

Hazel Pardington  
SD 3533-101  
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Relational Agriculture as a Way to Discover Intergenerational Connections

Healing begins with self-determination in relation to the body that is the earth and the body that is our flesh.

–bell hooks, *Reclamation and Reconciliation*

I was never able to meet my two grandmothers, but I have always been told by my parents that I resemble these two incredible, yet very different, women in my own ways. My father's blood mother, Mary Sue Planck, was one of the original San Francisco hippies who lived on Haight street from the 1960s until she passed away unexpectedly at the young age of 55. She was an anti-war campaigner, a mental health advocate, and was known in the Rock n' Roll community for her ability to talk people down from their bad acid trips at concerts. She would frequently have her letters to the editor of the San Francisco Chronicle-Examiner published on account of her obvious passion towards discussing social issues that were affecting her community. This is mostly what we know about her considering that my dad was raised by another woman, Carly Pardington, across the country in Carrboro, North Carolina. My dad didn't get to know Mary Sue until he reached adulthood. My maternal grandmother, Jenny Fitch, was not radical like Mary Sue. Jenny was a typical Southern woman who loved to garden, arrange flowers, paint landscapes, and cook. She was only 57 when she passed away. While I had always been interested in learning about these two unique women whom I share blood with, it wasn't until fairly recently that I started to grieve this loss of intergenerational knowledge and kinship ties. I didn't feel connected to these two women until I started gardening myself.

During the summer of 2019 I took a Garden Practicum course and adopted a plot of my own at the Roots Garden on Howard Street, a five minute walk from my apartment. Using the

skills I learned from my gardening class I was able to successfully grow zucchinis, tomatoes, basil, cucumbers, and other herbs from the ground for the very first time. Nothing can compare to the excitement and pride I felt when I pulled my first ripe zucchini from the plot I had been tending for months. The ability to harvest food from my own garden plot made me feel more empowered than I ever had before.

Not only did I grow as an individual by working in the garden, I also grew more connected to the community that managed the land, including garden managers, interns, classmates, and even volunteers. The process of *embodied caring labor*, practiced by those making use of this unique green space, helps to not only create a beautiful garden, but also helps facilitate, as Neera Singh states, “[one’s] sense of community and ‘being-in-common’ with the rest of nature and with each other.” As a common space in the downtown Boone community, the Roots Garden serves as a place for people to compost their food scraps, learn about growing produce, learn how to make their own tinctures, and even to use as a small green space where one can relax and escape the asphalt. As a commons, the Roots Garden is able to facilitate a way for people to “reclaim control over [their] lives and over the conditions of [their] reproduction” (Singh 2017, 765). Once one learns of the power of a community garden you can’t go back, you’ll always see them as ripe with opportunities.

As I started to view gardening as a strategy to bring communities together, I began to consider the intergenerational connections that gardening could facilitate as well. Being divorced from the land is a relatively new phenomenon in the American South, which was considered a mostly agrarian society until just about a half century ago when agricultural monopolies and polluting industries started taking over. I was able to recognize the radical potential that community gardens offer by connecting with my community and growing my own produce.

Understanding gardening, an activity my maternal grandmother was most fond of, and returning to the land as a strategy of independence where, like my fraternal grandmother Mary Sue said, “you wouldn't have to work for the Man,” allowed me to connect with my ancestors in a way I never thought would be possible.

Mary Sue felt strongly that people should strive to practice, “Loving your fellow man, loving your friends, love animals, love people.” Although she didn't embody traditional caring labor performed by women, she practiced a sort of feminism that understood that liberation from oppressive hierarchical structures would create a better world for her and her fellow man. My grandmother Jenny was not a radical visionary like Mary Sue, but she too believed in a better life for her descendants. Jenny once wrote that she hoped her children “will find the unique pleasure that good food, flowers, and herbs can bring.” I have been able to embody both of my grandma's hopes for their descendants through my anti-capitalist education and my experiences cultivating the land, which allowed me to use some of my own produce to make my family's favorite dish, Jenny's squash casserole. By sharing Jenny's classic family recipe with my loved ones in Boone I also felt more linked to my other grandma Mary Sue, on account of her giving nature and devotion to caring for those around her.

## Squash Casserole with White Cheddar Cheese

*6-8 portions*

### Ingredients:

- 1 medium-size onion, thinly sliced
- 2 pounds yellow squash, thinly sliced [subbed one lb of yellow squash for zucchini]
- 1 teaspoon salt, freshly ground pepper
- 2 eggs
- ½ cup of milk
- ½ pound Vermont or New York white cheddar cheese, grated

[her original recipe also calls for 2 tablespoons of sugar & 1-2 tablespoons of butter, but now my family omits these ingredients from the dish]

Instructions:

1. Preheat the oven to 350°
2. Cook the onions [I like to caramelize them rather than boil them with the squash] and squash in a small amount of boiling water for 10-15 minutes or until fork-tender. Drain well. Arrange in a 2-quart baking dish. Add salt and pepper.
3. Mix eggs, milk, and cheese and pour over the squash mixture.
4. Bake at 350° for 45 minutes. Cut into squares and then into diamonds to make a prettier shape on the plate.

While I feel extremely lucky to have been able to experience these increased kinship ties with my maternal ancestors through practices like gardening, cooking, and sharing meals, I can't help but wonder how future generations will be able to connect with their ancestors if cultivating the land is no longer an option on account of our current climate emergency. How will future generations build community if everywhere becomes privatized and our few remaining common spaces become enclosed? Will people be able to continue cultivating native fruits and vegetables when our familiar growing seasons cease to reliably operate as they have for centuries? Will the soil be healthy enough to sustain life? These are the questions that keep me up at night.

One of the most challenging aspects of addressing climate change is confronting the widespread notion that we do not have the answers to the wicked problems caused by this emerging crisis. While we certainly don't have the solutions readily available for all that the climate crisis will change, there are plenty of things humans *do* know about our natural world that can serve as ways to mitigate the effects of this emergency. We know that trees are amazing at sequestering carbon dioxide, so why don't we protect our remaining forests and plant more native trees? We know that diversified polycultures are more productive and resilient than conventional plantation or monocrop agriculture, so why don't we experiment with cover crops, refrain from tilling, and start intercropping our farms and gardens? We know that up to 35% of food in high-income countries is thrown out by consumers, so why don't we implement

interventions that address key waste points within the food chain? As follows, there are plenty of ideas out there on how to address certain issues related to climate change!

I never had the opportunity to learn directly from my grandmothers, but now we speak the same language through the soil. If humans are to conserve a world that allows for people to use the land in ways to affectively connect with their ancestors, there needs to be action now. Any of the solutions listed above could, and should, be attempted by gardeners as part of their cultivation strategy. Ensuring that people of every vocation can find accessible actions they can take to mitigate the effects of climate change should be essential to building a widespread climate movement.

#### References

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