An anthropological reflection on urban gardening through the lens of citizenship

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Robin Smith

11.1 Introduction

On an early summer walk around my new home Leiden, a university town in the Netherlands, I came upon a lush, green courtyard surrounded by homes. Gracefully bordered by a gravel walkway, off to one side of it was a large square of freshly turned soil with a hanging wooden sign with white hand-writing reading 'Gekroonde Liefdetuin', or Crowned Love Garden. This modest herb garden stood there empty of people as I lingered to photograph it and the nearby stone garden fountain framed by blossoming roses. I began to wonder how this garden might be a political act. Reflecting on the transient student nature of this not quite urban, but then not quite not urban, university town, I considered whether gardening in this space might cultivate feelings of belonging, groundedness, or even a localized sort of citizenship for those tending it. Was it a community experiment that I stumbled upon in this particular space–time that would soon wilt away from neglect or flourish from communal love, or was it part of a continuation of an illustrious past about which I would remain completely oblivious? Was it a contested space, or a transformed one, a spot previously home to garbage bins or a playground? In pondering the literature on food citizenship, justice, and sovereignty, I began to question whether such spaces were inherently political, or whether makers of these gardens in semi-public areas must dig into those grass roots with political intent to make them so, as they turn the cultured soil over on itself to disrupt what is currently growing to make room for something novel, a new configuration of plants, ideas, and political values.

As an American anthropologist living in Europe for approaching two decades, I reflected also on my position as a non-citizen of this country, and what binds me to it more abstractly, such as shared social values and ancestry. Carrying my residence permit in my wallet and thinking about how I might make this place home, I realized how anthropologists are in the fortunate position of conceptualizing citizenship either literally, as a category of membership defined by the state to issue passports and determine residency, or more abstractly as a way of being, performative, enacting, or related to identity or belonging. We may also interpret citizenship as a relational category, a way

of organizing groups within society, making insiders and outsiders defined in different ways, or even creating inequalities between these groups, amongst other things. However, citizenship is consistently a political category in these vastly varied conceptualizations, a relational category to the state, and the surrounding discourse often includes a discussion or problematization of rights that are being denied or contested, and how these rights connect to citizenship by defining or challenging it. In conceptualizing meanings of food citizenship, one may frame an individual action like consumption or a collective action like urban gardening either in opposition to governance policies around food, or in opposition to the market structures limiting different configurations of economic transactions to emerge. Tacking between political and economic fields, developing a theory of food citizenship grounded in action necessitates approaching the study of consumption practices as a total social fact, in the tradition of Durkheim (1938).

In this chapter, I investigate potential ways of approaching the concept of food citizenship from an anthropological vantage point. I reflect specifically upon the diverse roles of community gardens that social scientists have unearthed in their efforts to unpack the value and meaning of gardens to urban citizens, linking these findings to anthropological research on urban citizenship to posit a roadmap towards a more concrete conceptualization of food citizenship. In so doing, I raise a series of questions that remain unanswered, but that are posed to inspire new conceptual understandings of these locally specific communal spaces. In suggesting that food citizenship may thus have multiple local meanings, I realize this may complicate efforts to theorize its definition in ways that would map on to efforts to bring the issue of food citizenship to policy contexts. Still, unpacking the nexus of theories on citizenship and social science research on urban gardens offers a roadmap, albeit a bumpy one, to understanding the values and beliefs underlying the consumer food choices that ultimately drive the vertical integration of the food sector, such that we may make more targeted interventions to modify the existing food system.

11.2 Planting the seeds of food citizenship

The concept of food citizenship was developed in the North American context in the 1990s by Thomas Lyson, the idea being that consumers become 'active food citizens' by engaging in the food system consciously—this includes them becoming occasional producers in ways that promote a democratic food system, in the sense that high-quality farm products become more available to otherwise marginal socioeconomic groups (Renting et al. 2012, citing Lyson 2005). Stephen Gliessman conceptualizes food citizens as those mindfully understanding their food-shopping decisions as having broader political and economic implications (2006, 339). Such studies as those below posit the existence of food citizenship as an almost generalized social environment where there is a broad consensus on the value of such high-quality food

products being available to everyone, but sometimes also as being an identity around which people define themselves and their community.

Community gardens in urban settings are promoted as ways to democratize access to high-quality food for those living in economic precarity (Armstrong 2000; Mares 2014; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004). Particularly in the United States, access to healthy food in food deserts like Detroit, framed in discourses around food justice, are embedded in diverse urban governance ideologies, placing food squarely in the political field of city planning (Jung and Newman 2014). Engaging in the food system by becoming producers, to whatever a marginal degree, is considered part of a process of *cultivating* citizenship (Poulsen 2017, 135). They are also often cast as contributing to neoliberal governance values—in the sense of urban self-provisioning being a way of further entrenching capitalist logics (Hébert and Mincyte 2014, 209). Although they may promote self-reliance for everyday needs, some researchers are approaching them theoretically as 'forms of political agency that contest, transform and re-signify "the urban"', re-casting them yet again as potentially *not* emblematic of neoliberalism (Ceteromà and Tornaghi 2015, 1123). Given the diversity of contexts and peoples engaging in urban gardening around the world, it seems plausible that both interpretations may be valid, and that it is place-dependent. Indeed, in some contexts it may not be political at all, as Veen et al. have found that, in some Dutch urban gardening groups, where participants 'perceive engagement in the gardening practice as a hobby, not as an economic activity', they may not even manage to incorporate the food they grow into their daily consumption habits (2014, 296).

However, some researchers, such as Ghose and Pettygrove in their study in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, suggest that the same community garden can simultaneously 'contest and reinforce local neoliberal policies', as a local government may try restricting gardens while simultaneously recognizing their value in non-profit community development and property tax revenue (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014, 1092, 1109). Indeed, cities do not just have regulatory roles for local food systems that make political power important to understanding them (Matacena 2016, 54), but they have city planning for land usage. As such, gardens are spaces where participants may be said to enact citizenship through their transformation of the space according to their own interests, 'claim rights to space, engage in leadership and decision-making activities, contest material deprivation, and articulate collective identities' (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014, 1098).

Similarly, Crossan et al. suggest that, in Glasgow, Scotland, community gardens rather 'promote an *equality-of-participation* and community making', employing the term 'DIY [do-it-yourself] citizenship' and contrasting this with the idea that neoliberalist constructions of citizenship supposedly favor individuated citizens that are independent agents not beholden to any sense of social responsibility (Crossan et al. 2016, 937). That said, were neoliberalism promoting atomized citizen subjects, then communal urban gardening seems to be contrary to this ideology, as it is ostensibly promoting

social responsibility and community (self-)reliance. Proponents of framing urban gardening and other alternative food procurement paradigms within discussions of citizenship regard civic agriculture as an avenue for changing the characteristics of the actors in the food system, drawing us away from producer-and-consumer, but also seeing this as a way to, at least partially, extract food from capitalist market relations (e.g. DeLind 2002).

To Crossan et al. in Glasgow, urban gardening inspires a form of 'citizenship that is *generative* of collaborative social relations', in that it entails learning about one's community members through interaction with them that exposes one to 'different ideas, cultures, social classes, etc.', and that in so doing, this facilitates crafting identity and 'their understanding of what citizenship entails', and thus participating in urban gardening constitutes political participation (Crossan et al. 2016, 941, 943). This analysis suggests that an exposure to social difference leads to a remaking of personal or collective identity, and ultimately a reworking of one's definition of citizenship, but it is hard to imagine that this is universally so, even if it can be proven in the context of urban gardening initiatives in Glasgow. What is it about gardening with others that would inspire new definitions of citizenship to emerge? Here, gardening is cast as political, as it threatens to add chaos to the orderliness of urban planning (Ceteromà and Tornaghi 2015, 1125). In some cases urban gardening is more overtly political in intent, as for example in Palestine, where Anne Meneley has shown that guerrilla gardening is a form of political resistance because it is a tactic for survival in politically oppressive conditions (2014, 77). Such an example also highlights how urban gardens may be at once communal spaces and in some ways private, as they are governed and used by defined groups.

Lauren Baker has conceptualized urban gardens in Toronto, Canada as sites where notions of food citizenship can be explored, in that 'democratic practices are being cultivated in community gardens' and by those in the movement advocating food security (Baker 2004, 305). In this case, participants in urban gardens become politicized by being introduced to social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focusing on food security issues, are more generally challenging urban planning conventions, and as they are gardening on land that is of value to building developers, they also occasionally become embroiled in local politics in defending their rights to garden (ibid., 305–306). Additionally, food security organizations promote urban gardening in the city in an effort to encourage so-called 'democratic' food procurement practices in their efforts to cultivate 'food citizens', or people who consciously consume and are connected to their food (ibid., 308–309). In referencing Laura DeLind, Baker explains that participating in urban gardens also changes people's values around food in ways that theoretically will increase societal support for reforming the food system in the future (ibid., 309, citing DeLind 2002, 223).

Such analyses posit urban gardens as conduits to other politically engaged activities, but the question remains whether urban gardening inspires a

remaking of one's individual and collective identity. Social scientists and environmental and food activists Chiara Certomà and Chiara Tornaghi also suggest stepping away from the above debate, instead encouraging investigating 'what ideas about the city and belonging these practices embody', and what impact urban gardens may have on the people engaging in them in the fields of local politics, relations of care, and even their hypothetical 'emancipatory' potential (Certomà and Tomaghi 2015, 1123).

What is it that makes gardening in open, communal spaces particularly anarchic or otherwise transgressive in the urban setting? The term *concrete jungle* has long been used to refer to the wildness of a seemingly static human-dense space of fixed, concrete gray buildings that characterize urbanity and around which humans scurry like ants, devoid of green, living beings. House plants and windowsill herbs are not transgressive, but drawing on Mary Douglas' (1966) monograph *Purity and Danger*, Ralph Bulmer's (1967) analysis of why a cassowary is not a bird reminds us that certain attributes of a living system belong to it and it alone. The casting of urban food projects as alternative, innovative, or transgressive spaces suggests that the *status quo* belief is that the urban ecosystem is not a space for edible gardens, and that by placing a garden there a group is subverting the natural order of things. Is food not to be borne within concrete environs? In the following section, I interrogate recent anthropological conceptualizations of urban citizenship as it may pertain to urban gardening, suggesting ways to frame the practice in novel ways to parse out its meaning in modern life.

11.3 Citizenship and urbanity

Anthropologists have studied the issue of urban citizenship in recent years to unpack how urban dwellers create a sense of belonging in transient spaces and articulate their status to the governance regimes in their midst. Kinga Pozniak (2015) conceptualizes the urban built environment as expressing the ideology of society and as a sort of 'spatial governmentality', and in this vein one may interpret urban gardens as an attempt to engage in reshaping or provoking city governments. Citizenship is an associational identity, James Holston has explained, and can be one of multiple identities an individual adopts—but the state, he points out, holds more power over the definition of citizenship than any other associational category we generally use that relies upon memberships, statuses, or groups (2008, 20). In citing T. H. Marshall, Holston explains the concept of citizenship as broken down into political, civil, and socioeconomic categories that allow for the expansion of citizenship from the legal and 'narrowly political' realm to instead delineate how citizenship may act as a mediator between state and society, and beyond this to help 'to distinguish the practices as well as the institutions and bureaucracies through which citizenship becomes substantive' (Holston 2008, 24, citing Marshall 1977, 101). In problematizing a concept like food citizenship, the

question then becomes: through which institutions does citizenship become substantive? Guerrilla gardening in urban environments may be a political act, but how does it become an act of citizenship? What is the difference between the two? Is there one? Wherein lies the agency of the individual in this determination? The term food citizenship incorporates the state into its very structure, as citizenship is wholly a state-based concept. What is the difference between this and politicizing urban gardens?

As mentioned above, James (2013) argued that new conceptualizations of citizenship may be based on historically rooted ones, and Holston extends this to point out that this is a limiting factor in the potentiality to develop 'counter formulations', as the 'insurgent and the entrenched remain conjoined in dangerous and corrosive entanglements' (2008, 4). In problematizing the notion of food citizenship as an insurgent counterformulation of citizenship, it might be wise for future researchers to investigate in what ways this notion is rooted in other localized definitions of citizenship, and question how these competing citizenships interact in not just dangerous or corrosive ways, but also potentially constructive, dynamic ways. Following such a line of inquiry, this ultimately raises the issue of how food citizenship might engage with other notions of belonging.

For example, one well-known Italian concept of localized belonging that comes to mind is *campanilismo*, that is, self-identifying as belonging to one's *campanile*, or the bell tower of one's village (or town). It is interesting that, simultaneously, Italy is also home to multitudes of *terroir* and geographically protected or culturally specific agricultural and food products, including Denominazione di Origine Protetta (PDO), similarly rooted in local definitions. The idea of rooting oneself through local monuments and *terroir* brings to mind place making in more urban contexts. The legal institutions defining food territories were initially formed through negotiations between producers, and secondarily between society and the state, but by codifying them in law they become enforceable legal concepts by state and international governance institutions (Demossier 2011; Guy 2003; Leitch 2003). This is so even if they are molded and reproduced in more abstract ways through everyday practice on farms, in wine cellars, or in kitchens at an individual level. I suggest that, in a Bourdieusian sense, individuals may be said to *practice* institutional norms. That is, one may embody *terroir* or PDOs in accepted ways that reproduce a defined set of quality criteria for a given product—and that, in so perfecting, this allows one to claim belonging to a specific overlap of geographical and social space. Food citizenship dances within and between these more established foodie concepts, and in so doing these pre-existing concepts may assist us in grounding food citizenship more squarely in the field of political life, helping us to theorize the idea of citizenship in relation to food and food production. Urban gardens may be conceptualized as living monuments that root townspeople in ways that *terroir* roots those in rural areas, drawing on similar feelings of digging into the earth to plant one's belonging to a specific territory. In

this sense, urban gardens exemplify the *terroir* of modernity. In eating and trading the fruits (and vegetables) of their labor, urban dwellers signify their position in an otherwise anonymous, undifferentiated concrete jungle of urbanity, allowing them to perform their belonging to a unique urban *terroir*.

In reflecting on such varied anthropological literatures, I see an opportunity for us to dwell on urban gardens as enacting a form of agency on their urban surroundings, living or not. A common issue in defining citizenship in a more traditional way is through the bestowment of land ownership rights. Land ownership, often for farming but not always, is a central issue across the world. Its contestation can become a battle ground for the recognition of citizenship or legal statuses that would grant such basic and central things as voting rights. In the modern urban context, Holston found in Brazil that rights to the city are articulated by the urban poor asserting that the city is their political community, drawing on issues specific to living in the city such as rights to housing, property, and social services such as day care, through organizing at the residential community level to state such claims (2008, 336). Meanwhile, Catherine Wanner conceptualizes the built environment of the city as able to 'inspire bodily sensations', in that the built environment influences city dwellers such that it has agency over the people who circulate within it (2016, 200). Taking these seemingly disparate ideas together, one might posit that creating urban gardens, planting in the midst of the built environment—indeed, sometimes disrupting an urban, concrete jungle's character—may frame community claims for the land on which urban gardens are cultivated, and these processes may ultimately influence the bodies of urban inhabitants. That is to say, to extend Wanner's idea, gardens in urban spaces may be interpreted as having agency over the people in their midst. The intertwined nature of property and citizenship suggests that community gardens on urban land root claims to citizenship and articulate those claims outward on to the people circulating in their urban midst. Urban gardens may have unintended consequences on proximate humans in anarchic and unexpected ways. In appropriating urban land to create new gardens, their makers may be (inadvertently) cultivating new subversive modes of influencing fellow citizens, quietly planting the seeds of change as the rest of us obliviously scurry by.

In the closing section, I unpack how urban gardens may more explicitly constitute a citizenship project, suggesting ways of framing future research through contrast with the recent historical meanings of urban gardening in various socioeconomic contexts. This will shed light on how food citizenship might be productively framed as a contemporary ideology in the context of global food insecurity and the politicization of food systems. In laying out the myriad ways urban food is conceptualized by local actors, I also begin to peel back an understanding of possible synergies between local beliefs and national food projects that will hopefully inspire future studies on the subject.

11.4 Citizenship through gardening

New forms of citizenship, Deborah James has argued, are most often formed on the basis of previously accepted ways of defining groups that in fact act as templates, additionally pointing out that definitions of citizenship are 'aspirational, providing visions of what a future social order might look like, and of how political belonging and participation within that order ought to be structured' (James 2013, 27). Applied to the concept of food citizenship, I must wonder aloud whether it would ever be the primary mode of an individual or group's self-identity like property rights is in so many places across the globe, or whether it will always be a secondary or tertiary category of belonging. Is it too much to ask for a citizenry to primarily define itself around its relationship to food, or as food crises rise in this era of global economic precarity, is food going to increasingly become central to everyday conscious living and politics? If a food citizenship is to emerge, on what historical template is this based, and what social order do its adherents envision? To Nicolas Jaoul, citizenship is 'a deeply ideological, contested, ambivalent terrain' with political and emancipatory potentialities for groups seeking to define and claim it in new ways (2016, 4). Could urban gardening ever be cast as emancipatory in the sense of freeing one from dependence on the agri-food industrial complex?

Urban gardens have historically been situated in an ambivalent political terrain of their own. Most generally, urban gardens have been important as protective against collapses of urban food supplies (Barthel et al. 2015, 1). During World War II, allotment gardens were promoted as part of a home-based, everyday strategy of American patriotism (Mares 2014, 33). In eastern Europe during the socialist era, they were relied upon as a coping mechanism against food shortages (Smith and Jehlička 2007, 403). Then, allotment gardens were occasionally sites of subversiveness. For example, in late socialist Poland, Anne Bellows described that nationalist resistance to Soviet domination could be found in domestic acts against activities that were widely considered 'absurdly forbidden', like a family growing what was characterized as 'subversive potatoes'—those varieties that were not approved by the state to grow—in that families made efforts to conceal the fact that they were growing such potatoes by going out early in the morning to cut their distinctive red flowers (Bellows 2004, 259–260). Today in Poland, allotment gardeners are the largest users and managers of land in the country, where contemporary city land use policies for such gardens are said to 'reflect a history of social stability that spans the political and economic transformations' from the nineteenth century to the present (ibid., 247–248). In contrast, in the Dutch city of Rotterdam, local government promotes urban gardening in less green districts in order to widen access to healthier food at lower prices for low-income residents (Cretella and Buenger 2016, 8). Such a diversity of impetuses for engaging in urban gardening begs the question: how might a concept of food citizenship be universalized as a movement or ideology?

Is participation in an urban garden necessarily a political statement? Jaoul has drawn on Jürgen Habermas ([1962] 1993, vi–vii) to understand the inter-relationship between popular culture and popular politics, in that popular culture is said to enjoy great autonomy in creating counterprojects against the so-described 'hierarchical world of power' dominating popular politics, challenging the *status quo* and acting as a mode to collectively assert power in relation to popular politics (2016, 4). Certainly, urban gardening projects inspired by a desire to disengage from the *status quo* as a sort of counterproject against the vertically integrated nature of the food system might be cast as such, but would this not make such gardens anarchic political spaces then? Unruly spaces where food regulatory regimes do not apply, where other rules rule, and where other values blossom? For example, Irena Knezevic shows how, even in Canada, participation in informal food activities exposes the shortcomings of food safety regulations, in that participation embodies the participants' 'interpretations of food and health governance … as well as ideological and material forms of resistance' (2016, 410, 421). That is to say, even though urban gardening removes the question *Where does my food come from?*, such unregulated, anarchic food spaces may be new sites of risk, as they are sites of innovation and not subject to government scrutiny like other food producers. At the same time, this might be a purposeful act, as some people may find the regulation, pasteurization, and degermification of foods to be emblematic of the ills of the modern food system (Brice 2014; Leitch 2000; Paxson 2008). Trust is central to these systems in facilitating the cooperation and coherency that ultimately make them stable (Thorsøe and Kjeldsen 2015, 165).

Further contributing to their anarchic nature is the simple observation that they take place outside the formal food production system—and outside the formal economy for that matter—insofar as not being subjected to its regulatory regimes of food safety production inspections and taxes. Even though participants must generally engage in the formal economy to create such spaces by buying supplies and seeds, not to mention supplementing their own daily diets with bought foodstuffs, they are creating new economic spaces outside the formal one that raise questions about the state's capacity and ethical imperative to reach into communities to regulate their economic activities (see Makovicky and Smith 2020). Thus, how alternative are these spaces, and at what scale do we expect them to have an actual impact on the dominant food system? How long can or should they be autonomous? When should they become regulated, and when they are, how? Are alternative spaces especially citizenship spaces, and if so, why? Might we better conceptualize urban gardens as symbolic statements, as living, communal monuments speaking a quiet political truth? Is the whimsical Crowned Love Garden of herbs a silent political garden, a reaction to the tiny, standardized plastic containers of parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme that its cultivators tire of buying at the supermarket? Must the participants in an urban garden conceptualize their own practice as political for it to be so, or may they be passive actors in a larger project of transforming cities? What are the implications for

our understanding of human agency then, and might not the actors in these larger projects be guilty of coopting an unwitting herb garden in their political efforts?

Additionally, what constitutes food in value-laden and ambiguous terms like 'good', 'healthy', or 'clean' is specific not only to nations, but to communities and individuals (Caldwell 2007). Although nations may codify definitions in food safety regulations, individual interpretations may diverge, and may inspire engaging in urban gardening to enact such divergent food cosmologies. For example, in Russia, Melissa Caldwell has found that 'ecologically clean' foods are believed to be

> those that are grown by a relative or friend, gathered and processed in the course of group activities, and then circulated through personal networks, preferably as gifts. Not only does the personalized nature of these foods make them trustworthy, but it also endows them with attributes of taste, quality, and cleanliness that are believed to be lacking in foods produced by anonymous, impersonal capitalist means.
>
> (Caldwell 2007, 54)

Indeed, in post-socialist Europe, urban gardens may provide for household consumption, in part through sharing, bartering, and trading within their communities in informal ways (e.g., Bellows 2004, 250), maintaining or creating new informal economic networks that exist at the margins of, and sometimes undergird, the formal markets.

Curiously, researchers have found that, in post-socialist Europe, self-provisioning through participating in activities such as urban gardening may even be perceived as ways of 'consuming normality', in the sense of adopting a healthy, western-style diet, where those who are not reliant upon urban gardening for essential self-provisioning may instead regard it as engaging in 'voluntary simplicity' in 'a novel political dimension' of action (Smith and Jehlička 2007, 399–401, 404). This suggests that, at least in some post-socialist contexts, urban gardening has transcended its role as a coping mechanism making up for unsteady markets to enter into the field of beliefs about how one lives well and healthfully, and of considering food as representative of a particular ideology or politics. This brings a new dimension to our understanding of food citizenship as both a concept and ideology, as it may be something adopted in new social environments and imbued with new meanings.

11.5 Conclusion

One may have noticed that a diversity of open-ended questions sprinkled like seeds on bare earth go unanswered at this chapter's end. The intention here is to allow those seeds to germinate in the minds of our community of food researchers—or more precisely, researchers who investigate human relationships to food. The environmental drivers of global climate change

contributing to increasing food insecurity make social relationships to food—and food production—some of the most salient issues of our day. Unpacking the meaning of food for individuals and communities takes us an important step closer to understanding the food choices that ultimately drive, for better or worse, the structure of global food procurement systems. In meaning we find the drivers of individual and collective decision making. With such knowledge we may design more lasting alternative food procurement systems that rival present ones, alternatives that may be scaled up to viable systems whilst maintaining the social values foundational to them.

The first step, however, is to clarify whether it is even possible to define a sort of citizenship that is grounded in working the earth beneath our feet. As the above reflections on anthropology, urban life, and gardens suggest, to my mind the answer arcs towards *yes*. The concept of citizenship as constituted through lived experience and action—here, through turning the earth as one gardens, in solitary or in the company of one's community—grounds people to urban landscapes as farming does in rural ones.[1] Reflecting on this, I see how, when incorporated into daily life, urban gardening may transform the ways of being, even the *habitus*, of individuals and communities that seek to cultivate their roots to a particular place, both literally and figuratively. Meanwhile, as described above, gardens may influence the transformation of individuals both passively and actively in other ways.

Such insights as are offered here only set the groundwork for future research on the varied meanings of food citizenship in contemporary society. What is clear is that humans seek meaning in everyday practices. They pursue novel ways of building community—such as community garden initiatives—drawing on pre-existing structures but signifying them in new ways that synergize with contemporary political and economic realities. That such projects simultaneously disrupt the dominant agri-food industrial complex allows for the rays of opportunity to seep through the cracks to let food system changes emerge and root in locally meaningful ways.

Acknowledgments

Note

1 I wish to thank the participants of the *Food citizens?* project stakeholder meetings for germinating this insight through our productive conversations about food citizenship—and the potential for anthropological fieldwork to help us understand it better.

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