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Sofya Aptekar

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Visions of Public Space: Reproducing and Resisting Social Hierarchies in a Community Garden¹

Sofya Aptekar²

Abstract

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² Department of Sociology, University of Massachusetts Boston, 100 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, MA 02125-3393, sofya.aptekar@umb.edu

Urban public spaces are sites of struggles over gentrification. In increasingly diverse cities, these public spaces also host interactions among people of different class, race, ethnicity, and immigration status. How do people share public spaces in contexts of diversity and gentrification? I analyze the conflicting ways of imagining shared spaces by drawing on an ethnographic study of a community garden in a diverse and gentrifying neighborhood in New York City, conducted between 2011 and 2013. I examine how conflicts among gardeners about the aesthetics of the garden and norms of conduct reproduce larger gentrification struggles over culture and resources. Those who wanted the garden to be a lush and orderly space drew on their privilege and resources to leverage support from institutional actors and push through a vision that resonated with aesthetic preferences of affluent residents and developers. At the same time, I found that the diversity, combined with several other characteristics, created openings for cultural disruption. Utilizing relationships built across dramatic lines of class, race, and immigration difference, less privileged gardeners were able to destabilize hierarchies and defend their visions of this public space. Conflict and messy deliberation – rather than harmonious community – facilitated engagement with difference.

Key words: diversity, public space, culture, gentrification, inequality, community gardens

Public space often plays host to the battles of gentrification, the process whereby capital reinvestment displaces low income residents, as high income residents move in, and development alters neighborhood landscapes (Davidson and Lees 2005). The struggle between users of parks, sidewalks, and plazas and the elites who strive to control these spaces through exclusion and privatization has been amply documented (e.g. Shepard and Smithsimon 2011, Low and Smith 2006, Zukin 1995). In New York City and elsewhere, community gardens are sites of confrontation between city-backed developers and local residents fighting to preserve these spaces of alternative production, community, and ethnic expression (Eizenberg 2013, L'Annunziata 2010, Martinez 2010, Schmelzkopf 1995, Shepard and Smithsimon 2011, Zukin 2010). In much of this literature, as well as in public discourse, community gardens are portrayed as spaces of anti-gentrification activism and struggle for the right to the city. But there is also evidence that gentrification struggles, particularly over culture, take place within these gardens (Martinez 2010, Zukin 2010). Beyond gentrification and the class- and race-based conflicts that it brings, many community gardens are situated in urban contexts characterized by diversity stemming from waves of international migration, which creates a complex web of intersecting categories of race, ethnicity, legal status, and language (Farrell and Lee 2011, Logan and Zhang 2011, Vertovec 2007).

In this article, I draw on ethnographic research to explore cultural struggles within a New York City community garden, illuminating the ways in which neighborhood and city contexts and power inequalities structure encounters and relations among a diverse group of gardeners with conflicting visions. Despite the often-lauded potential of public space to build cosmopolitanism and tolerance in diverse settings (see most recently Anderson 2011), the community garden under study is often a site of conflict where societal hierarchies and conflicts

of gentrification are reproduced. But, it is through struggles over scarce resources and clashing visions that people engage and form ties with others across multiple categorical differences, creating some openings for resistance of existing hierarchies and a rewriting of the gentrification narrative.

DIVERSITY, PUBLIC SPACE, COMMUNITY GARDENS, AND NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE

Public space is often touted as crucial in supporting political participation, democracy, tolerance, and social change (Berman 1986, Kohn 2004, Shaftoe 2008, Young 1986). Even in gentrifying neighborhoods, old timers and their diverse supporters come together in public spaces like community gardens and parks, building alliances to mobilize resistance (Martinez 2010, Shepard and Smithsimon 2011). Public spaces are said to build tolerance when people divided by social class, race, ethnicity and other lines of categorical difference come into contact on city sidewalks, in parks, and other urban public spaces. In a recent study that highlights this potential of public space, Anderson (2011) identified particular public spaces that serve as cosmopolitan canopies, where diverse people encounter each other with tolerance and conviviality, bracketing the ethnic and racial tensions that normally characterize city life. Similarly, a growing literature on everyday encounters in public spaces points to conviviality in the ways people routinely negotiate difference and construct fluid identities (Hall 2012, Wise and Velayutham 2009). The role of public space in building tolerance and cosmopolitanism fits within the contact theory framework, which postulates a positive relationship between frequency of contact between members of different groups and tolerance (Allport 1954, Hewstone 2009).

But, as shown particularly in research on gentrification, public space can also be exclusionary, with urban elites attempting to control its use through design, surveillance, and outright privatization (Kohn 2004, Shepard and Smithsimon 2011, Smith 1996, Zukin 2010). More broadly, there is no guarantee that public space encounters are convivial and build tolerance. Rather, fleeting encounters may reinforce prejudices and animosities, or people may fail to engage with each other at all (Amin 2002, Lofland 2010). Valentine (2008) criticizes the rosy picture painted by some ethnographic research on everyday urban encounters for its failure to contextualize public space within broader structures of inequality, which results in optimistic but superficial portrayals of public space interactions (see also Wise 2010). To complicate the matter, not all public space is the same, particularly if we embrace Shepard and Smithsimon's broad definition of public space as space where people can interact with many unfamiliar others in the course of various public and private activities (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011, p.18). Among such spaces, particular social patterns, contours of control, and physical infrastructure result in different outcomes in terms of potential for fostering democracy, community engagement, solidarity, or other positively-valued outcomes commonly associated with public space. For instance, in dealing specifically with dilemmas of ethnic and racial diversity, Amin (2002) points out that places that best disrupt existing categories and animosities are those where people come together for a common purpose, having to negotiate through difference. Along with workplaces, youth centers, and sports clubs, Amin identifies communal gardens as such 'micro-publics'.

Thus, community gardens are public spaces that hold potential for unsettling categories and encouraging tolerance, a crucial function in contexts of gentrification and immigration-fueled diversity. At the same time, it is important to note that the process of cultural disruption

that leads to transcendence of accepted categories and hierarchies reveals itself in disagreement and deliberation rather than conviviality and consensus (Amin 2002). Disagreement and deliberation, however, are more often found in accounts of what happens between community gardens and the forces allied against them, rather than in the internal dynamics of these gardens. Most scholarly literature, as well as public accounts, presents harmonious, if not outright utopian, portraits of community gardens (Birky and Strom 2013, L'Annunziata 2010, Lawson 2005, Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004, Schmelzkopf 1995, Staeheli et al 2002). There are exceptions. In her study of community gardens of the Lower East Side, Martinez (2010) describes the conflicts in how people in formally organized, orderly 'artist gardens' and those in Puerto Rican, community-oriented 'casita gardens' understood the purpose of garden space. These visions had much to do with what gardeners expected from each other and how they experienced the larger neighborhood and its boundaries and norms of interaction. Similarly, Eizenberg (2013) describes three distinct types of gardens across New York City as Puerto Rican, African American, and gentrifier, each with different practices and visions. Zukin (2010) develops a developmental typology of gardens with a progression from garden as social movement to garden as site of local and sustainable food production, and notes that immigration-driven diversity can bring conflict. Even these studies, however, emphasize differences *between* gardens, rather than examining the ways in which larger contexts of gentrification and diversity play out *within* a particular garden.

Yet, research on neighborhood gentrification would lead us to expect conflicts over the use of community garden space by gardeners, and not simply between gardeners and their adversaries. Like other public spaces, community gardens are affected by the cultural and economic storms of gentrification raging outside their gates. The cultural agenda of

gentrification, couched in seemingly neutral terms of aesthetic order, affects visual and behavioral aspects of community gardens (Zukin 1995, 1998). High end property development and concomitant influx of affluent new residents can result in enforcement of new norms of sociality in public space (Smith 1996). For instance, Chaskin and Joseph (2013) report concerns over people congregating in groups for leisure, playing loud music, and drinking alcohol in public parks in a mixed income development in Chicago. Writing about a different Chicago neighborhood, Patillo (2007) describes efforts to eliminate sidewalk care repair and barbequing in parks. The censoring and even criminalization of such public behaviors are also reported by Freeman (2006) in two gentrifying New York neighborhoods. Owners of property adjacent to community gardens are anxious about the appearance of these public spaces and conduct of their users, because they can have an effect on property values (Voicu and Been 2008). Given these observations, a community garden in a gentrifying neighborhood is especially likely to experience conflicts over what it should look like and how people should behave in it, in addition to disagreements over access, relations with the community, and organizational structure and resources.

I investigate multiple competing visions within one community garden in a Queens, New York, neighborhood characterized by gentrification, legacy of racial segregation, and dramatic immigration-driven diversification. I show that differences in how the garden is understood (e.g. a place to grow food, a place of beauty, or a community space) are not simply a reflection of a multicultural mosaic in an iconically diverse locale. Instead, the visions of the garden reflect normative notions of community and civility, as well as local memory and identity, and are inextricably connected to social inequalities and power hierarchies beyond the garden gates.

What are the processes through which particular visions of the public space compete and prevail?
How are societal hierarchies replicated and when are they challenged?

NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

The community garden under study is located in a Queens, New York, neighborhood settled by waves of immigrants, including Italians in the early 20th century, and Greeks in the mid-20th century, and again in the 1970s. In the past two decades, there has been a rapid diversification as multiple groups of immigrants have moved into the area, including those from Mexico, Ecuador, Bangladesh, China, Morocco, and Croatia. Although the neighborhood continues to be identified with Greeks and features several major Greek American institutions, many Greek immigrants and their descendants have left (Alexiou 2013). No ethnic group comes close to dominating the area numerically (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

In addition to a diverse population of first, second, and third generation immigrants, there is a concentrated population of African Americans and Puerto Ricans, who reside primarily in the waterfront public housing developments, far from major corridors of transportation and services. In the past decade, the public housing population itself has become more diverse, as more immigrants from countries such as China and Bangladesh are housed there. A recent explosion of high end development has brought construction of new apartment buildings and growing rents. Some of this development, including a recently constructed luxury 19-story building, is taking place along the waterfront, which was previously home to various industrial and commercial properties. There are plans for a vast new high-rise complex alongside and even inside the public housing development. To summarize, the three distinguishing features of the

neighborhood for the purposes of this study are (1) high levels of diversity, (2) spatial concentration of disadvantaged African American and Puerto Rican populations, and (3) ongoing gentrification.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data for this study comes from ethnographic observation of a community garden and surrounding neighborhood for two years starting in the summer of 2011. I began by volunteering in the garden and spending time in its shared spaces and walkways. Eventually, I became a member, gardening in the communally-run community plot and sharing an individual plot. I attended and helped out with garden meetings and events, participated in online discussions, and interviewed new and old gardeners formally and informally. I took numerous photographs and some video footage. I repeatedly informed the gardeners of my work as a researcher. All the names in this article have been changed. I also drew on Census data and a review of the local media and non-profit agency reports to better understand the local context. As part of a broader project, I interviewed people in the surrounding neighborhood who were not involved in the garden.

In analyzing the data for this article, I studied my fieldnotes and interviews transcribed by an assistant in order to identify episodes in which gardeners expressed their vision for the garden, both aesthetically and in terms of expected behavior of gardeners and visitors. I looked for commonalities in these visions to create typologies. I repeatedly returned to the field to test my understanding of the different visions, relying on focused observation as well as direct conversations with people in the garden.

COMMUNITY GARDEN

The half-acre currently occupied by the community garden examined here has had a long history as an abandoned lot and site of criminal activity. In 1998, a local branch of a national charitable organization acquired the lease for the site and erected a fence around it, with plans to turn it into a park. In 2006, with the space still not much more than a fenced-in lot, a small group of anarchist-leaning activists took over and began a community garden. Within a year, dozens of people joined the garden, working on individual plots along curving paved walkways and sharing green common areas. Membership grew rapidly, fueled by advertisements placed in local organic stores, a community supported agriculture group, and online – and by passersby noticing the changes on the lot. In 2009, the gardeners fought against an effort to reclaim the garden as a more traditional park, led by the residents' association in public housing across the street and the non-profit organization that originally held the lease. Relying on claims of safety (e.g. that a traditional park would encourage drug dealing) and demonstrating that local residents had access to the garden and its common areas, gardeners were able to stave off an imminent takeover.

At the time of research, the land was owned by the city, and the space was under the Parks Department umbrella as an official community garden, governed by city rules under a lease renewed every four years. Over two hundred people were on the waiting list to get a plot. Immediate neighbors of the garden continued to be divided in their opinion of the garden. Some neighbors said that white people in the garden were giving away plots to each other at the expense of black and brown people. Although open hours were posted on the gate alongside a Parks Department sign, some people, particularly new immigrants, did not realize that they were

allowed inside, which is a common issue in accessing New York's community gardens.

Meanwhile, more affluent residents of the new apartment buildings were either excited about the opportunity to engage in trendy urban gardening or avoided local public spaces altogether, considering them dangerous.

During fieldwork, there were over 200 members of the garden, most attached to over a hundred individual plots approximately 100 square feet in size. Some plots were tended by single individuals, and others by several people connected by kinship or friendship. About a fifth of the members were public housing residents from the development across the street. Two years after the garden was founded, a group of gardeners established a community plot, which was meant to provide an opportunity to garden for those on the waiting list or interested in casual involvement, and to experiment with agricultural techniques. The community plot is comprised of about a dozen raised beds of various sizes in the center of the garden, and is tended cooperatively by a team of five to six core gardeners and a variable number of drop-in gardeners.

According to the garden's rules, all members have to live or work in the area. Many members were immigrants, with an estimated 40 languages spoken in the garden. There were also many white, native-born professionals who were not originally from New York. The garden is wheelchair accessible, and there were a number of disabled gardeners. Gardeners were of all ages, including a few teenagers, as well as the elderly. Many came with young children and grandchildren. The garden is also a public space visited by people who are not members. City rules mandate 20 hours per week of open access to the public during the warm season; in reality, the garden gate is unlocked more than that. Local residents, primarily immigrants and people of color, stroll through the garden and spend time in its shared areas. Occasionally, visitors to a nearby sculpture park and museum walk over to take pictures of the garden and the murals

surrounding it. While the garden is a public space in that it is at least technically accessible to the public, the patterns of social relations within it are often, but not always, of a parochial nature, defined by Lofland as being characterized by “a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbors who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within communities” (Lofland 1998, 10).

The entrance gate of the garden opens onto the main common area: a green space with benches, a picnic table, and small trees where gardeners and visitors could be seen alone or in groups on a warm day. Across from the common area is a teardrop-shaped community plot. Walking along a series of curving paths, a visitor encounters a tightly packed patchwork of small plots. Some are overgrown with weeds, others are meticulously maintained, and yet others are somewhere in between. A few plots have towering structures built to support plants; some structures are made with found materials, such as baby cribs and fencing, others are constructed of wood. The garden dazzles with a wide variety of grown produce, from basil and tomatoes to three-foot-long purple string beans and enormous winter melons. Some plots have signs: “Your mama’s farm”, “Do not touch! This is a private plot!!!” A few are fenced in and padlocked. There is a tool shed and a rather clean portable toilet. One of the older gardeners has built an open shed structure for small gatherings – a *casita* of sorts. A stroll through the garden during the warm season is a rich sensory experience and a jarring juxtaposition of outside and inside. It is an oasis of greenery separated by a chain-link fence from small industrial establishments and dilapidated housing, the chirping of small birds overpowered by piercing beeps from school buses backing up into garages and trucks thundering past.

The garden is governed by an elected steering committee, which maintains the relationship with the city and takes care of organizational tasks such as collecting the voluntary

\$20 yearly membership fee, purchasing shared tools, arranging barbeques, enforcing rules, and negotiating disputes. They also bring proposals to the general membership, which votes on them during the scarcely attended monthly meetings. Some garden rules came from the city, such as a prohibition on drinking alcohol, smoking, gambling, and constructing permanent structures without a permit. Others were developed in general membership meetings, including responsibilities to maintain one's plot and pull weeds, obligations to volunteer on completing common tasks, and rules against entering other people's plots, leaving children unattended, bringing dogs, and playing radios loudly. In theory, the garden operates on a three strikes rule: after two public warnings from the steering committee, delivered in writing and publicized to the membership, and an attempt to resolve the dispute with a third party mediator, a gardener could lose membership. In reality, most rules are broken and unenforced, and only one gardener had ever lost membership, after posing a physical threat to others. Few people wanted to be on the steering committee, so its eleven seats went partially unfilled, and the elections were hardly competitive. There was some turnover in the composition of the leadership, as people experienced burnout (including the original founder of the garden) or simply moved out of the area. At the time of research, the steering committee reflected the diversity of the garden to some extent, but some immigrant and minority gardeners, including those on the steering committee, felt that it was really the handful of white professionals – branded 'the lawyers' by some – who were making the important decisions. These leaders also ran the garden meetings, using a style of facilitation that was ostensibly participatory but resulted in exclusion of those gardeners who had difficulties with English, or did not embrace middle-class cultural norms of community building (Lichterman 1995).

IMAGINING THE GARDEN

In a space transected by differences in race, class, ethnicity, immigrant status, disability, and duration of local residence, there was no one way of imagining what the community garden should be like. Gardeners and visitors were engaged in a competitive struggle over scarce space, and this struggle was intricately connected to the normative struggle to define the desired appearance of the garden, its organization, and behavior guidelines. There were several ways of imagining the garden that competed for dominance and connected to larger neighborhood changes. As these visions clashed, many social hierarchies were reproduced, yet gardeners developed spaces of resistance and formed durable ties across lines of categorical difference.

Below, I describe four ways of imagining the community garden. The descriptions of these visions are ideal types drawn from ethnographic observation. In practice, people sometimes subscribed to elements of different visions, as well as holding other, more idiosyncratic visions. The four visions are: private property, green space, farm, and community space. Each vision elaborates not just what the garden should look like, but lays out a normative framework for behavior and delineates boundaries within the garden and between the garden and outside. After illustrating each way of imaging the garden, I describe a series of conflictual events that occurred during my fieldwork and highlight the way conflict between visions of the garden connected to larger structures of inequality.

Private Property

The most prevalent way of seeing the community garden was as a patchwork of private property. Many gardeners related to plots assigned to them in the garden as owners. They felt strongly that

they should be able to do whatever they wanted with their plots, as long as it did not blatantly interfere with their neighbors or garden rules. For instance, Estelle, an older white gardener recently placed in the public housing after a spell of homelessness, explicitly referred to her plot as her property. Estelle grew few plants; her plot was dominated by found objects that many others considered not related to gardening. Under pressure from members of the steering committee who criticized her plot as an eyesore, Estelle half-jokingly proclaimed her plot an independent territory and defended her right to decide what was on it.

While gardeners are periodically reminded that it is the city that owns the land, and it could be taken away, the private property view of the garden is widespread among all types of gardeners, from residents of public housing to immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Southern Europe, to mostly-affluent white newcomers from outside of New York. Those who hold the private property vision tend to emphasize boundaries between plots, some fortifying these with fences, gates, and locks. These measures come under criticism by gardeners holding other visions of the garden. In one dispute over fences, which was conducted on the garden listserv, Tania, a white native-born woman from outside of New York, defended the locked fence surrounding her plot. She referred to the frustration experienced by her family when produce they grew in the previous season was stolen.

Gardeners who see the garden through a private property lens were also concerned about access to the garden as a whole, expressing anxiety about security, theft, and disorder. Along with another gardener, Estelle drafted an ultimately failed proposal to institute photo identification cards for all gardeners. As we will see below, boundaries between plots and with the outside community were offensive to those who saw the garden as more than a collection of private plots.

Green Space

A different way of imagining the community garden was garden as a green space. Those who held the green space vision emphasized that the garden had to be visually pleasant and orderly. They fought against clutter, structures, fences and locks, and weeds. Green space meant a particular aesthetic vision: literally green, lush, but also neat and ordered. Plots like that of Estelle or Tania, above, or plots overgrown with weeds were decried as eyesores. In the shared community plot, the green vision of the garden came into conflict with other visions over a bed of asparagus. Two of the gardeners, Lily (white) and Desiree (African American), who worked on that plot, loved the beautiful frond-like plants, but argued forcefully against building structures to support them. Both moved to New York as adults to pursue work in theater. Speaking through a vocabulary of visual aesthetics, they felt that built supports for asparagus would look ugly. Tai, a Chinese immigrant gardener, wanted to use recycled poles and string to create a support structure for the plants. The dispute was resolved by me when I purchased green wire supports that were almost invisible, appeasing Lily and Desiree's aesthetic preferences while providing less than ideal but passable supports for the asparagus.

The green space vision privileged an aesthetically pleasing appearance over the private property imperative to protect personal plots. Some gardeners even disagreed with the garden rule that prohibited people from entering each other's plots. They wanted to be able to help those whose plots did not comply with the green vision. But that did not mean unfettered access to the garden as a whole: some control was deemed necessary in order to maintain the green nature of the space, reducing vandalism, trash, etc. The green space vision for the garden was

intricately related to maintaining a positive relationship with the surrounding community and justifying the garden's existence to city officials. Gardeners who wanted the garden to be a green space wanted it to look pleasant to passersby. They were aware of the criticism leveled at the garden by some local residents. In creating a beautiful green space, they hoped to differentiate it sharply from the trashed vacant lot it was before, justifying the use of the land as a garden. These gardeners believed that the better the garden looked, the more likely it was to remain a garden – and not be turned into a park, community center, or a condominium. Framing their vision in terms of survival of the garden added to the relative success of the green vision. Many disagreements, such as the one over asparagus described above were settled in way that appeased the green vision.

Social categories and visions of the garden were not neatly matched. Moreover, while an ethnographic case study can reveal social mechanisms and processes, it is less suited for establishing certainty about representativeness and statistical data gathering, making it difficult to report proportional prevalence of visions among gardens or their intersections with categories of race and class (Small 2009). At the same time, my research indicates that while the private property vision appeared to be widespread among everyone, the vocal green space proponents were disproportionately white, highly educated, native-born, middle class people, many of whom have moved from outside of New York. Their access to resources afforded by their social networks and high levels of education helped build the influence of the green vision despite the much more widespread private property vision, and the greater investment of time and effort by those who viewed the garden as a farm (see below). Crucially, the green vision was congruent with the city's preference for what community gardens look like, as well as with what other researchers have described as the vision of gentrifier gardeners and large non-profit

organizations that manage some city gardens (albeit not the one under study here; Eizenberg 2013; Martinez 2010; Zukin 2010).

Farm

Gardeners like Tai, who wanted to tie up asparagus plants with ‘ugly’ string and sticks, viewed the community garden as a place to grow food above all else. Aesthetics took a back seat to the needs of plants, agricultural experimentation, and the imperative to recycle and reduce waste of materials and space. As Aya, a Japanese immigrant gardener, pointed out in response to another gardener’s insistence on things looking good: “I didn’t come here for beautiful, I came here to harvest [sic].” I call this the farm vision.

People who viewed the community garden as a type of farm cared about boundaries in a different way than other gardeners. They may have been more concerned that a fence was shading a struggling plant than about its purported ugliness. They even sympathized with gardeners who wanted to protect the fruits of their labor from theft by erecting fences. And these gardeners did not wish for an unfettered access to the garden from outside because they feared disruption to their agricultural plans in the form of theft of food or tools, or the trampling of plants. While gardeners with a green space vision attempted to make the garden look attractive, gardeners with a farm vision could vociferously oppose this tactic. Martin, an Eastern European immigrant gardener, dismissed the wish of public housing residents to ‘look down and see a park, not a garden’ by pointing to what in his view was an abundance of local parks. What people really needed, he said, was a garden where they could learn about growing food. The garden should be for people who love to garden above all else.

A few of the proponents of this view of the garden were young, mostly white, educated people who were interested in practicing the newly trendy urban agriculture (Macias 2008). They were concerned with sustainability issues, permaculture, and food justice. But many others were long-term immigrants and older African Americans originally from the South, who were deeply interested in and rewarded by hands-on gardening. Some were recreating gardens they had in their places of origin, and many others were gardening for the first time. They devoted much effort to learning gardening techniques and exchanging knowledge with like-minded others across lines of race, ethnicity, and class.

Community Space

The fourth vision of the community garden was as a community space. More so than for any other gardeners, those with this way of seeing the garden were focused on issues of access and boundaries. It was important to these gardeners that the community garden was easily accessed and welcoming to everyone, even if it raised the risk of theft and vandalism. Within the garden, the community space vision meant an emphasis on the quality of interactions between people. Growing respectful relationships came before growing food or looking green and lush. Wendell, a Jamaican immigrant gardener, got angry when others walked past him in the garden without saying hello. As someone who often reminded others of the ‘community’ in the community garden, he gently reproached those whom he perceived to have failed in everyday civility. Other community-oriented gardeners even criticized rude email exchanges as compromising community.

Within the parameters of this vision, building of boundaries between individual plots was a physical manifestation of suspicion and lack of civility. Gardeners who believed that the garden should be a community space criticized those who protected their plots with fences and locks. They were not sympathetic to the threat of theft. For them, the garden was first and foremost a public community space where it was unreasonable to expect the same experience as in a private backyard. Some pointed out that people who took the produce might be hungry, or not have access to fresh food. There was a religious aspect to this outlook for those gardeners who viewed the bounty on their plots as God-given. At the same time, some were upset by theft because the thief did not *ask* – if only they had asked, produce would have been shared in the spirit of community.

Many of the gardeners who held the community space vision of the garden lived in the immediate neighborhood of the garden. Many were African American and Puerto Rican long-term residents of the public housing development. They were often seen gardening on more than one plot, just as multiple people gardened on the plot assigned to them. Instead of having a strong attachment to individual ‘private property’ plots, these gardeners supported each other by pitching in when someone was sick or away, or simply wanted to experience gardening. Ties with other gardeners and community members facilitated communal and caring behavior, which sometimes puzzled other gardeners who expected a one-to-one correspondence between person and plot. Sense of ownership came more from the input of labor: if someone helped plant a crop, it was considered partially theirs, even if it grew on someone else’s plot. There was a strong emphasis on honoring those who work the most in the garden, especially through physical labor. In a way, the community vision comes closest to bridging the garden with the desires of some in the surrounding neighborhood when they wish for a park that is accessible to all.

Removing the Eyesore

Although there were significant differences in defining this public space, its appearance, and appropriate behavior, the everyday encounters among people there were largely civil and often convivial. Perhaps because gardeners were brought together by a common interest of keeping the garden open, many went beyond civility and place-specific friendships (Lofland 1973) to enduring relationships that extended to their lives outside the garden. Many such relationships were among people of similar backgrounds, but some reached across significant lines of class, race, and ethnicity. In fact, several gardeners praised their experience in the garden because it had allowed them to become friends with the kinds of people with whom they did not normally interact. This appreciation of the opportunity to destabilize normal social categories was not limited to a particular vision of the garden or a particular demographic group.

Nevertheless, it is precisely this deeper engagement with difference that also led to conflict and deliberation over clashing values. Almost unanimously, gardeners complained about squabbles and tension marring their enjoyment of the space. Below is an account of one conflictual incident, demonstrating the processes through which the green vision tended to prevail in the garden. Through this incident, I describe the clash between different visions of the garden as it reflected the dynamics of local inequalities. What I want to emphasize is the way these visions were connected to societal hierarchies, how these hierarchies were resisted, and the way conflicting garden visions articulated with the processes of neighborhood change around the garden.

The conflict centered on the issue of clutter and excessive structures in the garden. Covered in lush growth in the summer, structures such as grape arbors, small and large cold frames, and elaborate supports for beans and squashes became starkly visible in the off season. These structures were against the formal garden rules, and the steering committee reminded the members to take them down to prepare for cold weather. However, some structures remained in the garden over the winter, particularly among those with the farm vision. The eyesore appearance of the garden drew complaints by some in the immediate neighborhood, and even calls to the Parks Department and local politicians. As mentioned, gardeners who wanted the garden to be a green space were particularly attuned to how the garden was perceived and pressed gardeners with unattractive plots to clean up. They were also more likely to be highly educated, middle class people who have dominated the garden steering committee. Their leadership and ability to advocate for their vision of the garden was supported by their access to economic, social, and cultural capital. They sometimes used legalistic language that served to intimidate and confuse, knew how to effectively engage city authorities, and facilitated meetings in a way that naturalized their agenda.

The main target of these so-called ‘lawyers’ in this instance was Maral, an elderly immigrant gardener from Western Asia, who, despite her advanced age and frailty, had amassed a vast collection of found objects that she claimed to need for future agricultural experiments and recycled art compositions. During the growing season, Maral’s plot was a multicolored spot full of flowering vines, including her signature ruby hyacinth beans. In the winter, the clutter of random objects was more visible, although many other plots had both clutter and large structures. One of the first to join the garden, Maral grew increasingly isolated from the other gardeners. The formal letter warning her that the steering committee would forcibly clear her plot was

couched in terms of a safety hazard posed by her constructions. On the day of the scheduled clean up, Maral arrived with a city employee who oversaw community gardens, and whom she had contacted with claims of elderly and disabled abuse. Although this official responded to Maral's call for help, he quickly reassessed the situation upon his arrival and sided forcefully with the green vision of the garden during the emotionally fraught several hours as other garden members carted away Maral's 'junk'. Although Maral attempted to bring objects back on her electric scooter, many of her structures were dismantled, including the scaffold for the hyacinth beans.

In confrontation with the elderly Maral's farm vision of the garden, the green vision prevailed, supported as it was not only by various forms of capital among garden leaders but also by institutional validation of the green vision by a city employee. Although this garden is not managed by philanthropic organizations that run many other community gardens in New York City, the cultural agendas of these organizations influence the context in which all community gardens operate (Eizenberg 2013, Martinez 2010, Zukin 2010). In the face of superior resources and capital of the green vision leadership, their arguments about the survival of the garden and safety, and the support they enjoyed from the city agency, gardeners with other visions did not interfere with the dismantling of Maral's garden even though many were uncomfortable with what transpired.

Resistance

Why was Maral's plot forcefully de-cluttered, while other gardeners with extensive structures on their plots were left largely undisturbed? The stories of two other gardeners illustrate the

dynamics of power in the garden, the space for resistance, and the connection to neighborhood change. An older and disabled gardener, Tai had a plot many considered to be more visually egregious than Maral's, with extensive scaffolding visible through the chain-link fence close to the main entrance. She was a sophisticated gardener who conducted experiments on her plot, even cross-breeding plants to create unique varieties. During the forceful cleanup of Maral's plot that winter, Tai received a harsh reprimand from the city worker for the appearance of her plot. One of the 'lawyers' gave Tai a written notice to clean up her plot or face Maral's fate. In a vivid illustration of just how differently people see the garden, Tai asked me and others to serve as her eyes and imagine what her critics would say about particular aspects of her plot. She was unable to see the same physical features in the same manner as the proponents of the green space vision. For her, everything had a purpose connected directly to the needs of her plants.

During the intervention, Tai wanted to know exactly which structures were in violation and asked for it in writing. Over the course of the next six months, Tai replaced some of the plastic and metal with more attractive wood, and a few of her objects were discarded by the steering committee. Nevertheless, much of her structure remained intact. In resisting the green space imperative, Tai not only drew on her reputation as a master gardener and on her experience with the operation of urban community gardens, but also on the extensive social capital she built in the garden through the sharing of knowledge, material goods, and goodwill. Some of her biggest critics qualified every statement about the ugliness of her plot with avowals of her generosity and kindness. And those who were less interested in the green space vision insisted that she be left alone to garden in her own way, and conceded that her dedication to recycling was worthy of praise. She was able to find people to help her interpret the legalistic language of the written warning and construct responses in English. Moreover, Tai drew on her own

residence in the public housing development to confuse and complicate arguments about the local community seeing the garden as an eyesore. For instance, she countered arguments about local residents' being offended by the ugliness of her prominently situated plot by saying that she also lived across the street. All of this made it difficult to mobilize much support for a forced cleanup of Tai's plot. By building multiple connections with people across lines of categorical difference and complicating morally-tinged discourses of localness (see also Martinez (2010)), Tai was able to push forward her farm vision of the garden, resisting the replication of stratifying structures that placed her in a vulnerable and powerless position.

Vision Prevails Over Rules

Meanwhile, Martin, a middle aged gardener who immigrated from Eastern Europe decades prior, had the largest structure in the entire garden. A skilled craftsman, he had built an enormous oblong cold frame, covered in milky plastic in the cold season. Unlike Maral and Tai, Martin built with clean lines and economy, and maintained a consistency of building material, using uniform pieces of wood rather than recycled metal and plastic. Enormous plants thrived underneath the cold frame, cultivated by custom cross-bred worms and irrigated by a system of small rain spouts. He saw nothing in common between his plot and those of Maral and Tai, but on the emotional winter day of the cleanup, the city official pointed out his plot as violating rules against structures. Martin was not there to defend himself but he did not need to be. Members of the steering committee directed the conversation immediately towards the beautiful, lush, and orderly paradise inside Martin's cold frame, which was not apparent because of the plastic covering it, and encouraged the city worker to go check it out for himself. It is not that Maral,

and especially Tai, did not have an extensive knowledge of gardening and utilize complex and innovative techniques. It is that, unlike Martin, the materials and the methods they used did not conform to the visual standards of the increasingly popular urban agriculture practices of gentrifying New York. Unlike Tai, Martin did not need to actively draw on his institutional knowledge or social networks that transcended visions of the garden, although as a middle class white man and a respected gardener, he would have had considerable resources there. The design of his plot, while violating the Parks Department rules about structures, strongly conformed to the aesthetic guidelines of the green vision associated with urban food production trends described by Zukin (2010), and would withstand challenges.

DISCUSSION

In studying a community garden in a diverse and gentrifying urban neighborhood, I found conviviality, formation of ties across difference, and significant conflict over the very definition and meaning of this tightly packed urban space. The differences in gardening practices were not simply part of a horizontal multicultural mosaic to be celebrated as part of the popular everyday diversity discourse (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Instead, they connected to social hierarchies being reproduced within this public space. In the conflicts over what the garden should look like and how people should act in it, those who wanted the garden to be a lush, green, orderly space were supported in implementing their vision by its resonance with the aesthetic preferences of high end developers and affluent residents. These aesthetic preferences were legitimized by institutional support of the Parks Department and the philanthropic organizations that manage many of the other community gardens in the city. Judgments of beauty or its lack, order and

disorder, worked to naturalize this vision of public space, reproducing the hierarchies in the larger society that privilege placemaking of more affluent white urban residents (Zukin 1995, 2010). These gardeners drew on their economic, social, and cultural capital to push through their agenda, at the expense of other ways of seeing the garden. They had the knowledge and skills to leverage support from powerful players such as city agencies and local politicians. Attempts by less privileged gardeners to do the same backfired, as when Maral enlisted a government official's help, and he turned against her, backing garden leaders who pushed the green vision of the garden. The same leaders advocated on behalf of another gardener whose structures violated garden rules, in part because his plot conformed to the aesthetic vision of ordered green lushness.

Rather than serving as a space of civil cosmopolitanism and fleeting encounter, the common focus of the gardeners resulted in deep engagement with difference, much of it conflictual and messy. But this messy conflict was valuable for bringing deliberation, uncovering unarticulated stances, and for occasionally destabilizing established and intertwined cultural and socioeconomic hierarchies (Amin 2002). The tensions and confrontations go against our ideals of harmonious community (Young 1986); yet, they are not only inevitable when diverse people truly engage with each other over a shared space and project, but can be more valuable than passing conviviality and cosmopolitanism. There was room for lived experience of diversity in this public space to lead to deliberation, meaningful engagement with difference, disruption of hierarchies, and cultural destabilization (Amin 2002). The friendships and allegiances went beyond fleeting encounters and could be marshaled when resisting the power structures that characterized the garden and its context. The engagement of gardeners with each other across gulfs of class, ethno-racial, and immigration differences opened up spaces for resistance that could benefit those with less power through formation of enduring ties. That

partly explains how Tai, described above, was able to avoid the forced destruction of her plot structures, while Maral was not successful.

The garden was embedded in powerful institutional hierarchies characterizing the neoliberal city, and as many urban gardens, it faced challenges to its future existence. I show that the internal dynamics of this space were a microcosm in which the struggles over gentrification and attendant changes in cultural norms and socioeconomic landscape played out among an extremely diverse group of gardeners. Although developed in a specific community garden, my typology of visions can be applicable elsewhere, particularly in public spaces that, like the garden, are characterized by significant user control and selective exclusion (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011). For instance, one can easily envision a similar configuration of visions in parks, plazas, green spaces, and sidewalks. Even in libraries, which are usually more directly controlled, there are disagreements between those who emphasize an aesthetically pleasing experience more on par with a bookstore café, those for whom library collections are most important, and those who see local libraries as community centers and resources. Similar dynamics may be applicable to private spaces, such common areas in coop buildings.

Diversity complicates everyday negotiations over the use of scarce urban public space, because it can potentially multiply the number of conflicting visions and make communication across class, cultural, and linguistic boundaries more difficult (Zukin 2010). At the same time, I have shown how conditions of diversity in the community garden occasionally helped create spaces of resistance to larger power structures. Gardeners from very different backgrounds engaged and formed enduring ties with people from very different backgrounds and ideas about the public space. This was facilitated by the characteristics of the community garden itself, including the sense of threat to its survival, the shared investment in its continuation, the

parochial nature of much of the interactions, and a sense of common purpose and activity combined with the physical demarcation of the discrete space to maximize the potential of deliberation and co-existence of competing visions. Public spaces with more transitory patterns of use, for instance, may not reach the same levels of engagement, although one can envision spaces other than community gardens that would exhibit some of the same characteristics. Libraries and flea markets, for instance, can facilitate meaningful interaction across cultural difference, realizing the interculturalist potential described by Sandercock (2004), where right to difference and right to participate in and occupy public space are continuously negotiated in daily interactions.

This community garden is situated in a rapidly changing neighborhood, experiencing not just an influx of different immigrant groups, but the development of housing and services for new affluent residents. With an enormous high end complex planned for the immediate vicinity of the garden, the neighborhood will soon house many more residents, putting pressure on shared spaces such as the garden. The city owns the land of the community garden, and concern about its future was ever present. The green vision for the garden is about making the garden look good in a way that is aligned with cultural consumption preferences of new affluent residents. It is part and parcel of the cultural changes that accompany the gentrification process: the community garden as a delectable sight that enhances the living environment of the affluent, mostly-white professionals in the same way as an organic farmers market or a pedestrian plaza (Zukin 2010). The delectability is enhanced by a visual display of human diversity, which draws middle class newcomers to urban neighborhoods, even though their engagement with people who are different from them may remain minimal (Wessendorf 2013).

Thus, the long-term survival of the garden may be predicated on dialing down its diversity – not necessarily its demographic diversity, but diversity of visions and viewpoints – and elevating one way of seeing the space to an overpowering paradigm for aesthetic and normative considerations. The community vision of the garden, especially, is threatened, as convivial socializing can easily be redefined as loitering and working class sociability, in general, becomes criminalized (Chaskin and Joseph 2013, Freeman 2006, Patillo 2007). The community vision holds the most promise as a compromise between those who want to garden and those among the local residents, particularly those in the public housing development, who would rather see a park or a community center with open access. As such, the loss of the community vision of the garden is a blow to the claim of these longtime residents on their neighborhood.

The implications of the dominance of one vision of the garden (the one held by the most advantaged gardeners and the city government agencies) are troubling for those who value democratic engagement and multicultural, multi-class alliances. A diverse community garden in a gentrifying neighborhood may become scrubbed of the messy everyday work of deliberation across difference. The cultural destabilization and resistance that takes place through meaningful interaction may become minimized, as one vision comes to dictate what the garden looks like and how people should use it. The unified front and consistent aesthetic presentation may safeguard the garden's survival, but at the cost of the more meaningful practices of diversity.

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