



Article

Beyond Inclusion: Cultivating a Critical Sense of Belonging through Community-Engaged Research

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Abstract: A broad body of literature outlines the interventions to support underrepresented and minoritized students' inclusion and sense of belonging into university contexts. In this paper, we explore how two first-generation students of color articulate a critical sense of belonging through their reflections as student researchers in the Apprenticeship in Community-Engaged Research or (H)ACER program at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). (H)ACER integrates community engagement, ethnographic sensibilities, critical race and decolonial theory, as well as women of color feminisms into a curriculum designed to train critical scholar-researchers. Through themes of feeling isolated on campus and returning 'home' in the garden, building comfort with academic theory, and navigating insider/outsider identities in campus/community contexts, we trace how the students developed an awareness of their positionality and made sense of their experiences of 'belonging', both within the campus and community contexts. Their narratives spark our deeper exploration into how critical approaches to community-engaged research may offer a pedagogy for supporting student sense of belonging that extends beyond inclusion, a promising vein of further research.



Citation: Beckett, Linnea K., Flora Lu, and Sheeva Sabati. 2022. Beyond Inclusion: Cultivating a Critical Sense of Belonging through Community-Engaged Research. *Social Sciences* 11: 132. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11030132>

Academic Editors: Steven McKay, Stephen Webb and Claudia Lopez

Received: 21 December 2021

Accepted: 12 March 2022

Published: 17 March 2022

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Keywords: critical sense of belonging; community-engaged research; community learning; community garden

1. Introduction

Community-engaged research is often positioned as an intervention into traditional social science research, a methodology that may in fact be more rigorous, actionable, and accountable by centering the knowledges of communities who are most impacted by—and who are experts of—issues of social injustice (Balazs and Morello-Frosch 2013; Gutiérrez and Penuel 2014; Warren et al. 2018). Importantly, as Gordon da Cruz (2017) and other scholars (e.g., Hale 2008) have argued, community-engaged research must not merely realign research for “the public good,” but also produce knowledge that dismantles “systemic sources of racial and social injustice” (p. 343). In addition, researchers have demonstrated that undergraduate students benefit from and can meaningfully contribute to community-engaged research (Greenberg et al. 2020), especially when the questions address issues experienced by students and/or their home communities.

In this paper, we explore the potential benefits of programmatic interventions that bridge what Gordon da Cruz characterizes as “critical community-engaged scholarship” with undergraduate education, especially for students from underrepresented backgrounds for whom retention can be a concern. Scholarship has highlighted the importance of community-engagement in developing student sense of belonging, a key indicator of college academic achievement and retention (Ahn and Davis 2020). Expanding on this scholarship, we explore how community engagement, coupled with training students to think like ethnographic researchers, may support students to mediate their university identities and their sense of belonging more broadly. In other words, we propose that

community-engaged research, as opposed to other activities designed to make students feel a part of the university, can facilitate students to develop a critical sense of belonging.

We define critical sense of belonging as a potential response to culturally salient, community-engaged research opportunities. Students are given the tools to articulate the systems that (re)produce their exclusion in higher education and to trouble epistemological hierarchies. Through their training in critical, anti-colonial and decolonial research methodologies, students theorize their positionality as critical scholar-researchers. They also learn to mediate dynamics of their own identities as they reflect upon and navigate the liminal spaces of campus/community, learner/knower, insider/outsider. In this paper, we describe some theoretical and pedagogical approaches that we believe foster a critical sense of belonging.

We draw from our experiences as part of a campus–community partnership that co-founded a community garden that became the cornerstone of a new community-engaged research and learning program at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). The Apprenticeship in Community-Engaged Research program or (H)ACER was designed to address the deeply embedded political economies of racialized social inequity, both on our campus and in the region. It was also designed as a critical counter-project to previous service-learning programming that centered on exposing white, economically advantaged students to the inequities experienced by marginalized communities in the region. This paper outlines the conceptual framework and programmatic design of (H)ACER, elaborating how (H)ACER engages and aims to disrupt these racialized and placed-based inequities. We highlight how the design of (H)ACER and its community-engaged partnerships align with [Gordon da Cruz's \(2017\)](#) conception of critical community-engaged research, and describe how (H)ACER pivots from traditional models of service learning that position undergraduates as “helping” marginalized communities, potentially entrenching beliefs in white saviorism. Instead, (H)ACER designs community and campus engagement based on anti-racist and anti-colonial principles in an effort to generate mutually beneficial campus–community partnerships.

We then center the theorizations of two women of color undergraduates who dis-identified with our campus—a large, public R1 university—and identified the Calabasas Community Garden as reflective of their home communities to explore what we are calling a critical sense of belonging. Each had struggled with feelings of isolation on campus, yet through their roles as ethnographers in the community garden, they were able to reconcile elements of their university identities and developed nuanced ways of reflecting upon their positionality and sense of belonging. Without collapsing the distinctions and nuances, the students share how learning in community, in a space and with people that felt like ‘home’, supported them to hone their own critical understanding of, and sense of belonging at, the university.

Recognizing that the experiences of these two students are not generalizable to all students, nor to all Latinx students or students of color, we approach their reflections on their experiences as *theorizations* that are exploratory and qualitatively important for opening up future lines of inquiry. Our paper aims to set a foundation to consider how critical community-engaged research may serve as both a methodology and a pedagogy to support the retention, belonging, and general success of students who have been systematically excluded from colleges and universities. We draw from scholarship on student sense of belonging to situate and engage the theorizations of the students. Further, we consider how (H)ACER, which integrates ethnographic sensibilities, critical pedagogies, and decolonial and critical race feminisms, includes methodological and pedagogical components that may support students to develop a critical sense of belonging. Our research points to the possibilities of designing programming—as well as further studying the relationship—of critical community-engaged research and student sense of belonging.

Entering the Garden

“It was my first time being in the Calabasas Community Garden and meeting some of the parents that have garden plots. The first thing that caught my attention was the speaker blasting *cumbias*, immediate nostalgia arrived as memories of me dancing at family parties began to play in my head. The next thing that caught my eye was the *molcajete*, the stone tool used to grind up plants, usually used by my family to make a sauce to accompany the food, which sure enough one of the women was working on: a green and red, super spicy sauce. As I approached the table where many of the women were preparing the food, the sharp smell of the *chilis* punctured my nose. The woman working on the sauce assured me it was going to be made really spicy; she then assigned me to continue grinding up the sauce after I offered my help. The sounds at that gathering [are] what [were] most memorable to me—sounds of music, laughter, and so many conversations happening all at once, about days at work, about family, about food, about upcoming community events that were going to require a lot of food labor, about land and food ways that they have maintained and brought over from Mexico, and about the ways in which people enjoyed eating the various foods that were being made. Another woman was heating up *tortillas*, and some women talked about how delicious it was to eat a *tortilla* with smeared hot sauce on it.” —Araceli, former UCSC undergraduate¹

Araceli came to the garden as part of her undergraduate training in community-engaged research, but the sounds, smells, tastes, and conversations evoked a sense of comfort and familiarity, even during her first visit. As she worked to grind up the sauce in the *molcajete*, she listened to the gardeners weave conversations about their day-to-day lives, the food they were preparing, and stories from their communities of origin. Araceli’s experience reflects the fact that education is simultaneously intellectual and affective, individual and collective, introspective and outward-looking. Preparing students to become critical consumers and producers of knowledge toward a more just and equitable society necessitates such a holistic approach.

These premises guided our design and implementation of the (H)ACER program, which began in 2018. In (H)ACER, students learn about the politics of knowledge production, become versed in qualitative research methods, and develop ethnographic sensibilities as part of a broader practice of ethics and reflectivity. More specifically, students learn that community members are experts and hold important and unique views of the phenomena under study. Through readings in ethnographic, women of color, and decolonial feminist methodologies, students practice engaging in community contexts as critical ethnographers. (H)ACER supports undergraduates, especially those historically and systematically excluded from higher education, to interrogate what “counts” as research and to think critically about their experiences within the university, their own learning, and lives. The program organizes undergraduate community learning and research apprenticeships around long-term research projects with partners such as the Calabasas Community Garden.

The Calabasas Community Garden and (H)ACER were envisioned as interconnected, anti-racist, anti-colonial, community-engaged research spaces that center asset-based framings of underrepresented and minoritized communities.² In an effort to better understand undergraduate experiences in the program, we conducted in-depth interviews with two former undergraduates who were deeply involved in the garden through (H)ACER’s inaugural cohort. When we asked them to share their own theories that guide their community engagement, the students emphasized how their sense of belonging at UCSC changed over the course of their involvement with (H)ACER. We know that community engagement has shown to support the retention and inclusion of non-dominant students (McGee 2021); yet, prompted by Araceli and Julisa’s narratives, we propose that coupling community-engagement with training in critical research methodologies might meaningfully support a sense of belonging among first-generation students of color.

When theorizing their perspectives of community-engagement, rooted in their own ethics, belonging emerged as a prevalent theme in both Araceli and Julisa's stories. Through their field notes and interviews, they initially describe feelings of isolation and 'outsiderness' on campus before starting their work at (H)ACER. In contrast, both Araceli and Julisa felt at 'home' in the garden, comfortable in the space and with the community. This outsider/insider divide reflected the racial tensions across the county, with UCSC situated in an affluent and predominantly white community and the community garden in an agricultural, Latinx and predominantly working-class community. Through their training in the program, the students learned how to think about, or theorize, their own experiences using academic language. As they developed these ethnographic skills of observing, describing, interpreting and reflecting upon their own positionality, Julisa and Araceli describe through their field notes how they came to mediate their own identities as university students from Latinx communities similar to the community garden.

Both Araceli and Julisa came to recognize that although they felt like 'insiders' in the garden, the gardeners saw them as university students, positioning them as different from other gardeners. Araceli describes how she came to acknowledge and accept her status as university student in the garden and Julisa describes what this status meant for her as she conducted research in the garden. Each learned to acknowledge and work with their academic identities while building loving relationships with the community gardeners and their families.

While often dichotomized, students experience the campus and community simultaneously. For example, the university often conveys the accomplishments of students through affirmations of an independent self, which can cause dissonance for students from underrepresented groups who often conceive of themselves as interdependent, intertwined with family and community (Covarrubias et al. 2016). As Julisa and Araceli adopted their identities as researchers, they also mediated their place-based identities. They underwent a relative shift from insider to outsider in a community, and outsider to insider at the university. When campus programming recognizes and respects community partners, designs culturally salient learning experiences, and bolsters students' ability to link their funds of knowledge and academic training, a critical sense of belonging can emerge. Students recognize that their affiliation with the university creates a different power dynamic with community members, and that they can put that power to use through forms of knowledge production that values and visibilizes community expertise. Moreover, by contributing to a core mission of the campus—research—students may feel less of an imposter or interloper at the university.

2. Theoretical Framework

Student sense of belonging has been defined as a "psychological measure of integration in the college community and attachment to an institution" that is connected to positive outcomes such as student retention, educational development, and overall academic success (Hurtado et al. 2015, p. 62). As Strayhorn (2019) elaborates, student sense of belonging includes students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers (p. 4).

Research on student sense of belonging aims to understand the factors that contribute to the persistence of undergraduates within higher education, taking into account the distinct racialized and cultural experiences of students of color (Hurtado et al. 2015; Strayhorn 2019). Museus et al. (2017), among other scholars, highlight how persistence for students of color is not just about integration (often into predominantly white institutions), but requires that we build "culturally engaging campus environments" for students from racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse communities. In this way, efforts to understand student sense of belonging offers experiential texture to the often implicit logics of whiteness, settler colonialism, and heteronormativity, among others, that have long organized the teaching,

research, and cultural practices of many U.S. colleges and universities (la paperson 2017; Stein 2018, 2020; Wilder 2013; Tuhiwai Smith 2012).

Importantly, student sense of belonging has been shown to positively impact students' social and psychological well-being, self-confidence, academic achievement and retention (e.g., Freeman et al. 2007; Hagerty et al. 1992; Hausmann et al. 2007; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Pittman and Richmond 2007; Rhee 2008). Research on student sense of belonging focuses on different indicators that contribute to belonging, including the impacts of academic and social programming, faculty mentorship and support, as well as campus climate (Hurtado et al. 2015). In addition to creating culturally engaging environments within a campus community (Museus et al. 2017), scholars identify the necessity of programming beyond the campus itself that allows students to engage in spaces that are reflective of their home communities and cultures (Ahn and Davis 2020).

Some studies provide insights into what makes these experiences relevant and meaningful for students. For example, Ebony McGee (2021) makes recommendations for attracting and retaining underrepresented people in STEM fields, such as the "equity ethic," which she describes as including a 'humanitarian project' in the curriculum (p. 86). While students study within their discipline, they also link up with community projects. McGee cites a study with engineering students where they participated in a community service-learning project mentoring younger Latinx youth (Camacho and Lord 2013, cited in McGee 2021). The same authors also studied a first-year engineering class where students received hands-on training in solving complex problems in "developing" countries. Students worked in small groups to solve these problems. The program increased female student retention by 27% and Latinx student retention by 54% (Camacho and Lord 2013, cited in McGee 2021). Such studies demonstrate that underrepresented students tend to stay in STEM fields if there is a meaningful link to community and real-world issues. In addition to connecting curriculum to projects that expand equity, McGee recommends programs establish "learning communities for students and faculty" and "offer affirming content" (p. 88).

As Ahn and Davis (2020) elaborate, student sense of belonging is multidimensional and complex; they highlight at least four domains to understand student sense of belonging, including academic, social, personal spaces, and surroundings. Sense of belonging is not only "related to students' identity, experiences and personal stories," but importantly, it is also "developed from their own cultural and historical backgrounds, which establish the sense of space" (Ahn and Davis 2020, p. 629). In this way, belonging extends beyond an individual subjective feeling; it is deeply relational and place-based, and can be understood "as a relationship or a linkage between a person and the society" (Ahn and Davis 2020, p. 630). We find this framing particularly useful when considering a student's agency as they develop their sense of belonging. We add to this frame of sense of belonging with an analysis of power and oppression.

Although (H)ACER was not developed to address student sense of belonging, our engagement with Julisa and Araceli's theorizations of their experiences in the program surface possibilities for a pedagogy of critical belonging. Centering a Critical Race Theory analysis, (H)ACER recognizes belonging not as a neutral phenomenon, but one that carries different values and judgments based on dominant racialized structures and discourses of power and oppression (Yuval-Davis 2006). (H)ACER aims to not only create relevant, research-based experiences for undergraduates, but also to support students to reflect upon their intersectional identities and analyze structural forms of power and oppression. The aim of (H)ACER is for students to understand themselves as knowledge producers, to understand their critical reflections of their experiences to these structures as theorizations.

Through methodological training and experiential learning, (H)ACER strives to train students to think like critical ethnographers. Drawing upon Ahn and Davis (2020), a student's sense of belonging is dialogical, between the self and society. We can then extrapolate that as a student's sense of self, position in society, or perception of society change, their sense of belonging may also change. Moving toward a critical sense of

belonging then, we argue, is aligned with a student developing a critical understanding of the self in society. Rather than seeking inclusion into dominant cultural values and practices (i.e., white, heteronormative, patriarchal, etc.), or waiting for the long, slow, and incomplete work of institutional transformation, cultivating skills of a critical sense of belonging can emerge when students are invited to critically analyze these very conditions. Through practicing seeing the world through the eyes of a critical ethnographer, students may learn to render strange the normative patterns and dominant cultural values and practices that compose their everyday lives. This also includes exploring their own sense of belonging as intersectional subjects in society. Still, drawing from [McGee's \(2021\)](#) insights, learning how to see oneself in the world more critically is not performed in isolation, but happens through meaningful links to community and through engaging real-world issues that support a student's sense of purpose.

3. (H)ACER Background

Beginning in 2012, Flora Lu began collaborating with Calabasas Elementary School as a space for experiential learning through an environmental justice course with the Latin American and Latino Studies Department. Calabasas Elementary School has a mostly white non-Spanish-speaking teaching staff and a 97% Latinx student body (100% free and reduced lunch) in a predominantly farmworker, working-class community with high levels of food insecurity. A few years prior, some UCSC undergraduates affiliated with the Life Lab Program³ revitalized a small 'Discovery Garden' at Calabasas Elementary, with eight garden beds, a few storage sheds, and a small greenhouse. When the students graduated, the project faltered, and the garden fell into disrepair. By 2012, the Discovery Garden no longer was a usable space to engage children in outdoor education: the area was overgrown with weeds, no edible plants were growing, and the infrastructure had been vandalized.

Through the environmental justice class, students participated in group projects tasked with restoring the Discovery Garden: the greenhouse was rebuilt, gopher wire and new soil installed in the garden beds, vegetables planted, and the area weeded and mulched. However, the fact that the course was just one quarter per academic year was insufficient to maintain the site as a vibrant and verdant space for learning. In 2014, meetings began with Calabasas administration and families to talk about the possibility of turning an abandoned lot at the school into a community garden. Facilitated by bilingual Calabasas staff and UCSC students, interested parents dialogued and co-envisioned what the lot could become and how it would be governed.

The establishment of the Calabasas Community Garden proceeded in fits and starts, without sufficient funding and staffing to consistently demonstrate forward progress. A turning point occurred in 2016, when Lu was awarded a USDA NIFA Hispanic Serving Institution Education Grant, which enabled the creation of a food justice coordinator position and the hiring of Linnea Beckett. Beckett's approach was to continually show up with undergraduates and a few dedicated volunteers from the local community at the lot and build the infrastructure already outlined in prior meetings. Parents who had become fatigued by repeated efforts that did not seem to bear fruit began to notice the tangible changes in the one-acre space that was transforming into a garden.

The Calabasas Community Garden was established in 2017 and approximately 15 families signed up for plots. As of the writing of this article, the Calabasas Garden community consists of a heterogeneous group of over thirty Latinx families with diverse (agri)cultural histories and practices. The families have transformed a once-vacant lot into a verdant, thriving space in which to grow food, gather, and find respite. The garden has become a resource for the elementary school's teachers, students, and families, as well as UCSC faculty and undergraduates.

Drawing upon her prior research, Beckett recognized the garden as a powerful space for supporting Latinx family and community building. A rich body of literature on asset-based Latinx family and community engagement (see [Villenas 2001](#); [Dyrness 2011](#); [Delgado Gaitan 2012](#)), emphasizes counter-narrative strategies for re-imagining the home and school.

Generating these counter-narratives in community-led spaces (Beckett et al. 2012) supports Latinx families to combat deficit frames (Valencia [1997] 2010) and create equal footing to advocate for the learning and success of underrepresented and minoritized students.

Located at the elementary school, the garden could also serve as a teaching site for school personnel and schoolchildren. In the original plan, raised garden beds lined the front of the garden were allotted to the teachers, but Beckett suggested instead positioning classroom teacher plots alongside family plots. This design strategy was intended to shift the social organization of learning by positioning Latinx family (agri)cultural knowledges and practices alongside school plots to support students' overall academic success. This intentional creation of space, along with the community activity in the garden of collaborative workdays and leisure, supported the garden to emerge as a "third space" (Gutiérrez 2008); that is, an environment that privileges horizontal forms of expertise and recognizes "heterogeneity as an organizing principle" (Gutiérrez et al. 2009, p. 237). The garden invites intergenerational, cross cultural, and multilingual exchanges; privileges community knowledges by design; and represents a different, anti-oppressive arrangement, where Latinx immigrant families are the garden stewards and experts. This integrated garden design with the school personnel and university undergraduates seeks to make possible new, more equitable relationships and to honor the diverse funds of knowledge that the families bring (González et al. 2006). These diverse funds of knowledge are often invisibilized through the dominant and deficit (Valencia [1997] 2010) frameworks of Latinx families in the region.

In addition to creating a "third space" towards recentering the Latinx families' funds of knowledge within the elementary school context, the Calabasas Community Garden was conceptualized as a site of community-engaged research that reflected the broader vision of the (H)ACER program. Somewhat similarly to the racialized, classed, and cultural distinctions that position students, families, and teachers at Calabasas, (H)ACER was established as a response to the historical and present-day raced, classed, and cultural tensions of our university campus, the students it serves, and our broader community.

3.1. Campus and Broader Community Context

Santa Cruz County, encompassing about 273,000 people in the Central California Coast from Big Basin to the Pajaro Valley, is a region of stark differences. Compare, for instance, the cities of Santa Cruz and Watsonville, which are its two population centers (Table 1). The former is older, wealthier, whiter, and more formally educated; the latter is younger, lower-income, more people of color, less formally educated, and more bilingual.⁴

Table 1. Demographic comparison of the two major cities in Santa Cruz County. Source U.S. Census Data 2019.

Measurement	City of Santa Cruz	City of Watsonville
Population	64,608	53,856
Persons under 18 years, percent	12.58%	30.3%
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, percent	61.6%	15.2%
Hispanic or Latino, percent	21%	81.2%
Foreign-born persons, 2015–2019, percent	14.6%	36.0%
Language other than English spoken at home, percent of persons age 5+ years, 2015–2019	26.3%	74.9%
Bachelor's degree or higher, percent of persons age 25+ years, 2015–2019	53.8%	12.3%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2015–2019	\$854,200	\$464,200
Median household income (in 2019 dollars), 2015–2019	\$77,921	\$55,470
Per capita income in past 12 months (in 2019 dollars), 2015–2019	\$39,683	\$20,869

UCSC, ensconced in the racial and class privilege of the city of Santa Cruz, has been and remains a predominantly white institution. The need to diversify UCSC was first recognized during the 1960s, when most of the faculty and administration were male, the staff largely female, and the student body virtually all white (Brown 1979, p. 9, cited in Lipschutz 2020). Ellen Matsumoto, one of the 25 undergraduates who went on a hunger strike in 1981 protesting the lack of a Third World and Native American program, recounted, “Santa Cruz, especially at that time, was just so extremely white. I would walk around campus, and everybody would know my name because I wasn’t white. It wasn’t even who I was. It was because I wasn’t white” (Lomberg 2016). More recently, however, the racial and ethnic diversity on campus is concentrated in the undergraduate population, which has been majority-minority for about a decade. The UCSC Office of Institutional Research, Assessment and Policy Studies reports that in the Fall of 2018 (the last year for which data are readily available), 65% of ladder rank faculty, 72% of lecturers, 58% of staff, 40% of graduate students, and 30% of undergraduates were white. In Academic Year 2020–2021, 26.1% of the undergraduate student population was Latinx; 28.8% Asian; 4.6% African American/Black; 30% white; 0.7% American Indian/Alaskan Native; 0.3% Pacific Islander; and 7.6% International.

Every two years, all campuses at the University of California undertake an Undergraduate Experience Survey (or UCUES); the 2020 UCUES for UCSC (Table 2) found differences by race/ethnicity in terms of students’ perceptions of and experiences within the university (UCOP 2020).

Table 2. Results of various Likert survey questions, by race/ethnicity, for the 2020 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) at UCSC, compared to overall UC results.

Statement	Percent Responding “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”					
	Latinx	African American	Asian	American Indian	White	UC Overall
I feel valued as an individual at this institution.	28%	20%	28%	26%	31%	37%
I feel that I belong at this university.	46%	38%	43%	42%	53%	56%
This is a welcoming campus.	53%	34%	54%	34%	58%	64%
Students of my race/ethnicity are respected on this campus.	48%	24%	54%	58%	78%	62%
Students of my socio-economic status are respected on this campus.	45%	32%	60%	56%	70%	62%
Overall, I feel comfortable with the climate for diversity and inclusiveness at this university.	45%	26%	54%	42%	52%	60%

UCSC students of color trail white students in terms of belonging, mattering, respect by race and class, and comfort with the climate for diversity and inclusion. Moreover, UCSC students trail overall University of California (UC) system-wide measures of these variables, taken from the approximately 67,000 respondents of the survey across the nine campuses (excluding UCSF). The only measures for which respondents at UCSC were higher than the UC-average was for white students’ perceptions of the respect accorded to their race and socio-economic status.

The 2020 UCUES survey at UCSC also found that 55% of undergraduate students did not have academic experiences with a diversity focus and 78% had not conducted academic service learning or a community-based learning experience. While 34% of respondents had undertaken a research project or paper as part of coursework, only 19% had assisted faculty in conducting research and 14% had conducted their own research under faculty guidance. (H)ACER undertakes community-engaged learning and research experiences for undergraduates that seeks to traverse the gaps between Santa Cruz County and within students in UCSC.

3.2. Creating Capacities for Undergraduate Participation in Critical Community-Engaged Research: The (H)ACER Program

In Fall 2012, the campus demographic passed a threshold of more than 25% Latinx-identified undergraduates and qualified as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). In Spring of 2014 the campus received its letter of designation from the U.S. Department of Education, allowing it to apply for federal HSI grants ([Regents of the UCSC 2021](#)). This designation made it possible to apply for the USDA NIFA HSI Education Grant mentioned above, which was pivotal for supporting the work in Watsonville. It is important to note that while the project focused primarily on a growing Latinx student body and regional population, its efforts, and those of (H)ACER more broadly, are dedicated to outreach, education, retention and success of students of all backgrounds and intersectional identities.⁵

Within this context, we developed (H)ACER as a space within the university to support the growing body of Latinx students, many of whom are also first-generation students.⁶ (H)ACER supports community-university connections, critical undergraduate community-engaged research and learning. Building on and yet distinct from other robust, critical community-engaged research models on our campus, such as the community-initiated, student-engaged research (CISER) model ([Greenberg et al. 2020](#)), (H)ACER runs community learning experiences and undergraduate research apprenticeships through its signature projects. The signature projects, including the Calabasas Community Garden, are grounded in long-term community-university partnerships and the research conducted through each signature project is both exploratory and secondary to the partnership. This means that while research projects may start and end, the partnership continues through university programming and community events.

Drawing from women of color and decolonial feminist methodologies, as well as sociocultural learning theory, (H)ACER utilizes community-university partnerships, programming, and research for social justice efforts locally and for undergraduate students from underrepresented and marginalized communities. (H)ACER's undergraduate curriculum is based in a collective study of the politics of knowledge production and the ethics of community-engaged research, with attention to multiple-intersecting oppressions and the role of the university and its agents in reproducing said oppressions. The program's guiding philosophy is based in problem-posing education ([Freire \[1970\] 2000](#)), the assumption that undergraduate students and community members are knowledge holders and producers, and that individuals can move from 'ready-made' sense or 'common sense' ([Lugones 2003](#); [Gramsci 2007](#)) to forge deeper understandings of themselves and their historicity ([Glass 2001](#)). Just as critical approaches to community-engaged research reorient whose knowledge counts and ground research in an ethics of reciprocity for social justice ([Foster and Glass 2017](#)), (H)ACER supports first-generation, students of color, and students from other communities that have been systematically excluded from higher education develop ethnographic sensibilities and utilize them in community-engaged research contexts.

[Gordon da Cruz \(2017\)](#) argues that critical community-engaged research goes beyond merely including "the community" or contributing to the "public good". Instead, critical community-engaged research should collaboratively develop knowledge that illuminates and disrupts structurally entrenched social injustices, legitimize the knowledges of marginalized communities, and emerge from and support asset-based framings of communities. Together, these and other aspects of Gordon da Cruz's framework highlight

key methodological and ethical commitments that are necessary if community-engaged research is to be leveraged for social transformation.

(H)ACER's design and its potential impacts on undergraduate students parallels these aspects of [Gordon da Cruz's \(2017\)](#) framework and is based on several foundational principles. One of the first is that knowledge is produced everywhere. This means that learning is also situated and co-constructed ([Vygotsky 1978](#)) among peers, elders, youth ([Lave and Wenger 1991](#)), environment, artifacts ([Engeström 2001](#); [Engeström and Sannino 2010](#)) and in relation. Following this, professors are not experts disseminating knowledge, but facilitators of knowledge co-construction. In regards to teaching within the constraints of the racial-colonial universities that persist within the United States (e.g., [Stein 2020](#); [Wilder 2013](#)), educators can still be subversive ([la paperson 2017](#); [Harney and Moten 2013](#)). Thus, (H)ACER is interested in linking university resources to community-initiated efforts to foster dignity, health and well-being, a reflection of our ethical commitments as scholar-educators at a public university towards advancing social justice. This comes from a commitment to building contingent collaborations ([Tuck et al. 2014](#)) and solidarities ([Gaztambide-Fernández 2012](#)) that privilege the relationships over institutional demands to package student experiences. Therefore, (H)ACER has only a few long-term partnerships. These partnerships are grounded in ongoing conversations regarding mutually beneficial programming and collaborations to support community partner's diverse agendas and that honor community cultural wealth ([Yosso 2005](#)). The Calabasas Community Garden is one of these unique partnerships.

(H)ACER's philosophy recognizes that all of us—community members, educators, and students—are conditioned by race, class, gender, and other structures that systematize oppression, but we are “not determined” ([Freire 1998](#)). In other words, these structures are neither omnipotent nor deterministic. Through critical solidarities and relations, we can learn about the world together and engage our agentic possibilities ([Lugones 2003](#)) to learn about the contours of our ever-shifting creative response to the hegemon. Finally, our approach to troubling what counts as knowledge includes centering but not fetishizing or disembodiment of funds of knowledge ([González et al. 2006](#)).

These principles and commitments informed the design of the (H)ACER Program (Table 3). Together, the program themes and aims articulate (H)ACER's curricular, theoretical, and pedagogical approaches to training undergraduates as community-engaged researchers, as well as the ethical and political commitments it centers. Undergraduates take (H)ACER courses in order to engage these themes and learning objectives and conduct research apprenticeships to put theory in practice and reflect upon their own research praxis. Based on their coursework and level of engagement, (H)ACER supports students to work in one of various signature projects, including the Calabasas Community Garden. Learning in the garden with families and undergraduates aims to honor and respect diverse community knowledges, while simultaneously disrupting the notion for students that the academy is the primary place where knowledge is produced and held.

Table 3. The (H)ACER Program Framework.

Program Themes	Detailed Program Aims
(1) Settler colonial history-presents of California and of U.S. higher education, and situate ourselves in these history-presents	(1a) Examine how settler colonialism constructs our current social, political, relational and territorial arrangements, with a focus on Santa Cruz County and UCSC. (1b) Describe a people's history of California, i.e., pre-Columbian history, history of colonization, labor history, building of racial capitalism, and liberation struggles. (1c) Explain how the racial-colonial university produces specific kinds of knowledge.

Table 3. Cont.

Program Themes	Detailed Program Aims
(2) Politics of knowledge production and challenging research	<p>(2a) Analyze the racial-colonial roots and present of the university.</p> <p>(2b) Explain how the racial-colonial university produces specific kinds of knowledge.</p> <p>(2c) Identify how social science research has roots in settler colonialism.</p> <p>(2d) Explain how research can be used toward decolonial and emancipatory ends.</p> <p>(2e) Identify key differences between positivist and critical theory epistemologies and methods (worldviews).</p> <p>(2f) Describe how we might use research in pragmatic ways to support community organizations.</p> <p>(2g) Explain how we might use research with communities in response to settler colonial contexts.</p>
(3) Complicate and pluralize notions of “justice” in social justice research	<p>(3a) Recognize how different groups, organizations, and institutions utilize the term ‘justice’ in very different ways.</p> <p>(3b) Identify and describe at least two different ways ‘justice’ is operationalized and why.</p> <p>(3c) Understand how ‘justice’ and ‘social justice’ as terms, can be diversely operationalized for domesticating and liberating ends.</p> <p>(3d) Explain the difference between advocacy and research.</p>
(4) Critical qualitative research methods	<p>(4a) Develop skills to conduct qualitative research, e.g., interviews, participant observations, and focus groups.</p> <p>(4b) Create a community map.</p> <p>(4c) Develop tools to speak with community partners.</p>
(5) Ethnographic sensibilities	<p>(5a) Develop practices of ethnographic looking and listening.</p> <p>(5b) Develop attentiveness to relationships.</p> <p>(5c) Develop a praxis of reflexivity.</p> <p>(5d) Utilize inductive, interactive and recursive data collection and analytic strategies to build theory.</p> <p>(5e) Articulate ethical research practices.</p> <p>(5f) Develop consciousness and attentiveness to cultural context.</p>
(6) Ethical commitments to action, and response-ability to situatedness.	<p>(6a) Develop capacities to ‘be with’ contradictions; not a being with toward dissociation, inaction, or comfort, but as a form of engagement and provocation toward dialogue (Lugones 2003).</p> <p>(6b) Explain how theory can be experience-based and “home made,” meaning that one’s position, history, and relationships matter (Lugones 2003; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Morales 2001).</p>

(H)ACER trains students in ethnographic methods toward these aims. More than a method, ethnography includes a set of skills—what (H)ACER students learn as *ethnographic sensibilities*—that include an attention to ontologies, epistemologies, affect, and how we (re)make ourselves as people in the world (Freire [1970] 2000; Lugones 2003; McGranahan 2014). Situated in understanding the politics of knowledge production, as well as the funds of knowledge that marginalized communities always bring (González et al. 2006), (H)ACER courses develop ethnographic sensibilities for students to practice identifying and describing community knowledges. Students are asked to foreground their perspectives

and describe how their perspectives relate to their experiences (lived knowledge) and theory (academic knowledge). As students look outward to describe what they are seeing, they are also looking inward to make sense of their own experiences. Onto-epistemic heterogeneity, the idea that “knowing and being are inextricably tied” (Warren et al. 2020, p. 278) guides (H)ACER’s pedagogy to support students to ask questions about our historically and socially produced positionalities in connection with whose knowledge counts, in which spaces, and towards what ends. Departing from a framework of inclusion, (H)ACER draws from onto-epistemic heterogeneity to surface the “deeply rooted in the pasts, presents, and futures that sustain and imagine multiple values, purposes, and arcs of human learning” as central to its approach to liberatory education (Warren et al. 2020, p. 278).

(H)ACER conceptualizes ethnographic practices as theory making and central to the cultivation of an ethics of community engagement. We ask students to write about themselves, each other, and the world around them. As they do so, they are learning to make sense of phenomena, build meaning, and theorize their experiences. Students reflect on their own identity formation as it relates to their perspectives of the community; they also reflect on how they enter into and build relationships with community members and community spaces. We talk with our undergraduates about (H)ACER’s long-term responsibilities to the Calabasas Community with the aim of supporting the garden’s development. Together, this shows how the design of the (H)ACER program parallels Gordon da Cruz’s (2017) framework of critical community-engaged research, particularly in (H)ACER’s approach to developing the connections between critical knowledges, situating marginalized communities as experts, and in centering asset-based frameworks in its engagement with marginalized communities, among other aspects of its design.

4. Methodology

Before the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, the (H)ACER program served approximately 115 undergraduate and 5 graduate students during the 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 academic years, a number derived from a count of participants in courses, experiential learning programs, internships, volunteer clubs and other educational opportunities. The vast majority identify as one or more of the following: people of color (mostly Latinx), first generation college student, bilingual/multilingual, and queer. Given that some of these students were involved in multiple activities and/or both years, there are not 120 unique individuals. This spectrum of involvement thus spanned students who participated in only one facet of (H)ACER on one end—what we estimate to be about 80%—to students on the other end who immersed themselves in multiple learning experiences and were leaders. The two students we focus on here are the latter; they were chosen as emblematic of the potential of the approach we describe and are noteworthy in their accomplishments and the degree of their commitment and engagement. In other words, this is a purposeful sample, and we are not claiming representativeness.

Julisa and Araceli are both first generation college students. Julisa identifies as a first-generation college student and undocumented queer Mexican woman of Purépecha ancestry. Araceli identifies as a queer woman of Otomi ancestry. She was also a first generation and transfer student. Araceli and Julisa spent at least a year as ethnographic researchers in the garden. They would write up field notes every week from their visits. They averaged visiting the garden about once or twice a week, depending on the season. In the summer, they could spend up to three days a week in the garden. We would meet as a research group approximately once or twice a month to discuss a reading or outline a method, methodology or theory in relation to Julisa and Araceli’s field notes or general observations.

Over the year, each student took on leadership roles in the garden to support other undergraduates. Araceli coordinated the after-school program at Calabasas, supporting undergraduates to facilitate enrichment activities with elementary school students. She also spent time with the Calabasas families as she tended to the garden beds allotted

to the after-school program and classroom teachers. Julisa coordinated all of the critical community learning activities in the garden, which often consisted of day-long visits of undergraduates to the garden where they would work and spend time with the families. As the students worked with Beckett to coordinate logistics and collaborate on the vision of their time in the garden with fellow students, they shared their ideas of student engagement in the garden—inextricable from their strong ethic of community engagement, which arose from a deep honoring of the people, land and practices in the garden.

Toward the end of their tenure in the garden, Beckett asked Araceli and Julisa to write up their ethic of community engagement. Shortly after, Beckett and Sheeva Sabati sat down with Araceli and Julisa for an in-depth interview about how they came to understand their positionality, their role as researchers in the garden, and their own theories of community engagement. Due to the proximity of the authors with the students represented, authors returned to Julisa and Araceli at different times in the process of conceptualizing and writing up this paper. In the section that follows, we uplift Araceli and Julisa's theorizing of their experiences, with an attention to how it helps us think through the connections between critical community-engaged research and student sense of belonging.

5. Findings and Discussion

In the following subsections, we begin with sharing Julisa and Araceli's reflections on UCSC campus versus the Calabasas Community Garden. We use an insider/outsider framework to disentangle the student's descriptions of their place-based sense of belonging throughout the findings. For example, the students describe feeling isolated on campus (outsiders); yet, while in the garden they felt like they were at 'home' (insiders). As the students continued to study in (H)ACER and work in the garden, they began to complicate this insider/outsider dichotomy and revealed ways in which they were navigating their belonging. In the second section, we highlight how students developed comfort with academic theory, specifically with women of color feminisms, which supported their praxis as ethnographers to theorize their positionality and experiences. In the last section, both Julisa and Araceli describe coming to terms with their university identity in the garden, which, for Araceli, brought up feelings of being an 'outsider' in the garden, even though it was a place of strong linguistic and cultural resonance.

As demonstrated through their theorizations, over time, Julisa and Araceli describe their experience on campus and at the Calabasas Community Garden as less disjointed as they utilized the framings and concepts from (H)ACER to make sense of their experiences, both in ways that made sense to themselves and were valued in the academy. This intermediate state, in which students were not polarized as either an insider or an outsider but somewhere in between, enabled Araceli and Julisa to critically interrogate—with the tools they gained from (H)ACER—the dynamics of both the garden and the university. Neither fully insider nor outsider, they are able to perceive both spaces with more clarity, conduct better research, and contend with the stressors of being in an elite, predominantly white, institution.

5.1. *Feeling Isolated on Campus and Returning 'Home' in the Garden*

After a year of research in (H)ACER, Araceli revisited her arrival story, sharing with our research group how the sounds and smells brought her into the garden, and the significance of the space:

"Before I was a part of (H)ACER it was very isolating. I didn't have any friends on campus. I was having a very isolating experience and part of it was of my making, but I had so many conversations with classmates where they were having the same experience; having such a hard time making friends and feeling at home. So, being at the garden was just like driving back home on the weekends . . . (w)hen I go to be with family and I am surrounded by aunties and uncles and kids. A huge contrast is like breaking bread together. Here at UCSC I am always eating by myself. I have my own room so I eat by myself. So that is definitely

such a huge contrast from home, you don't eat by yourself. You always eat with family . . . Here at UCSC I don't have my family, so it is kinda just me navigating this space, but at Calabasas, it *is* family."

Connecting the garden with her home, Araceli describes an intergenerational space where people 'break bread' together. She describes a sense of family that is not predicated on a nuclear family, but a collective understanding. With family, you are part of something, you belong at the table. When she moved to the university, she felt isolated and alone, as reflected in her solitary meals. The garden, in contrast, made her feel connected and surrounded by family. The garden provided the space and ethos for her to feel at home, to feel like she belonged.

Julisa echoed similar themes in her reflections about her undergraduate experience:

"I had a really hard time staying in Santa Cruz. I had to work full time my first two years and I wasn't doing very well in school. I was kinda just doing things because I had to. I had a lot of mental health problems and I was at the point where I was like, I am just going to leave. It just doesn't feel worth it anymore, I feel like I am wasting a lot of myself. So when I went to Watsonville, it really is one of the main things that kept me here because it was getting really hard.

I had a lot of friends and I was living with friends and everything, but it didn't feel like enough for me to stay here because everybody has their own life, we were all depressed too . . . We talked about our depression and we were each other's therapists, but it wasn't 'healing' healing. It was healing in the sense that you had a space where you can be hurting and be understood, but everybody that I have ever met has felt the same way. They say, 'Santa Cruz is just not a welcoming space.' It is just the culture shock; it doesn't feel like home and I don't feel like I belong here. Really, students say that. So, we were all like, 'So, yeah! It doesn't feel like home!' [exasperated laugh] And really all we do is like, be in our rooms and I think everybody had to find something that kept them here. From all of my friends from my first two years, I think about 85% of them either dropped out or left. Just left because they couldn't afford it anymore; it just didn't feel worth it for them, they didn't find anything that kept them here . . . [My friends] were all Latinx, specifically undocumented. We were all in the same spaces because we had to work [in the dining hall] or we had just met each other. I think I was hanging out with about eight of them and only three of us stayed and graduated. It was [the Calabasas Community Garden] space that kept me here."

Araceli describes her experience at UCSC as one that was "isolating" while Julisa characterizes her engagements within the campus community as a "culture shock". The undergraduates share feelings that locate them as outsiders on campus. Sense of belonging can be understood "as an aspect of interpersonal relatedness most dissimilar to loneliness and most closely associated with social support" (Hoffman et al. 2002, p. 229). Fit, or the perception that one's values or characteristics are congruent with others, and valued involvement, or the notion that one is structurally and socially integrated, are defining attributes of sense of belonging (Hoffman et al. 2002). Both factors resonate with what Araceli and Julisa articulate here. They characterize the campus as an inhospitable space where they were outsiders, even though they had a strong network of peers with similar experiences, as was the case for Julisa whose friends were also Latinx and undocumented, or despite the fact that they asserted that the isolation was of their own making.

Recognizing that many of our Latinx students have more in common with the Watsonville community—including social and cultural literacies—than UCSC, (H)ACER's work with the Calabasas Community Garden offers students opportunities to connect and work with a community that may feel like 'home' for some students. The feeling of being at home in the garden for Araceli came from the simple but important interaction of eating a meal in an intergenerational space with similar language, food, and cultural practices that reflected home. As Yuval-Davis (2011) writes, belonging might be understood as an on-going project,

“an emotional (or even ontological) attachment, about feeling ‘at home’” (p. 10). Even though the community garden is a space curated through university-programming and not their actual home, these familiarities created a space where Araceli and Julisa could feel comfortable to just be. Although Julisa could process her experiences with her peers and described this as a needed form of “therapy,” she describes her experiences in the garden as “healing”. The connection to the garden, a space beyond the campus and its dominant cultures is literally what kept her at UCSC to finish her undergraduate degree.

This ease to be opened space for Julisa to connect to her transnational roots. When she entered the garden, she returned to a familiar place. Julisa never felt nervous in the garden. Instead, the garden emerged as a place for her to not only be around people that sounded like her mother and her uncle, but it also allowed her to return to Mexico; her home country that she left when she was eight years old and to which has not been able to return. She explains,

“[In the garden,] I felt like I was with my mom and my uncles, but also the sense of home of going back to Mexico. Because the garden, the community reminded me of being specifically in Mexico. I grew up in San Jose, but we lived in an apartment in the middle of downtown. There are freeways. I told Araceli that part of my life growing up was like, one of the noises that makes me feel at home is hearing cars go by because I lived in a very busy area. But when I was in Mexico, my grandpa had a house and he had a big *huerta* and a lot of my family runs avocado *huertas*, so we had a bunch of different gardens and there was the community part. The neighborhood would get together and they would have carne asadas or whatever special during *Semana Santa*, everybody just gets together and that is something I experience here again. I never experienced it in the United States specifically, that sense of like, oh my gosh, I feel like I am in Mexico right now and this deep nostalgia of actually feeling the same. Especially since I was going through a lot of identity issues cause I had just hit the milestone where I had been here for longer than I had been in Mexico and it is always like that idea of I don’t know where my home is because I have been here way longer and I don’t feel like in Mexico it would feel the same and I also don’t feel like I belong here. That sense of finding a home and finding a sense of belonging and really being in the community garden, that is the only place that I have been in in the United States that ever made me feel like that. Like that I actually belong to the space. It feels like Mexico in the United States.”

As Julisa approached the ‘milestone’ of being in the United States longer than she had been in Mexico, raising questions for her about her identity and belonging, she found the garden. The garden transports her back to Mexico linking her to her transnational roots, and through this connection, Julisa was able to visit sensorial memories of her grandfather’s land in the garden. The garden allows her to feel a ‘deep nostalgia’ and to be with the community in the same way she remembers in Mexico. As such, the garden opened space for Julisa to explore and navigate the tensions of her transnational identity and reconnect to a part of herself that was starting to feel farther and farther away.⁷

For both Julisa and Araceli, the garden represented a ‘home,’ an emotionally and ontologically comforting space. The garden also provided an important community context, linked to their academic work through (H)ACER. The program goals aligned with their goals of community health and well-being, which created continuity between their experiences in the garden and at the university. This ability to feel comforted, to just *be*, facilitated Araceli and Julisa’s capacities to calm the ubiquitous stress response that they described feeling when in and around campus, which is inconducive to their deeper intellectual work and reflection. This move off campus is an important first step toward a critical sense of belonging. Both Julisa and Araceli were able to get off a campus that felt hostile to them and to rest in a different space.

5.2. Building Comfort with Academic Theory

Through (H)ACER, Julisa and Araceli conducted close readings of anti-colonial and decolonial theory and feminist methodologies. Aligned with [Ebony McGee's \(2021\)](#) recommendation, we created a learning community for our students alongside their experiences at the garden. (H)ACER classes are facilitated similar to a graduate research seminar. As they read theories that were both culturally relevant and resonated with their values and beliefs, they shared how they developed more comfort in utilizing academic language that had previously contributed to their sense of alienation.

When asked in the focus group what they found most challenging to navigate at UCSC, both students described challenges with academic language and theory before (H)ACER. Spanish was both Julisa and Araceli's first language. Araceli explains,

"[I]n order to navigate higher education, you have to speak a certain language. It [has] very specific words and symbols and things and I have struggled a lot with it probably because Spanish was my first language and then . . . English, but at a higher ed level is a whole other level of English. So, what I needed a lot of help with was translation."

Julisa shared a similar challenge to academic readings explaining that she "would read a paragraph over and over again" or she would get discouraged and tell herself, "this isn't for me. Oh my gosh, if I can't read this . . . now, then I can't do anything." Both Araceli and Julisa sought out help with translation and learning how to read academic language and more specifically social theory.

(H)ACER provided small classes and culturally relevant theory that spoke to Araceli and Julisa's lived experiences. Each then emphasized times they sought support from (H)ACER faculty for this translation work. Araceli would ask for clarification and explore the theories in the research group. Julisa recalls her experiences in research group meetings, talking through theory. As she read, discussed and made sense of the theory in the research group, she began to really enjoy it.

"I was just like, 'Wow, I really enjoy theory.' [laughs] Now that I understand how it works and all the different theories and different types that are available and out there . . . So, I started learning I was really into theory. I also, my biggest struggle was finding words to express things that I had felt or that I had witnessed or that I had lived. I could describe them and I could talk to you, but I never had the institutional knowledge to describe certain things. I think that is another thing that I navigated and I am doing better now. I know a lot of words now."

In both cases, Araceli and Julisa describe feeling alienated from academic language and through their study in (H)ACER, became more comfortable with it. Beckett witnessed both students bringing their experiences and perspectives to bear on anti-colonial and decolonial theory and women of color feminist writings that often-framed research discussions on positionality and research methodologies. Through their study of these literatures, it seemed as if each found an onto-epistemic resonance with theory. The students explored their own anti-racist and anti-colonial politics through the useful concepts such as moves to innocence ([Tuck and Yang 2012](#)), and resonated with the authors' unwavering conviction to frame decolonization as based in the re-matriation of land. Araceli and Julisa also heard themselves in [Lugones \(2003\)](#), [Moraga and Anzaldúa's \(1983\)](#) writings, which recognize women of color experiences as 'theory in the flesh' ([Cruz 2013](#)). They describe how they felt the authors were writing with them and for them. Araceli and Julisa were reading theory that was both culturally relevant, resonated with their values and beliefs, and enabled them to articulate their broader experiences in the academy with a greater sense of coherence, replacing deflating attributions of themselves as students.

In research meetings, we discuss field notes as a space for theory-building and sense-making. Their field notes initially tended to be merely observational, but as time went on, they linked observations to reflections, making sense of what they were seeing through their own perspectives. In this way, they were bringing in their experiences and theories

they had read to think about what they were witnessing. Bridging the duality of the familiar and academic was not the only way these students reformulated how they understood themselves and their experiences. They also confronted ethical questions about their positionality while working in (H)ACER.

5.3. Navigating an 'Outsider' Status in the Garden

Thus far, Araceli and Julisa have described their feelings of isolation on campus before beginning their work in the Calabaras Community Garden through (H)ACER. As the students found contingent comfort on campus through their studies and connection to the garden, they were also learning about themselves as university students through experiences in the garden. As they were building relationships in the garden, the students shared how they developed ways of navigating their university identity *through* and *within* the community context, learning that while they felt 'home,' they were also university students with a certain 'outsider' status. During the interview, Araceli reflected on her positionality and framed it as "insider/outsider." She acknowledged her identity as a university student and visitor to the garden positioned her on the outside, while her linguistic and cultural practices positioned her as an insider. She describes a moment where she reflected upon her status as a university student. At first, she was uncomfortable at the idea of being identified in the garden as someone from the university, but through her developed ethic of engagement, she came to realize that she can be both of the university and of the community.

Araceli was at a potluck, enjoying a conversation with a community member. She recounts:

"The community member said, 'Oh yeah, you all over there you are so intelligent, you are so sustainable and you know so much and us over here, we are still using plastic plates and stuff and we don't really know much.' And I tried to ask them questions to center their knowledges and bring in this concept I learned in a feminist course about how colonial processes have made it so that knowledge is kept in the [ivory] tower and this whole myth that scholars have knowledge and they are the experts and everybody else doesn't. I was thinking about that and trying to explain to them, 'No, no, we all carry knowledge and that is a myth.' But then we also had a research meeting with Linnea and Flora and Julisa and I remember learning there, because what I was trying to do was put me and this person on the same level, like we were on the same playing field because my intention was like, 'No, we are all the same, I am not smarter than you.' But then I remember in our research meeting talking about the problem with collapsing things like that and . . . the privileges that we do have that are very real. Like even just having a UCSC ID and having access to this ginormous database and library. Those are enclosed spaces that are not open to everybody. I remember in that one research meeting we had in thinking about that and learning about how it is important to recognize that we are coming into these spaces representing the university whether we want to or not. So, we can't be like, 'Oh, I am just like you,' because, no, you're not. They don't have access to the things that we do as folks in academia and so the way that I kinda make sense of me being in there, I think about what one of the elders in there told me which is like, he was describing who I was to another student interns that was new to the space. They were like, 'She is one of the really nice college students that comes and helps us around the garden.' So yeah, I definitely came to a recognition that I need to recognize my privileges and take ownership and say yes, I am coming from the university and that is ok. I can still have loving relationships and connections with these folks without having to strip myself of certain identities or privileges."

Araceli carefully describes her resistance to being positioned by the gardener as "intelligent" by nature of her association to the university, and her impulse to uplift the knowledges we all bring, as she had learned through (H)ACER's analysis of the politics

of knowledge production and community-engagement. At the same time, she knows she cannot deny that she is a university student. She knew she had to recognize that part of her identity and the privileges it brings. Her impulse was to collapse that aspect of her identity, to return to her cultural and linguistic roots and approximate herself to the community members through what she held in common with them. Instead, a community member identified this difference and held it up with esteem. Araceli reflects on this moment and realizes that she has to claim her university identity.

Villenas (1996) describes women of color ethnographers as border crossers, navigating the liminal spaces of insider/outsider status. Through descriptions of her own experiences as an ethnographer working in community contexts, Villenas identifies the complexity of being a “privileged” ethnographer that positions her as ‘other’ or ‘outsider’ in the community in which she feels very much an ‘insider’. Araceli mediates her identity as a college student through this interaction with the gardener. Instead of resisting the privilege-laden differences that qualify her as an ‘outsider’ in the garden, she learns that she can embrace it, enter the garden with this part of her identity and still belong. As she states, “I am coming from the university and that is ok.” This reconciliation is a powerful moment and opens the possibility for her to engage her identity as a college student differently. Araceli’s careful engagement with her positionality as both an “insider” and “outsider” demonstrates a sense of reflexivity and capacity to navigate the tensions of belonging—and not belonging—across university and community spaces (Villenas 1996). Importantly, we get a sense of her ethics of community engagement and how ultimately, she can “still have loving relationships and connections with these folks without having to strip [herself] of certain identities or privileges.”

Julisa likewise reflected on her identity with intentionality and complexity, in ways that evoked the foundation of her methodologies studies in (H)ACER and utilized the garden to mediate her relationship with her and other undergraduates’ college identities. Julisa would go to the garden as a researcher and often worked alongside other undergraduates who were there for community-engaged education. Sometimes she was in a leadership role and sometimes she was there working while others were in the garden. Over time, she became more and more comfortable speaking about the garden and talking with undergraduate students about working in the garden. During the interview, she shared a few important lessons she shares with students, “especially Latinx students that are coming from spaces similar to Watsonville who are also going through a journey of understanding positionality and all of their biases and privileges.” Julisa elaborates,

“For me, [it is about] understanding where the balance is. You can’t separate yourself from the university and that’s ok; you just gotta not be weird about it. But it was like the idea of being raw with people and being honest. I always had this consciousness of like, especially since I conducted interviews with families, what are these interviews for? Who will have access to them? What are they going towards? Like understanding that you have to tell them, it is part of the university. This is what the university is doing, this is how it is playing a role in this space. It is important to be really clear about it, but also in personal life.”

Julisa describes how she navigates the insider/outsider role—as both a college student and also someone who identifies with the community—by staying with the complexity and tensions, rather than trying to resolve them. Her compass is her commitment to the community, which orients the why and the how of her work, as evoked in the critical questions she poses. Here, Julisa extends her acknowledgement of her university affiliation beyond Araceli’s comments, adding that you cannot deny the affiliation, you have to own it and you have to recognize that this affiliation comes with important ethical questions that you (as a researcher) need to ask as you engage the community. Questions such as: what is the purpose of the research? Who will have access to the data? And sharing these questions with the community partners. You must be forthright, honest and share your intentions with your community partners. Julisa describes her ethic of community engagement through her ‘outsider-ness.’

Julisa understands that her status as a college student and researcher in space requires her to take care of her relationships in the garden differently, holding an ethic of community engagement with “thresholds” she can cross and which she should not cross (Tuck et al. 2014). For example, in her interview, Julisa also shared that often the moments of relationship building with community gardeners were not captured in her research or would only sometimes make it into her field notes. Consistent with the structure of (H)ACER, for her, the relationship with the community was first, one that considers our positionalities and social locations, while simultaneously extending beyond them. One of the anchors that grounds her in her process is her strong accountability to the community. For Julisa, “These types of collaborations are really only possible by building strong, consistent, and honest relationships with the community, and being conscious of where you stand at all times and always aware of who you’re truly accountable to.”

6. Conclusions

Building a sense of belonging necessitates something deeper than a social network or the desire for sociality; it entails congruence, integration, and being valued. These sentiments are not, we argue, realized by trying to convince historically underrepresented and minoritized students that the campus is for them when that is fundamentally, structurally, and historically not the case. White supremacy, patriarchy, anti-blackness and settler colonialism are inherent to U.S. university culture, including that of UCSC. Scholars have documented the negative impacts of racial microaggressions on the mental health and self-esteem of students of color (Nadal et al. 2014a, 2014b; Soloranzo et al. 2000; Yosso et al. 2009); for students of color at supposedly progressive institutions, this may contribute to experiences of gaslighting. Therefore, supporting student sense of belonging requires those with institutional power to develop a myriad of policies, spaces and programs designed to address the multidimensional aspects of belonging. (H)ACER was designed to reconceptualize and remedy shortcomings in traditional service-learning approaches by centering issues of power, knowledge, and equity in which the university is firmly embedded in structures of social and economic inequity. (H)ACER not only resonates with students’ senses of themselves as interdependent (Covarrubias et al. 2016), but also underscores the importance of campus/community interconnections.

Araceli and Julisa received training to structurally analyze their experiences; to explore women of color theorizing; and to connect everyday lived experiences of inequity or oppression as structural in origin. As they received this training, they were also spending time in the garden, which generated this stark affective and relational contrast to the university.⁸ This distinct contrast was brought to bear on their reflexive praxis in (H)ACER and can be seen throughout the findings as each navigated their insider/outsider status on campus and in the community.

As the students navigate both campus and community spaces, they realize that belongingness is something they can participate in creating, through the development of ethnographic sensibilities, self-reflection, and critical theory. Julisa and Araceli start their higher education careers very much feeling like outsiders on campus. They visit the Calabasas Community Garden and feel pangs of home, and bask in their insider-ness. But as they continue to interrogate the world and their place in it, they realize that theory—specifically women of color feminisms and decolonial theory—start giving words to their experiences, enabling them to start theorizing themselves in new ways. Between that and the opportunity to conduct research (the sine qua non of a R1 institution), they feel more like an insider on campus. In the Calabasas Community Garden, their university education means that community members see them as outsiders in many ways, and place value on that. The insider/outsider pendulum reflects the liminal spaces that we all occupy, the dynamism of our lives and evolving personhood, and the necessity of change as one grows. We propose that (H)ACER, by providing both community-engaged research opportunities and training in critical theory and methodology, offers a pathway to a critical sense of belonging. More research is needed in depth and scope to further explore

student sense of belonging in community-engaged research. Future research might more systematically study on a broader scale students' sense of belonging before, during, and after their involvement in critical community-engaged research projects.

However, perhaps more importantly, educators have the opportunity to infuse their teaching and mentorship of undergraduates with an attention to the pedagogies of critical community-engaged methodologies. For example, we might make space to think through these questions with our students: Who do you think belongs at this university? How do you know? How might the politics of knowledge production—what counts as research, whose knowledges count—also be connected to your experiences as students of color at this campus? These lines of inquiry support students to link their experiences to the histories, people, and places that shape our institutional contexts, which can lead to critical understandings of positionality and place.

Araceli and Julisa's narratives also highlight the importance of not only training undergraduates with the skills to conduct research, but to also critically think about themselves as researchers and about knowledge production in a political context. Not only did this become central to their theorizations of their ethics of community engagement, but these skills also supported them to navigate and leverage their own knowledges within the academy. When theories are relevant and connected to students' lives and experiences, this promotes academic self-efficacy, motivation, and metacognition. Contributing to research, the most lauded function of a university, can enable students to push back against imposter syndrome, to find validation and worth not only through their experiences with community, but through their ability to structurally analyze their own and their communities' experiences. This sends a powerful message to underrepresented students that they do not need to become someone else in order to 'belong'. Instead, they can draw from their experiences to theorize back, to belong on their own terms.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, L.K.B.; methodology, L.K.B.; formal analysis, L.K.B. and S.S.; data curation, L.K.B. and S.S.; writing—original draft preparation, L.K.B., F.L. and S.S.; writing—review and editing, L.K.B., F.L. and S.S.; funding acquisition, F.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The (H)ACER program has been funded by a US Department of Agriculture National Institute for Food and Agriculture Hispanic Serving Institution Education Grant (#2016-38422-25552); multiple internal grants from UCSC (Measure 43, Student Fees Advisory Committee, Alumni Association DVP funding), and a generous gift from a community donor.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the University of California, Santa Cruz (protocol code 2696 and 27 July 2016).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Acknowledgments: We would like to acknowledge the exceptional work and friendships of both Julisa and Araceli and the Calabasas community gardeners for their continued trust and openness to working with (H)ACER. We are grateful to the staff and student leaders at College Nine and John R. Lewis College for their support.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ The student names in this paper are pseudonyms.

² We use Ebony McGee's (2021) terminology of underrepresented and minoritized communities to emphasize the structural and historical oppressions that create these categorizations.

³ A local school garden program.

⁴ Issues of political economy, housing, and gentrification in the county are pressing and outside the scope of this paper. See the [Anti-Eviction Mapping Project \(2021\)](#) and [Greenberg et al. \(2021\)](#).

⁵ While the Calabasas Community Garden particularly connects Latinx students to the broader Latinx community, (H)ACER supports all students to develop situated relationships to community-engaged research. It is committed to supporting students

from communities who have been historically and systematically excluded from higher education, including first-generation, undocumented, and/or QTBIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black Indigenous, People of Color) students.

- ⁶ According to the UCSC office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Policy Studies, of the 17,866 undergraduates enrolled in Fall 2014, 5183 or 29% identified as Hispanic/Latino. Of these Latinx students, 3436 or 19% were also first-generation. For additional data, visit: <https://iraps.ucsc.edu/iraps-public-dashboards/student-demand/enrollments.html> (accessed on 6 September 2021).
- ⁷ This is yet another axis of insider/outsider perception, demonstrating the complexities of belongingness.
- ⁸ Although our research was stunted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Araceli and Julisa’s descriptions of their experiences in (H)ACER begin to outline a framing of a critical sense of belonging rooted in both program design and student engagement. However, it is important to note that the (H)ACER does not purport to develop a critical sense of belonging or critical consciousness. As faculty, we can only design and create environments that hopefully incite reflective analysis that includes student sense of belonging, but it is up to the students to decide to explore and theorize community engagement and reflect upon their belonging. In the words of Julisa, “I think (H)ACER is providing the space for that to happen, but it is up to people to make those connections, to reach out. You can’t force those relationships”.

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