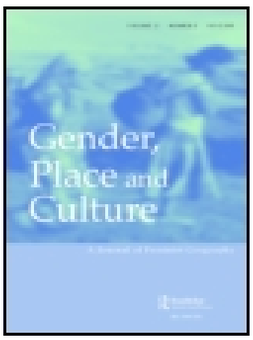

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DISSERTATION PRECIS

Care-fully enacting diverse foodworlds in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

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My dissertation is a critique of some inherent problems in agri-food research and practice in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand (A-NZ) and the global north. It is deeply feminist in its politics in that it highlights the value of typically ignored, diverse and 'alternative' food practices. These practices are those that trouble the entrenched ecological, social and economic exploitations of often profit-driven, intensive and/or industrialised food systems, in pursuit of something different. Through a set of case studies in Auckland, my dissertation engages feminist conceptual work of: *care* (Tronto 1993; Puig de la Bellacasa 2016); *diverse economies* (Gibson-Graham 2008); *embodied attunement* (c.f. Carolan 2011); in the practices performed by *assemblages* (Lewis et al. 2013) of alternative food initiatives (AFIs).

Theroretical underpinnings

I will start with the alternative food initiatives (AFIs) as my objects of study. As I depict comprehensively in my example of the Crowd Grown Feast (Sharp 2018), I frame AFIs as *assemblages*: 'socio-spatial formation[s] … brought into being by knowledge production, notably by assembling economic practices, relations and trajectories of thought and action' (Lewis et al. 2013, 185). Theorising AFIs as assemblages recognises the tensions and the generative potential of the connections between human and more-than-human

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actors. It sees these actors as related to eachother, and as related to larger food system processes and sites. This framing is also helpful for observing real-world impacts at different scales. Specific AFI case studies in my dissertation include farmers' markets, foodboxes, raw milk collectives, organic farmers, individual dumpster divers and guerrilla gardeners, and a 100-person food-growing-and-eating project. Each AFI has transformative potential in their own way.

The theoretical influence of *care* attends to AFIs' matters of concern (Hill 2015) which push back against blinkered, hegemonic framings of scientific, industry, and even academic institutional approaches to food and its politics. Joan Tronto has been a key proponent of care theory in women's and political studies since the 1990s. She has explored ideas of care-giving, care-receiving, and caring-with subjects and objects of study. She has examined practices where care acknowledges reciprocity in the relations between things involved in 'everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world' (Tronto 1993, 103). Further, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's conceptualisations of care (2011) deliberately notice and attend to relations of objects and sites that conventional systems tend to overlook or neglect. I use Tronto's and Puig de la Bellacasa's notions of care in my thesis to interrogate 'conventional' and 'alternative' food practice.

To further explore AFI practices, I also draw on JK Gibson-Graham's concept of *diverse economies*. Gibson-Graham, central and energetic champions of feminist, post-structural notions of economic plurality, shift a focus from dominant capitalist economic production and consumption, to diverse and 'alternative' economies. Specifically, Gibson-Grahams' (2008) performative ontological project of diverse economies is known for opening up understandings of previously un-acknowledged or under-acknowledged economic practice. This activism resonates with Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) employ of care theory to acknowledge what is neglected. I use diverse economies theory to argue Gibson-Graham's refrain that there are everyday, routine practices of labour and exchange that are ubiquitous, but which are not commonly recognised as 'economy' because they only *sometimes* articulate with capitalist exchange. I therefore use the precedent of diverse economies to broaden understandings of food economy to *all*, diverse food-related exchanges that take place.

Food assemblages of diverse care

What *assemblage, care* and *diverse economies* theory offer is framing that has allowed me to provoke traditional understandings of transformative food politics. The theory led me to three key findings:

First, there are important grey areas that lie *between* what have been conceived of as fixed, discretely-bounded, capitalist versus 'alternative' food practices. Rather than existing in opposition, these grey spaces show

capitalist and 'alternative' food economies interrelating/interdepending – a representation that has been traditionally neglected in progressive food politics, as acknowledging capitalism's value might appear to undermine a non-capitalist agenda. An assemblage approach, taken together with diverse economies theory, does the important work of dispensing with binary categories like conventional/alternative, and good/bad foods, which misrepresent the true nature of messy food production and consumption spaces (Sharp, Friesen, and Lewis 2015). In this regard, assemblage framing might be seen as care-full in recognising this usually neglected 'messiness'.

Other overlooked aspects of care that I interrogated in the grey areas of food production and consumption included the contradictions of care that resulted from discordant care interests/politics. In my thesis one example I give is the disruption caused through simultaneous but contradictory care for food surplus/food waste, food insecure individuals, and the particular knowledges, ways of thinking, and acting, that are ingrained in institutional practices and narratives (e.g. conventions, regulations and pervasive knowledge practices of industry, governments, and consumers) in the AFI practice of dumpster diving (Sharp et al. 2016).

Second, in this grey space of 'alternative' and 'conventional' thinking and doing, potential for other newness is demonstrated; for example, the re-valuing of food objects and practices. To continue the dumpster diving case study, the practice of 'salvage' valuation offers a space where the capitalist organisation of the supermarket determines when food becomes waste, and then a process of re-valuation occurs when surplus (waste) is then valued as food that can be eaten. This revaluing demonstrates *care* for humans and non-human others. Here, care metrics rather than purely economic metrics, might be applied: to the environment in reducing waste, to humans in answering food security issues for some, and, to food systems by re-circulating (non-)food objects. This example of changing valuation that occurs throughout the AFI supports my assertion that AFIs are better regarded as assemblages of dynamic and emergent food relations, as a political project for imagining and practising food differently.

Third, I surmise that re-valuations are borne out of care-full embodied *attunements* that are generated through everyday, routine encounters with food. Embodiment is the idea that we know and encounter the world through our bodies — through what is tactile, olfactory, tasted, auditory and visual, or, 'sensed'. Alongside my use of interviews and questionnaires to collect research data, I employ feminist methods that privilege the body, including participatory ethnography and auto-ethnography. These latter methods use the 'body as an instrument' (Longhurst, Johnston, and Ho 2009) to obtain food data on visceral and sensory aspects of food practices, and to enact the AFIs through performative practices (Probyn 2000; Butler 2005). Food only really becomes food in certain contexts, when we are bodily

attentive or *attuned* to it as food, through practice. Attunement offers a counterpoint to Michael Carolan's (2011) food research on 'tuning', which discusses how our bodies have become conditioned, or tuned, to a particular brand of taste, as 'Global Food' has become conventional in our every day. Reasonably then, our bodies could become attuned to a different food system. Attunement is a reflexive practice of noticing, using the body to measure, reframe and then produce knowledge. It cultivates bodies to become perceptive to differences between objects and things through practice (Sharp 2019a). Using the same case study as before, dumpster divers become attuned to food: they *notice* the surplus food as waste, read it through their bodily senses (e.g. smell, touch, taste) for its eating potential, and then reframe and revalue it as a new food object. Thinking through the bodies in food relations is yet another feminist intervention in my work which helps emphasise methods in geography that can help us to understand a variety of food politics.

In my research I embodied these AFIs as a participant ethnographer. Positionality was therefore important to this project's interest in a different kind of knowledge production. As a pregnant woman researcher conducting fieldwork which involved vegetable harvesting, animal husbandry, cooking, and eating food with participants I examined myself as part of the food systems assemblage, and performatively practised my diverse economic food- and care-work in the field (Sharp 2019b). This meant identifying how care is variously practiced, by me for food and fieldwork participants, by fieldwork participants for the food and for me as a researcher, and by the food for eaters (human, and more-than-human), including the conflicts of care that emerge in these spaces.

Varied case studies in my dissertation illustrate the creation of new foodworlds. They point to different representations of food economies and an understanding of how attunements are materialised in foodworlds, through reassembling food objects and their (more-than-human) relations, and through conscious valuations of care. As a contribution to the field of food politics and feminist research, my work advances an understanding of the possibilities of being attuned to, and enacting different, diverse worlds, care-fully.

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Disclosure statement

A disclosure statement reporting no conflict of interest has been inserted. Please correct if this is inaccurate.

Notes on contributor

Dr Emma L Sharp is a Geographer, with a research focus in food politics, intersectionality, care, and, alternative economies. In her teaching she brings a critical social science lens to environmental geographies. She is a founding member of the NZ Women and Gender Geographies Research Network (2013–) and associated Puāwai Collective, and leads the Critical Food Studies Group in the School of Environment at the University of Auckland. She is an Associate Investigator with Te Pūnaha Matatini – a Centre of Research Excellence hosted by the University of Auckland.

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