organizations (including the Canadian Organic Growers – Ottawa Chapter, Notre Petite

Ferme, Greta's Organics, and the start-up farmers at the Just Food Farm) and individual farmers who strive for alternative food systems and food justice models. The Karen farmers and their children have noted significant improvements in their eating habits and overall health due to having an abundance of fresh and nutritious food. Lar Htoo and Day Htoo's eldest son, Neh, expressed that he thinks it is good his parents can farm again because now they are healthier. Neh said his parents do not work, and if they stay home they get "too depressed." Neh mentioned that he thinks it is important for his parents to continue farming their way, and for the Karen youth to see the Karen ways.



Figure 5.4: Two Karen youth visiting the farm to learn and volunteer in the Karen farming ways and traditions.

As Neh further explains: “so many young Karen people who have been here for more than two years and they already begin to forget their own language and culture.”

At K’Nyaw Si, the farmers practice seed saving and organic farming. The Just Food Farm is currently undergoing its preparatory years before meeting full organic certification. The Karen participated in an organic workshop facilitated by Just Food. Before the workshop began, it was necessary to explain to the Karen the need for certified organic farming in western society, and the need to differentiate between organic and conventional methods. The Karen practiced organic farming in their home state in Burma because they believe exposure to chemicals is unhealthy. Furthermore, they do not use chemicals because they are expensive, and cause more damage than good. Shar Lah La and Kloy Htoo explained that they wouldn’t know how to use the chemicals even if someone gave them some.

In fact, the Karen have ways to nourish their soil and repel pests with natural remedies made from their own produce. A common method of replenishing the soil is to burn a crop and let the land lie fallow for a year or two before it is used again. They repel pests by making a concentrated mixture of hot chillies and garlic. They also recycle and repurpose materials to build structures in the garden to support plants and vines. The Karen are contributing to a culturally rich and biodiverse ecology by using seeds passed from one generation to another, and by practicing their food growing traditions in a way that fosters a healthy socio-ecology. Finally, the Karen farmers’ partnership with Just Food is mutually beneficial since it results in new socio-ecologies. The Karen farmers are learning how to farm in their new ecology with advice and resources from members of Just Food. Reciprocally, Just Food is fulfilling that part of their food justice mandate that specifically focuses on marginalized communities. The following section looks at

some of the barriers and challenges that the Karen face in gaining access to land to grow food.

Section 5.2: Barriers and Challenges to Producing New Social Ecologies and Community

Access

As of winter 2013, the Karen have had two successful seasons of growing food at K’Nyaw Si in partnership with Just Food Ottawa. However, the Karen still face a number of challenges and barriers. Previous to the Just Food Farm, the Karen tried participating in community gardens. There was only one community garden in close proximity to their home; however, it was located in another community housing project, and it was very small. There are long waiting lists for other Ottawa allotment and community gardens that are farther away from the Karen farmers’ neighbourhood. Based on my participatory work with the Karen, I have learned that they indeed ‘live in the moment’ due to a lifetime of threats to tenure security, persecution and the experience of living in a protracted refugee situation – these experiences have deeply engrained a sense of impermanence and flux within their psyches. If they think there is a waiting list for a garden, they will assume that they will not get this land. Near the end of every growing season, the Karen farmers ask me if they will still have the land for next year. The Karen farmers are aware that they have the land as long as Just Food Ottawa can secure a land access permit while undergoing lease negotiations –currently, tenure security is unstable and on a year-to-year basis. The Karen remain concerned that they will lose the land due to something they do wrong, even though they are partnered with Just Food.



Figure 5.5: Kloy Htoo carefully tending his plants and weeding by hand.

When talking about traditional and organic methods for enriching soil, Shar Kloy translated for his father the following concern:

... burning [old crops] is like the Karen state law there, it's like here even the government don't allow people to burning here, he doesn't want to burn anything here. He just want to follow the rule and watch over the plant [sic].

The farmers ask me if their work is good, and if people think their garden is messy. They are afraid that Canadians will think their garden is “messy” and their re-use of materials (such as sticks, and string and pie plates) will be thought of as “ugly” – thoughts that stem from the Karen observing the clean and manicured landscaping of Canadians and are no doubt influenced by Canadian garden aesthetics and lawn care.

Robbins et al. argues that the industrially-produced garden and lawn aesthetic is “reflected in the transformation of a relatively obscure style of pre-romantic English garden into the most common and monolithic feature of the urban American landscape” (Robbins et al., 2001, p. 373). North American lawns and grass represent a toxic landscape that consumes agricultural land and replaces it with the ultimate unproductive monoculture.

Similarly, when visiting Pi and Naw’s backyard garden, they mentioned that one of their neighbours (to the left of their home) complained that their backyard was wild and messy. The neighbour to the right of their home is a Chinese-Canadian immigrant and, according to Pi and Naw, was much more accepting of their gardening style. The neighbour to the right had cultivated space for growing food and herbs as seen in Figure 5.6. There is a clear difference in the use of space between the neighbours. Pi and Naw’s backyard is almost completely edible. The neighbour’s yard is mostly occupied by lawn, with garden boxes edging the perimeter of the yard. However, there is a shared affinity between the neighbours for growing edible spaces.



Figure 5.6: Pi and Naw’s neighbours’ backyard. These neighbours were more accepting of Pi and Naw’s gardening style due to their own appreciation of cultivating space for food and herbs.

“Is it a Safe Place?”

As mentioned before, it is difficult for the Karen to negotiate a place to grow food due to specific social challenges and barriers. The Karen rely on support workers and their children for access to services until they are familiar enough, and feel comfortable with, the travel route to social services. There is an engrained sense of fear and wariness towards strangers and unfamiliar places due to a lifetime of war and persecution and living in a protracted refugee situation. The Karen elders will not travel alone and they must ensure that a place is safe before they stay there. The Karen farmers were recently interviewed by researcher, Rachel Cleary, visiting from Australia. The researcher wanted

to know if the Ottawa Karen farmers had any advice for those who were working with Karen farmers in Australia. When asked if they thought it was a good idea for men to leave their families to farm, the Karen replied that it was normal in the Karen state for the men to be away from home for farming and it is a good thing. However, they followed that comment by saying that the place must be safe. Shar Lah La affirmed: “as long as the place is safe, the man can go.” One day the Karen farmers, Scott, and I set up a tent shelter at K’Nyaw Si for rainy days and storage. After the shelter was erected and organized, Kloy Htoo and Lar Htoo started laughing and joking and translated to me: “now, if the soldiers come with their guns, we can run and hide in the shelter.” To the Karen, it was a joke. The joking is indicative of a sense of relief from fear; however, it demonstrates that the fear of persecution still rests at the edge of their memories and daily thoughts. Therefore, ensuring safety, security, and familiarity (with other farmers at the Just Food Farm) has been essential to the success of K’Nyaw Si.

Finances:

The Karen experience a number of financial challenges in urban agriculture. The start-up costs of K’Nyaw Si, and the costs of maintaining the backyard garden of Pi and Naw, have been a challenge to meet. The Karen have very little extra income that they can spare for seeds, tools, resources, and water costs. The farmers have had to be innovative and resourceful in acquiring materials and water for their garden. In the summer of 2012, Central and Eastern Ontario farmers suffered severe drought and extreme heat conditions that consequently baked crops and reduced yields (Galloway, 2012). The cost to keep plants watered and healthy has been prohibitive for Pi and Naw and their food garden has

suffered as a consequence. However, their tall, intercropped plants have provided shade for some of the vegetables – limiting evaporation from the extreme heat.

For the farmers of K’Nyaw Si, language barriers and a lack of governmental support services have prevented them from understanding and accessing the financial resources available to Ontario farmers and start-up projects. KLEO is stretched in terms of the services it is able to provide and there is a lack of knowledge of the Ontario and federal financial support services available for farmers. There are a number of financial resources available for Ontario farmers such as: Farm Credit Canada, Canadian Agricultural Loans Act, and Agricultural Credit Corporation. However, these resources, mostly, finance larger farm operations. Smaller loans are available through organizations like Canada Small Business Financing Program that focus on supporting small community businesses. However, business owners and farmers with an established sense of socio-economic security are the only ones who can easily access many of these loans. The Karen farmers, who are currently on social assistance, are not in a position to enter into a loan agreement. Therefore, they remain reliant on fundraising and partnering with other charitable organizations – a strategy with limited long-term potential – for their small farm project by. Engaging in fundraising and partnership building requires a great deal of networking and communications work. Language barriers, along with limited phone and Internet access, prevent the farmers from developing potential partnerships. The farmers of K’Nyaw Si have, at times, depended on the guidance and assistance from the volunteers of KLEO and Just Food members for seed and plant donations and fundraising. In July of 2012, I submitted a proposal to the Awesome Foundation – Ottawa Chapter in the hopes of gaining funds for K’Nyaw Si. The Awesome Foundation

is comprised of ten trustees who pool together \$1000 to donate to a project that they determine to be “awesome.” They describe themselves as “an ever-growing worldwide network of people devoted to forwarding the interest of awesomeness in the universe” (Awesome Ottawa, 2012). The K’Nyaw Si project won the July 2012 award of \$1000. The money has been used to purchase tools, materials, seeds, pots, plants, potting soil, gas, a wagon, and bins for transporting produce. Winning the award gave an added boost of confidence for the Karen and they expressed their joy at being recognized for their work and story.

KLEO has been working on incorporating K’Nyaw Si into their 2013 annual budget costs. Scott has been working to secure a private donor who will contribute to the future costs of K’Nyaw Si. However, security of tenure of K’Nyaw Si and the Just Food Farm remains contingent upon securing a long-term lease of the Greens Creek farm lands with the NCC. The following sections will discuss how land use management in Ottawa is determined by specific society-nature constructions and how alternative perceptions of *social nature* can influence more inclusive policies towards land access – specifically for growing food.

Section 5.3: Social Nature, Migration, and Farming

To reiterate, this research is informed by theories of social nature as a means to explore how populations relate to and discursively construct their surrounding ecologies. Of particular interest are the various ways that the Karen urban farmers in Ottawa perceive nature and how these multiple perspectives might inform public policy towards a more just, inclusive, and democratic approach to land-use management. First, Section 5.3 will

discuss how social nature and migration relate by highlighting the material cultural experiences of the Karen farmers. Second, it will explore the Karen farmers' perspectives on nature and how they might shed light on the limited and exclusionary greenspace management in Ottawa.

Research on migration studies has occupied political, cultural, and spatial realms of geography. Most recent migration research in geography argues that climate or environmental change has the potential to influence human migration (McLeman & Hunter, 2010). Migration, as an adaptive response to climate change, is increasingly becoming a reality for many populations, especially for small-island, coastal, and agriculture-dependent populations (Barbieri et al., 2010; Julca & Paddison, 2010). The mass movement of people due to environmental change intersects with and is embedded within social, cultural, and economic processes operating across spatial scales, from the local to the global – often with varying outcomes for people. Those who are in more vulnerable circumstances may be more susceptible and less adaptable to environmental degradation or disasters – forcing them to migrate (Myers, 2005; Tacoli, 2009). Much of the research linking climate change and migration is predicative and thus it is difficult to discern the impact that climate-induced mass migration will have on the environment. Tacoli (2009, pp. 513-514) argues that the inherent difficulties in predicting the impacts of climate change on human mobility are:

[...] partly because of the relatively high levels of uncertainty about the specific effects of climate change, and partly because of the lack of comprehensive data on migration flows, especially movements within national boundaries and in particular for low-income countries that are likely to be most affected by climate change.

The climate change – migration thesis is one of the only ways that researchers are linking migration to the human-environment nexus. Migration studies and social nature have largely occupied separate scholarly spheres. However, trends in North American population demographics and concerns for environmental issues indicate there is a need for more research linking environmental values and migration (Carter et al., 2013). I intend to use social nature as a category of analysis to explore the experiences of the Karen farmers in Ottawa. As a reminder, social nature is the concept that challenges the society-nature dichotomy, and offers, instead, a view of nature that is intrinsically social (Castree & Braun, 2001). The research project with the Karen farmers provides a case study that highlights nature's social character while critiquing the social construction of nature that excludes marginalized groups from utilizing nature in ways that differ from the social norm.

There is an assumed discontinuity between a resettled refugees' home country and their new host country. Forced displacement highlights the significant social, cultural and material differences between home countries and third countries (countries of resettlement). More important are the ways that resettled refugees, like the Karen, work "creatively to maintain a sense of continuity with the past, with 'home,' and with whom they perceive themselves to be" (Dudley, 2011). The material and cultural ways that the Karen re-produce social nature are examples of how forced migration is part of a continuum of the social experience – one in which the "displaced may identify, construct or reject the myriad continuities and discontinuities, contiguities and distances" (Dudley, 2011, p. 746) between the past, present and a hoped-for future.

The narratives of the Karen farmers have demonstrated that there is a significant difference, conceptually and physically, between their lived experiences in Thailand and Ottawa. It is important to recognize that without doubt the Karen are happy to be free from a protracted refugee situation (not to mention persecution). However, there are material and cultural discontinuities that are difficult to reconcile in their place of resettlement. Dudley (2011) explores the ways in which Karen refugees create a feeling of being at home in the “prolonged camp-based limbo.” Dudley explains how attempting to feel ‘at home’ is part of the “coming to terms with every day life within the refugee camps, and together with seeking to make sense of the traumatic displacement processes that preceded that life, it is an essentially *cultural* process; an attempt to give meaning to experience” (p. 743). Throughout this project, I have sought to expand on Dudley’s work by exploring how producing a sense of home in Ottawa is, likewise, a cultural process. Furthermore, I explored how creating a sense of home through farming sheds light into Karen constructions of social nature.

Farming for the Karen is an occupation that reconciles some of the discontinuities of distance from their country of origin. Chapter 4 discussed the ways that having a place to farm and a place to call their own was significant for personal identity, sense of purpose, sense of self-worth, and, ultimately, for overall mental health. In this section, the focus is on producing continuity with cultural identity – focusing on the practices, attitudes, and material that convey culture and simultaneously produce social nature. There is a familiar sense of home produced and experienced by the Karen farmers, elders, and youth that work at (and visit) the farm. The farming methods, the plants, the tools, and the physical activity, activate a sensory experience that reminds them of home –

“they feel familiar in material and sensory terms” (Dudley, 2011, p. 746). Like Dudley, I expand on the importance of materiality or material culture – which can often be equated with physical things. However, material culture is constituted of relationships, as Dudley explains:

My conception of ‘materiality’ lies in the mutually constitutive relationships between people and things: the embodied, sensory experience of the physical world by an equally physical subject, and the multiple influences each may have on the other. (p. 747)

The discussion on how the Karen produce and use material culture gives insight into the perceptions of multiple views on nature and society. Furthermore, the results from the farm project diverge from myths of resettled refugees’ passivity and dependency. Indeed, the relationships, social nature, and material culture produced through this project highlight the inventiveness and agency of the individual participants.

Since the beginning of the K’Nyaw Si project, there have been a number of material challenges. For example, the Canadian farm tools proved slightly unfamiliar and broke easily. The Karen asked to have some traditional tools brought back from Thailand. Scott brought back a number of hand-held tools, such as hoes and shovels, from Thailand that are completely fashioned out of metal and not easily broken. The Karen seemed to appreciate and prefer the craftsmanship of these tools over their Canadian counterparts. However, in our first season of farming, we did not have the tools from Thailand and relied on donated materials – that often broke. Lar Htoo demonstrated his knowledge and inventiveness by repairing tools, often, working with only his large knife. The Karen often use machetes as a tool for most work around the farm: repairs, clearing brush, harvesting and preparing produce for meals. They demonstrate their skill and comfort with these tools as they transform the space around

the farm into a place they can call K’Nyaw Si. One of the first days working with Lar Htoo at the farm, he asked me for a knife to repair a broken hoe. I found a small Swiss army knife in my backpack for him. Lar Htoo shook his head, smiled and said he would repair the tool at home. The following day, Lar Htoo returned with a traditional Karen knife, and a whetstone – a knife that was of simple yet superior quality to mine, about three times the size, and more practically designed. Working with traditional tools is more practical and efficient for accomplishing tasks around the farm. Simultaneously, working with traditional tools provides a sensory familiarity, and a material cultural continuity.

The Karen are beginning to see that their farm work has great value in their families and communities. On a larger scale, the Karen feel overwhelmed that their work at K’Nyaw Si has reached a greater network of: resettled refugees with agrarian backgrounds, resettled Karen on the other side of the world (Australia), and alternative farmers internationally. Specifically, Rachel Clearly, a researcher from Queensland University of Technology, Australia, studying the benefits of farming for resettled refugees in Australia, visited K’Nyaw Si. Clearly received a tour of K’Nyaw si from Sharla La and Kloy Htoo and conducted an interview – including words of support and advice to the Karen farmers in Australia. Sharla La and Kloy Htoo greatly appreciate all the support and recognition they have received, and the fact that their story might affect the lives of other Karen farmers in Australia. Their daily work in the fields, the farm gate sales at Just Food, and their previous participation in the Carp farmers’ market has changed and developed their own understanding and value of farming. The Karen know that farming feeds their families but now they see their work in the greater context of the

environment and social systems. Shar Lah La and Kloy Htoo often exclaim in English: “No farmer, no food” and “Farmers feed cities” – I do not hide the fact that my own exclamation of these phrases has influenced the adoption of this outlook and connection of farming to urban systems. They are extremely proud of their work at K’Nyaw Si because they see it as an occupation that: 1) ties them to social relationships, and, 2) maintains agricultural biodiversity that is directly related to social and cultural reproduction. The tools used, the food grown, the socio-ecology produced, makes up the material culture through which the Karen establish their part of their cultural identity and convey that identity to others. Furthermore, their work transforms the ecological landscape to include a richer diversity of plant life – plant life that can be used for food or medicinal purposes. More Karen would like to farm; however, it is difficult to find space to grow in an urban system that privileges leisure in existing greenspace.

The Karen see an abundance of greenspace (typically used as open leisure space) in their urban neighbourhood that could alternately be utilized for growing food, plants, herbs and medicines – producing social nature in the city and creating desired socio-ecological linkages. However, the NCC and the City of Ottawa determine land-use designations, function, and accessibility of the urban natural environment. The Greenbelt is depicted as nature outside the city – a site to be visited. For example, the most recent Greenbelt Master Plan (NCC 2013) describes the value and contribution of the Greenbelt to the identity of Canada’s Capital stemming from some of these following factors:

- The Greenbelt was conceived as, and continues to be, a tangible *expression of the federal government’s desire for a Capital of outstanding character and beauty*. The Greenbelt enhances the unique identity of Canada’s Capital Region. As the urban area grows, the Greenbelt’s role in defining, beautifying and conserving nature in the Capital for the benefit of Canadians will continue to grow in importance.

- The Greenbelt is a *cornerstone of Capital sustainability*, offering many social and environmental benefits to visitors and residents. The Capital's growing population increasingly seeks out the Greenbelt's natural spaces, farms and pathways as places to enjoy nature, find good food and exercise. Sustainable land and building management practices make the Greenbelt a Capital environmental showcase.
- The Greenbelt is a *living symbol of the natural and cultural landscapes that provide the foundation for much of Canada's inhabited areas*. This diverse, predominantly rural landscape provides a fitting and symbolic setting for the capital of a country rich in natural resources and of a people who aim to use the land wisely. In so doing, the Greenbelt complements the wilderness of Gatineau Park and the urban Capital's parks, buildings and parkways as expressions of Canada's diverse landscapes. The Greenbelt also demonstrates our national commitment to stewardship of natural resources.

Agricultural production is located outside the urban core with the exception of a handful of farmers who have remained on their family farms (leasing back from the NCC) as well as community gardeners. The 2013 Greenbelt Master Plan purports that the NCC is committed to supporting local, sustainable agriculture, and developing policies to reflect their changing values. However, negotiating with the NCC's leasing department to establish long-term land tenure can be a lengthy and prohibitive process. Farms are still located in the rural areas of the greenbelt with little movement in support for urban farming. Urban and peri-urban greenbelt land is still associated with recreation, conservation, and escapism from the urban core. The NCC describes their changing values with the following statement:

Diversified sustainable agriculture activities will move towards a "work within nature" principle to provide local food with strong community involvement. Greenbelt farming practices will decrease energy and chemical inputs and waste outputs while positively contributing to natural system processes. Visitors will find many diverse experiences throughout the Greenbelt, predominantly outdoor learning and recreation featuring the rich natural and cultural history of Canada. The facilities accommodated within the Greenbelt will also operate and perform sustainably, in harmony with natural, cultural and social features (ix).

The NCC is moving towards their “work within nature” principle – a principle that is inherent in Karen culture. For the Karen farmers, nature is realized as inescapably social. Being placed in an urban system and completely disconnected from their previous way of life remains a constant and ongoing challenge. Understanding the varied ways that immigrant populations perceive nature can inform more inclusive land-use policies and actions – ultimately creating a landscape that is reflective of a multicultural society. Simultaneously, the opportunities for networking in an urban system can create hybrid foodways that are both participatory in informal market systems (farmers markets, and farm gate sales), and continuous of informal sharing networks and reciprocity, between human and non-humans, that are intrinsic to the Karen culture.

Karen villages in the Karen state of Burma are traditionally independent of formal markets and urban systems. Their independence from formal market systems may be linked to a longer pattern of conflict and exclusion from the central state. However, based on my conversations with the Karen, I have gleaned that they live collectively sharing and trading goods between families. The Karen consume and produce nature through the construction of their homes, food, and clothing and through cultural and religious practices. A book published by the Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhuttha

Foundation explains how many Karen villagers:

[...] grow rice in paddy fields about fifteen minutes walk from the village. They also grow fruit and vegetables around the village. The village is mostly self-sufficient. The villagers weave their own clothing, grow their own food, and build their own houses. Only rubber thongs, tools and medicines come from outside the village.

Many of the Karen festivals are based on a mix of the practice of animism, Christianity and Buddhism. Harvey (2005 p. xi) explains the beliefs of animists and animism with the following:

Animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others. Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons. Persons are beings, rather than objects, who are animated and social towards others (even if they are not always sociable).

The many ways that the Karen farmers in Ottawa care and worry for their plants is indicative of the social relationship they feel towards non-human persons (their description of nature). During times of climatic stress (such as the excessive rain and drought experiences in the first growing season) Shar Lah La often conveyed great worry for her plants. When working with the plants, she often speaks to them in Karen. When asked why she is speaking to the plants, Shar Lah La has exclaimed: “Because I want them to grow!” Kloy Htoo and Shar Lah La worry, constantly, that there will not be enough plants or their plants will not grow, similar to how one might worry about their children if they are not growing. The social relationship between the Karen farmers and their plants is representative of the inseparable and interdependent concept of social nature.

The Karen in Ottawa take every opportunity to gather to celebrate their culture through festivals. Festivals are often celebrated outside and specific meals are reserved for special occasions. Meals are made from their harvested produce and shared with the broader community. Extensive participation with the Karen in Ottawa demonstrated that food plays a central role in their culture. Every meeting and visit with the Karen is met with fruit, tea and snacks – it is a way of expressing hospitality and developing bonds

with both new friends and old. Greetings such as “Aw mee wee lee ar?” – “Have you finished eating?” reflect the central role food plays in Karen culture (ibid). The farm lands are also a place for socializing, celebrating, and practicing Karen culture. At the Stittsville farm, the Karen farmers had a place to spend the night with their families. Many celebrations, picnics, social events and birthdays were celebrated at the Stittsville farm. At the K’Nyaw Si, friends and family come to the farm to visit, socialize, assist, and relax. Shar Lah La often prepares a special meal with her fresh produce when receiving guests at the farm (shown in Chapter 4).

The Karen farmers produce social nature through their agricultural practices in Ottawa. For the Karen, nature is inescapably social. Nature is their livelihood, their home and their religion. Often, Shar Lah La asked me why “we have so much land that nobody grows food on?” This is a difficult question to answer. I explained to Shar Lah La the history of the construction of the Greenbelt and the expropriation of farm land. I explained that big farms are valued over smaller farms. She said it was like how the Burmese took their land, except there they use “guns and burn everything to push the farmers away.” The Karen farmers were made to feel like the “lowest of the low” (Scott) because of their livelihood. However, in Canada, the farmers take great pride in the food they produce and in their farming skills. Outside of market influences, farming produces food *with* and *for* family and community, and reduces dependence on a capitalist economy.



Figure 5.7 Lar Htoo and Shar Boi (daughter of Shar Lah La and Kloy Htoo), working at the wash station together. Lar Htoo is using his traditional knife to trim the produce.

Scott describes the social importance of farming, farm land, and farm produce: “Farming is also a major family affair in that they use the farm fields as a celebration area, using the food directly from the field for family picnics and outings to the farm.”

The Karen farmers were asked questions about nature. Broadly, they were asked what nature means to them. These questions were perceived to be very general and the concept of nature had to be explained. Words such as trees, air, outside, plants, flowers, animals, the farm, space, earth, environment, farm, bodies, and food were used to describe nature. Kloy Htoo expressed that he can “breathe better at the farm.” He said that in the city “there is too much noise and the air is not so good.” The first time the Karen farmers surveyed the land at the Just Food Farm, we went for a long ‘nature’ walk into the Green’s Creek Conservation Area. Shar Kay, the eldest daughter who was translating that day, expressed that she “loves to walk in the fields” and “she could spend a day just walking outside because it reminds [her] of home.” Shar Kay asked me if there would be many flowers in the summer, because she loves fields of flowers. The flowers that were blooming on the first visit to the farm were mustard flowers. Shar Lah La and Kloy Htoo asked me if we (Canadians) eat these (wild mustard plants). They asked if they were allowed to harvest these wild flowers so they could eat them. That day they harvested many wild edible plants – plants that are often overlooked as weeds in Canadian culture. Shar Kay explained that her parents would eat many wild flowers and plants. Scott explained further that when the Karen first arrived in Ottawa they would go for nature walks and the Karen would glean plants as they walked – recognizing plants and flowers that were edible such as wild mustard. In Ottawa, there is one organization called Hidden Harvest that gleans from fruit and nut trees across the urban foodscape. Hidden Harvest also plants trees and connects tree owners to gleaners in the city, focusing mainly on edible trees. There is potential for networking and knowledge sharing between the Karen and Hidden Harvest – with the Karen’s knowledge of edible

plants, both groups can expand on their efforts to build a more edible landscape and food secure system in Ottawa – specifically amongst marginalized communities.

5.3.1 *Construction of Nature-Spaces in the City of Ottawa*

Exploring the link between social nature and migration can provide a new dimension to social nature and migration theory. In doing so, we can address the symptomatic silences produced by various constructions of nature. According to Castree (2005 p. 27), “symptomatic silence is the ‘absent presence’ of an idea, assumption or belief that helps to establish the meaning of a knowledge-claim without appearing to do so.” For example, the City of Ottawa’s Greenspace Master Plan for Ottawa (2006) determines where nature is, what type of nature it is, and what types of behaviours belong in different types of nature while simultaneously silencing alternative ideas and uses for greenspace. Both the City of Ottawa’s *Greenspace Master Plan* and the Ottawa Stewardship Council’s *Greenspaces in Urban Places* publications define greenspace as an important part of the urban ecosystem. However, both major publications define greenspace as areas of conservation – limiting human interaction. The Ottawa Stewardship Council wrote the following with regards to Ottawa’s natural areas and greenspace:

The physical disturbance of natural habitats by humans significantly reduces native biodiversity, the quality of ecological functions and ecological integrity within natural habitats (Ottawa Stewardship Council 2009).

Indeed, human disturbance of natural habitats can cause a harmful reduction in the quality and quantity of sensitive ecosystems. However, this depends on the type and scale of interaction. Alternatively, sustainable and resilient agricultural practices in

between and amongst ecologically sensitive zones can increase biodiversity, pollinators, connective green corridors, and decrease erosion. Furthermore, agricultural practices can foster an ethics of care for natural areas and a practice of stewardship.

The City of Ottawa's *Greenspace Master Plan* divides Ottawa's urban and peri-urban greenspaces into three categories: 1) Natural Lands; 2) Open Land and Leisure Space; and 3) Other Open Space. The *Greenspace Master Plan* promotes the Open Land and Leisure Spaces as greenspaces for recreational and leisure activities (e.g., sports such as biking or walking; relaxation and socializing). Furthermore, the categories are meant to create a "natural" setting for urban residents (Greenspace Master Plan 2006). The City of Ottawa has five main objectives to improve, increase, and sustain greenspace in the city (see Box 5.1). Incorporating and encouraging more urban agricultural practices like community gardening, urban farming, and yard sharing can help meet these objectives – especially the objectives of *adequacy* (that seeks to meet the needs of a growing and diverse community), of *sustainability* (that seeks out innovative methods to protect greenspace), and of *connectivity* (that seeks to improve access, biodiversity and movement of species).

The Five Greenspace Objectives

Adequacy - The City will provide enough greenspace to meet the needs of a growing and diverse community and to maintain natural systems, biodiversity and habitat.

Accessibility - Ottawa residents will have ready access to greenspace in close proximity to their homes and communities.

Connectivity - Ottawa's greenspaces will be linked to provide for variety and improved access to recreational facilities, and to improve biodiversity and the movement of species.

Quality - Greenspaces will be attractive, safe and well-designed, serving the multiple needs of users while defining the unique identity of communities. Where greenspaces are primarily natural areas, they will be preserved in manner that maintains or improves natural features and functions.

Sustainability - Greenspaces will be planned and managed in a way that minimizes human intervention and public spending over time, through reliance on natural processes as well as innovative methods for protecting greenspace.

Box 5.1: City of Ottawa's Five Greenspace Objectives

The quality objective states that greenspaces “will be attractive... while defining the unique identity of communities” they serve. Greater consultation with Ottawa's diverse communities is necessary in order to discern what is attractive and to whom. For the unique identity of communities to be materially realized through the construction of nature artifacts, there needs to be a more inclusive discussion considering whose ideas of nature(s) count – whose ideas are privileged, and whose are silenced (perhaps even inadvertently).

The City of Ottawa, the Ottawa Stewardship Council, and the NCC continually set boundaries on where nature is, what types of nature there are, and how to engage with

nature by way of “enframing” (Gregory 2001). Gregory (2001, p. 92) explains the term as follows: “‘enframing’ means both to set the world up as a picture and to treat the world as a picture.” Gregory explains that the enframing of nature requires three objectives to be fulfilled: “‘nature’ has to be held at a distance, set up as an object, and structured as a more or less systematic totality” (p. 92). The enframing of nature involves an organized staging of nature to which the audience is persuaded to believe that the representations are real. The enframing of nature also depicts what kind of activities or behaviours are acceptable in certain spaces. The division of Ottawa’s greenspace into three categories and the depiction of specific activities for those categories exemplify the power of enframing. Since its inception, the NCC has held the most power in enframing and shaping the Ottawa rural, urban and peri-urban landscape.

5.3.2 Moving Toward Access and Multifunctional Places

Ottawa has an abundance of greenspace (as mentioned in Chapter 2) that is owned and controlled by the National Capital Commission (NCC). The Greenbelt once acted as a buffer against urban sprawl, however, a growing population and urban expansion has led to a leapfrog effect with satellite cities (such as Kanata, Barrhaven, and Orleans) growing outside the Greenbelt. Furthermore, sections of the Greenbelt have, over the last 50 years, been deemed surplus and rezoned for sale to commercial developers (Supreme Court of Canada; Federal Court Reports 1966, 2000). Prime farm lands, some farms of more than 175 acres, were purchased for approximately \$110,000-\$300,000 at the time of expropriation. In the early 1990’s, some of that that land was deemed surplus and the NCC sought to rezone, divide and sell the land to developers for over 6 million dollars

(Federal Judicial Affairs 2000). Any farmer that wanted to reacquire their land would have to put in bids with corporate developers – the cost prohibiting farmers from competing in the bid. Farmers and their families have been pushed outside the city limits and with the amalgamation the city of Ottawa now includes some 1200 farms in rural areas outside the greenbelt. There are a small handful of farmers that remain on their original family farm land within the peri-urban area. However, the farm land is leased from the NCC, and the land being farmed is significantly downsized. Douglas Woodburn maintains a portion of his farmland located next to a chain of big box stores on Innes Road (this land has been maintained not without struggle as the Woodburns' were one of the families to take the NCC to court over the expropriation and the re-zoning of agricultural land to commercial property). Driving through the corridor of big box stores one finds a small section of land where a few bulls, horses and goats reside. Woodburn has been assisting the Just Food Farm by renting his farm equipment, sharing knowledge on various approaches to building a fertile farm, and giving advice on dealing with the NCC. Woodburn has been a constant advisor for K'Nyaw Si while the Karen adjust to growing in their new ecology, especially, during the 2012 extreme heat and drought conditions. Having access to farmland that is within the peri-urban limits, makes a significant difference for the Karen in terms of transportation and access.

The NCC owns and manages the Greenbelt land, and capital urban land that is separate from the Greenbelt. According to the National Capital Act (2013), the object and purpose of the NCC is to be responsible for the “planning, as well as taking part in the development, conservation and improvement of Canada’s Capital. It is also responsible for organizing, sponsoring and promoting public activities and events that

reflect our country's heritage and official languages." According to the NCC's Annual Report (2012-2013, p. 17), the NCC will fulfill its mandate through three main objectives found in Box 5.1:

- Building a capital by ensuring that federal lands are used to their greatest potential in ways that contribute to the significance and heritage of the Capital.
- Connecting Capital sites, experiences and meeting places, with a particular focus on the downtown core and along the Ottawa River and Rideau Canal shorelines.
- Maintaining and safeguarding nationally significant natural environments and real property assets for current and future generations.

The NCC's goal is to make Ottawa a model of urban planning, focusing on environmental sensitivity and sustainability (2013). Consequently, the NCC is dialectically and materially constructing a separation and disconnect between natural environments and the urban by stating that the Greenbelt "provides a place where local and visiting Canadians can play, exercise and experience the natural world, as well as our rural culture and heritage." The statement simultaneously paints a picture of a nature separate from the urban – nature that is to be visited, and visited in specific ways.

Furthermore, this picture of Canada removes individuals that are new to Canada as landed immigrants, resettled refugees, or permanent residents working towards receiving their Canadian citizenship. The NCC further states on every page of their website that Canada's Capital Region is: "Canadian, just like you." The NCC offers a cultural pass to new Canadian citizens on their first year of obtaining citizenship allowing them to access Canadian museums and artifacts across Canada for free. Unfortunately, the offer of cultural exchange is not available for immigrant and refugee groups, who are not yet Canadian citizens, who could greatly benefit from the free pass – the pass is for new

Canadian citizens. For the Karen, the Greenbelt, greenspaces, and places of cultural significance in Ottawa have, until recently, been seen as inaccessible. The Karen have felt excluded and invisible in their new home – lacking autonomy and a voice. The Karen elders rarely left their homes (except to go to work or to English school) until they had access to land for farming. This may suggest that the Greenbelt, greenspace, and leisure spaces in Ottawa need be more accessible and multi-functional for an increasingly multicultural population that are not, necessarily, official Canadian citizens.

The K’Nyaw Si is exemplar of the relationships between local and non-local knowledge and material culture. The work of the Karen is embedded in the local but global in reach as their story reaches across global space. Their work is part of an effort to re-appropriate and transform local peri-urban landscape towards more multifunctional and polycultural places, and to foster relationships grounded in the concept of social nature. Similar stories of farming among resettled Karen refugees have emerged in grey literature across the United States and Australia (see USDA funded Karen Refugee Farm Indiana 2011; Karen Organization of Minnesota 2009; Linville 2013; Lunn 2012; North Carolina Folklife Institute 2013; World Relief Minnesota 2012; Weigl 2012). Much of the grey literature reports the same benefits and barriers to farming that the Karen face. Access to land and difficulties in an urban system are often the main challenges the Karen face. Supporting the multi-functional use of greenspace in urban and peri-urban areas to include vegetable farming can greatly benefit resettled refugees with agrarian backgrounds. Most significant of the benefits are: preventative and rehabilitative mental health outcomes, more food secure homes and communities, stronger social relationships

that include human and non-human networks, and richer sensory experiences that foster cultural identity.



Figure 5.8: Scott and Shar Boi walking through the fields of K’Nyaw Si. A hopeful sign is seen with the first flowers of eggplant.

Coleen: When I first introduced a middle-aged Karen man re-settling in Ottawa after more than 12 years in the camps to the land that was available for him to farm; his words were, ‘OK now. Now I can die here’. He was overwhelmed with the knowledge that he could work the land and farm. It was like he had found a place, now, outside the city because when they come in, they’re in the city and it’s nothing you can imagine. So to get out into the country and see that there is real land out there was just unbelievable for them. They all want to be in the country but how do they get there what do they do there?

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This thesis and project is inspired by the story and lived experiences of a group of Karen refugees living in Ottawa. There has been significant anthropological research documenting the Karen (and their distinct culture). Furthermore, there has been significant research documenting the persecution of, human rights violations inflicted on, and protracted refugee situation of the Karen people. However, there is a paucity of data documenting the resettlement of Karen refugees in third countries such as Canada. This research sought to extend existing insights beyond the refugee camps to explore Karen experiences of resettlement in Ottawa. More specifically, this research aimed to highlight the importance of agriculture, for the Karen (who come from agrarian backgrounds).

Based on preliminary research, I anticipated that farming in the peri-urban area would provide the Karen with increased food security, and a material identification with culture. I did not anticipate, however, that the research project would have significant transformative effects for the Karen farm participants; though I am delighted this proved part of the outcome. Throughout the research project, it was brought to my attention by Scott, volunteers, and participants that many of the resettled elders suffer from depression and other mental health issues. Depression, and its various manifestations, can result from traumatic past memories, present difficulties, and future worries. As discussed in Chapter 4, farming has had a significant transformative effect for the Karen elders. There are noticeable, positive changes in physical and mental health for the participants. Chapter 4 contributes to geographic literature by demonstrating how having access to land to grow food can have significant positive transformative effects in terms of self-worth, sense of purpose, and personal identity. Being able to provide food and to

contribute work to the family is very important for the Karen. The Karen elders who farmed at K’Naw Si have demonstrated the importance of having access to land, and how this access contributes to improvements in physical and mental health.

Furthermore, this research adds to the growing scholarly field of migration and place-based theory. Here the importance is on having a place to call your own. After decades of persecution, forced migration, and a protracted refugee situation, resettlement provides another challenge. Resettlement for the Karen people means freedom from persecution, however, they still feel that they are not at home and do not have a place to call their own. They not only feel like strangers in their new country, but also in part invisible. The data from this project and a significant amount of grey literature highlights the benefits of both farming and having a place to call their own. I have provided an analysis linking place-based and migration theory with the farming experiences of the Karen. I have discussed how forced migration and resettlement creates an emotional geography of loss, and how re-establishing self-worth, through the application of specific skills and knowledge, can create a palimpsest of new experiences, memories, and identity.

In material cultural terms, the Karen have transformed the space provided to them through culturally-unique, local, organic farming practices. These practices operate within Ottawa’s urban and peri-urban boundaries and simultaneously transform the landscape into an inclusive and healthy socio-ecology. The material transformation of the space consequentially provides added food security, social capital and material-cultural continuity. Furthermore, these practices can foster an awareness to create more accessible and multi-functional greenspaces in the city. A multi-functional use of

greenspace that includes farming, gardening and gleaning expands on the current leisure and conservation approach to land-use management in the city of Ottawa. Furthermore, a more accessible land-use management policy requires a more inclusive approach to planning. Including the voices of marginalized and invisible minorities is more representative of our multicultural and poly-vocal nation (and thus more democratically deliberative).

Migration studies and concepts of social nature (posited by political ecologists, among others) have largely occupied separate scholarly spheres. This study has highlighted that the relationship between human migration and social nature extends beyond climate migration. Social nature is a concept that explores how people relate to their surrounding ecologies, problematizing the dualistic relationships that separate humans from nature. The responses from the Karen indicate that they feel enriched and comfortable when they can engage with nature not only in very practical ways (such as farming) but also in leisurely ways (such as walking, resting, and socializing). Often, the practical and the leisurely are intertwined. The Karen were surprised by the lack of access to greenspace to grow food in Ottawa. Having a place to engage in their traditional practices has provided them with an opportunity to reconcile the material cultural discontinuities experienced through resettlement and to transform their new ecology into one that reflects their extensive knowledge and skills. K'Nyaw Si and the support shown towards the Karen farmers' story and efforts has changed their outlook on life in Canada.

The story of the Ottawa Karen refugees is illustrative of the strong diversity amongst immigrant and resettled refugee communities in Ottawa. As immigration in

Canada continues to grow, more people are being placed and resettled in mid-sized cities like Ottawa (Ray & Bergeron, 2007). In fact, Ottawa draws the largest portion of refugees out of all Canadian cities (Mohamoud, 2007). This diversity calls for more effective and long-term social service planning. One-size-fits all planning measures may be difficult to avoid given the constraints of the current right-wing, neoliberal climate. Despite the growing diversity and the endorsement of multiculturalism, funding for civil society organizations (such as support groups for newly arriving immigrants and resettled refugees) has been significantly curtailed (Luther, 2007). There is a great need for service provision (and funding) that takes into account the diversity among immigrant and resettled refugee populations, living in Ottawa, including: circumstances upon arrival, gender, visibility, culture, and age. I call for a diversity in funding and allocation of funds to match the diversity of Ottawa's population of resettled refugees. Specific attention should be paid to the range of skills and knowledge of newcomers in order to secure work that is suitable and appropriate. Furthermore, there is a need for an extension of funding for civil society support groups that continue to provide support for resettled refugees beyond the first few months after arrival to ensure mental, physical, and socio-cultural health.

I recommend that further academic inquiry focus on other newcomers, with agrarian backgrounds, and their unique perceptions of nature. More specifically, how might a more inclusive, accessible and multi-functional use of greenspace or nature act as a preventative measure in mental health illnesses amongst newly arriving (and recently settled) refugee and immigrant communities. In this regard, a family health physician recently suggested to me that further inquiry demands medical and health data to make

the research meaningful to health practitioners, not to mention to influence policy. Thus, I would recommend further inquiry and engagement with the Canadian Collaboration for Immigrant and Refugee Health (part of the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Medicine, Immigrant and Refugee Health Project) to produce more evidence-based research relating the benefits of traditional work (such as farming) for refugees and immigrants with agrarian backgrounds.

6.1 Methodological Constraints

Both the methodological approach and chosen methods for this research project provided rich and rewarding results. However, there were a number of challenges and constraints encountered throughout the research process. In particular, PhotoVoice, community-based, and participatory research presented a number of constraints. My hope is that the following discussion of these roadblocks and difficulties may inform researchers to help reconcile and avoid these challenges in the future.

PhotoVoice

From the outset, PhotoVoice presented challenges during the ethics application process to the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (REB). PhotoVoice is not, necessarily, a new methodology. However, it presented a number of conflicts for the REB. Primarily, the reviewers did not understand why people's faces (or even people) had to be included in the photographs and images. I had to explain twice in writing and in a meeting that the photographs would be chosen by the participants to represent what is most significant to them based on the research topic. Therefore, if the research participant were to choose to include a photograph that shows an image of themselves or a family member (including

one of their children), then it would be considered data and a significant representation of their worldview. The PhotoVoice exercise did not represent an extraction of data, an exploitation of human participants, or a violation of human rights. The photographs provided a tool through which the participants could visually tell their story – a common practice when working with individuals with significant language barriers.

In the end, the ethics revisions took nearly 3 months before final approval was granted. This was, indeed, a frustrating period. I felt that I was being penalized for attempting to create a platform and research project that fosters an ethics of care, understanding, cooperation, and balance of power relations. The REB declares that it ensures research that involves honest and thoughtful inquiry. I thought that allowing the participant to tell their story in their own words and through their own eyes would be the highest form of honesty I could achieve. Often, knowledge frameworks and research methodologies can be sites of struggle for marginalized people who may feel as though they have little control, understanding, or ownership over the research process and its outcomes (McAreavey & Das 2013). PhotoVoice works to reconcile these struggles by placing the methodological tools (quite simply, a camera, and the photographs/images generated) in the hands of the participants. I remained firm in my methodological choices in an effort to advance and normalize research methodologies that are representative of the participants' ideas and worldview.

Community-based research and the role of gatekeepers

Operating in a community-based research context produced a number of constraints. First, working with the director of a community and charitable organization that is

already overladen with priorities within the community was difficult in terms of access (including available time and scheduling). The community director both consciously (and probably inadvertently) served as a gatekeeper for members of the Karen community. Often, gatekeepers prove necessary mediators to enable participation from minority groups in a sensitive and meaningful way (McAreavey & Das 2013). However, presenting proposals, securing meeting times, and shadowing the community director presented challenges at the outset. This was mainly due to the over-booked schedule of the gatekeeper. Furthermore, the gatekeeper was working and traveling in Thailand for a 5-month period during the research. Establishing a rapport with the Karen community required an initial level of engagement that depended on introductions and meetings arranged by the community director – requiring a great deal of time negotiation.

Second, due to the sensitive nature of the Karen's persecution and protracted refugee situation, the gatekeeper was often protective of the information provided by the Karen, and sensitive to the reaction certain questions or topics might induce. I never asked about or spoke of the refugee camps unless this information was offered either during interview sessions or in participatory conversation. At times, I struggled with the protectiveness demonstrated by Scott. Refugee status can often be utilized strategically to gain much-needed service, care, and funding. However, I believe it is important to promote agency and autonomy – breaking away from a refugee status that can be infantilizing. Scott explained that the Karen are a people that have never experienced autonomy. I explained that everyone has agency and autonomy, even though, for years theirs would have been repressed and abused. It is important for that autonomy to be realized, now that they have a place to call their own and access to land to transform by

making their own decisions – un-coerced by outside forces. I reminded the Karen during our meetings that this was the time for them to make the decisions. If they don't want to farm, they don't have to farm. It was important to emphasize to the farmers that the farm was for them but they were not bound to it. The K'Nyaw Si was not a project for any other purpose than to gain access to land for Karen to grow food if they wanted to. I had to remind Shar Lah La that she was the boss, that she made the decisions. At times, I could see she was uncomfortable with the idea of being “the manager.” She would ask me to tell her what to do. I would say: “Can you tell me what you want me to do today? I'm here to help.” I suggested that now that the Karen are living in Canada and have a place where they can make their own decisions, un-coerced by outside forces, they can begin to learn to express more fully their personal autonomy.

When conducting interviews with the Karen, Scott often felt the need to interject and elaborate on answers given by the Karen. Scott wanted to ensure that I was getting what I needed from the interviews. I explained that I had no agenda in mind other than to help share the story of the Karen in their own words. I explained that the answers given by the Karen were enough – even if they seemed simple. Simple answers told their own story.

The story of the Karen continues as they prepare for another growing season at the farm, in 2014, in partnership with Just Food Ottawa. However, Just Food must work within the constraints and boundaries enforced by the NCC. A negotiated lease has not yet been signed by the NCC and Just Food, making the farming arrangement still somewhat precarious. The last two years and the upcoming farming season will likely be undertaken with a Temporary Land Access Permit (TLAP) until a lease is finalized.

However, hopes are high that with funding and support, Just Food, K’Nyaw Si, and other organizations such as Operation Go Home and The Ottawa Food Bank, can continue to demonstrate the benefits of small-scale urban farming – and eventually, secure a long-term lease of the land from the NCC. In previous seasons, the Karen have produced high quality produce and have participated in the farmers market on the Just Food Farm. The Karen have learned (sometimes through the loss of crops) from each growing season how to read the Canadian weather, climate, and soil – demonstrating their courage, and their powerful will to farm and connect with their new social ecology. The expression of culture and identity through place-making is realized by gaining access to land and the practice of farming. The most rewarding and telling result revealed, through the work at K’Nyaw Si, is the transformative power realized.

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