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Cultivating Community: Collective Identity as Built Through Urban Gardening in New York

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Cultivating Community
Collective Identity as Built Through Urban Gardening in New York

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by

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To the Gardens and Gardeners of New York City,
thank you for all you have taught me …

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Introduction

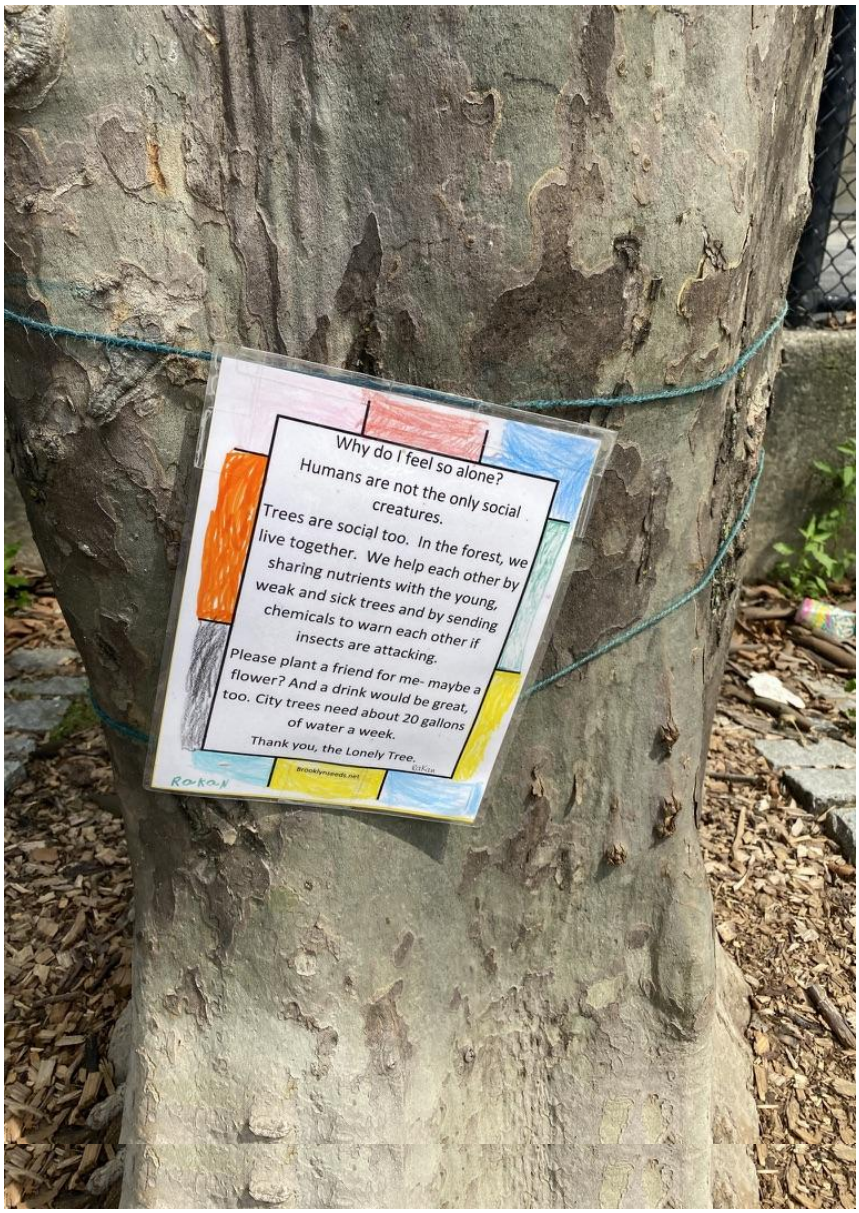

Figure 1. A laminated sign hangs onto the trunk of the tree outside of a New York park, secured by string. The sign has been colored around the edges by markers, crayons, and colored pencils. It reads: “Why do I feel so alone? Humans are not the only social creatures. Trees are social too. In the forest, we live together. We help each other by sharing nutrients with the young, weak and sick trees and by sending chemicals to warn each other if insects are attacking. Please plant a friend for me - maybe a flower? And a drink of water would be great, too. City trees need about 20 gallons of water a week. Thank you, the Lonely Tree.”

Eden in The Streets

My favorite image - the one that I return to when I close my eyes, the one that takes shape behind my eyelids - is one of afternoon sunlight speckled through tree leaves. I imagine myself lying on a bed of moss in a forest, looking up towards the sky. Light peeks through a thick canopy and dances with the wind. Perhaps sounds of nature accompany the scenery; birds call to each other as the branches rustle. My breath becomes indistinguishable from the wind, my thoughts flit back and forth with the birds, and my body takes on the unhurried movement of the plants that grow around me. In this imaginary moment, I am far from another person yet not at all alone. I do not think this daydream is uncommon for most people, and perhaps my readers can find something relatable in it. I bring us to this imagery for a reason. I want to sit with this feeling for a moment, to dissect my daydream. I believe it has something to tell us.

The familiarity in this daydream, for many of us, is the imagination of nature as a tranquil space; that is, in this imaginary nature is a space poignantly absent of human-built worlds with their hustle and bustle. What makes the image of light bouncing through tree canopies one that I return to over and over again as an escape is not only the lack of human-made chaos but also the quiet presence of the world around me. In this moment that exists over and over again behind my eyes, I am not on the Earth looking up through the trees, I am in it.

This moment is reminiscent of Tim Ingold's notion of the sphere, in which human beings *dwell in* the world rather than living on it.[1] Ingold sets up a dichotomy between two differing world views; on the one hand, humans can experience the world as a "globe," on the other, we experience it as a "sphere." Ingold's distinction between the 'globe' vs. 'sphere' is central to the

[1]Tim Ingold, "Globes and Spheres: The Topology of Environmentalism.," in The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill, 2011, 209–18.

discussion that follows and will appear throughout this writing. I frame his idea of the sphere as a way of describing relationships of attention and care between and amongst human and non-human actors. Our made-up sanctuaries like the one I have described matter greatly in this sense. They become more than moments of fiction, illustrating to us the inner workings of our spherical life-worlds.[2] These concocted forests of calmness have something to tell us about the earth and how we envision our relationship to it. This imagined moment of solitude in a forest within which I, or perhaps *we*, find refuge tells us about ourselves as we exist as planetary beings in relationship with the Earth. This mental escape exposes to us the connection between ourselves and a more-than-human way of being, a connection that elicits feelings of peace, calmness, and rejuvenation while also inspiring action.

Finding peace and calmness within nature is a common trope, but it is by no means a universally shared experience. In fact, the way that individuals experience relationships with their environment is highly dependent on their social and cultural context. For many, the thought of lying alone in a forest is anything but comforting. Nature as a solitary sanctuary is an idea imbued with historical and semiotic meaning, and the way that we imagine ourselves relating to nature is shaped by our positionality within social life. The equation of nature to fantasy has a history that reaches back to Henry David Thoreau's veneration of living peacefully in the wilderness of Walden pond.[3] Through a historical lens, we see wildness and nature come into position as desirable in a largely Western context. William Cronon writes about the sublimity of wilderness as an enticing frontier of the 19th century, noting a national shift in the narrative. He

[2] Thank you, Tim Ingold, for these phrases without which I could not have made this statement.
[3] First published in 1854, Thoreau's memoir titled *Walden; or Life in the Woods* was incredibly influential in the transcendentalist movement of the time. The book upheld the narrative of nature as equivalent to peacefulness, which became popular amongst a demographic of white middle-class people.

remarks on the emotions wilderness evoked before this shift as "anything but positive," saying that before the time of the transcendentalists natural wilderness was mostly associated with "waste" and "terror."[4] The shift in the narrative comes with the *cultivation* of the wilderness as gardens. Wilderness becomes a frontier for man to discover and eventually control. The change from terror to wonder that Cronon writes of is imbued with spirituality, positioning nature as a tool through which humans can create a Garden of Eden.[5] Nature in the form of gardens allowed the dangerous darkness of wilderness to become "pure, and light - land that is pristine or barren, but that has the potential for development."[6] These understandings are produced by an era of colonial thoughts that allowed White explorers to position nature within their rights of "Manifest Destiny."[7] The historical and cultural contexts that led to this association between nature and tranquility are important in creating a framework for this project. As Cronon suggests, the trope of nature/tranquility as one in the same *comes from somewhere,* it is not simply an objective reality. At some point along the thread of time, wilderness (i.e. nature, plants) had to be imbued with meaning in relation to social life and order. We come to a modern understanding of what "nature" entails, and the emotions and beliefs it invokes, through this long and detailed cultural history.

The relationship to wilderness that Cronon discusses focuses primarily on a lineage of White European settlers who experienced America as a "sublime frontier,"[8] as unbuilt land that

[4] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature, 1996.
[5]Carolyn Merchant, "Reinventing Eden," in Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature, ed. William Cronon, 1. publ. as pbk (New York, NY: Norton, 1996)., along with other compiled essays discusses at length the Western idealization of an Edenic nature and suggests this as
[6] Merchant, "Uncommon Ground,"137.
[7] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness."
[8] For more on the Sublime Essence of Nature, see Cronon (1995; 73). "God was on the mountaintop, in the chasm, in the waterfall, in the thundercloud, in the rainbow, in the sunset… Among the best proofs that one had entered a sublime landscape was the emotion it evoked."

held both danger and promise. This narrative is positioned distinctly within a Western context, and while this may be the narrative within which my daydream is built, it may not be for others. It is not my intention to generalize the intricacies of human-plant relationships and in doing so erase the multitude of experiences these relationships produce. Rather, situating the historical narratives regarding human's place in nature as culturally specific and impactful allows us to understand plant-human relationships as both tools and products of social meaning-making. It is the examination of the relationships between humans and plants - and the semiotic worlds of social meaning that are created by such a relationship- that sparked the inspiration for this project. It is these relationships, and the social, political, and personal outcomes they produce, that have guided this project from my imaginary forest to the community gardens of New York City.

This project led me to a room in Brooklyn with no air conditioning, out of which I spent two very hot summer months trudging around New York City with the hopes of discovering *something* about urban gardens. Not completely sure what I was looking for, I let my daydreams guide my questions. I wondered why, in a landscape predicated upon commercial and industrial growth (and mostly covered in concrete and asphalt), did people go to such lengths to build shared gardens amongst the chaos? It seemed probable to me that the greening of New York by way of urban gardens was backed not only by a need for fresh produce but something more. Perhaps the residents of New York had the same daydream as me, and they had begun to build it for themselves between the busy city streets. What I saw in New York City was a new iteration of the recreation of Eden, one that attempted to reclaim land snatched up and paved over. In doing this work of reclaiming land, residents of the city established spaces in which nature becomes continually imbued with social meaning. Moreover, these spaces - within which

humans act out relationships between themselves and their environment - hold meaning not just in their objective existence but in their juxtaposition specifically within an urban landscape.

Urban community gardening has risen in popularity across New York (and the world) over the past 50 years.[9] The reasons for this, once again, are not without social, political, and cultural influence. The gardens themselves are products of semiotic worlds in which nature is positioned within the narrative of tranquil wilderness. Throughout my time in New York, many of my interlocutors - most of whom worked or volunteered at a community garden - cited food sovereignty as a reason for gardening, however, everyone I spoke to *also* remarked on an emotional connection to their gardens. Their presence in these spaces was not purely logistical or mechanical - it was not simply about producing sustenance. Even using urban gardens to produce food for consumption is in itself an action that holds symbolic cultural meanings. I will take time in later chapters to discuss this in much more detail. Through my fieldwork, I learned that the subliminality that classified nature at the end of the 19th century was indeed being recreated in pockets throughout the city. These spaces not only produced nourishment but created new Edens in the street that broke apart and renegotiated the urban landscape.

Troubling Spaces

This project frames gardens as spaces within which social meaning is unmade, remade, negotiated, and complicated. These troubling spaces are built by deep kinship between humans and non-humans - a kinship that makes one question and reassesses how one lives in/with the

[9]By the late 1970s there were nearly 1,000 registered community gardens across the 5 boroughs of New York City. There are currently over 500 active gardens.

world. Scattered across the city, tucked between sidewalks, and at once always separate from *and* in relation to the 'outside,' community gardens in New York City create spaces within which perspectives are altered. Through their intentional opposition to the urban landscape, community gardens position themselves as symbolic spaces where human-plant relationships are created and enacted. These spaces are (and have been) used as tools of activism, resistance, and representation. These more-than-human assemblages create meaning within themselves, and have consequences for a broader social network.

In what follows, I focus on how urban community gardens trouble city landscapes through human-plant relationships.This is the theoretical assertion with which I frame the arguments of this project. I want to establish urban gardens as troubling spaces that produce *and* are produced by culturally contextual understandings of human relation to space and environment. To understand urban gardens in this way is to acknowledge the power they hold in creating change. This is by no means a lofty or hypothetical claim. A look at the history of community gardens in New York City reveals green spaces within urban landscapes as *tools* of social action. This project explores why and how urban community gardens remain throughout time as vehicles for the conduct of social action. While my intention is not to retell the history of community gardening in New York City, I find it necessary in understanding the moment within which community gardens currently operate.

Seemingly tied to the narrative of community gardens is a promise of community based action. Sprouting out of a response to economic crises in the 1970s, the modern community garden is founded upon (and infused with) action against urban struggle.[10] This action comes in

[10] Throughout history, gardens have been deployed as combative tools against war, poverty, famine, and social crisis in New York City. More information on this can be found in Chapter 1.

many forms, and is dependent on the needs and wants of the community organizers, but it is hard not to notice the link being made throughout the city between community gardening spaces and social action projects.[11] At once a space that defies busy city life with its stillness, gardens are also spaces within which communities gather to actively resist hardship and injustice.

Gardens create these spaces in a number of different ways, as will be displayed in the following chapters. What I found interesting throughout my experience of conducting research, however, was a kind of persistence to hold space for specific marginalized groups of people as a way of actively resisting subjugation. This can be seen very clearly through the Tehuti Ma'at garden's mission and practices, as well as my experience while trying to research this garden. Tehuti Ma'at is a co-op community in Brooklyn that focuses on using garden spaces as means of healing. This space is specifically meant for African-American New Yorkers, and does extensive work with Black communities that addresses the violent and racist histories that African-Americans face in this country and beyond. The garden is strictly centered around an African diaspora, and the community is using their garden space as a tool of active education and healing for that demographic. This garden space offers real emotional effects for members, and creates space through which this group can do social work.

When I learned of this garden, I was interested in speaking with any members who were willing and possibly touring the garden myself, however, I quickly realized that no members were, in fact, willing to speak with me. After several emails and voice messages with no response, I felt rather discouraged. It took me the rest of the two months of my fieldwork to understand that the lack of accessibility I was given to this community was, in itself, an act of

[11] A few of these programs that use gardens as vehicles for social change that I personally encountered during my time in the city are the City Parks Foundation, Red Hook Farms, the Green Guerillas, and GreenThumb.

resistance against larger oppressive systems. My positionality - as a college student, as a researcher, as a White woman - was something that I knew I had to be conscious of in my research, and in this instance it became relevant in a way I had not anticipated. I found that because of my identity as a White woman, the Tehuti Ma'at community was not a space I had the right to enter - even (or especially) as a charismatic researcher. This community, through their garden and co-op, is doing the work of reclaiming their indigeneity and cultural history (with all its violence and injustices). To be able to decide who is or is not welcome in this space is part of that reclaiming.

In this way, history matters deeply in creating these spaces as they are. For this reason, I take some time to observe gardens not just in their present moment but also in the historical context which formed them- and which they formed. By looking at how and why gardens emerged as tools of trouble, we can see how they continue to do so today and can continue to do so in the future. Gardens create trouble not only in space, but also in time. Many gardeners that I spoke with relied on an idyllic romanticization of the past in order to create hopes for the future. Their work in community gardens was guided by a return to the past (which in turn created hope for the future).

Gardens alter ways of living amongst and between urban street grids by holding space for different kinds of growth. The rate of this growth is slow; it disregards the fast pace of urban life. A sapling planted in the garden takes its time in becoming a tree, and in doing so exists on a temporal scale adjacent to the city. While the city bustles around gardens, the seeds planted within them become fixtures that move through time slowly until at last they return to the soil. This temporality complicates and counteracts the never-ending growth that is the city landscape. The gardens of the city exist through and in time as relics of the past *and* hopes for the future.

Urban gardens are, as Gabrielle Hecht suggests, 'interscalar vehicles' that hold past, present, and future within their walls.[12] These vehicles are constituted by matter, and matter becomes an object able to transverse temporal and/or spatial scales. For example, the sapling becomes able to move across temporal scales on a different plane than humans. Planting a tree today creates an interscalar vehicle to the future because of the assumption that the tree will live to see generations of human life. At large, gardens are interscalar vehicles because they are spaces that hold within them deeply rooted stories of the past, the attention and care of the present moment, and hopes and aspirations for the future. All of these scales become packed into the fences of the garden, making it the bearer of any and every moment at once.

The troubling presence of garden spaces in an urban landscape is what makes them rich spaces for the cultivation of life, and even more so, for community. As this paper will show you, spaces must be troubling in order to create new growth. The trouble of gardens manifests itself in countless ways - even some we cannot see or understand. But turning towards these spaces of trouble, leaning into them and allowing them to create spaces for cultivation is what allows us to strengthen relationships between both human and non-human beings.

Deep Kinship

I have found immense inspiration and validation through the theories of Donna Haraway,[13] specifically those which discuss human and nature *becoming with* one another in multispecies ontologies, a world in which a deep kinship is ever present and waiting to be felt

[12] Gabrielle Hecht, "Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence," Cultural Anthropology 33, no. 1 (February 22, 2018): 109–41, https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.1.05.
[13] Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*: Making Kin in the Chthulucene, Experimental Futures: Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

between all 'earth beings' in what she calls the *chthulucene.*[14] These are the theories that aid me in the translation of my fieldwork in the pages that follow. Haraway suggests the chthulucene as an alternate mode of visualizing the interconnectedness of all beings on Earth that goes above, below, and around what we consider to be the anthropocene. The chthulucene is a lifeworld in which beings reach through time and space towards each other, where stories are still being told and heard, and where beings are in constant state of becoming with one another. Haraway describes these beings as string-like, continuously "threading, felting, tangling, tracking, and sorting"[15] through the earth, building and being built by relations of kinship between human and more-than-human beings.

These ideas are important for thinking through my project for two reasons. First, Haraway's ideas help me in thinking through community gardens as spaces that challenge anthropocentric ways of being, and also truly change the way life happens. Perhaps life in the garden is life in the chthulucene, and distinctly different from/troubling to urban life in the world exterior to the garden. This exterior world is one in which human beings are dissuaded from thinking about/with their relationship to the environment in the name of the Anthropocene - or as Haraway would like to rename it, the Capitalocene. On Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene and the distinctions between the three, Haraway writes: "Both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene lend themselves too readily to cynicism, defeatism, and self-certain and self-fulfilling predictions… in which both technotheocratic geoengineering fixes and wallowing in despair seem to co-infect any possible common imagination".[16] The world outside the garden

[14] Haraway (2016; 2) explains the etymology of the word *chthulucene:* "It is a compound of two Greek roots (*khthôn and kainos)* that together make a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth."
[15] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 36.
[16] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 56.

is one which often fails to recognize a “chthonic” reality in which assemblages between human and non-human beings create relationships of kinship that actually make worldly change.

Secondly, I want to think of the physicality of plant life-below-soil as a material representation of a chthulucene. This may help you and me to better understand the interconnected networks that make up community gardens in the city as I describe them. I will rely on imagining gardens in this way throughout my project. I implore you to imagine the spindly roots of trees, bushes, flowers, grass reaching downward and outward through the earth. These roots extend beyond the garden space that is often bounded by fences above ground, and meet and mingle with all other soil beings across the city. Imagine the vastness of this network, and its ability to exist as endless unique entities while at the same time remaining one. In a theoretical sense I think of community gardens in this way. Infinitely and starkly differentiated by the goings-on of each community in each particular piece of land, urban gardens also exist within the same shared network. There is something that allows them all to be defined and understood as “community garden.” Let me give another metaphor for this network by using fungi as my example.

Fungi have become quite popular as a spectacle of amazement; it seems wildly magical and improbable that all fungi are literally connected to each other the world over, yet it is very much true.[17] In scientific terms, a mycorrhizal network connects over 90% of life in the soil - almost enough for all plant life to be considered one macro-organism. Fungi not only connects all life (including human life) but quite literally makes it possible. Small fungi find themselves gathered around plant roots, attaching themselves beneath the soil. They create a mutually

[17] There is opportunity for me to point you towards countless works on the deeply amazing life of fungi, however I shall mention only two here. For more on fungi magic, see Anna Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World (*2015), and Merlin Sheldrake's *Entangled Life* (2020).

beneficial relationship with the roots wherein water and nutrients are consumed by the fungi and subsequently passed on to the plant. This process is so necessary for productive plant life that it is not often you find roots without fungi. Perhaps some time you will find yourself in a position to take a look at the roots of a growing plant, perhaps a wild daffodil or even a house plant. Dig the roots out of the soil. If you look closely you may find attached to them thousands of fine white strands. You are looking at fungi, they are everywhere and everything, and they make life happen.[18]

This deeply interconnected network of beings literally spreads itself through layers of the earth, sustaining life as it goes. But let us for a moment think beyond the reality of fungi grounded in earth, and imagine it as part of an even greater network of kinship, of friendship, of mutual understanding between all beings, human or otherwise. Changing our understanding of kinship relations in this way opens up new possibilities for creating life worlds. These possibilities are explored in this project.

What would we find if we allowed ourselves to think up a world in which leaves, roots, vines, fungi reached through soil, beyond their physical bodies, to intertwine and dance with our own viney limbs? It is with this question in mind that I begin the journey of learning from and translating my research.

Methods

Between June and July of 2021, I lived in a shared Airbnb in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. I lived there with two other women, one of whom I became very close with by the end of my time in the

[18] I learned this while studying fungi in an environmental science class during my senior year of high school. Unlike countless other bits of information I forgot during that time, this has stuck with me as a testament to the deeply impressive workings of the world.

apartment. This space that I used as my resting ground, my base camp for two months became an important fixture in my research experience. The apartment was located only a block from a public park where I spent many afternoons with my roommate, observing the others that shared the space with us and quietly collecting observations. Across the street from the park is a community garden whose history goes back to the 1960s. While community gardens are certainly not few or far between - especially in Brooklyn - to have this particular garden that would later become so important to my research positioned in such a way that I walked past it nearly every day seemed like a stroke of fate. I will return to this garden at the conclusion of this project to explain exactly why it is so important. Looking back, this room in Brooklyn was the only place from which I could have done the work that I did to create this project. But when I arrived, I had no idea how much this area would guide me in my thinking for this project.

Before arriving in New York City I created a plan (which was, of course, promptly thrown out the window upon my arrival). My intention was to visit as many community gardens as possible in order to get the most "accurate" picture of urban gardening. Through these visits I planned to create connections to people who work and volunteer in a broader city-wide network of gardening. I would conduct in-person interviews with a range of garden participants and record them on a hand-held device. In addition, I would spend time observing community gardens during open hours and participate in some gardening when I could. I quickly learned that the fieldwork I had pictured was not going to work for several reasons. First, in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic, many gardens had closed their gates with no set date of reopening. While most gardens usually have consistent hours in which their gates are open to the public, many now had only a few hours a week in which only members of the garden were allowed inside. Not only

was it more difficult than I thought to find a garden whose gates were open, in many cases it was difficult to find *anyone* to talk to at all.

Additionally, I suspect that my assumption that gardens were spaces easily accessible to me in any context was misled. In several instances where I did manage to get in touch with garden members through emails, phone calls, or visits to farmers markets, I experienced a lack of accessibility that had to do specifically with my own identity. I was by no means directly unwelcome in any space. However, as I mentioned earlier in the case of the Tehuti Ma'at garden, it became clear to me that many gardens were not readily accessible to me - because of my presence as a non-residential New Yorker, a researcher, a young woman. This shaped the way I did my field work, and led to some important discoveries and observations along the way.

Instead of the many interviews I had planned to conduct, I was obliged to gather information in other contexts. I spent much more time observing gardens - sometimes through closed gates - than I did conducting interviews. Throughout my time researching, I conducted only a handful of interviews, but the voices behind my project were many. As my research progressed I learned that the voices of gardeners were not the only ones that I needed to listen to. Voices matter to this project, and it is necessary to make it clear throughout the writing that follows whose voices we are hearing. The most prominent voice you will hear is my own as I tell you about what I learned through observing not only garden spaces but the city landscape as well. My observations and participation are what I rely on heavily in my fieldwork. The voices of several New Yorkers who are members of gardens are also particularly present, and it is through their words that the garden spaces will be revealed to us.

Much of this project (perhaps all of it) is based on the notion of humans lending their voices to the Earth. Through my observations of the city and its gardens, as well as the

interviews I conducted with garden members, I am also speaking on behalf of the Earth. I like to think that through this project you will hear the voices of the gardens themselves as well.

A Walk

What you will find in the pages that follow is an opportunity to walk about two gardens with me. What I hope you will find in these places, as I did, is not only the tranquility of cultivated nature but a remade perspective. It is my intention that you come away from this world having made what was once common uncommon. As we walk, the space I create around us through these pages will become a space of immense complexity. While I do this work on the page, I hope you bring this experience into all walks that you may take with nature. Perhaps the next walk you take - perhaps through a garden, the woods, or even down the street - will also open up new avenues for thinking and understanding with your surroundings. This is what community gardens in New York City have to teach us about the world.

I offer here a perspective of not only gardens in the urban environment, but ways of relating to/with them that complicate and reorder relations of attention and care. This communal, cultural, and conceptual work is necessarily done through gardens across urban landscapes. The walk I am about to take you on will show you why and how this work takes place in the specified territory of gardens.

Anthropological ethnography, in my mind, is about the translation of experience into a story. As anthropologists, we hope that the story is one that opens opportunities for thinking differently. We cannot hope to create a representation of anything except our own experience. Furthermore, we are tasked not with *discovering* (as the old world of anthropology may say) new

ideas, but of translating practices already in existence. What I found in the gardens of New York City is not new, and I do not claim to have anything to say about it that my interlocutors could not say themselves. But what I hope to accomplish here is a translation of their world to yours.

I have done my best to translate my research with an understanding of the importance that urban gardens hold in cityscapes not only to the environment but also to the residents who dwell there. These gardens matter to New Yorkers, as was made very clear to me in my time there. These human beings who garden have certain understandings about their relationship to garden spaces and the non-human life that they hold. I propose that we all enter this project with a shared understanding that plants are social actors within city scapes - an understanding I found to be present among all my interlocutors. Whether or not we believe a rosebush has consciousness, or a tree has feelings, it is necessary for us to validate the ideas that my interlocutors for this project base their work on.[19]

I learned the importance of writing *with* the beliefs and experiences of my interlocutors from Mai Lan Gustafsson,[20] an anthropologist who wrote an ethnography on spirit culture in Vietnam, in which she takes great care not to write about her interlocutors' experiences with spirits in a way that makes a judgment about whether or not what they told her was "true." Following Gustafsson, I try not to explain what my interlocutors are experiencing in a way that makes a judgment about its validity, but instead to create a translation that speaks with the beliefs, experiences, and realities of the subjects that I discuss. That reality is this: community

[19] This way of writing is used by many anthropologists as a tool to decenter our own knowledge as researchers. One such anthropologist, Elizabeth Povinelli writes about this in her (1995) work on Aboriginal relationships to rocks and other non-human matter.

[20] Gustafsson (2009) wrote about her positionality as a Vietnamese American doing research with Vietnamese interlocutors who believed in spirit possession. She recounts that her obesity was seen by her interlocutors as a sign that she herself had been possessed by demons. Gustafsson refrains from making any remarks about the validity of her interlocutors' beliefs and instead wrote her ethnography without making these kinds of judgements.

gardens across the city offer human beings an opportunity to be in deep kinship with nature. This is an emotional, spiritual, mental *and* physical kinship that holds semiotic meaning in social life. In this world, plants are considered actors that respond to and interact with human behavior, and the spaces they create are spaces of great social and communal power. I set up specific frameworks with which to understand my research in order to guide us on the walk we are about to take. My translation cannot be "neutral," and by choosing to frame it in certain ways I am producing new knowledge through my translation, but it aims to bring to the page an understanding of how my interlocutors view themselves and their gardens.

As we embark on this walk together, I want you to hold onto the notion of attention. This project aims to understand urban gardens as spaces that cultivate community through shifting relationships of attention and care. However, I argue that the attentiveness cultivated by gardens alone is not an end in itself. The trouble that gardens bring to urban space is merely a means through which attention is cultivated, and this attention is merely a tool with which we can begin to view the world differently. What I discuss in the chapters that follow is how we may understand community gardens as the *beginning* of different ways of thinking, rather than an end. While I focus on showing how relationships of attention and care are cultivated through gardens, it is my intention that my reader understands these kinships as a mechanism through which knowledge and action can be produced. The cultivation of community through gardens can be seen throughout this project as the cultivation of *intent.* By building spaces where certain types of communities are formed, gardens and gardeners establish ways of thinking about the environment to be passed to future generations of the community.

The two body chapters of this project are organized between two gardens in the city - one in Manhattan and the other in Brooklyn. This project is not meant to be a direct comparison

between the two gardens; I could almost just as easily have chosen any other two gardens amongst the more than 500 in the city. While these are not the only gardens that I did research in - and are not particularly more important than any other community garden project that I studied - I found that they offered me the most space within which to explore and understand the goings-on of this city-wide phenomenon. Much of what I say and show to you about these gardens can be applied to and seen in other places throughout the city (and the country, and the world), while others are irreplicable and specific to the context of that space. The point is not to focus too heavily on the particularities of these two gardens, but to also understand that each and every garden has distinct semiotic worlds produced within them.

I begin with the garden in Manhattan, where we will walk together along a narrow cobblestone path with tree canopies overhead. In this garden, the way the light bounces through the leaves and onto the path will remind us of my daydream. Chapter one positions community gardens within the spatial and temporal scale of urban life. To begin, I take you to the Lower East Side of Manhattan where we enter into the gates of the Liz Christy Garden, which is considered by many to be "the first community garden in New York." The chapter situates this garden-- and by extension garden spaces throughout the city - in relation to the exterior urban landscape that surrounds it. Using deep analysis of the physicality of the garden as well as the semiotic world of negotiated meaning created through it, this chapter continues to establish gardens as spaces of social importance and meaning-making. I discuss concepts of order and disorder,[21] and the ways in which garden spaces complicate these notions by creating *intentional* disorder.

[21] Mary Douglas, "Introduction," in Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo, Routledge Classics (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), 1–6.

We will discuss a brief history of this garden to establish the temporal scale of community gardens in the city. Here I also discuss gardens as a response to wastelands, and the process of turning wastelands into productive spaces of growth that does work of beautifying neighborhoods and bringing people together. Positioning this garden firmly within a resistance movement of the 80s and 90s, the first chapter shows how these two things work effectively together. This chapter opens discussions of what it means to create and maintain a community within a garden space, and how the definitions of community may vary between spaces. I conclude with a discussion of the way seeds are used in the garden as tools for cultivating nativeness. Through this Manhattan garden, I examine urban gardening as a means through which residents create relationships that change the ways they think, act, and understand themselves in relation to their environment.

On our second walk, I turn our focus inward so that we can more closely examine the deeply rooted relationships that sprout from within the garden itself. Chapter two more directly posits community gardens as 'islands of trouble' within urban landscapes, and focuses on human-plant assemblages more directly. This garden lets us have a look at a different kind of community. Located in Brooklyn, this garden's surrounding environment differs from the first garden. We see again how the outside urban landscape shapes the interior space of the garden. We also see another iteration of the ways in which human-plant assemblages manifest themselves in culturally specific ways. In a community garden whose members are almost entirely People of Color, these deep kinships look and act differently. Chapter two is meant to elaborate on the deep relevance that these human-plant relationships have in cultivating connectivity to place, person, culture, and self.

We conclude our walk by allowing ourselves to hear the promises community gardens make to the future. The final chapter of this project considers how gardens interact with worldwide issues like climate change, and the possible solutions they could offer. In this chapter I focus on the rhetoric of my interlocutors which points to a deep investment in a sustainable future. This future rests upon the work of the human-plant relationships layed out in the previous chapters. It is my intention not to offer any solution to the ailments of urban life or environmental crisis, as I think such a grand statement would be misleading. However, I do hope we emerge from the thick vegetation of trouble created by community gardens with a few new questions on our minds.

Chapter 1 | Liz Christy Community Garden

Intentional Disorder:
Cultivating Calculated Disruption

Mary Douglas[22] coined the idea that dirt, although often thought of as a physical property of an environment, has always been culturally defined and therefore has significant social implications. Douglas's suggestion allowed anthropologists to analyze social dynamics in a way that encompassed waste and its cultural meaning. This conception of dirt has been influential in understanding relationships between demographics and the ordering of urban spaces. We can also use Douglas's argument to understand urban landscapes and the semiotics of dirt and disorder in city spaces. In the context of New York City's urban gardens and waste spaces, I use Mary Douglas's argument of disorder as an ever-present culturally framed notion to identify how urban space becomes marked as either ordered or disordered. That dirt is a culturally defined concept is important in understanding how the marking of urban spaces transcends materiality through physical space. Understanding dirt as a culturally relative idea shows us how space becomes symbolic of social order and disorder. In New York City, this order and disorder of city landscapes (and therefore the order or disorder that classify social structures) translates as either a space of capitalist production or a space of waste. I will explore how this markedness becomes

[22]Douglas, "Purity and Danger."

legitimized through systems of ordering culture/people based on race, socioeconomic status, and class. This may help us to understand ways in which the greening of urban spaces penetrates and complicates a deep sense of order and cleanliness for city communities.

In this chapter, I will use Douglas's argument that dirt is a culturally influenced notion to help us understand the cultural significations that gardens hold. Garden spaces in New York City become marked as matter out of place in several ways; the greenery and natural life that resides within garden spaces break up the grid of concrete that constitutes the city, and this breakage in what we understand to be the city landscape marks these garden spaces as something other than "normal" city space. My observations during my fieldwork led me to understand the significant social ramifications of matter deemed "out of place" in New York City. These disordered spaces within an urban context produce social meaning, and this chapter will use this idea to show you how urban garden spaces are intentionally "out of place." I use the Liz Christy Garden in Manhattan as an example of the ways in which garden spaces trouble and dis/re-order urban space. This is not to say that gardens are always necessarily physically "ordered" or "disordered" - gardens take many physical shapes around the city. These spaces can range from neatly organized and weeded garden beds to spaces that mimic "wild" nature through their lack of pruning and grooming. The garden that I take us to in this chapter more closely aligns with the latter type of space. However, my argument is that no matter the material make-up of the garden, the space itself is always involved and invested in disordering urban spaces of capitalist production by disrupting and remaking ways that we understand urban space (and humans' place within it).

Using this framework I will analyze how this intentional disruption of city space - both physically and symbolically- marks urban gardens as independent bodies of resistance. This

chapter focuses on the Liz Christy Garden as a conduit for discussing how green spaces became sites of intentional disordering, and how their presence in urban life has expanded over the last 50 years. During my field observations at the Liz Christy Community Garden, I noticed distinct intentionality in the work being done through urban gardening. These spaces of nature were and are meant to cultivate more than just greenery - they are incredibly calculated and curated spaces of socio-cultural meaning whose presence impacts and interferes with culturally defined senses of order in New York City. This chapter aims to address how urban gardens *do social work* through their operational practices as well as their performance of intentional disordering that draws on symbolic social meaning.

Waste Space as Urban Symbolism: The Advent of the NYC Community Garden

For some, resistance looks like taking waste spaces - spaces that have become symbolic of decay, in this case, empty lots used as trash dumps- and turning them into green spaces with the explicit purpose of creating "clean" recreational space for community members through the medium of agriculture. In the 1970s and 80s, New York City was at the start of a post-industrial green revolution. Emerging from the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, the city landscape was left barren and a vast majority of its built space abandoned. With the city on the brink of collapse - economically, politically, and socially - public funds had been cut drastically and employment rates were low. City-run programs like sanitation and after-school programs were cut back in an effort to avoid total bankruptcy, and a mass exit of middle-class families to the suburbs in order

to find jobs took place.[23] Public land (some of which was acquired by foreclosure) became mostly vacant and abandoned lots, fenced off and left unused.

The NYC Parks website[24] discusses the fiscal crisis of the 1970s as the catalyst for the community garden movement. As a result of the severe urban neglect that faced the City at this time, empty lots had become stagnant spaces of waste and decay. Discarded appliances, car parts, and other trash piled up in some of them while others were simply left untouched to waste away on their own.[25] This kind of degradation of physical landscapes fosters a tension between notions of dirt and cleanliness. I would like to rephrase this dichotomy as order and disorder within a social context that adheres to Mary Douglas's concept of "matter out of place."[26] Physical disorder of space, in turn, permeates a social sphere of meaning and allows for space to become socially disordered. These waste spaces - abandoned buildings, empty lots, and vacant space being used as literal waste dumps - engendered anxiety within communities because of the social meaning they held. These spaces that had been abandoned and left as dumps, mostly in lower income and minority neighborhoods, represented the city's inability to care for its residents. The lack of city infrastructure paired with the flight of many Whites to suburbia left the city hanging in precarity. An impending total financial collapse of life in the city seemed imminent, yet middle and low-income families were left to continue on with their lives.

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[23] "NYC in Chaos | American Experience | PBS," accessed April 20, 2022, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/blackout-gallery/.

[24] "New York City Department of Parks & Recreation," accessed April 20, 2022, https://www.nycgovparks.org/.

[25] An NYC Parks article on the history of community gardens spells out the ways in which the fiscal crisis led to the foundation of the Liz Christy Garden - at the time known as the Bowery Houston Community Farm and Garden. However, it is interesting to note that by asserting this as the first community garden in the city, what is really meant is that this was the first *legal* garden in the city that had a lease on the land they used ($1 per month). Unsanctioned community gardens had existed primarily in marginalized neighborhoods prior to this as a tool of resistance against food access inequality.

[26] Douglas, "Purity and Danger."

For some residents across the city, this precarity was an invitation to action. They used these empty lots as a canvas upon which they could display their resistance to systems of city governance that result in the atrophy of residential neighborhoods. The act of community gardening is at once performative and quite logistically useful. Producing food for a neighborhood is practical, an act with a directly inflected intention. In this way, the garden does what it is "supposed to do." However, because a garden space in an urban landscape goes against/complicates ideas of order and disorder in both environmental and social ways, the garden can never not be a performative tool by nature of its existence.

In the 1970s, waste spaces had become symbols of the city's hardship as a whole. They were the daily reminders of economic and social anxieties. So it only made sense that these very spaces would become the hosts of a new movement that directly countered this state of urban depression. This is exemplified in the creation and subsequent mission of the Liz Christy Community Garden located in the Lower East side of Manhattan. By 1973, the plot had become the first "official" community garden in the city. Located in close proximity to China Town, Little Italy, and the East Village, the garden is a sliver of greenery tucked alongside Houston street. Its tall fences are covered in vines that create a blanket between the garden space and the built environment of the city streets. This barrier that defines the garden space from the rest of the city is not, however, meant to keep people out. The gates are open almost every day, sometimes for 24 hours at a time, inviting in anyone who wishes to pass through. Walking into the garden from East Houston street feels like walking through a sort of portal. The sounds of the street on the other side of the fence do not evaporate, but they become suddenly more out of place, abnormal in this space that is no longer encompassed by the New York City landscape - this space feels at once at the center of the city and far from it.

The garden consists of a maze of narrow footpaths winding around several varieties of fruit trees, bushes, and grapevines hanging around an arbor. Many alcoves branch off of the footpaths, allowing benches and chairs to be tucked away even further into the serenity of the greenery. Three sizable fish ponds also find themselves at home in this space. There are no marked garden beds - aside from the raised bed near the front gate meant to make gardening accessible for wheelchair-bound guests. The edible vegetation is allowed to mix freely with other flora making the garden feel that much more natural, that much more adjacent to city life. All of this is crammed into a space the length of a short city block, but the space is organized in such a way that it could be explored endlessly.

In a conversation I had with Don -one of 20 'official' gardeners who act as a governing body for the space- that took place before I came to visit the garden, he told me that the layout of the footpaths, the way it seems never to end, was an explicitly intentional feature of the garden's design. "Our garden was designed to be the opposite of city streets," Don explained to me over the phone. He made a point of addressing the intentionality of the garden's layout: "all our paths wind and curve, we didn't want people to come walking through quickly. So they enter through the garden, we have cul de sacs in the garden, we have little alcoves where people can sit on benches and just do whatever they want." The garden space is meant to be the antithesis of the city streets that lay just on the other side of the fence. Its purpose is to explicitly juxtapose a sense of chaos seen to be caused by the built urban environment of New York's Lower East Side with the calm, slowed pace of life inside the garden.

Figure 2. A footpath leading to an alcove amongst The vegetation at Liz Christy Community Garden - Photo by author, 2021

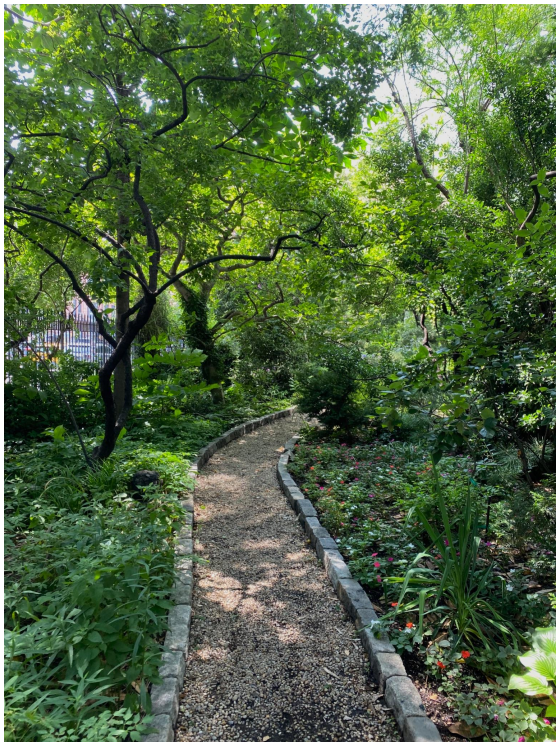

Figure 3. The main pathway winding through Liz Christy Garden - Photo by author, 2021

On my first visit to the Liz Christy Garden, I met with Don on a bench between the koi pond and a large tree that he had planted in the early days of the garden. Don - in his mid-80s now- was part of the group of college students that began the garden in the 1970s, and is the only "original" member left. Don took me on a tour, walking me through each portion of the vegetation and sometimes offering anecdotes about a certain fruit tree or garden bed. As we walked we passed people, alone and in pairs, scattered around. Some were sitting with books, some with food from the Whole Foods Market across the street, some had stepped in off the street to take a phone call.

The Liz Christy Garden is meant to emulate an oasis, and as such is in direct conversation with urban structures of built city life. The garden rests at the crossroads of two major Lower

Manhattan streets, in between three economically, racially, and culturally diverse neighborhoods. I show in figure four how the garden is tucked between streets and neighborhoods. It also sits directly across from a rather large Whole Foods Market - an establishment that appeared relatively recently in comparison to the life of the garden but still seems poignant to the discussion of juxtaposition between built and natural space. The presence of this grocery store seemed to be relevant for Don, who mentioned on several occasions that many people who pass through the garden are coming in to enjoy a lunch that they bought across the street. This Whole Foods Market, known for being a trendy place for rich, white, "health-conscious" shoppers to pick up groceries, is at once in opposition to the garden's identity as an antithetical wrinkle in the urban landscape while also in some ways contributing to it. Much could be said about a counter-culture of "trending sustainability" that has been developing since the mid 2000s.[27] A form of Western consumerism driven by a kind of environmental virtue signaling is employed by businesses like Whole Foods to appeal to a niche (but trending) way of performing sustainable living. This kind of performativity differs from the kind of environmental work going on inside gardens in many ways, the most prevalent of which is their temporality. Shoppers at Whole Foods are encouraged to use paper or reusable bags. They feel good about buying "fair trade" products, but for many of them, once their shopping experience has concluded they are done with this act of environmental consciousness. While gardens have their own kind of impermanence - people can come and go as they please, plants will grow and die - the garden is operating on a more sustained and committed temporal scale.

I am interested in what having a Whole Foods Market across the street does to an urban garden, and how it is viewed by both the gardeners of the Liz Christy Garden and its patrons.

[27] For more information on this see Paarlberg 2010.

Whole Foods, an empire based on marketing ethical sustainability through consumerism, at once defies the work of the Liz Christy Garden and works with it. The proximity of the two spaces necessitates a conversation about different ways of performing sustainability. The fact that Don mentioned the chain store several times in our conversations showed me that this conversation is indeed taking place, even if it is not fully articulated. In Don's narrative, there is a tension between the two. The Whole Foods represents the consumer's world, while the Liz Christy Garden represents a "pure" form of nature and sustainability.

Figure four also shows an entrance to the 2nd Avenue subway station that runs directly under the garden. The foot traffic from the subway entrance is a contributing factor to the garden's high number of daily visitors, and now that a health foods store sits just across the street, the tucked away space covered in greenery becomes the perfect off-beat lunch spot for busy New Yorkers to catch a breath.

However, I wonder if perhaps the two are not so different. Both spaces are in the market of selling something, whether it be fair trade coffee or a narrative of the unfiltered beauty of wild nature. The Liz Christy Garden, having become more of a tourist attraction over the years, almost becomes part of the Whole Foods experience. Allowing hundreds of people to walk through the garden daily, and then shortly afterward return to their urban lives, positions the garden as the same kind of morally performative experience as shopping at Whole Foods. This is indeed part of a larger aspect of gardens in New York City. While many are not quite so geared towards entertaining passers-by, they all still participate in a green-washing happening across the city. By their very nature, these gardens are spaces that we may enter and exit at will, allowing us to dose ourselves with only the right amount of nature consciousness. In the Liz Christy Garden, only

200 feet from a grocery store that specifically targets people's desire to perform sustainability, it feels like a certain amount of *garden-washing.*

By visiting the Liz Christy Garden, one feels refreshed and maybe even a little more connected to nature. I know I felt this on my visits to the garden. But perhaps this feeling comes from our satisfaction with believing that we have performed our care for the environment. With the ability to enter and exit the garden gates according to our own terms comes the evident truth that perhaps the garden is a product to be consumed in the same way as Whole Foods.

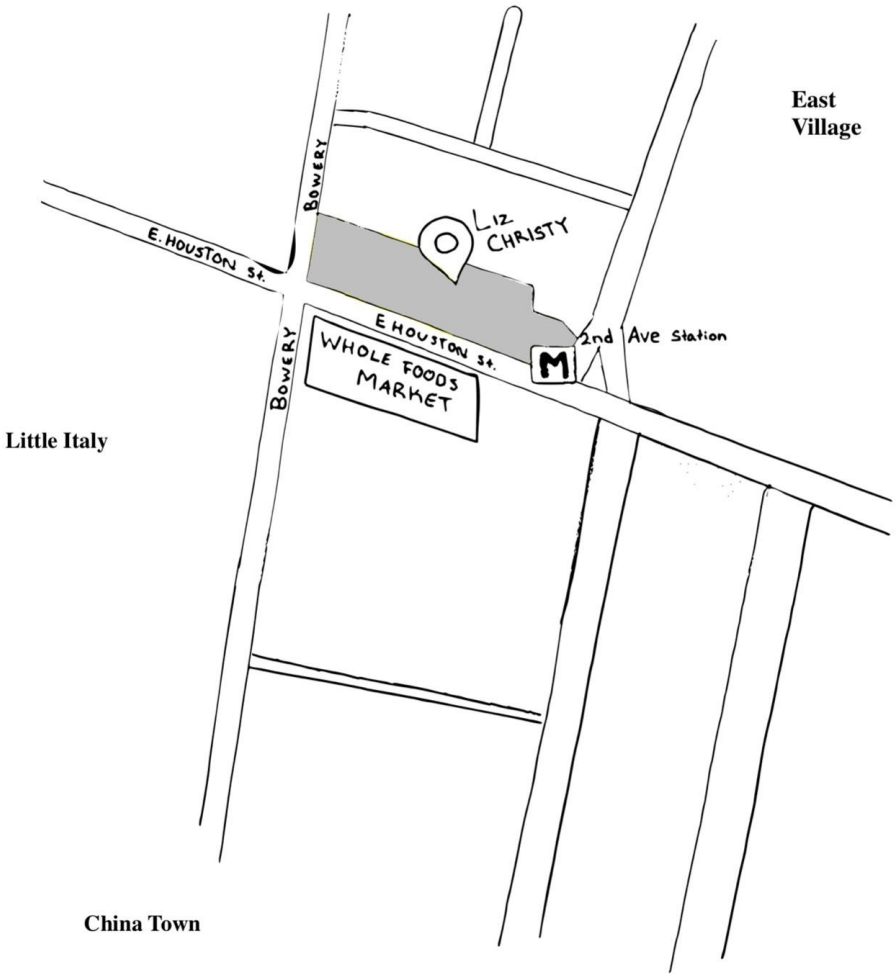

Figure 4. Street Map of Liz Christy Garden and surrounding area, 2021. The garden sits above the 2nd avenue subway station, at the intersection of Bowery and Houston, meaning that there is heavy foot traffic in this area.Visual created by Author.

Don spoke of how, in many ways, the intention behind creating the space has always been to create a moment of calm in the buzzing city. But also, a lot has changed since 1973. In the beginning, the garden was a response to dilapidation and degradation - a place for people to grow their own food and through doing so reconnect with a sense of control over what felt like urban chaos. The garden has not moved, but the city around it has been in constant motion. What was then the center of a struggling area of the city with many immigrant populations mixing and colliding has now become a trendy consumer hotspot.

My intention in highlighting the historical moment at the origin of the Liz Christy Garden in this chapter is to make visible the ways in which the project of creating this garden was a direct response to what these empty lots, dilapidated buildings, heaps of discarded trash, and general lack of care for a built environment (i.e. the progression of the Lower East Side becoming a 'waste space') represented. What residents were concerned with was not only the structural integrity or hygeneity of their neighborhood (although this was no doubt a concern), but what waste represented in a cultural and symbolic context. Having empty lots filled with waste, no street maintenance, and no "clean" public space was a symbolic indicator of status. The presence of waste was so unsightly and undesirable in part because it acts as proof of the absence of care and attention. Ways that we conceptualize waste go far beyond physical properties. Let me again invoke Mary Douglas's[28] notions of dirt as "matter out of place" in the context of NYC urban gardens. This helps us understand how ideas of waste permeate social world-makings; waste becomes (or has already been) an entity imbued with socially contextual ideas. Waste represents itself in a semiotic urban landscape. Chloe Ahmann discusses how "waste evokes

[28] Douglas, "Purity and Danger."

decline in many ways,"[29] and employs Karl Marx's[30] theory of waste as "ominous excess" to explain why it is that urban decay and waste produce such social anxiety. If a space has been left to waste, it signifies most simply that something is fundamentally *wrong*. More than this, I would argue that it is symbolic of a lack of care for city space on a systematic scale (e.g. for the environment, for the people living in it).

With this in mind, one can easily understand the urban gardening movement as a form of symbolic resistance against waste and all its intertwined associations. What is a more direct opposing action to decay than using those spaces marked as spaces of waste to create new growth through gardening? The gardens reorder space that has already been tucked away into a category of forgotteness in a way that makes it difficult to ignore. By remaking waste spaces as spaces for "fresh," "clean" growth, urban gardens fluster our understanding of ordered space through what they represent. I had a moment of realizing how powerful this symbolism was when I asked Don what he and the other gardeners did about animals and "pests" that got into the garden. "What do you do to maintain the garden and keep it looking so beautiful," I asked. Don's eyes widened and his mouth formed a grin as he exclaimed, "Nothing!" I assume he could tell I looked puzzled because he elaborated, "we just let the animals be. If they want to come, they'll come. This place works like its own little ecosystem, we don't do a thing!"

Now, I must point out that moments after having said this, Don introduced me to a woman in overalls who was vigorously working on weeding one of the flower beds. I was amazed that the fact that someone was literally manicuring the garden a few feet away from us did not deter Don from perpetuating the narrative of the garden as a wholly natural and

[29] Chloe Ahmann "Waste to Energy" Page 331
[30] 1978

self-sustaining place. It seemed that this insistence on a narrative of wilderness was connected to a need to understand the garden space as something other-than urban space. Perhaps what is at skate here is the idea of the "sublime frontier," which I discuss using Cronon's[31] ideas of wilderness as a symbol imbued with cultural meaning. It did not matter that, in fact, they did quite a bit to keep up with the maintenance of the garden. Understanding the Liz Christy Garden as a space of total wilderness, unscathed by the human touch, is essential in creating a subliminal space. It was clear that what the garden symbolized, how the garden acted as a space of wild, free, organic, fresh growth was more important. Although, as Don says, "things have changed a lot since then [the 1970s]," this core symbolism of the garden that was planted with the seeds originally sewn in the soil at the corner of Bowery and Houston has remained present.

Gardening as Resistance:
The Green Guerrillas' Urban Revolution

The lot that is now the Liz Christy Garden wasn't always such a serene getaway from the hum of city life. In fact, it was once an abandoned space that contributed to a sense of general decrepit degradation that was taking place all over the city. Liz, a college student in the 1970s living in the Lower-East side was walking on Houston street past an abandoned lot that, at the time, was used as a waste dump for the neighborhood. The lot, gated but still accessible, was "full of trash and old tires and TV's and stuff," said Don, who has been a friend of Liz's since the beginning. As Liz walked past she noticed a child playing in an overturned refrigerator, pretending it was a ship. She asked the mother of the child in the refrigerator why she and the

[31] Cronon, The Trouble with Wilderness in Uncommon Ground.

other neighborhood parents didn't clean up the lot to create a better space for their children to play. The mother had responded, according to Don, by saying that she worked several jobs and didn't have time for projects like that, "you're young and in college… why don't you and your friends do it instead?" In a conversation I had with Don about the creation of the garden, he told me that it was at this moment that Liz decided to turn that lot into a green space. Thus this space that had once been a contributing factor to an air of deterioration of the early 70s in New York started its journey to becoming what Don relays as a radiating source of hope not only for the community near Houston and Bowery street but for all of New York City.

At the same moment that Liz Christy was building what was then called the Bowery-Houston Farm and Garden, she (along with her unnamed group of like-minded friends, including Don) was creating an organization that now more clearly articulates the connection between resistance and urban gardening. Liz and her friends dubbed their group the "Green Guerrillas," a name that states front and center the intention of defining and using the direct link between the use of natural space and unconventional tactics of resistance. The group was focused on a kind of radical action that was carried out by throwing seed bombs - balloons filled with water, soil, and seeds- over the fences of blocked-off abandoned lots or planting flowers in any empty dirt they could find. Today, the organization has expanded into a non-profit that is committed to being an "advocate for food and environmental justice, and hub for youth leadership development".[32] They have funding to support community garden projects around the city, and although they have "grown and changed along with the movement," the core identity of community-social-activist-gardeners is vehemently maintained.

[32] "About 1," Green Guerillas, accessed April 20, 2022, https://www.greenguerillas.org/history.

What I want to discuss is not the work that this organization is doing particularly, but the ideological basis of that work and why and how it is so powerful. In doing this my hope is that it will become clear to my reader the significance of the pairing between urban gardening and resistance, and why this pairing emerged in the first place. There is undeniably an overt connection being made between the act of gardening and the act of resistance, one that resonates with millions of New Yorkers. On their website, an early member of the Green Guerrilla group is quoted saying “It was a form of civil disobedience. We were basically saying to the government, if you won’t do it, we will".[33] It is not lost on the members of this movement that their presence, their work as gardeners is symbolic as well as logistical. While a goal of urban gardening has always been to produce enough food to feed a neighborhood, I want to highlight that within its internal dialogue it has also always been an explicit symbolic act that *carries a social purpose beyond survival.* Members of the Green Guerrillas have articulated since their genesis that their actions are not only symbolic but are explicitly intended to produce social change through resistance by way of urban gardening. Urban gardening and the greening of city space can symbolize many things, and can be an act of resistance in many ways. For the Green Guerrillas, resisting the abandonment and dilapidation of the physical landscape was enacted by people coming together and putting in shared work to change those spaces into aesthetic, calm, peaceful oasis.

It is important to address and deconstruct the name of the organization itself. The combination and juxtaposition of the two words - “green" and “guerrilla” - is by no means an unintentional coincidence. The oxford dictionary defines the word “guerrilla” as a descriptor of someone who is “a member of a small independent group taking part in irregular fighting,

[33] “About 1,” Green Guerillas, accessed April 20, 2022, https://www.greenguerillas.org/history.

typically against larger regular forces," or, "[a word] referring to actions or activities performed in an impromptu way, often without authorization." The word is also commonly known and associated with the phrase "guerrilla warfare," a tactic of irregular warfare that often involves ambush attacks, sabotages or raids. With this etymology in mind it is easy to see how naming one's organization with such a word is intended to evoke very specific connections and associations. To associate an organization with tactics of warfare, more specifically tactics of unusual and often unauthorized actions, is to explicitly name that organization as a resistant entity. To understand *what* they are resistant to, we must bring into play the first half of the name. To call themselves the Green Guerrillas is to identify in what sense this group will be "guerrillas." This name evokes an image of a group of young people using their ability to act freely to reorder dilapidated city space by putting plants in place of waste.

In this way, "nature" as a category is employed with new meaning; as previously mentioned, the conjunction of gardens and urban space becomes emblematic of some space/action bigger than (or different from) their categorization as useful places. Green spaces - or the greening of spaces- become a form of activism. In most cases, this activism does not look like rapid action, but rather "everyday activism," a term that I borrow from Monica White.[34] Although it does not follow suit with the immediate, loud action that occurs in the form of protests, campaigns, or marches in the streets, the work that the Green Guerillas partake in is no less productive as a form of resistance. Monica White suggests that practices of gardening are in fact even less legible as acts of resistance because they are at once disruptive *and* productive.[35]

[34]MONICA M. WHITE, "INTRODUCTION: Black Farmers, Agriculture, and Resistance," in Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement (University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 3–27, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469643717_white.
[35]WHITE, "Freedom Farmers," 6.

Moreover, they are perhaps disruptive *by the very nature of their productivity.* If we recall the notion of waste spaces and their implications as symbols of the systematic absence of care that represent an imposed devaluing of the people who live amongst waste, the productivity of an organized group creating space for natural production *amongst and in place of waste* is a direct disruption to a larger urban narrative, this becomes even clearer in later chapters discussing urban gardening in predominantly Black communities.

The Green Guerrillas' website states their belief in the " power of community gardening as a radical act." This is another moment in which the organization clearly marks the link they are making between green spaces and resistance. The throwing of seed bombs into abandoned lots does the work of amalgamating greening and resistance to produce a symbolic action. Physically replacing waste spaces with new botanical life acts as a sort of performance of action. This action does not necessitate the presence of human actors beyond the actual throwing of the seed bombs. Once the initial human-plant relationship is enacted, these activists let "natural" growth do the work for them, and in doing so give the seeds autonomy as political and cultural agents.

Just as seeds become political by their existence in an urban landscape, it is also impossible for those who garden in New York City *not* to be part of this movement of resistance - or at least not to be read as such. In fact, from my analysis thus far it seems necessary to give garden spaces themselves the title of "actors" on their own. Even if an agenda, set of principles, or political overtones are not intentionally superimposed onto a green space, that space is still imbued with symbolism as it interjects into cultural ideas of disorder by its very physical existence. The examples that I have provided in this chapter represent intentional place making

practices that purposefully claim the resistant nature of green spaces in their missions. However, it can be extrapolated that any green space (i.e. urban gardens, parks, etc) is only legible in the context of how its presence disrupts "normal" city landscapes. In other words, I pose the question of whether organizations like the Green Guerrillas and gardens like Liz Christy are imposing ideas of resistance onto green space, or if they are simply extrapolating and enunciating the inherently disruptive and resistant nature of these spaces.

Open Community

As Don reminisced about the past, I got the sense that the 'community' he talked about looked very different in the 1970s than it does today. The definition of community here is quite broad, encompassing pretty much anybody that steps foot in the garden. But in the 1970s it was a bit more specific. The garden was created for residents living in the area - being a resident of a dilapidated lower east side was part of the identity encompassed by the Liz Christy Garden community. Since then, the definition of community has ballooned outward and now seems to be multilayered. There are the "gardeners" - a group of 20 locals who are responsible for the upkeep of the space, and there are the people who visit the garden with no real intention to contribute any actual work. If someone is interested in moving from this outer sphere of community members who hold a place of "guest," into the inner community of people responsible for the garden, they must commit to 20 hours total of volunteer work in the garden, after which point they are given a small plot of land and a key to the gate. Still, there are no limitations to those who could participate in the garden, but in the 1970s it was much more clearly a space of social commons for residents of the area to come together in a time of hardship. Here the word

"commons' ' means literally a shared space utilized by many for different reasons. At its origins, a commons was a space of land at the center of a village which residents could use to suit their needs. If they needed space to grow enough food to feed their family, they could use the commons. They could also gather here and trade goods etc. Now, stemming from its original meaning, the word commons connotes a sense of *social* sharing. I want to employ both meanings here to represent the praxis of urban gardening.

That conceptualization of the garden as a space for people to come together in times of need lasted through crises such as 9/11, says Don. The night after the attack on the World Trade Center, the gates to the Liz Christy Garden stayed open all night and many residents from surrounding neighborhoods came simply to share in the feelings of grief and shock. In this instance, the garden space became the host for people to come together in a way they could not have done on just any given street corner. Many scholars have noted the connection between spaces of nature and a human feeling of comfort within them, as I discussed in the introduction. Drawing on Cronon, Turner, and several others, Bruce Braun[36] unpacks the multilayered understandings of nature that turn natural spaces into "purification machines." Braun discusses the "great divide" between culture and wilderness as a trope imbued with deep cultural and historical meaning. Much like Cronon suggests, Braun makes the argument that through the idealization of wild nature as man's frontier, we have positioned nature as a bounded space into which we must cross and find what we have been missing. Braun[37] makes the suggestion that "this boundary crossing was simultaneously a spatial and ideological move *away* from unnatural humanity (culture) and *to* humanity's true home (nature)." The Liz Christy Garden is identifiably

[36] Bruce Braun, "On the Raggedy Edge of Risk," in Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference, ed. Donald S. Moore, Jake Kosek, and Anand Pandian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 175–203.
[37]Braun, "On the Raggedy Edge of Risk" 194.

a bordered space within which certain kinds of social interactions are allowed to take place. Similarly, the garden was created with the necessity for these kinds of interactions in mind. Only through the practice of gardening, through the shared green space that the garden created, could community members have experiences that allowed them to heal from trauma, enact resistance, or connect to their own senses of identity and community.

These ideas of a binary between domestic and wild/natural life carry with them their own complex subtexts of racism, classism, and sexism. Don's ability to understand his garden as a space of wilderness, a space for emotional healing, is directly tied to his positionality within a Western historical narrative of the romanticization of nature. Just as Don portrays the garden as a space of total wilderness despite the upkeep that actually goes on, the Liz Christy Garden and others around the city are able to sustain reputations of being a refuge from urban life by relying on these historically romanticized narratives.[38] This is not to say that the garden is not useful as a place of refuge; evidently, the space brings peace and happiness to many who visit it. However it is worth keeping in the forefront of our mind throughout this discussion that the varying ideas of nature presented in this project are *all* deeply rooted in cultural histories. The ideas that create the foundation for the Liz Christy Garden, although no-doubt socially and communally productive, are at some points the result of romanticized and problematic narratives. In the Liz Christy Garden, a space run by predominantly White gardeners, the insistence on conceptualizing the garden as a cultivated wilderness echos Cronon[39] and Braun's[40] suggestion of the "purification" of humanity through nature. The community that is the Liz Christy Garden is indeed a rich and fruitful one, yet it creates community within a certain historically contextual

[38] Braun, "On the Raggedy Edge of Risk."
[39] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness."
[40] Braun, "On the Raggedy Edge of Risk."

framework. We will see in later discussions how communities in different demographics complicate and manipulate these ideas.

There are many ways to form community without gardens, but what I aim to show you here is how and why gardens can create a rich space for human connection through plant life. What makes urban gardens such a rich place for cultivating community and cultural identity is that the act of growing and eating food is and has been a cultural act rather than a scientific one.[41] Gardening is a joint practice that involves communicating and connecting with others who live around you, sharing tasks to serve a common goal, and finding ways to help others and yourself through shared work. Through *work* - a kind of work defined by tradition, nostalgia, and pleasure- people are able to participate in a process rooted in "idyllic" ways of being that have been proven throughout history to be the bed from which deeply bonded communities sprout.

By 'nostalgia' I mean a sense of desire for a past in which reality was not fragmented by urban life, where farmers worked to produce food to feed their family, their friends, their neighborhoods. This idea of nostalgia is consistent with Monica White's discussion of a Commons of Praxis.[42] There is a strong yearning for a sense of community built through shared responsibility, a yearning for the existence of a 'commons' in the literal sense. This is, perhaps, why community gardens in urban spaces have become so popular; they offer a symbolic version of a historic commons. Here people can gather with a shared intention, work side by side to create something, and satisfy this nostalgic desire to connect with a community through need based work.

[41] Cindy Ott, "Making Sense of Urban Gardens," Gastronomica 15, no. 3 (August 1, 2015): 18–27, https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2015.15.3.18.
[42] White, Freedom Farmers, 8

All of this unearths the assumption that *community must be cultivated.* It does not simply exist on its own, but rather must be made in some way. It is impossible to tell a history of civilization without centering agriculture as a key defining characteristic of a domestic community. Farming is synonymous with the genesis of "culture" in that this practice allowed for the communing of large groups of people around a shared goal - survival. Of course, this is no longer the case. The majority of the present-moment world does not still rely on local farms to get enough food for ourselves and our families- unless we consciously choose to live that lifestyle. Likewise, it is not necessary for most of us to spend our time sewing seeds and harvesting vegetables for members of our community to eat. It is now done for us so that we have time to work our corporate jobs, participate in the economy, get an education, become an artist, etc. Although farming may no longer be positioned at the center of society, what it symbolizes is still crucial to the cultivation of community and, if I may go so far, culture itself. Without gardens, without space for people to gather and partake in shared work whether symbolic or not, we are not able to create an understanding of what we share and how we define ourselves in relation to our neighbors.

My fieldwork at the Liz Christy Garden (and others discussed in chapter 2) confirmed Ott's assertion that urban gardening is a practice that calls on an "agrarian myth" that centers cultural associations and meaning-making rather than pragmatic food-making practices.[43] Members of the community at the Liz Christy Garden definitely do not need to be involved in this community in order to produce the food that they need to live, yet for many New Yorkers, this garden (and hundreds of others around the city) serves as a space within which community is continually made through connection with natural land. When I asked my interlocutors *why* they

[43] Ott, "Making Sense of Urban Gardens."

felt that community gardens are an important part of the city, no one answered that their sole purpose is to address issues of food insecurity. Rather, each answer was infused and entangled with a poignant sense that the garden itself created new meaning for the community- or created a new community altogether. When I asked what has made the urban garden movement stick for so long, Don repeatedly highlighted how the garden makes people *feel,* how it is "a place people can come to relax, to unwind, to find peace."

The way that the members of the Liz Christy Garden *define community* is specific and unique while maintaining relationality to the urban gardening movement as a whole. Part of the making of place that defines the garden is how Don and his fellow gardeners choose to define what constitutes *community* within and without the borders of the garden. As I discuss further in chapter 2, each of the more than 500 gardens across the five boroughs of the city creates different definitions of community for varying reasons. Throughout my interviews and conversations with Don and others at the Liz Christy Garden, the repeated use of the word "we" in an indeterminate sense intrigued me. In some instances, "we" referred specifically to the 20 members of the garden that keep things going smoothly. But other times, "we" encompassed a much larger and undefined group. "We" seemed to mean anyone who crossed the threshold from the street into the green space. There were several instances in our conversations when Don repeated anecdotal stories about the garden, and while I suspected that this was due to 60 years of telling and retelling them, I did not want to stop him from repeating himself. Not only was I wary of embarrassing him, but the fact that he clearly had certain stories memorized word for word showed me which parts of the garden he valued most. One of these anecdotes was about barbeques that were held in the garden before the pandemic: "We have a lot of those [barbeques in the garden] over the summer. Where else can you go and get a grill going and invite your

friends and have hot dogs and hamburgers in the middle of manhattan… Or the middle of lower manhattan? They [garden members] invite friends, their neighbors. We have events where we just start cooking and anybody that wants to come in, you know, 'Here's a hot dog for you!'" Don feels a sense of parental fondness for the garden, and his enthusiasm for visitors to experience the space mimics that of a proud father. For him, the garden is something to witness, something to *live* in - whether it be for 30 minutes or 30 years.

This kind of 'anyone off the street' mentality is a defining characteristic of the Liz Christy community. It is certainly not a universal attitude amongst all the city's gardens (for reasons that I will explore later on), but it speaks to the context that allows Don to think of community in this way. Perhaps part of this openness is due to the experiences of the people who run the garden. I think that the fact that most of the members of the garden are White is not insignificant in this discussion. I noticed a distinct difference in the broadness and openness of the "community" defined by gardens with predominantly White members and visitors versus those with predominantly Black ones. I will not pretend to fully understand the intricacies of this difference, as I feel it is distinctly not my place as a White woman to speak definitively on this dynamic. But I will speak on what I observed, which is that something about the Liz Christy Garden allows for a version of community that fosters an open-ended definition of who is a part of that community. Perhaps this has come to be a marked aspect of the Liz Christy Garden because of its physical location and the residential population around it throughout the last 50 years.

As shown back in figure four, the garden is situated between China Town, Little Italy, and the East Village. This is something that Don made sure to note when telling me about the garden. He describes the area in the 1970s as a "melting pot," emphasizing the diversity of cultures present in the surrounding areas. This meant that people of many different cultural practices were

coming together at this junction between Bowery and Houston in an interesting way. This manifested itself inside the garden as well. At the genesis of the garden, Don tells me, there were "sections" of the garden that people used to grow food from their own cultures: "There was a Chinese section, an Italian section, and people would share things and help each other." The garden space itself mimicked the "melting pot" of immigrant-built New York, and not only reproduced the cultural dynamics going on outside the garden, but allowed these people to find a shared ground upon which to interact. Not only would these people reproduce their culture by way of growing seeds from their homes, but they would also then extend that culture to others in the form of grown food. What I heard in what Don was telling me was that the garden became a space for immigrants to symbolically recreate a sense of 'home' through gardening in New York that not only helped to maintain a sense of individual cultural identity, but also helped foster cross-cultural conversations and connections.

Transplanted Nativeness:
Community Gardens as Proxy for Practicing Culture

To close this chapter I will delve deeper into the intricacies of the dynamics presented by immigrant populations who used the Liz Christy Garden to grow food from their native homes in the early years of the garden. I am interested in how these dynamics play out in urban garden spaces, and the implications this has for practices of culture and collective identity. The "cross-cultural" aspect of the community was another theme that Don highlighted throughout our discussions. He repeated the metaphor of the "melting pot" to describe the interactions between different immigrant communities within the garden space: "The Italian gardeners would help the

Chinese gardeners, who would help the Russian gardeners," and in doing so, a sort of commons is created within which cross-cultural harmony can be developed. By using the term "melting pot," Don is drawing a connection between the cultural dynamics of what is going on inside the garden to the broader dynamics of urban life outside the garden.

"Melting pot" is a term that was used throughout the early and mid-1900s to describe New York City (and the United States, broadly) as a place where people from many varying cultural backgrounds *come together into a "cohesive whole."*[44] It is notable that Don used this descriptor, with all of its historical context, and its overtones of assimilation. I had first gotten the sense that the diversity of the community was valued in such a way that the garden attempted to preserve those individual identities and hold space for them. I then realized that something slightly different was going on: Don's depiction of the garden as a melting pot makes sense in that he is understanding the garden as a place for people from diverse backgrounds to *become something else*, together.[45] This also makes sense when we consider my previous discussion of the garden as an "open community." Anyone who enters the garden, who participates in the garden, is no longer only defined by their identity outside of the garden space, but suddenly becomes part of a whole being that is itself made up of the amalgamation of every other member, and perhaps is equal to more than the sum of its parts. Once again, the garden becomes its own entity - with the ability to alter one's identity within it. A person's identity is not forgotten, but is melted down along with other garden members' to create a sense of oneness across many bounded identities. Once again, these are ideas that underlay Don's understanding of community

[44] "Definition of MELTING POT."

[45] This is especially interesting when juxtaposed with what I observe in the Abib Newborn Garden in Brownsville, which I will discuss in the next chapter. Using land to practice one's own identity while also sharing knowledge about crops and plants is a key aspect of the Abib Newborn Garden's practices.

in nature, and are in many ways founded on a deep romanticization of ideas of nature and Whiteness. These constructed histories help the Liz Christy garden to create a space within which this kind of melding of "all sorts of people" can take place.

The neighborhoods surrounding the garden look very different than they did in 1973, and therefore so do the people who walk through the garden. In this sense, the "melting pot" framework no longer refers to people coming together from different immigrant communities, but is still present in a more broad sense. Everyone in the garden, members and visitors, become part of something else no matter where they are from or why they are there. Their identity is not only changed by the garden but also changes it.

This, I think, is what Don was trying to say to me when he talked about the interactions between the Italian, Chinese, or Russian gardeners; In the 1970s, these people of different cultural backgrounds came to the garden as a safe space in which they could maintain their identity as distinctly Italian, Russian, Chinese, but also to create a new identity as more-than-American. What is interesting in Don's highlighting of this is that it assumes that these immigrant New York residents were using the garden *to practice culture* and therefore were able to share culture with others through gardening. This also assumes that something about the garden allows it to act as a sort of blank space that can be made to represent a culture or tradition. I want to spend some time unpacking why the garden was and is a space where foreigners can come to practice their cultures through the growing of food. Food is one of the simplest and most important ways to mark something as cultural - what we grow and what we eat comes from long and complex histories and traditions. It is also a direct way in which culture becomes part of our bodies. The food we eat makes us in more ways than one. What we put into our bodies changes how we feel and act physically, and by so doing, shapes culture. Foods - specifically, foods that

are grown through agricultural practices - become marked as cultural signifiers in this way. Beyond this, the Liz Christy Garden has extrapolated this identity-through-food process to also include identity through *anything* planted there.

I saw clear examples of how growing food and other flora are used as a marked practice of "planting identity" throughout the gardens I observed during my fieldwork. At the beginning of this chapter, I describe my first in-person meeting with Don by situating him and myself sitting across from an old tree that Don had planted in 1974. When Don mentioned this tree to me, he did so with a proud, nostalgic tone and a grin on his face that seemed to say, "look there, that tree *is* me." That one tree at the center of the garden is a marker of Don's place, of his longevity as a garden member, of his dedication to it, of the fact that he was, indeed, in that very place 50 years ago.

Similarly, when I asked Don if he thought being temporally tied to land is important to people, he quickly answered "Oh absolutely! People will come here and just say, can I plant some seeds? I won't be back again ever because I'm from, like, Detroit or wherever. But I love the idea of planting something here." In this scenario, the act of planting a seed in the Liz Christy Garden clearly marks the relationship between who we are and what we plant. The tourist, here, is using a seed to *plant a part of themselves* in the garden. They "love the idea" of their seed growing there, staying there forever, because it *represents them* and is a constant acknowledgement of the fact that they were there, that they exist, that they have a specified identity that lives on through their seeds. The tree (for Don), the seed (for the tourist), and the garden at large, is doing the work of resisting the erasure of one's identity. In this way, we can understand why immigrants found it helpful to use gardening as a way of both maintaining their own culture and becoming part of a new one.

This is a phenomenon that Monica White discusses at length - specifically in regards to enslaved Africans in America. While her main argument deals with the ways in which agricultural practices are an integral part of specifically Black resistance and liberation from slavery,[46] I think her ideas are also applicable to my analysis of garden spaces as tools for resisting cultural erasure. "Food provisioning can be liberatory,"[47] especially when that food allows the grower to connect to their home land and feel as if they have brought a bit of home with them. White describes this practice of production as a way for people to "practice the cultural and ceremonial uses of land they had brought with them, as a way to celebrate their ancestors and their homeland they left behind."[48] I want to further elaborate on this point and suggest that perhaps, for immigrants living in the Lower East side in the 1970s, for Don and other members of the Liz Christy Garden community, and for tourists who want to leave parts of themselves behind as seeds, using gardening to practice cultural identity is at once maintaining the identity of their homeland while also creating a new identity of performing "home" in an altogether foreign setting.[49]

Although this chapter has covered many discussions stemming from my field work at the Liz Christy Garden, my intention has been to draw connections between each idea. To close, I will suggest that the use of community gardens as sites for practicing culture and resisting erasure is directly linked to the way in which community gardens scramble ideas of urban order and disorder. Within the borders of the Liz Christy Garden, the ideas and distinctions that govern how we identify and perform ourselves outside of the garden are intentionally reordered. A waste

[46] For more on this see chapter 2
[47] WHITE, "Freedom Farmers," 13.
[48] WHITE, "Freedom Farmers," 14.
[49] An extension of this argument is that this performance of "home" is directly related to the resistance to enslavement, and is itself at the core of how people enact liberation and freedom. More on this shortly.

space can be made into a space marked by growth, freshness, beauty, and hope. A person can find space not only to express and practice their own identity but also to share it with others. A space is created that breaks the monotony of asphalt and concrete that defines the urban environment. This wrinkle in the urban fabric creates space for culture and community to be cultivated in a way that resists the erasure of identity, the decay of the built environment. The garden is not only the antithesis to urban life, but also becomes a key part of maintaining community identities amongst urban chaos.

* * *

As I sat on a bench in an alcove at the edge of the garden - on my own after one of my conversations with Don - I was surprised to notice my lack of attention to what was going on just two feet away from me on the sidewalk through the fence. I looked past the viney walls and tried to shift my attention to the "outside." It felt like moving into a completely different space, although I had not physically moved at all. The garden truly is its own world, enclosed by greenery all around, that feels impenetrable and powerful. To say it all quite simply, and in Don's own words, "when horrible things are going on outside, people come to the garden. In here, it's calm and peaceful." Yet within this calm and peace is an immensely complex myriad of phenomena.

Chapter 2 | Abib Newborn Garden

Islands of Trouble

I learned from Donna Haraway[50] that the word trouble is useful in understanding the work that urban gardens do in a city landscape. Using "trouble" to signify a "stirring up," a mixing, a confusion, Haraway says, "our task is to *make trouble,* to stir up potent responses to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places."[51] This is what I find community gardens to be in the business of enacting. Gardens in New York are, in many ways, reactions and responses; they are active sites that elicit emotional responses to societal events rather than stagnant spaces of existence. Community gardens are places of contradictions; they are spaces that complicate the world around them while also calming the people inside of them. The gardens that speckle the city across all five boroughs act as spaces of confusion amongst a concrete landscape. This confusion resides in the ways that community gardens insert themselves into the preordered puzzle of the urban landscape. They are home to numerous - often conflicting - phenomena. The existence of these spaces, their relationship to the urban environment, and what happens inside create complex relationships between people, space, and plants which

[50] Haraway writes about trouble in her 2016 book, "Staying with the Trouble." I find her analysis particularly useful for understanding the functions of community gardens in a theoretical sense. While Haraway does not particularly speak of community gardens, she speaks of a multispecies sociality (that echoes other works of hers) that I view as directly applicable to the work I do in this ethnography.
[51] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1 (emphasis added)

scrambles our understanding of order and disorder. This chapter will explain how gardens are at once settling and stirring, at once unnoticeably quiet and insistently resounding.

In this chapter, I now focus on relationships that take place within the space of the garden. I will show how urban gardens complicate social order and enact crucial ways of making community through a process of "becoming *with*," an idea that I adopt and absorb from Haraway and Harlan Weaver.[52] Weaver builds on Haraway by suggesting that assemblages between human and non-human beings allow both to become something new in relation to each other - to *become in kind.* I suggest here that gardens are assemblages of value that depend on both human and more-than-human relationships. Gardens are identifiable as such only through the ways in which relationships are built through multispecies interactions. Humans and plants create relationships within gardens that define each other and create (recreate) ways of understanding in a broader social context. This happens through the rearranging and remaking of meaning that are constantly enacted through garden spaces.

As explored in the previous chapter, urban gardens complicate, reorder, and disorder ways of understanding social relationships. Having examined the relationship that garden spaces have to the environment around them, I want to turn inward. What follows is an analysis of community gardens that digs through the soil of the gardens themselves. In order to do this, though, I first need to make clear the way in which I am proposing community gardens can be viewed in an urban context. These varying spaces which hold so much in their soil are *islands of trouble* that take an active role in interacting with the urban sea that surrounds them.

To help my reader better understand why I propose this understanding of community gardens, it is necessary to take a brief moment to understand gardens in New York City

[52] Weaver, "Becoming in Kind."

throughout time as well as space. This interlude from a theoretical discussion is intended to highlight how and why gardens came to be what they are, and to highlight an interesting thread that connects gardens through their many iterations over time. Historically, gardens have taken shape across New York always in the form of a response. We can see this in the historically situated existence of the Liz Christy Garden discussed in chapter 1, which is generally understood as one of the first community gardens in the city. As previously discussed, this garden (followed by hundreds more in the following decades) was born out of a movement of resistance to government-created issues. A resistance to "government," specifically in response to the economic crisis of the time, was what fueled a movement that would overtake the city within a matter of years.[53] However, the concept of community gardens that we have now differs greatly from the first uses of the term. Origins of community gardening in urban areas across America reach back to the early 20th century, taking many different forms that only slightly echo what we know to be urban gardening today. Much of the gardening initiatives that took place before the 1970s were government implemented; during both World War l and ll "Liberty Gardens" produced massive amounts of agricultural products that aided the country's economic struggles. Likewise, urban gardens have been deployed many times during periods of economic and moral crises.[54] Thinking of gardens as something to be deployed by the government in response to national crises such as war and economic depression positions gardens as *tools*. This has similarities and differences to how we use urban gardens today. The contrast I want to highlight

[53] This argument can be found in greater detail in the preceding chapter.

[54] Von Hassell (2002) writes about the history of community gardens in depth, and I use key bits of information here to illustrate a brief and broad history of urban gardening. However, I will not go into detail. In this project, I use 1973 as the "beginning" of community gardening because it was at this point that community gardens took on a new meaning. I include only a small amount of history before this time in order to focus on community gardens as they are experienced now, rather than give a new summarized history of community gardens. For more information on the history of community gardens before 1973 and up to the current day, see chapter 1 of von Hassell's ethnography.

is that in the early 20th century, gardens were projects implemented by the government in response to crises, and were therefore presumably viewed as a top-down response. Meanwhile, my analysis of the Liz Christy Garden in chapter one clearly illustrates that the current greening of New York is enacted under the premise of a movement created by "everyday people" that positions itself in opposition to governmental oppression.

I provide this historical context as a useful framework for understanding that the metaphorical shape of gardens has changed drastically over time. By this, I mean that community gardens from the 1970s onward encapsulate new symbolic meanings different from those of the early 20th century. Gardens fill conceptual shapes in the mind of the public based on who and what is working inside them. While they have in many ways consistently existed as a direct response to events in urban society, who enacts these responses has changed hands. Although gardens today share commonalities with gardens of the past, *why and who* of community gardens differs. This changes the way that community gardens are seen and therefore function in broader society.

Gardens themselves can be considered as action, a statement, a conversation with the happenings of the city. At the same moment, they are in juxtaposition with the city and its individualized urban chaos. This essence of trouble has been alive in different iterations throughout history, even before the 1970s. But what I am interested in here is the specific ways in which community gardens today are enacted as spaces made and used by *people* (rather than the abstraction of a government). Although many are still funded by a government organization[55]

[55] Many gardens - especially in low income areas of the city- rely on funding from the GreenThumb portion of the NYC Parks Department. While this can still be seen as a government organization, GreenThumb was created a few years after the founding of the Liz Christy Garden with Liz as one of the founding members. This positions this particular government organization as fundamentally with the urban garden movement of the 1970s, and as something very different from the kinds of government led projects that implemented Liberty gardens and the like.

these gardens work on a community-based scale that can be viewed as a bottom-up system. To garden, or to exist in the space of a garden in the city, is to disrupt a hyper-individualized, commercialized way of life. The movement of the 1970s was predicated upon opposition to capitalist powers, rather than being reinforced by them. The position of community gardens as distinct spaces of personhood rather than government is what is important here.

The movement of the 1970s, discussed in chapter 1, which founded notions of urban greening as we understand them today, is rooted in the symbolic juxtaposition of the individual and the community, urban and rural. Simon Evans suggests that with urbanization comes a tension between a 'new' isolating individualism and an 'old' community commons. [56] This trope of urban life is seen to have replaced an 'idyllic' lifestyle of community-based living. This individualism is promoted by competitiveness incentivized by urban capitalism. To 'succeed' in an urban environment one must be concerned primarily with one's own acceleration up an economic ladder, therefore isolating oneself from not only other people but the non-human world around them. In the eyes of many socially and environmentally conscious New Yorkers, this capitalist-motivated individualism is at the heart of not only the deterioration of human connection but the deterioration of the Earth itself.

This is the point at which urban gardening enters the field as a response to a social struggle. Community gardens are, in part, an attempt to replicate that idyllic community centered around shared practices. In my fieldwork, this desire for a space that superseded the "discord and divisions that are perceived to be prevalent in present-day urban living"[57] was palpable. It was an underlying force that pillared the practices of the gardens. What we know as community gardens

[56]Simon Evans, Community and Aging: Maintaining Quality of Life in Housing with Care Settings, 1st ed. (Bristol University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9qgwsj.
[57]Evans, Community and Aging, 7.

today are spaces within which social relationships are continuously negotiated and consciously distinct from a social space on the "outside." One can be standing not a foot away from a space that is constructed by the growth of plants placed by gardeners, and still be "outside" of this community space. Thousands of individuals who walk throughout the city pass community gardens every day without giving it a second glance. Anyone who has walked on the streets of New York knows the drill: keep your pace quick and your head down. This way of walking past blocks with an intention of ignoring what passes you by is part of the individualistic sense that urban living promotes (although for many this individualism is also a safety measure in an often dangerous city). What is interesting is that while walking past a community garden - only a foot or two away from the boundary that defines the space - one is still completely separated from the happenings taking place right beside them. The space directly adjacent to the garden (by this I mean *any* garden in New York), whether that be a sidewalk or a street, is a space in which people conduct their physical bodies and social behavior differently than they would inside the garden boundaries.

I use the term "island" to imagine gardens as spaces with bounded notions of what is and what is not "garden." Clear boundaries separate the inside of a garden from the sidewalks and streets directly outside. In this way, the plants that are grown on a certain plot of land do the work of marking territory[58] incredibly effectively. This territory is both created by/with and perpetuates more-than-human assemblages between plants and people. Besky and Padwe remind us that territory-making practices are *always* contingent on these kinds of relationships between human and non-human actors[59]. The garden is a site that clearly demonstrates how "human and

[58] Sarah Besky and Jonathan Padwe, "Placing Plants in Territory," Environment and Society 7 (2016): 9–28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26204969.
[59] Besky and Padwe, "Placing Plants in Territory."

plant species enact, submit to, and resist spatial ordering" in an urban setting.[60] An anonymous bud sprouting through a crack in the pavement does not do this kind of territorial work because it lacks value gained through human and non-human assemblages. Likewise, a person standing in an overgrown field does not constitute a garden for the same reasons. In this way, plants make territory, and so do people. But neither would do so without the value added to each by becoming *with* the other.[61] These territorial boundaries created through assemblages of meaning produce a specific way of conceptualizing urban gardens. Gardens become pockets of land that are not the same as the material world that flows around them, much like islands in an ocean. Imagining urban gardens as islands of trouble is helpful in understanding the garden as a space that is distinctly different both from the urban landscape that exists outside its fence and from each individual garden across the city.

As a space of constant contradictions, compositions, negotiations, and symbolic actions, gardens are sites of trouble tied to soil. Each plot defined by plant life is separated from the urban landscape while constitutive of a city-wide network of community gardens. Besky and Padwe invoke Latour's argument that territory as a concept is crucial to ideas of community and processes of community-making. In a 2014 general analysis of anthropology and its function within the Anthropocene, Latour makes the suggestion that the importance of territory is making a resurgence - however rather than an idea of territory that is limited to physical landmarks, Latour writes that this idea of territory is more encompassing of "an unbounded network of attachments and connections."[62] Discussing Latour, Besky and Padwe highlight how ideas of territory are changing in a postmodern world. In response to Latour, they suggest that "the

[60] Besky and Padwe, "Placing Plants in Territory," 17.
[61] Ideas from Donna Haraway
[62] Latour 2014;15 as cited in Beskey and Padwe 2016

concept of territory is at the heart of ongoing re-localizations of places in a world no longer organized around a utopian project of modernity."[63] They are upholding Latour's claim that "territory" has adopted a new meaning that is localized in place but not bound to it. They also highlight a shift taking place in response to development in the wake of industrial urban development. Territory - and the making of it - has more to do with the creation of deeply rooted connections through similarities and common goals. Territory is no longer simply a claim to land created through markers, but a more-than-place based notion of space that symbolizes a reclamation of a new "utopian project." Community gardens are doing this complex work of "reclaiming" territory (in many senses of the word) that Beskey and Padwe discuss. These processes take place in gardens through "understanding [territory] as 'network,' which can serve as a critical tool for rethinking life on an ailing planet."[64] This was directly echoed by my interlocutors at a garden in Brownsville, Brooklyn whose focus differs from that of the Liz Christy garden, yet maintains a broader sense of community across garden spaces. What follows will illuminate how and why this is so.

This chapter explains how gardens across New York City - with all their varying shapes, colors, and identity markers - work on a city-wide scale that creates one "territory" of green space. In the making of this network of territory, both individual gardens and their larger presence continue to trouble the urban environment. Each garden can be seen as an island of trouble in the unique ways each one interacts with and complicates different sociocultural phenomena, yet *all* gardens also exist in a greater territory of trouble that challenges urban (individualist) ways of life. This chapter tells a story of the Abib Newborn Garden in Brownsville

[63]Besky and Padwe, "Placing Plants in Territory," 12.
[64]Besky and Padwe, "Placing Plants in Territory," 12.

in order to illustrate ways in which gardens across the city differ while also remaining deeply connected to one another. Through my visits and conversations with garden members I learned that while all gardens are islands of trouble, each makes trouble in different ways. I saw what this theoretical conception of plant-made-territory means in a deeply real sense, and it is my intention to share with you these islands of trouble through my field work. I take time in the section that follows to introduce the Abib Newborn Garden (and my interlocutors who find community there) to my readers as a lens through which to understand the troubling nature of gardens as places of more-than-human assemblages that allow humans to become with other beings. While chapter 1 highlighted community gardens' relationships to the outside world of urbanized landscapes, chapter 2 takes an interest in the relationships between humans and non-humans taking place inside the boundaries of the garden space. The *becoming-with* that I saw happening in the Abib Newborn Garden (and many others) is representative of a greater issue of what it means to exist with one's environment rather than in it. The many ways of making community in gardens can help us understand a world in which we do not simply live on the earth, but with it.

Abib Newborn Garden:

Inter(Intra)- Garden Connections

I sat in the leather passenger seat of David's car, fiddling with my pocket recorder, as we drove across Brooklyn towards Brownsville. It was a hot day in late July, and I was acutely thankful for the cool air blasting out of the vents into the car. After spending a summer traversing the city via subways, buses, and sometimes walking for long periods under the sun to get to

gardens, this felt like a luxury. I had never met David before, we had been put in contact through a mutual acquaintance, and I had called him earlier that morning to set up a future date to meet. But now, that same afternoon, we sat across from each other making polite introductions while I asked questions about the garden we were heading toward. David had offered to show me around the Abib Newborn Community Garden, where he is an active member. This was a garden I had not heard of before, in a part of Brooklyn I had never been to.

As we weaved through residential streets David told me about the garden, which he has been a member of for several years - although he lives in an entirely different part of Brooklyn. I asked David why he had chosen to join a garden so far from where he lived, especially when community gardens were both abundant and well funded in his neighborhood. He explained that he had become familiar with Brownsville when his wife began working on some community outreach programs for children in the area. He told me that he joined the Abib Newborn Garden because of the energy it emitted. He liked the community and he saw potential both for the benefit of his own happiness and the garden. Soon enough, he was a co-signer on the lease for the plot, along with Denelo, another member who I spoke with on my visit to Abib Newborn. David and Denelo now act as an advocate for the garden as well as leaders of the internal community.

I could tell by David's tone that he was deeply proud of his garden, particularly of the effort that he puts into it. It closely echoed the pride that Don expressed when speaking about the Liz Christy Garden. I asked David why he gardens, and he responded, "when I harvest, I'm happy. I put my stuff on Instagram, I'm telling people. I cook with it, I make meals! And then I show people, you know?" This kind of excitement about cultivating produce is something that I saw throughout the gardens I visited. Particularly, this is an excitement that seems to be directed

towards engaging people from the area outside of the garden. This pride is interwoven with external engagement, getting people around you to appreciate what the garden has to offer. This is what many of my interlocutors considered to be the essential purpose of community gardens in the broadest sense: to engage the community, for the benefit of the community. Clearly, sharing what he has produced in his garden, through photographs or meals, is an important part of what motivates David.

In the last chapter, we saw that engagement with a broader audience was important for Don as well. Even more so than the garden being discussed in this chapter, the Liz Christy garden is expressly designed for the public. Engagement with the wider community is what makes the garden the space that it is, it is what gives it meaning. This essence of urban gardening does not change when we move from a historic, well-funded, and well-known garden to a much younger, less developed one. Although the two seem to function almost completely differently. This is an example of the ways in which each garden is its own island, while also being connected to a much wider network of territory.

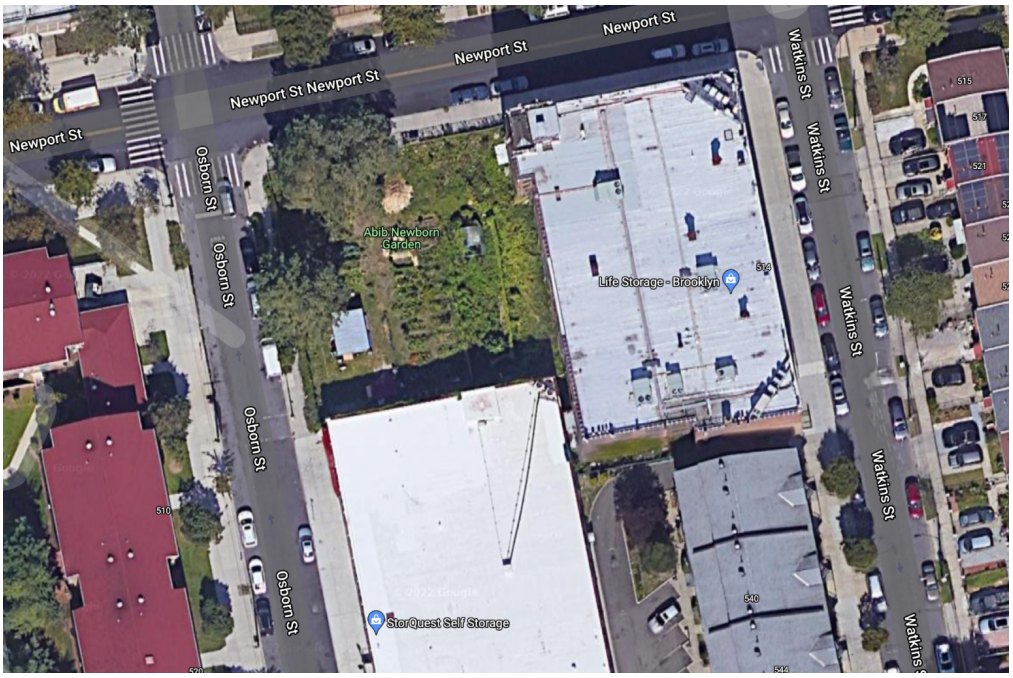

Figure 5. Overhead street view of the Abib Newborn Garden. Image screen grabbed from Google Maps.

Taking up less than a quarter of a block, the Abib Newborn Garden is tucked between two industrial buildings that are used by self-storage companies, with fences running between the garden and the streets. As seen in figure five, cars parked in residential driveways dot the street to the right of the garden. To the left - a mostly empty street. This image accurately represents what I experienced the day I visited; every few minutes a car would go by, sometimes a truck. I can recall only a handful of pedestrians walking past on the streets. It can also be seen in figure five that most of the garden is exposed to the sunlight, with little shade provided by tree canopies. The physical landscape of the Abib Newborn Garden alone differs drastically from the garden engulfed in tall trees and thick vines on the corner of Bowery and Houston. This garden does not experience nearly the same amount of public traffic that the Liz Christy Garden does. Instead of welcoming hundreds of visitors daily, the Abib Newborn Garden is never guaranteed to be open.

When one of the few members is working there, or there is a school program taking place, the gate is open. But sometimes the gate remains locked for days at a time.

The landscape of the two gardens differs greatly as well. As described in chapter 1, the Liz Christy Garden has evolved since the 1970s to be a curated experience for visitors from outside the garden. To achieve the atmosphere they want to create, members of the Liz Christy Garden have built a landscape within the garden that intentionally opposes the urban landscape. The Liz Christy Garden entices passers-through to forget that they are, in fact, steps away from busy sidewalks and bustling streets. On the other side of the vine-covered fences, thousands of people zoom past without any inkling of the Narnia-like world just beside them. The garden is meant to be completely separated from the outside world; once you walk through the gates it is all too easy to forget that you're in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Tree canopies and bushes encase the garden in a way that deliberately obstructs one's view of the street. Visitors to the garden are not supposed to be able to see anything beyond the fences, creating an illusion of a world within a world. When in the garden, you are not supposed to have any connection with the urban landscape apart from knowing that where you are is distinctly different from it. The Liz Christy Garden is organized intentionally to hide in plain sight. The space at once melts into the urban landscape (hundreds of people walk and drive by without a second thought), and is the total antithesis of it (plants and leaves cover almost all sightlines to the street). The garden plays on the dichotomy between urban and rural environments, between calm and chaos, to create a space that exists in opposition to city life.

The Abib Newborn Garden does not have the same thick tree canopies and viney fences that the Liz Christy Garden has cultivated. Not nearly as well known as the Liz Christy Garden - and only a quarter of its age - this plot of land in Brownsville more closely resembles the

traditional community garden. Raised beds constructed from planks of wood are allotted to members of the community in which they can grow and harvest their own foods. The ground between each bed is covered by wood chips and is weeded regularly to prevent plants from cropping up in undesignated locations. You can easily see onto the street from the garden, and into the garden from the street. There is not an attempt made to completely separate the garden space from the urban landscape in the same way as the Liz Christy Garden. In fact, it seems more important to the members of the Abib Newborn Garden that their space *is* visible to passers-by, or at least that it is not completely separated from it. Their fences are not covered by vines, allowing a direct and exposed line of sight in and out of the garden. The small number of trees in the garden, as well as its open space, create a very different environment that does not ignore or try to hide the existence of the urban landscape. Perhaps the lack of concealing foliage is due to the garden's young age; there has not been a lot of time in which to grow an encapsulating blanket of green over the space. But it seems that the members of the Abib Newborn Garden are not as interested in trying to conceal the garden and the urban landscape from one another as Don and the other members of the Liz Christy Garden are.

Figure 6. A view of the Abib Newborn Garden facing the South-East corner. A pile of weeds can be seen at the right of the photo, and to the left, four garden beds that have become overgrown due to lack of care during the pandemic. Behind them, the end of a greenhouse (the "herb hut") can be seen with a solar panel on top. Several students crowd around their summer program leader who teaches them how to identify unwanted plants and properly weed garden beds. Several mulin plants are left to grow outside the garden beds, and will later be harvested for use as an herb. Photo by author.

Two sides of the Abib Newborn Garden are constituted by brick buildings at least three stories high. On the side of one of the buildings, a billboard is mounted, advertising "$1, First Month's Rent" in large letters with a phone number of some large company to call below (Figure 6). The wall that the billboard hangs on is the only side of the garden that *is* covered in vines, unlike the fences. The billboard, a clear marker of urban life, is surrounded by greenery, as if the garden were absorbing its urban surroundings. The billboard becomes a habitat for the foliage of

the garden, the vines that drape around and above the advertisement make it somehow beautiful. It offers an almost comical juxtaposition between the economically focused city and a grass-roots project surrounded by it. The Abib Newborn Garden's intention is not to make the external urban landscape unseeable, unknowable, or nonexistent. Rather, the garden operates under the conjecture that the greening of the city happens one leaf at a time - until the whole city (billboards and all) is engulfed in a winding sea of green. This is evident through the hopes that both Don and Denelo hold for the future of the neighborhood. Both gardeners repeatedly express a wish that their garden and the values that grow within it will seep outward into the surrounding community.

Clearly, the Liz Christy and Abib Newborn Gardens differ both in physical and ideological make-up. The two are built differently, to serve different functions within the city. The way that the members of the two gardens conceptualize the functions of the gardens also differs. One - in busy lower Manhattan - strives to be a space of escape, a place that directly contradicts the urban landscape in order to bring calmness to visitors through serene nature. The other - in residential Brooklyn - functions as a host site for an idyllic way of life that fosters health through organic food and strong community. The two gardens are very clearly meant for different audiences and work towards seemingly different outcomes. Yet, there is something foundational about these two gardens that allows them both to exist under the category of "community garden" within the urban environment of the city.

The compared analysis of these two gardens is meant to unearth ways in which gardens perform different functions while remaining part of the same 'territory.' Harking back to ideas of territory discussed at the beginning of this chapter, this comparison helped me understand what territories made by plant-people assemblages look and feel like. After understanding what these

two gardens look like, I am left to unpack what my interlocutors say their gardens *feel like.* What I find interesting is that, despite all their differences, my interlocutors from both gardens describe their experiences with many similarities. "[Abib Newborn] was my oasis when COVID hit," David told me, "I could come here and I don't even feel like I'm in the area." The definition of the garden space as an oasis mimics Denelo's words, as well as Don's. Even though the garden that Don knows is different in many ways from that of David and Denelo, they speak about how they feel in their gardens the same way. Living in separate boroughs, having lived vastly different experiences across race, class, and education, what these three men have in common is care. This is the currency through which they measure their value in the garden, and how they show their passions and commitments. Perhaps what ties these two gardens together - and all gardens across the city - is a deep sense of attention and care. This is the kind of attention that differentiates the space outside and inside gardens. The constitution of a garden is founded on the care exchanged between both human and non-human beings. It is not only that they care for the garden, but that the garden cares back for them. The garden creates, and is created by, human-plant relations of care and attention that are mutually beneficial. While this care and attention may look different from garden to garden, these more-than-human assemblages are what make up the network of urban community gardens across the city.

We can dive deeper into examining these relationships within and between gardens in the following sections, which discuss how practices of land use in the context of the Abib Newborn garden are integral to its members' physical and mental health. Moreover, the relationships built through garden spaces are not one-directional. The ways that urban gardens use land (and land uses gardeners) to make and unmake community and social meaning can be seen through the ways that seeds, food, and plants maintain and evolve cultural traditions and symbolic meaning.

Sowing Seeds of Community:

Food Practices and Cultural Traditions

Half an hour after I left my apartment in Bed-Stuy and got into the car with David, we pulled up alongside the garden on Newport street. Through the chain-link fence, I could see someone raking between raised garden beds and a group of younger people gathered under a pavilion at the back. “Wow, you’re lucky!” David let me know. “We got Denelo *and* the kids here today.” At this point, I already knew who Denelo was. David had spent a considerable portion of our drive over talking about him with clear admiration. Denelo lived in a different neighborhood, like David, but he’s been a member of the garden since its inception 12 years ago. I got the sense that even though David never quite said it, Denelo was what kept the garden running. Now seeing him through the car window, I could immediately sense the dedication he had to the garden. He seemed focused on his task, and although raking weeds seems like a relatively mindless activity for most of us, Denelo seemed to have a deep commitment to what he was doing.

Behind Denelo, the people in the pavilion looked young enough to be in middle school or high school, all listening to a woman who looked to be somewhere close to 30. I learned later that these were high school students who were participating in a summer program sponsored by the City Parks Foundation. They had been cleanin up the garden and learning about small scale urban agriculture for the past few weeks. Denelo told me that the garden’s partnership with CPF has helped keep the garden running throughout the years. Along with a selection of other partner gardens across the city, CPF works with Abib Newborn to host educational programs year-round.

“It gives the kids something to do,” said Denelo, and he also acknowledged that without the kids, a lot less would get done in the garden. While I talked with Denelo and David at one end of the garden, the kids migrated from the pavilion to the garden beds. They were weeding and clearing out overgrown areas. Earlier that day they had learned how to brew tea from the herbs grown in the garden, and a large barrel of it now sat steeping on a picnic table. David was right, I had been lucky enough to catch the garden in an active state.

The garden buzzed with the energy of bodies moving and minds working. Everyone seemed attentive, involved. In a very real way, the care that exists within this space could be felt by all inside it. Through their partnership with CPF, the Abib Newborn Garden was not only caring for the earth, but also for the next generation of gardeners. David and Denelo both told me how important it is to have young people involved in gardening. They both seemed exceedingly proud of what the kids had accomplished and what they were learning. Denelo brought up the kids several times throughout our conversation without being prompted, as did David. Their pride was also filled with hopefulness - a hopefulness that their oasis, and all the work they have done in it, would be securely passed on to a new generation. This is a sentiment shared by many across the city and has led to hundreds of programs like CPF that support teaching gardens and garden education for children in preschool through high school. Many of these programs specifically target children living in under-resourced neighborhoods like Brownsville.

These programs intend not only to provide resources like fresh, organic food to neighborhoods like Brownsville with limited access to those kinds of resources, they also are about fostering relationships of human-Earth care. Knowledge of our interdependent relationship with soil and the food it grows is often left out of urban education, as David and Denelo both pointed out to me. “Kids who grew up in the city don’t know where their food comes from. You

ask them where their vegetables come from and they say the store!" David chuckled as he said this, but what he was really pointing to was a desire to foster consciousness of these kids' relationship with - and dependence upon - non-human actors. Talking with David and Denelo about the student program, and about young people in gardens in general, I understood that fostering agrarian understandings of food production was a crucial part of their work. They expressed that this relationship of awareness and care between humans and Earth not only fosters a healthier human, but is necessary for the health of the Earth and our future with it. Young people participating in urban gardens represent a hopeful future that draws on an idyllic, agrarian way of life. This future is one in which everyone has access to organic, healthy foods. Where children know how to grow their own food, where the interdependence of human-Earth relations is acknowledged and respected. These programs strive to foster caring and conscious relationships between children and the Earth as a form of building stronger communities and improving health and resources for the area. But also perhaps this is the gardening community's way of sowing the seeds of the future. The garden is operating on multiple scales here, both in the present and future. The seeds sown in the present become interscalar vehicles[65] that create possibilities for the future by serving the community of the present.

Throughout our conversation, Denelo stressed that ensuring this future in which healthy people exist on a healthy planet is more than just a hobby - it is a necessity. Attributing the current state of climate change and environmental degradation to the growth of urban living, Denelo talked about the imperative of healing the planet through the kind of work being done in community gardens. This idea of necessity underpins Denelo's reasons for gardening. It is important for him to take part in urban gardening not only because it makes him happier or

[65] Hecht, "Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene."

healthier, but because it is a route by which a world poisoned by industrial growth will begin to heal. This healing starts with food. It was made very clear through my conversations with David and Denelo that food production was the main material goal of the Abib Newborn garden. The purpose of this is to provide *healthy* foods to the members of the garden and, eventually, to the greater public. "Brownsville is definitely a food desert," David told me, "so to have things like farmers' markets… that's something that's needed out here because people don't get the quality food that they deserve." By invoking the term "food deserts," David means a lack of access to healthy, fresh food. The Brownsville area is not lacking in supermarkets, but it is particularly hard to find local, healthy, sustainable food to feed its residents. The necessity in his comments is evident. People *need and deserve* this kind of access to food grown locally and "naturally." Moreover, in the eyes of many gardeners including Denelo, the Earth needs and deserves to be rescued from urban development.

I argue that the project of food sovereignty taken on by so many gardens around the city does not work parallel to projects of cultivating community and culture through soil, but rather that each function in conjunction with the other. Food practices - and efforts for food sovereignty in under-resourced urban areas - are deeply entangled with cultural traditions. Creating islands of agricultural growth amidst the urban sea of sidewalks and fast food chains can do the work of reclaiming cultural identity. By addressing food sovereignty in Brownsville, David and Denelo are partaking in actions that resist erasure through land use. This action is similar to those described in the previous chapter that takes place in the Liz Christy Garden, where people from different geographical and cultural backgrounds use soil and seed to establish and maintain their presence. However, in a neighborhood where the majority of residents are African American or people of color, a garden whose members are almost entirely Black has different meanings. In a

socio-historical context, Black gardeners growing foods to share with a community has different symbolic and tangible outcomes than a garden started by white college students.

Monica White writes about the prevalence of the symbolism that ties itself to Black farmers and urban gardeners. Growing food is not simply growing food in this context (nor, arguably, in any context). Through histories of land dispossession, strategic separation of enslaved Africans from their agricultural traditions, and subjugation through food inaccessibility, the reclaiming of land for food production becomes a revolutionary act.[66] White refers to figures like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., the Black Panthers, who all have addressed the ways in which land is central to the project of Black liberation. She connects land with freedom movements throughout history, and asserts that use of land by Black farmers to grow food has time and time again been seen as a liberatory action.[67] In this sense, gardens are inherently political spaces. Bodies that take up space in an urban landscape to sow seeds and harvest crops are, in tandem with the land itself, actors in a project for freedom from subjugation. Black gardeners in New York City today follow a long history of black farming as a tool of resistance, and in many ways it is impossible (or at least irresponsible) not to address these histories while discussing the present-day reality of gardens like Abib Newborn. This garden, although not necessarily participating in an overt, active resistance, is inherently resisting social structures of oppression by way of its existence.

The land acts as proxy for connection with a cultural past, and taking up space for food production within a historical context of forced food insecurity and land dispossession[68] becomes

[66]White, "Freedom Farmers."
[67]White, "Freedom Farmers."
[68] Alison Hope Alkon, "Growing Resistance: Food, Culture and the Mo' Better Foods Farmers' Market," Gastronomica 7, no. 3 (August 1, 2007): 93–99, https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2007.7.3.93.

an act of resistance. This makes gardens and gardeners of all kinds, but particularly marginalized people of color and Black American gardeners, inseparable from a historical past. Their actions become imbued with the politics of space and culture. In a garden like Abib Newborn, this politicism is not fully articulated, yet it is enacted daily through the garden space in different ways. Foundationally, garden spaces made for and by Black Americans are spaces that defy colonial regimes of signification by disrupting mechanisms of oppression. The act of growing food - especially food that is culturally relevant and symbolic of an ancestral heritage - is an act against these regimes to take back land and skills through human-plant assemblages. Seeds sown in community gardens are seeds sown in community in the way that they both literally and symbolically root people in place. Both Denelo and David are motivated to be part of the Abib Newborn Garden because it is an assertion of their place in the city. The land they cultivate not only provides them with fresh food, but is also a connector between them and cultural traditions. As such, it also connects human beings across temporal scales through generations.

The foods grown in the Abib Newborn Garden are particular to the people that grow them. Many of the members use their garden plots to grow plants that are native to their cultural homelands. Mr. Smith, an elderly Jamaican man, brings callaloo seeds from Jamaica every year to plant in the garden. David told me that some years, he only grows callaloo because it is what he's "used to eating, it's something familiar." The popularity of callaloo in the Abib Newborn Garden is widespread. It seemed to be one of the core crops grown year after year by many gardeners. Many of the members identify as part of the Caribbean Diaspora, and say that growing and eating this plant keeps them connected to that identity. But it is not only the symbolic connection between food and culture that matters here. David, who was born in Senegal and grew up eating vegetables native to Western Africa, grows foods like okra and yams

because it connects him to Senegal in a more-than-symbolic way. Foods like these, he told me, are "in our DNA. They are part of us in the sense that those are the foods that we've eaten."

What David is pointing to here is an understanding of the deep relationship between plants and people. It is the acknowledgment that, through food, he is connected to previous generations of Senegalese family, and that he is connected to the land itself. But beyond this, it is also an acknowledgment of human-plant assemblages in a literal sense. Food becomes materially one with bodies, inscribing cultural histories within one's DNA. The body and the garden work together to recreate culturally situated experiences as both become with the other. Taking up space for these practices is a contradiction of urban social order. Relationships between nature and culture are reordered and complicated in these spaces and give way to human-plant assemblages that scramble systems of categorization meant to keep subjects dependent on a colonial system. By taking up space and land in a city and using it to grow and eat foods native to other countries, gardeners like David and Denelo transform both themselves and the land into a complex system that reclaims identity and builds community. Through something so fundamental as food, these gardeners enact cultural traditions and create a space that not only endures social suffering but creates thriving life.

Soil for the Soul

The necessity of urban gardens expands beyond a response to social and environmental struggles. While many gardeners' participation is motivated by a response to social struggle (economic crisis, food deserts, a global pandemic), the life created within urban gardens

becomes more than the sum of its parts. The accumulative existence of each garden - and all gardens connected through a larger network of seeded territory - has more than just a physical presence. As reported by my interlocutors, the urban garden - with its complex semiotics that trouble social ways of categorizing people and space - becomes itself an entity that has the agency to affect and be affected by human spirits. Throughout my fieldwork, every member of a community garden that I encountered spoke of an elusive "energy" that their garden held. This was abundantly prevalent in my experience at the Abib Newborn garden. Both Denelo and David have strong convictions about the necessity of gardens both in healing the material world and healing one's soul. David described this energy as "just something about the soil. When you feel it and you… you've grown something, you've cultivated something." The "something" that David is cultivating is more than just plant life. Denelo added, "you need green spaces because this is what gives you the energy, this place in here. That's why gardens are so important. It's an energy that's here and we need it. There's a healing energy in gardens." Once again, what is being referred to is not only the cultivation of plant life, but the cultivation of relationships between humans and non-humans that position both in relation to one another. There is an exchange of emotional and spiritual energy taking place here. The "healing energy in gardens" exists through a mutual relationship between soil, mineral, earth, and human.

As David points out in our discussion of food practices, Denelo is also acknowledging the interconnected nature of human bodies to soil: "we use minerals to heal ourselves because we are from the earth." He follows this statement by asserting that - with no room for argument - "rocks have consciousness." Conceptualizing minerals of the Earth as living and sentient beings, Denelo defines his relationship to cultivating the Earth as one with highly spiritual implications. Gardening is about producing food for a struggling community *and also* about cultivating

more-than-human emotional relationships that are mutually healing. In this sense, gardens are spaces necessitated by not only a desire for food sovereignty but also a desire for spiritual balance. The assumption being made here is that this spiritual balance is dependent on a soil and a person's relationship to it. The kind of peace, quiet, and balance that Denelo finds in the garden is not something accessible within the constructed urban landscape, or within a capitalist society that prioritizes commercial individualism.

We've seen throughout both chapters one and two that New York City gardeners feel there is an indescribable energetic presence to garden spaces (and nature in a broader sense). Gardens have the ability to nourish humans not only through the production of food but also through soulful connection to the Earth. The "energy" that my interlocutors continually talked about is beyond my ability to define, but it has been ever-present throughout my research. The soil of these New York City gardens holds within it the potentiality of cultivation. This cultivation, of food, of community, of peace, is what brings thousands of people across the city into community gardens.

* * *

After spending a few hours with David and Denelo in the garden, talking and walking around the overgrown garden beds, it was time to return to my apartment in Bed-Stuy. As we walked to David's car, parked on the sidewalk outside of the Abib Newborn Garden, I was hit with a wave of hot summer air. Although the temperature had not changed, and there had been no shade in the garden, the heat somehow felt more stifling on the street than it had in the garden.

The noises of the neighborhood seemed louder too. I was conscious not of the stillness of the garden, or the way the wind blew through the leaves of the trees, but of the far off sounds of sirens and cars passing. Inside the territory created by the garden, these noises were present but somehow less noticeable. Now, standing on the sidewalk, about to get into a car and start my journey back through the streets of Brooklyn, I felt as if I had just returned from a daydream.

It wasn't that there had been any real change in my surrounding environment, but rather that the way I related to it changed as I moved from within the garden to the urban landscape. In the garden, I was continually cultivating my thoughts in direct relation to the slow growth of the plants around me. On the sidewalk, I was disconnected from that relationship of care, and was thrust back into a world constituted by concrete and asphalt. Leaving this garden, as with every other garden I visited, I felt reluctant to move back into the urban landscape. As my interlocutors do, I longed for a future in which I never had to cross the gate back onto the sidewalk.

Conclusion

Figure 7. A wooden sign stuck into a soil pot at the Hattie Carthan Community Garden reads "cultivate community." Photo my author.

The walk I have taken you on in this project allows us a glimpse into only two gardens out of hundreds across the city. The Liz Christy and Abib Newborn Gardens are centered in this project as vessels through which to discuss the larger phenomenon of community gardens in New York City. While each chapter focuses on specific aspects of each of these gardens, it is my hope that from these two chapters we have been able to extract a larger picture of the gardens that make up a tentacular network through the city. On this walk, I have shown how urban gardens are spaces imbued with social and cultural significance. Their significance is not only tied to their ability to produce food, but also their ability to alter human relationships to and with the

environment within specific social contexts. These gardens, though each unique and singular, create relationships with human beings to produce a network of connections. This network operates above, between, below the city streets. The human-plant assemblages cultivated in these spaces unmake, remake, and complicate the social and physical urban city landscape. While walking through these spaces, even just for a short time, we can feel that these are troubling spaces. These connections are not the end of the journey, but they open the gate so that we may begin it.

In all likelihood, this walk has left us both with more trouble than when we began. Out of my research, new questions arose. Many of these are questions to which I still cannot offer answers. As I packed up my belongings and prepared to leave my little room in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, I felt as though I had only just begun to discover what questions I was actually asking through my exploration of community gardens. I have come to understand this project not as an attempt to answer all of my questions, but instead as an opportunity to ask them.

Looking back upon the conversations I had, the gardens I visited, and the story I have told for you here, I want to focus a bit more critically on the idea of trouble. What does trouble change? I am left wondering what the future holds and the role that community gardens play in it. In a global moment fraught with the precarity of the future, why does the act of urban gardening matter? What can it offer? After establishing gardens as spaces that cultivate trouble through attentiveness, I wonder how this attentiveness can be useful. My interlocutors are set on an often romanticized idea of urban gardening as a solution to the world's ailments. At present, all eyes are on the future and our place in it as Earthly human beings. 'Eco-anxiety,' a term that circulates throughout discussions of environmental sustainability, points directly toward human worry about our material impact on the world around us - in other words, the Anthropocene. The

question of the Anthropocene looms over every passing day as we witness new global crises. Much of our energy is spent speculating about what will become of the Earth (and us along with it) as a result of climate change and global illness. For many, community gardens offer a possible solution by decentering the Anthropocene. To decenter the Anthropos - an action that Donna Haraway posits as an absolutely necessary response to the climate crisis - is to invite the tentacular beings in and allow them to adjust our relationship to the Earth.[69]

But to imagine the garden as a purified space that holds the answer to our urban struggles is to ignore the complex human dynamics that are still at play within it. My main argument has been that urban gardens foster attentiveness and care, which in turn allows social and environmental change to slowly take root. But perhaps this attentiveness is only the prerequisite to action and change. The existence of gardens across the city does not guarantee a better future, giving a seedling the space to sprout is often not even half the battle. While my interlocutors all expressed their convictions that their work is building a brighter future, I am left to consider the historical and social narratives that allow them to think so. It is not enough to say that gardens are good and leave it at that, but we must question the social structures that lead us to this conclusion.[70]

Gardeners like Denelo underpin their dedication to gardening with the belief that any other way of living is damaging not only for the individual but for community, and most of all for the Earth. The kind of agrarian idealism that Denelo subscribes to (along with many others across the city, country, and globe) positions plant-human assemblages and the relationships they cultivate as imperative to sustaining healthy life. This dedication feeds on an idyllic past in which

[69]Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.
[70] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," and Braun, "On the Raggedy Edge of Risk."

humans are, in fact, very much centered in the narrative of a human-plant relationship. While gardens may help to cultivate attention toward non-human beings, they are still spaces where humans assume dominant control. The 'idyllic nature' narrative in urban areas like New York City is the result of a long Western history that cannot be separated from histories of systems of hierarchy and descrimination.[71] Yet these cultivated ideas of nature have become so woven into the fabric of our Western imaginaries that we often do not think twice about them. Urban gardeners believe that creating these deep connections with land and soil is the avenue through which climate crises can be addressed. Although Denelo knows the work that he is doing is "microcosmic" in the larger landscape of New York City, he still adamantly upholds the belief that unless we begin cultivating a balanced relationship with the Earth once again, "she's going to fight back."

The use of the Earth for industrial expansion, according to Denelo, "was never meant to happen." In this sense, urban development is in direct contradiction with a balanced human-plant relationship. The system of urban industrial expansion is what Julia Livingston would call self-devouring growth.[72] This is growth that, unlike plant life, does not occur in cycles of composition-to-life-to-decomposition. Rather, it disregards the latter half of the process, and refuses to rest until it has all but devoured itself. This kind of growth is one that thrives in the absence of attention, and the presence of a sense of absolute individualism. As I spoke of earlier, many New Yorkers walk by community gardens daily without ever looking up. This is beneficial to a system of self-devouring growth that relies on the individualism that persuades passers by

[71] Braun, "On the Raggedy Edge of Risk"
[72]Julie Livingston, Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa, Critical Global Health: Evidence, Efficacy, Ethnography (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

not to notice (and not to care) about the gardens they are walking past. The urban landscape is a system within which subjects are coaxed into a state of selective inattentiveness.

Within the anthropocentric landscape, people are positioned as subjects of urban life. Gardens create an alternative position by troubling the landscape - both physically and socially. While this trouble does not decenter the human completely, and perhaps gives us a more pointed sense of control over our environment, it allows us to reconsider the kind of care we enact to and with our environment. It is within these spaces that a particular kind of kinship is allowed to grow. As I think back through this project, I see this kinship as being a mechanism through which attention is cultivated, but it is not the end of the story. Like attention itself, perhaps the human-plant kinship that grows in these gardens is only a necessary precursor to the change my interlocutors hope to create.

Creating a world in which we focus our energy and power on cultivating community, rather than manufacturing individuality, is what many of my interlocutors considered to be the most direct path towards a future that breaks the cycles of devouring growth that we currently sit in. Urban community gardens do not offer an answer to the climate crisis, but they do embody the intent to create change in response to struggle. By cultivating community, gardens also cultivate the potentiality of the future. Community becomes a vessel through which urban gardeners can design the future that they envision, one that responds to struggle and hardship. This response-ability, as Haraway calls it,[73] is a powerful tool in enacting change. Gardens across the city are responding to the destructiveness of the anthropocene by sewing the seeds for a sustainable urban future. Most importantly, urban gardens continue to create questions within the

[73] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

anthropocene. In doing so, gardens play an active role in cultivating new ways of living and thinking in the world.

As I conclude this project, a sentence from Donna Harraway keeps swirling around in my head: "It matters what thoughts think thoughts."[74] The intentionality of these garden spaces, the specific relationships of care that they cultivate matter when thinking up (and rethinking) the urban landscape. Although my interlocutors may disagree, I do not see community gardens as spaces inherently imbued with the power to make good things happen. Instead, it matters what thoughts and intentions are being sewn in their soils. Urban gardens act as a bed of soil from which intentions, thoughts, and actions may grow. But the "goodness" of what grows in gardens is up to those who sow the seeds. Perhaps in this way gardens simply become another vehicle through which voices can be heard. I am not sure if the urban gardening movement in New York City will lead us into a rosy-colored future where humans live in harmony with nature, or even if this is a future worth moving toward. However, I am interested in understanding urban gardens as a way to think new thoughts.

* * *

Over the course of my two months in the city, I spent many afternoons seated on a blanket in the public park next to my apartment. As the sun set, it would illuminate the tall tree canopies of the community garden across the street from the west side of the park. This was the Hattie Carthan Community Garden, with which I quickly became acquainted. For the first month of my stay in Bed-Stuy, the garden gates were almost always locked, forbidding the entry of

[74] Harraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

guests. Sometimes I would walk around the outside of the fence until I found a section not covered by vines, and I would peer inside. Although I was unable to enter the space, I learned about it through conversations with other gardeners and my research on the history of community gardens.

I found that this garden, from which I lived only two blocks, was named in honor of a woman who helped shape the future of urban gardens in the 1960s. Hattie Carthan was a life-long resident of Brooklyn, and cared deeply about the lack of resources being given to communities of color across the city. Her care manifested itself through efforts to preserve and develop the natural environment, and her work began when she fought the demolition of a historic tree for the development of apartment buildings. Hattie understood the significance of the tree and the history it carried with it. She also understood the power of her action to preserve this tree in making a statement about human-plant relationships. After successfully preserving this tree and halting the development of the apartment complex, Hattie started an organization that planted over 1,000 trees along the sidewalks of Bed-Stuy. She had kickstarted a communal movement towards ways of caring for/creating community through promoting relationships with the environment.

Hattie's legacy has become so potent to the greening movement of New York that it is difficult to be involved in community gardening and sustainability without knowing her name. The community garden in Bed-Stuy that I would see every day was only one of several of her namesakes. There are parks, markets, organizations that continue to carry her name through history. Her identity has become fully entwined with the roots that push through the soil of Brooklyn. Through her work, she and many others sowed seeds for the future - seeds that

continue to sprout care, connection, and hope. She is truly emblematic of the kind of deep and troubling kinship that this project is built upon.

It seems a fateful coincidence that in my search for a place to stay while doing my research I would end up so near the Hattie Carthan Garden. Although, it also felt as though I could not have ended up anywhere else. I spent most of my time simply observing the garden and learning about it from afar, yet still it became a central figure in my research. When the garden's weekend market opened in late July, just as I was finishing my field work, I visited. Upon entering the market I was met by beaming faces who welcomed me and offered me tea. I spent a few hours there, making conversation with garden members and walking around the space. The whole experience was imbued with a palpable sense of care - everyone who was there in that space was there to make meaningful connections not only with each other but with the garden space, the food it produced, and the symbolic future that it represents.

This garden created space that held within it not only hope for the future, but also connection to the past through Hattie's legacy and the neighborhood's history. It troubled the urban landscape by encouraging and cultivating communities of mutual care and attention. What took place that Saturday at the Hattie Carthan garden - and what takes place everyday throughout the city's gardens - is the active cultivation of community that creates pathways through which we may walk into the future. Gardens are not an end-point in themselves, but they offer land in which we may root ourselves. What is special about these gardens is not what my interlocutors identify as the objective "goodness" of nature, but instead the space these gardens give us to learn how to think differently.

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