

## Cultivating self-reliance: Participation in urban agriculture as civil leisure

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### **Abstract:**

Using ethnographic methods, the present study explored volunteer participation in an urban farm in Austin, Texas, USA. Researchers spent three years documenting the activities of participants via participant observation and interviewing. Guided by the concept of civil leisure, researchers analyzed voluntary participation in the farm as a form of leisure practice that was oriented towards civic issues. Analysis indicated that participation was understood as a means of (1) fostering self-reliance through peer education, (2) establishing and strengthening place-based social networks, and (3) addressing civic concerns related to infrastructure and food security. These findings are interpreted within the context of Bauman's concepts of liquid modernity (2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Malden, MA: Polity Press) and liquid fear (2006. *Liquid Fear*. Malden, MA: Polity Press). On the basis of the findings and interpretations, recommendations are made to suggest ways in which municipalities might cultivate residents' civic impulses, especially as relates to urban agriculture.

**Keywords:** Civil leisure | civic agriculture | self-reliance | community | liquid modernity

### **Article:**

It's 10 am on a Friday morning in June in Austin, Texas. I'm<sup>1</sup> standing in front of a suburban home in north central Austin, taking a moment to savour some cool refreshment from my water bottle. For the last hour-and-a-half, I and four other volunteers have been unloading hardwood mulch from the bed of an F-150 that was filled to overflowing. Shovelful by shovelful, we've moved the mulch from the truck to the wheelbarrows and then deposited it in between rows of herbs and vegetables planted in the front yard of this home. The truck's thermometer says it's 96 degrees, but I know that by 2 pm today the temperature will easily climb into the triple digits. My water break affords momentary relief to my hamstrings and lower back that are in sad shape as a result of a mere 90 minutes of honest manual labour. I spend a moment contemplating how long I can continue standing in the shade before inertia takes hold and it becomes too difficult to resume my shovelling in the sun. As I put my hat back on, I hear one member of our group playfully curse the heat, the sort of curse that obscures the fact that our activities are purely

voluntary. Her comment leads me to wonder, ‘how can I possibly make the argument at some future date that shovelling mulch in the Texas summer heat is some form of leisure?’

How might one make sense of the scene described above as leisure? Some scholars would be quick to characterize an individual's ongoing participation in a community garden as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins 2007). Certainly, ongoing participation in community gardening might be found to exhibit the characteristics of skill acquisition, perseverance, durable benefits, and/or a unique social world. Additionally, there is a rich literature on volunteerism in leisure (see Arai 2000, among others) that might also be applicable to participation in urban farming activities. While serious leisure and/or volunteerism may be useful for describing the formal characteristics of the activity, we find each inadequate for exploring the ways in which participants in our study made sense of their own behaviours. Indeed, as this project unfolded, it became clear to us that participants understood their actions as having explicit civic and political dimensions.

As opposed to a traditional emphasis on enjoyment, freedom of choice, and intrinsic motivation (Iso Ahola 1979), civil leisure facilitates the exploration of overtly political activities such as organized protest (Mair 2002), participation in politically-oriented music festivals (Sharpe 2008), and the appropriation of urban spaces for unsanctioned leisure (Gilchrist and Ravenscroft 2013). Using civil leisure as a guiding framework, the purpose of the present study was to describe and analyze participants’ understandings of their ongoing involvement with Springwood Neighborhood Urban Farm in Austin, Texas. In particular, our inquiry asked, how does participation in volunteer urban farming manifest as a civically-oriented leisure practice? After a brief review of the civil leisure concept and related scholarship, we proceed with a description of the study context and research methodology before describing and interpreting our findings within the context of Bauman's concepts of liquid modernity (2000) and liquid fear (2006).

## **Civil leisure**

Civil leisure's origins are both conceptual and empirical. The concept's genesis was empirical to the extent that it arose from phenomena such as political protests that strongly contrast with prevalent leisure practices that are overwhelmingly commodified, privatist, and politically apathetic (Carr 2017; Hemingway 1991; Mair 2002). Given such characteristics, it is hardly surprising that leisure theory reaches its limits when trying to address phenomena that are overtly civic and/or political. As mentioned above, serious leisure and volunteerism may easily describe the formal characteristics of certain politically oriented leisure practices (e.g. planning a climate change campaign), but fail to capture participants’ worldviews relative to immediate or broader contexts.

With such theoretical limits in mind, Mair (2002) offered civil leisure as a conceptual tool that would allow scholars to focus on practices that ‘attempt to generate open and public discussion about issues that are important to society’ (p. 215), in her case political protest as leisure. Subsequent efforts have examined politically-oriented music festivals (Sharpe 2008), politically-informed food practices (Dunlap 2012; Mair, Sumner, and Rotteau 2008), and witch camps as forms of political, social, and environmental activism (Jones and Mair 2014). Having been utilized on a limited basis, the civil leisure concept is nonetheless an important tool for making

sense of behaviour in societies fraught with structural power inequities, exploitation, and conflict.

The present inquiry employs civil leisure as a theoretical framework for examining volunteer participation in urban farming activities as a practice that not only reclaims physical space through cultivation, but also recaptures discursive space from hegemonic discourses related to the roles that individuals can and should play with regards to providing for their own food and nourishment (Mair 2002). In this way, we used civil leisure as a framing concept to explore the practice of civic agriculture.

### **Civic agriculture**

Civic agriculture refers broadly to the relocalization of agriculture such that the practice of cultivation is tied to the social and economic development of individual communities (Lyson 2005). As opposed to obscuring the relationship of food to place, civic agriculture focuses on agricultural literacy in that individuals learn about the process by which food comes to be on their collective plates and what their role in the larger food system might be (Salvidar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004). To that end, DeLind (2002) has advocated for civic agriculture in which a populace engages with agriculture not simply as a consumers, but as citizens who are responsible to one another for the economic, social, and moral impacts of cultivation (Poulsen 2017). Given these characterizations, the current study presents itself as a prototypical example of civic agriculture.

As opposed to other alternatives to conventional agriculture, civic agriculture transcends the ‘problem-solving foundations of sustainable agriculture’ by strengthening community identity (Lyson 2005, 96). Chung et al. (2005) contended that this community identity ‘lives and thrives’ where public spaces welcome the ‘spirit of collective work’ (p. 107). Boyte and Kari (1996) outlined three elements of public work: it is performed by a number of people from diverse backgrounds seeking to address communal issues; it is explicitly for the public good; and it takes place in a public space that is accessible to all and serves as the facilitator of the collective goal. Thus, the practice of civic agriculture dovetails with the concept of civil leisure to the extent that discursive space precedes the creation of literal physical space in the form of a community garden, for example.

Engagement can take the form of actual cultivation via participation in a community garden or urban farm, but it may also occur through various forms of consumption, be it as a shareholder in a community-supported agriculture (CSA) farm or by shopping at a local farmer's market. Regardless of the mode of engagement, participants in civic agriculture find themselves learning about local availability, interact with actual producers, and see firsthand how their purchases might impact the local economy. As a result, civic agriculture fosters ‘indigenous, site-specific knowledge and [relies] less on a uniform set of best management practices’ (Lyson 2005, 96).

For DeLind (2011), the ultimate benefit of civic agriculture's locally generated knowledge is not merely the cultivation of socially responsible food, but rather an awareness of individuals’ agency that can be extrapolated to other arenas in the civic sphere. By understanding how one vital system works at a micro-level, civically-engaged residents can evolve from cultivation and

consumption practices to the quintessential acts of citizenship that affect all aspects of civic life: voting and activism.

## **Liquid modernity**

The pursuit of individual and collective agency via civic agriculture is all the more striking when considered against an underlying condition of fluidity that characterizes contemporary societies. Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity is the culmination of the twentieth century movement to dispense with the *solid* institutions (e.g. nation states, international alliances) that facilitated an entrenched and hierarchical, but nonetheless relatively stable international order. In its place, the *fluidity* of neoliberalism has advanced under a banner of 'free choice' as expressed in the consumer marketplace. For more than half a century, the liquid modern system of food provision has presented consumers with a thoroughly rationalized and inexpensive menu of commodity foodstuffs that are utterly abstracted from the place and seasonality. Emblematic of the liquid modern order, international commodity agriculture results from the dissolution of social networks in which activities such as food cultivation have traditionally been nested. Indeed, traditional social networks are the enemy of a thoroughly liquid order.

Any dense and tight network of social bonds, and particularly a territorially rooted tight network, is an obstacle to be cleared out of the way. Global powers are bent on dismantling such networks for the sake of their continuous and growing fluidity, that principal source of their strength and the warrant of their invincibility. And it is the falling apart, the friability, the brittleness, the transience, the until-further-noticeness of the human bonds and networks which allow these powers to do their job in the first place. (Bauman 2000, 14)

Thus, the obliteration of agriculture rooted in places and social networks has been accompanied by a growing anxiety related to opacity of the transnational systems that feed the world's populace (Estabrook 2011; Pollan 2006). As described in our findings, this generalized anxiety about the provenance of one's food is not only a defining feature of Bauman's work, but a background condition against which participants have structured their efforts to establish a place-based, communal agriculture.

## **Methods**

Given the nature of our purpose and question, we employed a qualitative approach to inquiry that endeavoured to generate rich data about participants' worldviews, especially as pertained to their participation in urban agriculture.

### *Description of site*

The present exploration of civic agriculture took place in the Springwood Neighborhood (pseudonym) located in northeast-central Austin, Texas. Springwood, which was once mid-century suburbia on the outskirts of Austin's core, has now become an urban core neighbourhood as a result of the city's explosive growth. Owing to these origins, Springwood is composed of single-family ranch and bungalow-style homes that sit on generous lots, ranging in size from a

quarter to a third of an acre. As opposed to neighbourhoods that have rapidly gentrified in south and east Austin, Springwood underwent a slower demographic transition throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Its lower-middle class neighbourhood profile has slowly become more affluent as young families have begun to supplant the original owners. Despite this demographic change, Springwood has maintained an active neighbourhood association that laid the relational groundwork for its neighbourhood farm.

The Springwood Neighborhood Farm was formed in 2010 with the goal of (1) promoting local food security, (2) transforming underutilized urban green space, and (3) fostering place-based social networks in the city's neighbourhoods (P. H., personal communication, July 17, 2013). These goals were pursued through the unique vehicle of neighbourhood farms composed of numerous garden plots located in the yards of neighbourhood residents, each plot tended by volunteers from the neighbourhood and across the city. The collective harvest of each neighbourhood's farm was sold to neighbourhood shareholders using a CSA model.

While being advised by Springwood's founder, each of the three neighbourhood farms operated autonomously, devising their own planting plans and recruiting shareholders. The volunteer workforce was composed of core members, who participated weekly in cultivation duties, and casual members who participated less frequently. Demographically, volunteers were relatively homogenous in that a majority identified as white, had received some form of post-secondary education, and were generally liberal in their political views. The gender composition of any given work group could vary considerably, but women constituted a slightly greater percentage of the overall volunteer workforce. There was some diversity with regards to participants' socio-economic status as indicated by the degree to which the production of vegetables was an economic necessity. Whereas some participants acknowledged that vegetable production was not something upon which they depended for sustenance, others clearly indicated their weekly harvests were an integral component of their household budget. With regards to age, volunteers were clustered into two categories: individuals of retirement age who lived in the host neighbourhood and university-aged students who generally did not live in the host neighbourhood, but who were interested in learning to cultivate food. Springwood and its constituent farm plots would occasionally stage special events, such as digging in a new garden plot or starting a new farm network, and such events would be attended by a more diverse sampling of Austin's residents. The relative homogeneity of participants was an issue of some concern for its core volunteers as it was acknowledged that the local food movement was largely a white, middle-class preoccupation.

### *Data generation & analysis*

In the service of exploring participants' involvement with and understandings of the Springwood Farm relative to its larger cultural context, the current study used an ethnographic methodology. As such, all three researchers engaged in participant observation and interviewed participants with the intent of describing and analyzing participants' patterned behaviours and their interpretations of such behaviours. Over the course of three growing seasons (Spring 2012–Summer 2014), plus some off-season activities, researchers spent hundreds of hours working alongside Springwood participants to cultivate produce in the different neighbourhood plots. Typical activities included digging-in plots, planting, seeding, weeding, irrigating, harvesting,

and composting, most of which occurred in the sweltering conditions of summer in central Texas. Work sessions typically lasted from 8 am until early afternoon, after which researchers would compose field notes in reaction to their experiences. Data was also generated from informal ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979) that took place during work sessions as well as 17 semi-structured interviews that took place with core and casual participants apart from work sessions. Semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and began with biographical explorations of food, family, and cultivation, and proceeded with questions meant to elicit participants' interpretive processes regarding their volunteer participation. Such questions typically framed participation in Springwood against the backdrop of more conventional forms of food consumption (e.g. grocery shopping, fast food consumption) in an effort to tease out participants' meaning making processes.

Having generated field notes and interview transcripts, researchers proceeded with a generally inductive approach to analyzing the data (Charmaz 2014). Transcripts and field notes were read and 'open coded' in a manner that captured any data deemed responsive to the research purpose. The open codes were compiled and then truncated into a set of focused codes that reflected the underlying similarities of various ideas. The data were coded a second time using the focused codes which in turn facilitated the compilation and comparison of different excerpts across the dataset. Based on this comparative process, the authors composed analytic memos, the purpose of which was to identify underlying patterns and relationships across the entire research process. The resulting patterns, which facilitated yet another review of the original data, served as the basis of the following findings.

## **Findings & discussion**

Participants came to Springwood with a diversity of motives (e.g. education, social network building, landscape transformation), all of which coalesced around creating an alternative to the industrial food system that supplies the majority of the industrialized world's food. Prominent among members' reasons for joining Springwood was a desire to foster a sense of self-reliance in the context of place-based social networks.

### *Cultivating self-reliance*

Many participants came to Springwood out of a desire to reclaim a degree of control over one of life's most basic processes, feeding one's self and one's family. Participant and volunteer coordinator, Eileen,<sup>2</sup> captured this sentiment:

We are very dependent on businesses and the government to provide us with everything. If you go to the grocery store, you get to buy as many of whatever [and] take it home with you. You don't think about how or where it grew, and in what conditions ... Food is something that everybody needs to survive. Your nourishment, it is even on a social level, we do a lot of things that center around food ... I think [learning to grow food] is more just for people to have as many life building skills as possible. Food is a pretty easy one, especially in communities. It doesn't take too much finesse necessarily. It is great for people to have that knowledge and power themselves. (July 2013)

Eileen's commentary captured the sentiment that learning to grow food was actually a process of reclaiming a basic competency that had been ceded to other entities in society. Other participants noted that the production of food was neither the only nor necessarily the most important outcome of Springwood's activities.

Growing up I made almost all my own clothes. Very few people know how to sew anymore. Nobody sews. It is so much cheaper to buy clothes than sew them now. But, of course when I grew up you made your own clothes because that was cheaper than buying them. Likewise, producing your own food and having an understanding about your own food, that is a skill that we need to keep. So, that's part of what the vision of Springwood is. To have that skill, and for people to understand their food and it's not just something that comes in a box off the shelf. (Deidre, July 2013)

Whereas the industrial food system casts people as merely consumers of products, Springwood endeavoured to turn its participants, such as Deidre, into producers of food (i.e. civic agriculture).

While acknowledging the overriding goals of self-sufficiency, participants were realistic in their understanding of the logistics and economics of food cultivation. Deidre qualified her description of Springwood's efforts, saying:

I actually don't like a majority of the food we grow ... But that doesn't really matter to me because when you learn to grow one thing you learn to grow another thing. It's all related processes. So, it didn't bother me what is being grown ... To me it was the learning and the community, and not the food that I get out of it. (July 2013)

This notion was reinforced by Anna Lee, who ate the food that was grown, but who recognized that consumption, and its value, was less of a priority than production.

The people who stay with Springwood for more than a season are people who really enjoy getting together and working together in the field, and who know that bringing the food home isn't their top priority. They like eating the food, and they use vegetables and try new recipes and share new ideas, but they are coming back again and again because they are learning something and they enjoy spending time with their neighbors. (July 2013)

Understood this way, Springwood steps outside the strict market logic of making choices that maximize one's utility. Participants understood that purchasing industrially produced food from chain supermarkets was clearly the sensible economic decision. Thus, participation was a deliberate decision to step outside of such market calculations in an effort to gain knowledge and competencies that stand in opposition to market forces.

A necessary byproduct of Springwood's effort to step outside of market norms was the need to educate and train its members in the practice of growing food. Some participants grew up on farms (Jeanette) and others had been gardening with their families since childhood (Cara), while the majority of participants had little to no experience with growing food. Without time or

resources for formalized instruction, participants gained knowledge firsthand by working alongside other more experienced volunteers.

Part of [Springwood's mission] is training each other on gardening. It doesn't matter how long you have been gardening or how long you have been farming, you always learn new things. So Jeanette is like a mentor to me, but then she has learned stuff from me too because I have lived here longer than her. Tara is like our tree lady; she knows how to sprout trees ... I guess you could say I am the compost queen. We all have our little strengths and we learn from each other that way. (Cara, June 2014)

Cara's observation encapsulates the notion that participation is as much an educational endeavour as it is a type of labour. Indeed, work sessions typically began with a brief discussion from Parker, Anna Lee, or one of the other more experienced participants during which the day's tasks would be laid out and often some sort of informal lesson would be given. Such lessons might address any number of issues, ranging from how to dig-in a proper row to soil amendments to plant pruning for health and production. In such situations, one individual might take the lead in giving instruction and conducting a demonstration, but individuals would readily contribute their viewpoints. The cooperative nature of Springwood's activities underscored the idea that skill acquisition and self-reliance were both individual and communal.

In almost all aspects of their activities, from learning to grow food to spending time getting to know one's neighbours, participants in the Springwood Urban Farm understood themselves to be acting against the prevailing norms of contemporary American society. Growing food is a tedious, inefficient process, especially for novices working at a small-scale. In many cases, participants acknowledged not only the inefficiencies of their cultivation efforts, but the fact that their efforts yielded uneven results. As reflected in the shares given to CSA subscribers, some weeks saw an overabundance of one item (e.g. kale) and a minuscule amount of another (e.g. bell peppers). Considered in this way, participants' activities and beliefs ran counter to the market rationalities of consumer culture in which it makes more sense to purchase food from an industrial system that delivers predictable quantities, familiar varieties, and reasonable prices. To make sense of participants' behaviours, especially as leisure, one must recognize their deliberate efforts to abandon a strictly economic paradigm of consumption and the adoption of an alternative and in many cases adversarial paradigm of production.

Any time you step outside of things that are usually bought and sold and make your own things, I think that is a form of activism. And when you try to agitate your neighbors to do the same thing, then that's really, depending on what's happening in the political world of your city, it can be intensely activist and political ...

[Activism] against the move over the last century and a half to take food, a most basic part of our lives, out of the household and away from individuals and have it be something that is mass produced and handed back at a cost. At a financial, worldwide economic cost, and an individual health cost. That's a movement towards whole food and away from processed food. But if you want whole food, and you want it to be maximally healthy, it has got to be grown nearby. Some of it is a movement against industrial agriculture itself, and that is an interesting piece of it too. That is part of ... why small



farms and farmers markets exist in such large numbers, and are gaining popularity. (Anna Lee, July 2013)

Anna Lee's sentiment captured that of the majority of participants who felt that reliance on the industrial food system was unjust and imprudent. As such, their time spent gardening was both a form of self-provisioning (Dunlap 2011; Schor 2010) and a form of activism (Mair, Sumner, and Rotteau 2008). This conceptualization of participation in Springwood as a form of activism is resonant with Mair's (2002) original articulation of civil leisure as practices that counter the consumerist and privatist characteristics of mainstream leisure. Voluntary participation in the Springwood Farm during one's leisure time was not only counter to the conventional logic of consumption, but was also out-of-step with the overriding nature of leisure as consumptive and apolitical (Carr 2017; Hemingway 1991).

Given that activities such as communal cultivation are exceptional as leisure practices, how might one make sense of them within a broader cultural lens? Participants' commentaries on the need to wrest some degree of control over cultivation back from multinational corporations clearly suggested a desire to reclaim individual and group agency. As discussed above, learning to grow one's food was not a move towards self-sufficiency by divorcing oneself from consumer culture. Rather, the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and to some extent the growing of food, was a means of reformulating the relative balance of power between individuals and large corporations. In so doing, participants felt they were reclaiming a modicum of self-determination while also hedging against the potential instabilities endemic to a transnational food system. Eileen captured this point, saying:

So many of our resources we rely, we outsource, not just talking about other countries, I am talking about other people in general. We don't have these skills. There is a lot of talk about the apocalypse and what happens when we reach peak oil. So maybe the apocalypse is like, a little sci-fi, but we are going to reach peak oil at some point, right? So, it is really important to have these skills. You don't have to think about what this is like. You don't have to sit up in your high-rise building on your computer and think about, I wonder what is going to happen when those grocery stores don't have food in them anymore. What am I going to do? (July, 2013)

In light of such an interpretation, Zygmunt Bauman's notions of liquid modernity and liquid fear provide a useful context for understanding participants' activities and interpretations.

As discussed above, liquid modernity captures the fluidity of the individual's situation in contemporary society. As opposed to being moored to traditional institutions such as nation-states or corporations, the liquid modern individual has been untethered in order to become oneself on a neoliberal sea of consumer choice. A fundamental irony of this situation is that,

... in the fluid and the light as much as in the heavy and solid stage of modernity—individualization is a fate, not a choice. In the land of the individual freedom of choice the option to escape individualization and to refuse participation in the individualizing game is emphatically not on the agenda. (Bauman 2000, 34)

In short, one is freed from the manacles of pre-modern institutions, but left without the security they afforded.

The transformation from solid to liquid is wide-ranging, but conspicuous with regards to the manner in which inhabitants of the liquid world eat and procure their food. Characteristic of the modern era, one's food emanates from a remote network of systems that are utterly opaque to the individual and is consumed in the absence of culturally relevant frameworks that could be rooted in place-based communities and relationships. As such, the individual is responsible for creating her 'self' via choices from a veritable universe of potential food products. Not surprisingly, this abundance of choice produces considerable anxiety for inhabitants of the liquid world.

An accompaniment to its predecessor, *liquid fear* captures the amorphous feeling of insecurity that is often experienced by members of contemporary societies. This 'derivative fear' does not fixate on a particular danger, but is the product of a parade of calamities, large and small, probable and unlikely, that organize our attention and behaviours. Chief among these fears is that which Bauman (2006) termed the:

... sense-numbing and mind-chafing grey zone ... from which ever more dense and sinister fears seep, threatening to destroy our homes, workplaces, and bodies through disasters ... The zone where power grids go bust, petrol taps run dry, stock exchanges collapse, all-powerful companies disappear together with dozens of services one used to take for granted. (p. 5)

Within this imagined grey zone, one can easily imagine residents coming to blows over a can of kidney beans in a grocery store whose shelves are virtually empty. Indeed, food shortages are a not so irregular feature of our globalized regime (Winkler 2017). The anxiety of dependency on a transnational food system is laced throughout participants' discussion of their activities and exemplifies liquid fear in its most elemental incarnation, and it is precisely this fear of scarcity that drives participants' preoccupation with self-reliance. As alluded to by participants' interpretations above, one can easily foresee a group of Springwood neighbours coming together to share a post-apocalyptic feast of rice, canned beans, and sautéed Swiss chard, freshly cut from a Springwood plot.

### *Place-based social networks*

Given the effort required to produce food at a neighbourhood scale, Springwood's efforts entailed the formation of neighbourhood-based social networks. As described above by Cara, social relations were formed not simply to perform labour, but for the purpose of peer-to-peer education. As residents coordinated to pursue the tasks of growing food, they inevitably formed connections apart from the immediate task at hand. As Paula (June 2013) explained, 'You learn a lot by working beside somebody. You learn about people's lives on a personal level. It is really difficult in our society to meet your neighbor unless you make a concerted effort'. Participant observation corroborated this assertion as the authors participated in numerous social activities apart from cultivating food, including birthday celebrations, afternoon 'happy hours', and evening meals at one another's homes. Certainly not all participants engaged in social activities outside of their garden labour, though a majority did.

Springwood's founder, Parker, described the creation of place-based networks as being an explicit goal of the farm. In doing so, she sketched what she saw as a conventional approach to inhabiting one's neighbourhood:

When I come home, I hide in my house. I don't know my neighbors, and I go on with life. So, the idea [of Springwood] was connecting people based on proximity again. Then, based on proximity, discovering who had knowledge and skills, and then encouraging people to tap into each other for those knowledge and skills, instead of like, go take a class, or drive across town to go garden, instead go gardening down the street. Or, walk down to a neighbor's house to buy food, instead of driving to the store for food. Sort of rediscovering this connectivity based on place, instead of just the people you know from work or family or church or whatever. (July 2013)

Whereas the industrialized food system is functionally unconcerned with place and locality (Janssen 2010), Parker understood Springwood and its activities as being intimately connected to a network of social relations, rooted in a geographic neighbourhood. This dynamic was reflected in the fact that individual garden plots were located in people's yards, which meant that work days for new volunteers often entailed setting foot in a neighbour's yard and meeting that person for the first time. Thus, the intimacy of working the soil and tending to the plants translated to cultivating familiarity with the other members of one's neighbourhood.

As with their desire for competence, participants' efforts to establish and nurture social networks may also be interpreted against the backdrop of Bauman's (2006) concept of liquid fear. As described above, liquid fear captures an inarticulate sense of dread about the seemingly ever-present potential for calamity in contemporary societies (e.g. financial collapse, despotism, terrorist attacks). Despite chronic rates of food insecurity, liquid fears related to food in affluent societies tend to focus on issues related to potential environmental (e.g. genetic engineering gone wrong) and health crises (e.g. detrimental effects of synthetic pesticides) as well as nostalgia related to the disappearance of real and imagined foods and foodways. As compared with the mysterious origins of industrially produced foods, Springwood's efforts provided assurance that its produce was cultivated in a transparent, healthy and socially responsible manner.

All such fears are underpinned by an implicit understanding that, lacking efficacious states or social institutions, individuals are left alone to confront the challenges of modern life. 'Even when (if) the benefits of joint struggle are convincingly argued', Bauman (2006) has reminded us, 'the question remains of how to bring the solitary fighters together and how to keep them together. The conditions of individualized society are inhospitable to solidary action' (p. 21). As such, Springwood's activities are as much concerned with the formation and nurturance of social relations as they are with the cultivation of food. As described by Edwin below, Springwood participants recognized that their concern for and connection to one another ran contrary to the impotence engendered by liquid fear.

Always you hear it is so much better not doing [the work] alone. The actual reality of, 'I don't know what I am doing but [Jeanette] does' to a more abstract sense of collaboration and responsibility to each other. You hear a lot of, it comes out in funny ways, shortly

before the distribution [to shareholders], anxiety level goes up. 'Are we going to have enough?' We always do. It is always this pleasant surprise. The fact that there is anxiety about it speaks of the responsibility or connectedness. We are in this together, we are serving each other, we are going this through for each other. That would be my description, others might have other descriptions. But that dynamic is very much there. It is a leap, it is embryonic, sort of a leap to take that to a self-empowered agency. (July 2014)

In contrast to the incoherence of liquid fear, Cara further echoed the connection of social networks to agency in the broader community.

We organize on other stuff. It may have nothing to do with food production on the farm. We will organize on other neighborhood issues because we have this network in place. We can tap it to see what we think and what we can do. Whether we want to speak as one voice. Yeah. There is an organizing component there, there is also the community. (Cara, June 2014)

As expressed by Cara, Springwood's efforts are also generative and therefore emblematic of civil leisure (Mair 2002). Within the context of leisure, participants' initial moves to simply gain knowledge and skills related to the cultivation of food have evolved into broader conversations and actions on civic issues, such as residential codes (Jeannette, June 2014) and water policy (Anna Lee, June 2013; Parker, June 2014). This distinctive combination of skill acquisition for self-reliance and solidarity via place-based social networks suggests an important, but neglected role for leisure in the civic life of a community (Hemingway 1991; Mair 2002).

## **Conclusion & implications**

The relatively large degree of time, money, and effort required to grow one's own food highlights the extent to which such practices are remarkable as leisure activities. As suggested at the outset, concepts such as serious leisure may adequately address the *etic* characteristics of volunteer participation in agriculture, yet fail to address the unique ethos of such endeavours from the perspective of participants themselves. To ignore the meaning making processes that accompany such activities is to avoid important empirical and theoretical avenues of exploration.

In the present case, we found that volunteer participation in an urban farm exemplifies the characteristics that constitute Mair's (2002) articulation of civil leisure. Further, this form of civil leisure may be understood in light of larger geo-political instabilities that threaten, actually or purportedly, many of the activities of daily life, such as feeding oneself and one's family. This context created a paradox in that daily participation was frequently enjoyable, but also set against a backdrop of serious concerns such as food in/security.

Given the growth of localized agriculture in the United States, especially since 2008 (Fonte 2008), municipal governments should take notice. Indeed, many community gardening plots already sit on public land, including public parks (Baker 2004), though such arrangements could be more widespread. Given that growing one's own food contradicts the mandate of liberalized markets and international trade, governments could assist in combatting the anxieties

of liquid modern life (Bauman 2000) in two principal ways, both of which are reflected in this study's findings. Firstly, by providing land, information, and equipment, municipal governments could facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills that function to combat the seeming incomprehensibility of a basic life process, namely where and how one's food is produced. Secondly, as is common with many such municipal initiatives, programmes focused on local agriculture stand a good chance of creating and strengthening social networks that in turn provide the solidarity that is sorely needed in the age of liquid fear (Bauman 2006). Despite its novelty, the idea of municipal government as the facilitator of agency and solidarity is not dissimilar to commonplace municipal initiatives designed to address health, wellness, physical activity, and nutrition.

Such a role for municipal government was explicitly envisioned by Parker, Springwood's founder, when she conceived of starting an urban farm.

People are also saying, 'all of the farm land is being pushed out because of suburbs'. I was like no, 'the land is still there'. So, let's just use it differently. You're ripping up food crops and you are planting houses. Why aren't we planting food crops between houses? So, I was seeing these two or three things could solve each other's problems if we just looked at our urban planning differently, and our urban landscape differently. A whole lot of people could be fed for a lot less cost, and a lot less effort. So, that was the original goal.

Well, the future Austin would just have food built into its infrastructure, just food. Like sidewalks, streets, like street lamps, and food. So, every street out near the sidewalks would have fruit trees, nut trees, perennials that people know it is kind of understood in that community if you walk down that sidewalk and you see something that looks like food, it is okay to pick it without somebody coming out of their house with a broomstick going, 'that's mine, that's mine'. So, this new infrastructure of what a city is, that says someone's land zone out by the street, that is for community food production. (July 2013)

As described, space for cultivation would be built into the urban landscape. However, the impetus for cultivation would be left to the residents themselves. Thus, urban planning might actually facilitate action, rather than passivity on the part of residents.

As occurred with Springwood, widespread public provision of urban agriculture (e.g. creating a 'people's garden' in every park) would also spark civic dialog on matters such as zoning, resource use, and municipal services. Just as with Springwood, such dialogs would inevitably transcend the immediate issue and generate further conversations about the respective roles of citizen and government.

In keeping with the civil leisure concept, we see future avenues of research exploring ways in which individuals and groups step outside the dominant and conventional discourse of consumption. Consumption is an inherent feature of everyday life, however, it need not foster the extreme dependence that characterizes the status quo. Future inquiry using civil leisure would do well to explore other forms of self-provisioning (Schor 2010), such as home brewing, or even forms of collaborative consumption (e.g. Home Exchange) that may blur the lines between work and leisure. Additionally, civil leisure might be employed to examine novel interpretations and

uses of public spaces in ways that foster citizens' agency and autonomy. Such instances could include alternative modes of transportation (e.g. walking, biking, skateboarding) and the temporary transformation of public spaces for resident-driven recreation (e.g. turning parking spaces into 'parklets'; Gilchrist and Ravenscroft 2013).

As has been displayed by the participants of this study, urban gardens can serve as the conduit to greater civic awareness and engagement. Despite the well-documented decline of participation in civic life in the West (Bellah et al. 1985; Putnam 2000), many recent national, and sometimes international, events (i.e. Women's March, March for Science, March for Our Lives, Black Lives Matter, to name but a few) suggest a renewed desire to reclaim agency and solidarity in the face of the remote governance of liquid modern life. Though on a smaller scale, the farmers of Springwood have taken similar action to build their knowledge base, and their potential, to be more involved members in the global dialog on food production and consumption. For them, civility was found in the soil.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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### **Notes**

1. First person pronouns refer to the first author throughout.
2. All research participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

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