“Soy Margarita, y mi vegetal favorito es las remolachas.” And thus begins the meeting for Huerta del Valle, a community garden. We go around the room, each saying our name, role in the project, and favorite fruit or vegetable… “My name is Shannon, I’m an intern working with Maria, and right now my favorite vegetable is eggplant.” There is a sense of family, community, and an excited tension in the air as we sit in Margarita’s living room – frijoles, guacamole, las camotes, and Marie Callendar’s pies the only things separating us. We feel this, despite the fact that many of us are just meeting each other for the first time and the most intimate thing we know about one another is our favorite fruit or vegetable. However, this does not matter, because we are all here and therefore, we know we are all united on one of the most fundamental aspects of life – food. We have come together on this night to talk about the past, present, and future of Huerta del Valle.

This discussion is essential, as Huerta del Valle will be the first community garden in Ontario, California, which is currently a USDA recognized food desert. I have been an intern working with Margarita (the garden manager) and the other four members of the Huerta del Valle committee for the past four months, becoming intimately familiar with Ontario and its citizens over the course of this time. As defined by the 2008 federal
Farm Bill, a food desert is “an area in the United States with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower-income neighborhoods and communities.” (USDA). If I walk around a one-block radius of Margarita’s house, it is immediately apparent that this is true for Ontario: there are four gas stations, three liquor stores, and three fast-food restaurants, to counteract a Fresh n’ Easy market and a Food 4 Less grocery store – both of which I notice seem to specialize in snack foods and small, sometimes bruised produce. When Margarita takes us on a walking tour of her neighborhood we visit these stores and she questions the quality of these fruits and vegetables.

There have been various actions that attempt to address the issues regarding food access in Ontario. Most recently, the city obtained the three-year HEAL Zone grant (Healthy Eating Active Living) from Kaiser Permanente, the goals of which are described below (HEAL Zone Initiative Fact Sheet):

- Improve policies and practices related to healthy eating, active living at community and institutional settings.
- Improve access to healthy food and healthy beverages
- Improve access to physical activity opportunities.
- Increase population-level awareness, knowledge, skills, and motivation around healthy eating and active living.
- Increase consumption of healthy food and beverages
- Decrease calorie consumption
- Increase physical activity

In order to accomplish these goals, the city divides the grant up and distributes it among
about a dozen community partners – Huerta del Valle being one of them. This has for better or worse married us to the city of Ontario and Kaiser Permanente.

While questions regarding produce quality and health are expressed, what is left unasked is why. Why is Margarita’s neighborhood a food desert? And why do the few grocery stores that exist carry such low quality products? As I conducted my research throughout the semester, I often contemplated these and other questions related to the perceptions health of Ontario. I realized that before I can even ask these questions – let alone understand the answers to these questions of health – I must first understand how different Ontario community members perceive and define health and quality food. By answering this research question, I hope to further the understanding and increase the discourse about the many versions of health and good food that surrounds the food justice movement. I examined the relationship between community members’ and city officials’ versions of health and am interested in how power relates to these questions of food access. Through my research, I have learned that in order to affect food justice and health change in Ontario, a mutual definition of health, community-sourced solutions, and increased critical thinking about power relations are necessary.

In order to gain an understanding of these different perceptions, I used several research methods including observation, writing detailed field notes, and conducting interviews. Most of my observation and field notes come from our weekly Huerta del Valle meetings, where we discuss anything from compost plans to be sent to the city to the increased need of community involvement in the project to preferred gender pronouns. Due to the familial nature and size of our committee, these meetings function as a way to openly talk about issues relevant to the garden and our lives and therefore
sometimes serve a similar purpose to a focus group, with each member playing an equally important role. Finally, I was able to learn most explicitly the answers to my questions in interviews with city officials and community members. Between these methods and immersing myself in the Huerta del Valle and greater Ontario communities, I have begun to understand these perceptions of food and health, the current scholarly written work, further research methods, data findings, and other details of which I will describe throughout this paper.

In order to understand food and health perceptions in Ontario, I must first contextualize it in the larger food system and food justice movement. America – a country that began with family and sustenance farming – has become the leader in the global expansion of the food industry over the past century (Pollan 2002 p. 12). With the advent of industrial farming methods like genetically modified foods, pesticides, monoculture, and large-scale heavy machinery, food production has increased dramatically (Pollan 2002 p. 92). However, it seems as if these methods have reached their tipping point as local and global communities begin to understand the environmental, social, and political consequences that result from the use of such practices. In order to combat these implications, people have begun to seek out alternative methods of producing and obtaining foods; the most prominent of which is organic food (Pollan 2002 p. 78). In addition, many other alternative food movements hearken back to this idea of Jeffersonian America and include locally sourced food, seasonally grown food, farmer’s markets, and community gardens. These methods of obtaining food have started to gain popularity among certain segments of the American population.
However, this option to circumvent the conventional food system is open to just that – certain segments of the American population. This population includes primarily white, upper-middle class, educated people who not only have access to such food choices, but the time and financial opportunity to make those choices a reality. This gap between those who have access to these foods – particularly fresh fruits and vegetables – has increased time and time again (R.E. Evanson et al. 2003 p. 759). In some cases, the lack of access to healthy foods relates to the prices of the foods themselves, while, in others, the accessibility of foods correlates to the neighborhoods in which people live – food oases or food deserts. These topics of food access and food justice have garnered much scholarly and activist attention with the rise and prominence of the environmental justice movement.

However, despite this attention, many scholars argue that there has been minimal action confronting the issues that surround food accessibility and justice. For example, Patricia Allen, professor at University California Santa Cruz is adamant about the untapped power academics have towards influencing the direction and depths of social justice movements (Allen 2007 p. 158). Conversely, there are those that believe the access aspect of food justice is often given a disproportionate amount of consideration. As University California Los Angeles professor and established environmental justice advocate, Robert Gottlieb argues, the rights of those who pick the foods are as important as the rights of those who eat them, even though they often are not discussed with equal weight (Gottlieb 2010 p. 38). Still, other scholars believe there is too much focus on the “food deserts” of American cities, and not enough focus on general low-income populations’ experiences with food access (Letee et al.
Despite the controversy over academic details of the food justice movement, there is a general consensus among scholars like Gerda R. Wekerle, Alison Hope Alkon, Kari Marie Norgaard, Robert Gottlieb, and Andrew Fisher that the food justice movement unites community-based action and activism with “sustainable agriculture and environmental justice and theory.” (Alkon et al. 2009 p. 292). Therefore, there is a sense of academic and community-based validity to the food justice movement.

However, the reasons regarding disparities in food access remain controversial. Some literature states that food consumption patterns are related to the general cultural norms of populations, and not the income or class distinctions of specific populations (Pearson et al. 2005 p. 197, Dai et al. 2011 p. 660). On the other hand, several studies show a correlation between food insecurity and income levels (Kendall et al. 1996 p. 1097). Whether eating fruits and vegetables is a personal choice based on culture or based on income levels, people from a diverse range of power levels have made many efforts to try to reduce this widely acknowledged disparity. These endeavors may involve anything from installing produce sections to corner stores, establishing community supported agriculture systems and starting community gardens. As Laura Saldivar-Tanaka and Marianne E. Krasny discuss in their article on the subject, community gardens act not only as a source of food for local (and perhaps non-local) residents, but they are also a great source of empowerment for potentially marginalized communities (Saldivar-Tanaka et al. 2004 p. 400). Furthermore, as Oberlin College professor Andrew Flachs demonstrates in his ethnography of Cleveland community gardens, many people in urban spaces use community gardens for their economic
benefit (Flachs 2010 p. 7). Perhaps more surprisingly, Flachs argues that community gardens also act as an artistic space that can help form participants’ identities (Flachs 2010 p. 8). This multi-use model is important as it begins to address social justice and food justice issues from multiple perspectives. Laura B. Delind follows this holistic model in her essay on food culture. She argues that food justice issues can benefit from analyzing local food culture through the lense of “people in place” (Delind 2006 p. 126). In other words, Delind proposes that a community’s cultural heritage is necessary in order to develop an understanding of their food culture and perceptions.

Julie Guthman further explores this idea of taking cultural histories and critical thinking of race and class into account when working for food justice in her article, “Brining Good Food to Others: Investigating the Subjects of Alternative Food Practice.” In this article, Guthman discusses the phenomenon of white privilege as it relates to food access issues. However, instead of focusing on the community members affected by alternative food movements in low-income “food desert” areas, Guthman analyzes the intentions and findings of her (predominantly white) students as they enter non-white communities with limited food access. In many instances, the students start their fieldwork projects with the best of intentions, trying to bring what they have learned to believe is “good food” to their fieldwork sites. Just as often, they leave finding that this version of good food is not always in line with community needs and wants. According to Guthman, her students – along with many others working for food justice – have lived a privileged life, so unaware of their whiteness and so conditioned towards things like grocery stores and supermarkets that they have the luxury to reject them and opt for “alternative” food sources. These privileges can create a certain
ideal of “good food,” which many activists bring to the communities in which they work, whether or not this is representative of the community’s cultural history and definition of good food.

The work and experiences described in Guthman’s article are very similar to my internship at Huerta del Valle community garden in Ontario. I began the internship aware (but not thinking about) my whiteness, with an assumed universal definition of good food, and an assumption that Ontario is an unhealthy community. However, as garden committee meetings and classes progressed, I quickly learned I was wrong. I began thinking about my whiteness and what it meant for me to be working in a predominantly Latino community on an issue that is fought predominantly by white people, despite the fact that it is an issue that primarily affects communities of color (Guthman 2008 p. 433). I conducted participatory-observation research, learned what “good food” meant to different community members of Huerta del Valle, and I let them tell me what they perceived as healthy and unhealthy aspects of the Ontario community.

Both in spite of and as a result of these personal reflections, I realized the fact remained that Huerta del Valle as a committee, was still a group of educated white people working with one community member to bring the first community garden to the city of Ontario. However, this is where the similarities between my internship experience and Guthman’s student’s experiences end. As a committee primarily made up of Pitzer College students, fellows, and faculty, we are extremely aware of our whiteness and varying life experiences and how these aspects of our personhoods can affect our participation in the project. We are therefore eager to hand over the responsibilities of the committee to the community and are excited to see Huerta del Valle as a community-
driven space that welcomes, but does not rely on the resources that come with our involvement in the project. Currently, we attempt to close the divide between academic and activist work through community-based research projects. These critical analyses of food access and the food justice movement are important, as they are necessary to discover insights about the controversial roots of food access issues and the quality of these reactionary movements. I plan to add to these conversations through an analysis of food and health perceptions and the effects of power relations on food justice and access issues in Ontario, California.

The connection of the food justice movement to other social justice movements is essential for effective social change. This is something that I have learned not only from my experiences in Ontario, but throughout my life as well. I cannot remember a time when the topic of social change has not been the center of a family discussion, the motive behind family decisions, or the reasoning behind my choosing Pitzer College. This is not surprising considering my mother is a professor of Social Welfare at UCLA and my father is a retired Deputy Chief in the LAPD. Needless to say, the two of them often have differing opinions on social justice issues and I almost always find myself identifying with the middle ground. This concept of mediation also affects how I participate in social change. I have grown up listening, contemplating, and attempting to reach a decision between two sides of issues facing our society. I am therefore often able to apply lessons learned during dinner table conversations to larger discussions between politicians or various community members with whom I may work.

My past experiences with social change efforts fall across the spectrum between direct services (charity) to empowerment opportunities (justice). Throughout high
school, I worked with the local Red Cross chapter organizing various youth groups and disaster safety events. I remember feeling bored and frustrated with this work, as I felt removed from any sort of change or community. Perhaps in reaction to these feelings, I transitioned my volunteer work from the Red Cross to Homeboy Industries – an organization in downtown Los Angeles that opens its doors to former gang members who seek job training and a refuge from their often crime-ridden neighborhoods. I definitely felt more at home in the Homeboy community and part of a social change effort whose goal was to empower its constituents.

While working at Homeboy, I was constantly aware of my race, class, and gender – things that will always affect how I experience the world. I was probably the only white upper-middle class girl working at Homeboy (despite its name, Homeboy does serve female former gang members as well). Although I do not actively think about these aspects of my personality on a daily business, they do affect how I experience work in certain communities. For example, I may get a slightly different version of a story due to my race or gender. Conversely I will probably have a certain reaction to a story as a result of my race or gender. For example, I can think of several times when a sexist comment was made – however mild, innocent, or seemingly well intentioned – and feeling conflicted as to how to react to these comments. Thus, the question of which background, community, and culture to respect – my own or those in which I currently work – is constantly in the back of my mind.

These experiences have shaped my academic and research interests as well. I know that my own life experiences have given me a unique lens through which I view these social issues and so my biases extend everywhere. Instead of leaving these views at
the door, I am able to use my experiences to my advantage in any given situation. However counterintuitive, maintaining objectivity in research is not only impossible, but also undesirable. In order to conduct this research I must be immersed in this community, which is unfeasible if I remain objective and removed from my past and current experiences. Being aware of my biases will help me understand the community I am in, with whom I am working, and allow me to learn from and embrace the similarities and differences that exist between us.

I feel these differences when I work in Ontario. I know as much Spanish as anyone who has grown up in Los Angeles would – which is to say minimal at best. Therefore, working in a city that is 70% Latino (US Census Bureau) definitely presented its own set of challenges. For example, all Huerta del Valle meetings are held in Spanish and Margarita speaks about as much English as I Spanish. The proceedings of the meetings were translated for me by English-speaking committee members, but there are certain depths and meanings that are simply lost in translation. Although this occasionally left me “out of the loop,” I never felt bothered. I did sometimes feel awkward being the only person who did not speak Spanish, as I did not want to seem ignorant, arrogant, or entitled when asking for things to be translated. I did not want to be a burden to the committee. Nevertheless, I embraced whatever discomfort I felt and took it as a learning opportunity. I knew that I needed to feel what it was like to be in the minority – however shallow of a minority experience it was. It is in discomfort that we learn and change.

Discomfort is almost normal in Ontario. There is discomfort in the way people living in Ontario travel from place to place – blocks are long and laden with train tracks
(a relic of the city’s past and present prominence in the logistic industry). There is discomfort in the disparity between living conditions in Ontario – affluence and poverty are separated by a single two-lane street. There is discomfort in the air we breathe, which is polluted with diesel fuel, jet propulsion fuel, particulate matter, and smog. There is discomfort in the vast landscape of warehouses that invade neighborhoods and invite semi-trucks into their arms. There is discomfort in the priority given to cars over people, as individuals are given minimal time to cross streets and gas stations, auto mechanics, and car dealerships seem omnipresent. There is discomfort in the empty storefronts, vacant lots, and foreclosed homes that line the four block stretch of downtown Ontario and indiscriminately permeate neighborhoods. There is discomfort in the way people consume food, as chain restaurants, fast-food franchises, and low quality produce dominate most of the foodscape in less affluent areas of the city.

However, this discomfort breeds community, and it is in these communities where Ontario citizens are able to find a version of comfort. People have developed ways to ease – or perhaps simply cope with – the pain of their broken city. As with many marginalized populations, some groups of people in Ontario begin to form social networks in order to combat the problems of a system that failed to take care of them on even the most basic level (Kingsley 2006 p. 257). The power of this human capital is evident in Margarita’s community. As she feeds my fellow intern and me sweet and savory tamales, we learn that her neighbor made them in exchange for the surplus pies Margarita made earlier. She makes these pies at Marie Callendar’s, her husband’s workplace, in the week leading up to Thanksgiving as a means of making a little extra money before the holidays. I describe this in my field notes:
We sat at Maria’s kitchen table and ate the different kinds of tamales that she put in front of us one after the other – fresas, piña, carnitas, pollo – all so good. My first strawberry tamale! She and I talk in Spanglish and learn about each other and the communities we’re from. We talk about how she and her neighbors share things like food, babysit each other’s kids, etc. She says it all comes back around.

This unofficial bartering system of time, food, and labor fosters relationships and creates community in settings where it is needed most desperately due to an absence of systemic support systems that exist in other, less disenfranchised populations (Kingsley 2006 p. 527).

As a result, I have experienced at least two versions of Ontario. There is Margarita’s Ontario and there is what I will call the “Graber Olive House” Ontario. This is best captured in the tour of Ontario (organized by our professor) that we went on at the start of the semester. The first part of the tour included a focus group at Margarita’s house in South Ontario, where people told us the stories of their road to America and their life of unemployment and fear in Ontario. For the second part of the tour, we went to Graber Olive House in North Ontario, where we learned about the agricultural roots of the city and their business’ legacy of family farming, production, and distribution of olives – which has remained unchanged since the 1930s (graberolives.com).

This dichotomy was evident on all sensorial fronts. As we drove north on Euclid Avenue (the main transportation artery of Ontario), from Margarita’s house to the Olive House, we saw green slowly overtake concrete and houses slowly replace mobile home
parks. We smelled the air getting cleaner as we drove away from the 60 Freeway and towards the San Gabriel mountains. We listened as the sound of birds chirping became louder than the freeway behind us. We felt the finished wood surfaces in the Graber family house and remembered the stickered linoleum countertop in Margarita’s kitchen. We tasted the brined olives covering our palates and replacing the salt from the tortilla chips and the cinnamon from the homemade Mexican rice pudding that Margarita insisted leave with us. I write this not to alienate or otherize any part of the Ontario population, but to simply illustrate the realities of the city as I experienced them.

These realities, combined with the realities of my internship site have been integral in forming the nature of my relationship with the community in which I work. As previously stated, the Huerta del Valle committee consists mostly of individuals associated with Pitzer College and a single community member, Margarita. Although we have become a tight-knit, horizontally powered community, we face challenges related to incorporating community members into the Huerta del Valle committee, stagnant city politics, and inconsistent means of communication.

The largest of these obstacles is the lack of Ontario community members represented on the committee. This is something that we have discussed at length as a committee and unanimously agree needs to be changed. However, we have been unable to even talk to community members – let alone incorporate them into our committee meetings – due to legal restrictions from the city regarding the Land Use Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding. Because Huerta del Valle will be in city land, the city took this precautionary action in order to ensure minimal community reaction in the
unlikely event that negotiating the legalities of the community garden was to fail. However, with the help of a group of law students from University California, Irvine, we were able to smooth out these legal hurdles and very recently obtained consent from the city to talk to community members.

This is one of several issues we have had as a result of our relationship with the city. For example, we attend monthly HEAL Zone meetings with representatives from the city, representatives from the other community partners, and zero representatives from the community that the grant is meant to serve. Additionally, the grant is based upon Kaiser and the city’s definition of health and they decide how that will be implemented in the community. Furthermore, as we discovered when canvassing in the neighborhood around the garden, not everyone trusts the city of Ontario, and our association with it may be problematic in certain situations.

However, working with the city is advantageous for Huerta del Valle as well. The city agreed to be financially responsible for the garden’s water and electricity needs, even after the grant ends in three years. Perhaps even more important, working with the city allows Huerta del Valle to tap into an established network of resources involving communication and policy. Moreover, our association with the city forms a sense of validity and permanency around the garden that could prove useful in future quests for funding.

However, Huerta del Valle faces internal problems unrelated to our relationship with the city. The most prominent of these challenges is general communication. Between legal agreements, flyers, finances, and other various planning needs, we share many documents and therefore use Dropbox to communicate. This is
problematic because Margarita’s computer does not have enough room to support a 5 GB Dropbox folder. Therefore, the person who would most need these documents has minimal access to them. Additionally, the language barrier again proves to be problematic, as most of these documents are in English, so even when Margarita has access to them, she may not understand what they say. As a committee, we work hard to combat these obstacles by translating documents as often as possible and finding other means of document sharing with flash drives and the like until we are able to purchase a new computer for Margarita.

In spite of – or perhaps as a result of – these challenges, the Huerta del Valle community is strong and is now becoming part of the larger Ontario community and food justice movement. I personally identify with the garden committee and am starting to feel more comfortable in other communities within Ontario as we invite them into the Huerta del Valle family. Developing a good relationship with these communities has been essential for me to learn and conduct my participant-observation, community-based action research project. As briefly described earlier, I carried out this research through several methods: observing continually, writing detailed field notes, and conducting interviews.

Developing good observation skills was necessary in order to gain even the most basic understanding of the communities in which I was working. Most of my observations come from our weekly Huerta del Valle committee meetings (which often serve a similar purpose to a focus group), where I quickly learned that everything is important: who is speaking and when, the mood and atmosphere of the room, the roles people assume for others and themselves, and the discussions that take
place. Outside of our meetings, I take in every detail of my surroundings: the general cityscape of Ontario, the cars, the people, the stores, the schools, and even the weather. Together, these observations form the bulk of my field notes. Recording what I saw, what I thought about what I saw, and why I thought that has proven to be essential in forming my research question and answering it. More importantly, the act of taking these field notes allows me to be conscious of my own positionality and recognize that what I observe and record are products of my life experiences, regardless of my immersion into this community (Emerson et. al 1995 p. 13)

Once immersed in the community, I was able to build relationships with certain individuals who I subsequently interviewed. I interviewed a total of five people, including community members involved with the garden (Margarita, Juan, and Cecilia) and city officials involved with the HEAL Zone grant (Linda and Ken). Although my observations and field notes allowed me to gain my own understanding and experience of Ontario, these interviews were crucial to understand the quality of life in this city. In these interviews, I was able to ask specific questions regarding health and food in this city (see appendix for list of questions). However, my own positionality is reflected in these interviews as well – I determine which questions to ask, I ask the questions, I interpret the answers, I choose what data to report, and I choose how to report that data. In an attempt to keep these disparities in power in check, between the interviewees and myself, the final question I ask is whether or not he or she would like to discuss anything that I did not raise. In the answers to this and other questions, I learned different perceptions of food and health, what people saw as solutions to the health and food access crises in Ontario, and how these answers related to larger aspects of the
individuals’ lives, families, and communities of Ontario and beyond.

The triangulation of these methods – observation, field notes, and interviews – helped me arrive at several conclusions regarding the culture surrounding food and health in Ontario. First and foremost, there is not one culture, nor one perception, nor one definition of health and good food in Ontario, rather these ideas of health vary on an individual basis. As a result, each interviewee posed different solutions to the different problems related to health and food access they see in their community. While city officials discussed the importance of health education in schools and communities, community members emphasized the need for increased access to quality foods. Additionally, there was a common theme in every interview regarding the idea that once given the necessary access and education about food, an individual is responsible for his or her own health and food choices. These themes are interconnected, recur throughout my research, and shed some light on health and food cultures in Ontario.

The notion that there are many definitions of “good food” and health is essential in understanding the issues that face Ontario on an individual level and society as a whole. Among those interviewed, these definitions fell on a spectrum from calorie counting and exercise to maintaining the health of one’s mind, body, and spirit. These perceptions of health are formed by individuals and pertain to their body and their community.

Individually, interviewees’ ideas of good food and health correlated with their involvement in the community garden. For Juan, one of the more active community members in the garden, health was not something he found in a grocery store or gym. Health was something he found in interactions with people – from working in the
garden, to sitting down at the dinner table. According to Juan, maintaining a healthy lifestyle is to “put good things in your body… How much do you love your body?” Though, as we conducted the interview, Juan continued to bring homemade kombucha and yogurt to our table while discussing the importance of family. It became evident that, to Juan, health is not just what one puts in their body, but who and what one surrounds their body with as well. Health as it relates to this connection of the individual to his or her family was a common thread throughout every community member’s interview. In addition to Juan, both Margarita and Cecilia, Juan’s wife, continually expressed this importance of family in terms of their own individual health. Juan communicated this idea that taking care of others is taking care of oneself, “If I see rocks in your path, I clear them so you can go free… I got to help, what else can you do? And I feel great.” Thus, it is clear that for these community members, the health of the individual is affected by the health of those immediately around him or her, namely their families and their support system. The idea is that a person’s physical health – the food one eats, their physical activities, and their muscle to fat ratio – is not the only factor that determines that person’s health, despite its dominance in dialogues about health. Rather, there are other aspects at play: mental health, emotional health, economic health, and social health were all expressed as important components to an individual’s quality of life. Therefore, according to these community members, health is multifaceted.

This is in slight contrast to the perceptions of health held by the two city officials we were able to interview, Linda and Ken. Both Linda and Ken are involved in the implementation of the goals laid out in the HEAL Zone grant. When asked about health,
both mainly referred to the physical health of individuals. Linda continually referred to the calorie content of foods when she talked about living a healthy lifestyle. For example, once she saw the high calorie content of a McDonald’s milkshake, she realized it was not a healthy choice. Similarly, Ken stressed the importance of portion control as it relates to healthy eating. He described his personal eating habits as, “Healthy plus,” meaning he eats nutritious foods, but with supplements of chips, desserts, and other “junk foods.” Later in the interview, Linda describes her former work with the homeless population of Ontario. Here, she expands her definition of health to include the mental status of an individual, saying that, “you have to treat the whole person.” However, this incorporation of individual mental health was as complete as the conversation became.

This difference between community members’ perceptions of health and city officials’ perceptions of health is notable for several reasons. First, the ways in which each of these philosophies has developed is important. Margarita, Cecilia, and Juan’s community is largely composed of low-income, immigrant families. As previously discussed, in the absence of institutional support systems to assist communities similar to Margarita’s, the members of these communities often form their own support systems. This is reflected in their perceptions of health and explains the interconnectedness they feel between individual and familial health. In this community, people sustain each other because it is how they have learned to survive living on the margins of their society. Therefore, the health of one individual affects the health of the others. For Margarita, Cecilia, and Juan, individual health is contextualized in his or her community’s health. Conversely, Ken and Linda are white, American citizens, and are
securely employed. These factors alone make it so that they do not need to rely on their community for support. They have access to basic necessities including quality food, childcare, and voting privileges, and Margarita does not. As a result, they do not have the same type of social network established as Margarita and do not have to support others or be supported by others. Therefore, they are able to think about health as an exclusively personal concept, instead of as an individual in the context of their community.

More importantly, in this situation, Ken and Linda have power and therefore influence on decision makers in the city of Ontario. Although power differences are inherent in almost all societies, the lack of understanding of different communities within a society is not (Kingsley, 2006 p. 530). This is a problem that Ontario is clearly facing. Linda and Ken are products of their communities, just as Margarita, Juan, and Cecilia are. However, Linda, Ken, and other decision makers in Ontario use their version of health as the version of health instead of considering possible differences in this definition that may exist among other communities. This version of health determines how projects like the HEAL Zone grant are implemented in the community. For example, the city hosts monthly HEAL Zone meetings, where the community partners come together and relate their experiences in the community from the last month. However, no community members are invited to these meetings and therefore the community voice is not heard. This challenges the efficacy of such projects because what they are bringing to a community may not necessarily be in line with what the community wants or needs. Therefore, community involvement in projects like the HEAL Zone grant is necessary in order to ensure a more successful implementation and outcome.
This inconsistency of perceptions of good food and health leads to inconsistent ideas for solutions to these perceived problems. The most prominent of these differences is the city’s emphasis on food and health education compared to community member’s emphasis on basic access to foods.

Throughout their interview, Ken and Linda continually referred to the lack of health education in schools and in the community. They agreed that this was a major problem that could be solved through changes in education policy. According to Ken and Linda, improving health education would help solve many food and health issues in Ontario. However, Ken also recognized that while youth education and incorporating nutritious foods into school meals is important, it does not address what he perceived as the more immediate issue of unhealthy eating at home, “it’s not just the education of the students, it’s the education of the parents, the families.” Ken continued to described several city efforts to educate families in Ontario including forming neighborhood groups, exercise classes at local community centers, and cooking classes that teach community members how to make healthy meals. Eventually, as Ken described, community members could be the ones teaching the classes, which would create community empowerment. This educational model is an example of the city’s efforts to affect change through top-down, policy-making avenues and grassroots organizing. It is through these methods that the city plans to confront the health issues facing Ontario.

However, among the community members I interviewed, there was no expressed need for education in schools or community centers. There isn’t a lack of knowledge of what foods to eat and how to eat them. There is a lack of access to the foods necessary to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The problems Juan, Cecilia, and Margarita described in
terms of their own health and their community’s health were related to the simple inaccessibility of healthy, high-quality foods. However, it is important to note that these community members may be self-selecting. They choose to participate in a community garden and therefore have a relationship with food and health that is not necessarily consistent with mainstream ideas about food. Nevertheless, as all three community members described, the produce that their families have access to is low quality and, according to Cecilia, “the price is not good either.” The city recognizes this issue of food access and has given part of the HEAL Zone grant funding to a Market Makeover project, which works to put fresh, locally sourced produce in an independently owned corner store, Pronto Market. While Ken acknowledged and respected this access aspect of food consumption, he continued to emphasize the importance of education. According to Ken, the Market Makeover project is important, as it gives people the opportunity to make the choice between an apple and a candy bar, but, as he states, “you can’t make a good choice unless you have education to make that choice.”

This highlights the idea of personal choice that was pervasive throughout all interviews. It was unanimously agreed upon that the main obstacle for community members to live healthily was having the opportunity to make healthy food choices in the first place. As Juan unapologetically asserts, maintaining a healthy lifestyle is a choice, “How much you love yourself? How much you love your body? As soon as you love your body, you say, I don’t gotta eat that kind of stuff.” However, Juan has access to a backyard full of fruit trees, a refrigerator full of homemade yogurt and kombucha, and small library of natural medicine books. Nevertheless, both Cecilia and Margarita expressed similar – though perhaps less blunt – sentiments. For the participants, once an
individual is given the access and education to make healthy choices, it is up to that individual to do so.

What is not asked is why that access was lacking in the first place. Although this may be my fault as the interviewer for not raising such questions, I do think what is not talked about is as important as what is talked about in these interviews. There is a reason participants did not raise these questions. What may be lacking in Ontario is not only health education, but a high-quality, well-rounded education where students learn to think critically about their surroundings. This education can be another aspect of a healthy individual and community. Breaking this false consciousness that is pervasive throughout Ontario regarding power relations, institutional barriers, and systemic faults will be necessary among community members and city officials alike in order to foundationally solve any issues facing the city of Ontario – health related or otherwise (Lather 1986 p. 260). However, it is true that a society is made up of individuals and is influenced by their decisions and vice versa. In this way, personal choice and institutional boundaries may both play roles in individual and community health. In other words, individuals exist in their societies and the health of one determines the health of the other.

These issues regarding food access and public health in Ontario illuminate the complex nature of maintaining healthy lifestyles in individuals and maintaining healthy societies. Through this research, I have been able to make several conclusions. My findings have contributed to the dialogue involving health and food culture in several ways. First, I have found that it is imperative for a mutual understanding of food and health to exist between decision makers and the communities for which they work in order for any kind of action to be affective. Only after this is established
can possible solutions enter the conversation. Finally, a similar understanding of and critical thinking about the sources of these disparities in food access is also essential to affect change in these communities.

We discuss these issues at our Huerta del Valle meetings and raise questions of health regarding individuals, our committee, communities, and society as a whole. As a new organization, we have the luxury to choose how we structure our meetings, decision-making, and power dynamics. We are able to create a space exactly how we want it, while allowing ultimate flexibility to new and unknown circumstances. Perhaps this is our ultimate definition of health. However, I would not have come to this realization without conducting this research project. Through the stories, discussions, events, and people I have been introduced to this semester, I have learned about myself. Through understanding other people’s philosophies surrounding food and health, I have been able to articulate my own.

Ontario has taught me, surprised me, baffled me, engaged me, and inspired me. I came into this internship and this project with certain preconceived notions and ideas of how the results of my research would look. I was wrong. I was most guilty of romanticizing community members and villainizing city officials. However, as the interviews played out, I realized that Ontario officials have only good intentions for their citizens and genuinely care for their city’s health. Additionally, despite the lack of community involvement, the city is making efforts to address these issues of food accessibility and health. As discussed, public health is deceptively difficult and intertwined with almost every aspect of a society, which makes finding solutions to low public health complicated. The city of Ontario is making a noble effort to address the
issues of health that face their community.

Just as I learned to recognize city failures and successes, I also gained an understanding that community members are not always right, which was a question I grappled with for much of the semester. In some situations, we all need someone who has had different experiences to offer new perspectives and ideas. However, it is important to remain respectful and open minded when working in communities like Margarita’s with histories of systematic racism and imperialism. Nevertheless, it is true that learning is a mutual phenomenon. We all learn from each other, whether we realize it or not. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank Margarita and her fellow community members, the Huerta del Valle committee, the Pitzer in Ontario Program, and the city of Ontario for welcoming me with open arms and reminding me what it feels like to learn.

We end our Huerta del Valle committee meeting much in the same way as we start it, perhaps an unintentional comment on the cycle of life we see in the garden. However, in order to encourage community development within our committee, we say not our own favorite vegetable, but that of the person sitting next to us.

“Soy Margarita, y vegetal favorito de Shannon es la berenjena.” We continue around the room, trying to remember our neighbor’s favorite vegetable and hoping no one forgets our own.

“Soy Shannon, y vegetal favorito de Juan es el ajo.”
Works Cited


