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Mini Ethnography: Race and Gender on the Antioch Farm

As I walked through the Antioch Farm on a sunny afternoon in May, birds flew overhead and chirped loudly in the trees. Some appeared to be swallows, some were a blur in the sky. The four-tiered compost system lay to my left. I noticed the new composting toilette housed in a small house-like wooden structure standing in the background. The toilette was a senior project of a student graduating this June. As I walked between the two main gardens, a gray haired man drove by me in a lawn mower. He smiled and said "hi." To my right was the large fenced in patch of land that was home to the chickens. While there appeared to be some deliberate gardening, the three chicken coops and the white hoop house were the most noticeable, surrounded by patchy brown grass. On the roof of one chicken coop was a small solar panel. To my left was another large fenced in piece of land, but this one was obviously a garden. Row after row of neat garden beds filled the entire space, and you could tell it was well weeded because pulled weeds lay near the beds. Some beds were covered in yellow straw. Beyond these two large fenced in gardens, lay the solar farm, with its 3,300 solar panels. As I walked around the outside edge of the main garden, I came across the herb garden. Pieces of wood on top of metal spikes were labeled with the names of the different plants. Further away was the edible forest, with similar signs indicating the names of the shorter plants. As I left the farm, I walked along a narrow path, which led me to the pond and tea garden. Two students sat on the bench there, chatting and laughing.

This farm is where some Antioch student workers work at least a few times a week. I have taken many groups of prospective Antioch students by the Farm before. The chickens are always the favorite of prospective students. I have also walked through the garden beds on my personal time to take a look at the lettuce, edible flowers, snow peas, and kale heads, and to breathe in the fresh air and gaze at the open field beyond. It was usual for no one else to be there and for the only sounds to be the clucking and bustling of chickens. I do have friends who work on the Farm or used to work on the Farm, but most of my knowledge about the Farm came from the material created by the Office of Admission. I knew what percent of the kitchen's food

comes from the Farm and how many geothermal wells are under the large grassy field. What I didn't know, beyond rumor, was what it was like to work on the Farm, and what the people involved with maintaining the Farm thought about the demographics of the workers.

I had been learning about the physical and mental benefits of interacting with green spaces and how quite often these ecological benefits were unevenly distributed between different races and classes of people. There had also been mutterings and complaints among Antioch students about how the student workers involved with the Farm were mostly white women. It seemed that way to me too, so I decided to find out what the people involved with the Farm thought about this. I wanted to know about their experiences working on the Farm and whether they noticed any special demographic makeup of the Farm workers. So I decided to talk to three people involved with the Farm: the Farm manager, one current student worker, and one former student worker.

Let's call the Farm manager Alice. Alice is in charge of operating the Farm. She manages Farm staff daily and also works with teachers who wish to incorporate the Farm into their classes. She will occasionally give tours of the Farm as well. Alice is the only non-student staff working on the Farm. Right now she spends 40 hours a week doing this job, even though for half of the year she spends 20 hours a week, as there is less work in the fall and winter season. She does not spend all her time on the Farm however, as she also has office work to do. She told me that there are eight part time and two full time student workers this quarter. These student workers are divided into two positions: crew leaders and assistants. Alice said that the crew leaders are usually fourth year college students, and that a nice mentoring style of work has formed now that the Farm is five years old. She told me that the fourth year staff had mostly been involved with the Farm for about 3 years. She said that though first year staff don't have a good retention rate, if workers are second years they are more likely to keep working on the Farm long term. It seems to me that new student workers are usually first or second years, and are weeded out from there, and whoever stays, stays until they graduate. Alice also pointed out that the Farm does not need many workers and there is a limit to how many students can work at the Farm. When hiring student workers, Alice said she looks for reliability, self-motivation, and enthusiasm for physical work and especially Farm work. She did not explicitly state that previous Farm work experience was required for students to be hired to work on the Farm.

Alice described a tight-knit community of Farm staff. Alice told me that students help her plan how to execute the weekly tasks, and that each week the staff eat lunch together. Alice

thought a weekly staff lunch meeting facilitated cohesion and better communication. When asked about the demographics of the Farm, Alice, who identifies as white and woman, said that while there are many students with changing pronouns, there aren't any students of color who work on the Farm this quarter. I did not ask her to clarify what she meant by students of color. At the beginning of our meeting, however, she did make clear that she does not collect demographic information from Farm staff. She did mention that the participants in the Farm Experience Program are often people of color, first generation college students, or from other marginalized communities. The Farm Experience Program is an opportunity for incoming first years to work on the Farm three weeks before the school year starts. Alice speculated that the students who sign up for this program are those who need more support and help in transitioning to college life. She also noted that these students often don't stay, maybe because they get what they want from the program. Alice was intrigued by the question about demographics on the Farm and mentioned that her acquaintances who manage community gardens in Springfield and Dayton are mostly women.

A current student worker, Brittany is involved with composting, weeding, animal care, and seed starts. She has been working on the Farm for one year. She works on the farm 10-15 hours a week and takes walks on the farm during her free time. She guesses she is on the Farm about five days a week. In the past, she has worked at a queer, women-owned farm. She thinks that the fact that the farm was owned by and run by women impacted the culture on the farm, making it more sharing and communicative. While discussing how the gender of the boss or leader can affect who works for them, she also thought that plant care can be seen as feminine while farming is seen as more masculine by society.

Brittany said queer people, gender divergent people, and women work on the Antioch Farm. She thinks this is the case because the Farm is a kind of third space, a work space that is at the same time not a professional space. This matters because professional spaces often have a strict dress code that relies on the separation of gender by men and women. Without this kind of dress code, the Farm can be a gender neutral space and a space without a heavy social gaze. Brittany also agrees that the Farm staff is dominated by white women. However, considering that the majority of students at Antioch are women and that there are very few students of color on campus in the first place, she does not think there are any less people of color working on the farm. She mentioned one student of color working on the Farm this quarter.

Identifying as Cuban American and woman, Brittany had some important things to say about the demographics of farm workers and the history surrounding this manual labor. She

pointed out this new interest in white communities to “get back” to nature. This interest comes from having a very different relationship and access to land. She talked about how people from communities who have historically worked on farms, especially as migrant workers or through forced labor such as slavery, may not be interested in doing this type of work. Some communities of color have been beaten by the land, she said, while working on the land has been liberatory for some. While discussing her own privilege of often being seen as white, she also made an important point that it would also be weird if all student farm workers were people of color.

Chloe, a former student farm worker, worked on the Farm for a total of two and a half quarters. Her main duties were to help with composting and to work on the fields. Before Antioch, she had worked on three other farms. She said the Antioch Farm was a positive, light hearted space. She said it was empowering to work on the Farm. Chloe, who identifies as white and a woman, told me that when she worked on the Farm, all her fellow Farm staff were white women. She told me that one of her friends of color applied but didn't get hired and she thought it was because he had no experience in farming compared to the other staff who did. She understood that it was efficient and convenient to hire people with experience, but she also thought the manager might be unaware of how some people might not have access to the Farm. She said that if you weren't hired to work on the Farm when you first got to Antioch, then there wasn't another opportunity to get involved with the Farm in this way. While she enjoyed the community on the Farm, she also thought it reflected the cliquey-ness of Antioch, as those who worked on the Farm also hung out together during their social time. Chloe told me that this atmosphere, where only white women worked, negatively affected her experience and desire to work on the Farm. Though she does not work on the Farm anymore, she is pursuing multiple other projects that include plants and working with her hands. She told me she loved that the Farm exists, but hasn't gone to any volunteer hours to work on the Farm again.

From these three separate accounts of work on the Farm, it is obvious that when it comes to discussing demographics, we do not share common definitions or knowledge about who people are. The fact is that only the person themselves knows how they identify in terms of race/ethnicity and gender, and thus one cannot accurately perceive this just by observing, even if you are intimately involved with the community. However, it seemed to me that there are some issues of access to Farm work that students of color face. While there needs to be more investigation in the matter, I believe a potential problem is that prior experience favors white college students, who are more likely to have had this kind of experience, while college students

of color at Antioch seem to often come from urban areas and thus not have this experience. Gathering demographic data after hiring students may be a potential way to facilitate accurate investigation into how access to Farm work may be limited at Antioch. Though I reached out on Facebook asking if one, was any student of color a former Farm staff, and two, if so were they willing to speak with me about their experience, I did not get any responses. I personally know at least one student of color who worked on the Farm for a couple of years and who also occasionally attended the People of Color group on campus.

I found that this process of trying to create a complete picture of the culture of the Farm workplace and the people who work there harder than expected. Even when I was just walking through the gardens, I noticed the challenge of depicting a place truthfully. I noticed I wasn't too concerned with accuracy because I thought, "Dean wouldn't know anyway," and I had to catch myself and look closer. When talking to those involved, I found that talking about race/ethnicity and gender was often awkward and sometimes uncomfortable. When translating my field notes into this narrative, I also realized just how much information had to be left out to preserve anonymity. Likewise, even though I had talked to some people informally about their experiences on the Farm, I could not include their accounts because of identifying information or because I did not obtain consent to do so.

*Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.