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Cover Page Footnote

This project is a part of larger research in the Anthropology Department of the University of Illinois at Chicago, led by Dr. Molly Doane. Data collection was done by the team, including the author.

Reconciliation and Resistance from the Ground Up: The Power of Affect in Chicago's Community Gardens

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Abstract

Chicago is the second city -- after Milwaukee in segregation. In the low-income, primarily black neighborhoods on the South Side of the city, community gardens are a spatial break with and grassroots activism against the grim landscape of economic, structural, and physical violence. But what is the gardens' social valence when they seem unable to countervail the ongoing history of marginalization by race and socioeconomic status? Drawing on affect theory, I illustrate how the slow and uneventful healing of personal tragedies in Chicago's community gardens is quiet, nascent resistance against neoliberal, post-racial injustices. In a society where the relationship between humans and nature has been heavily mediated by lopsided production and accumulation of capital, lives matter only if they fall neatly into the system of consumption and possession. Such mindset percolates through the space one inhabits and the experience in the space. A gardener's intimate interaction with nature circumvents capital's mediation between humans and nature and resurrects the lifeways that enable oneself, others, and the environment to coexist.

Keywords: Land, Nature, Community, Wellbeing, Gardening, Affect, Race

INTRODUCTION

One afternoon in the August of 2019, I met Ruth¹ in a community garden in Englewood, a primarily black, low-income neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago with high rates of crime and gun violence. Her son and his friends had frequented the garden before they were shot and killed in the neighborhood. The single incident of extreme violence snowballed into many others – Ruth was offered retaliation by local gang members and was asked by the police to go visit the mother of the suspect, which should have been a detective’s duty. She told me that she had resolved all things with God and wanted to hold a community service in the garden. The scorching sun, lushly overgrown vegetable beds, and mischievous figurines on the poles of the raised beds constituted a warm, peaceful ambience that contrasted with the grim reality that she recounted. Before she left, I helped her pick some green tomatoes to fry.

Community gardening has been popular grassroots activism since the 1970s, building on the history of communal resilience in times of crisis: liberty gardens during World War I, relief gardens during the Great Depression, and victory gardens during World War II (Birky 15). Recently, community gardens have endeavored to remedy social issues such as climate change, food injustice, and urban blight, often developing into organized political actions (Smith and Kurtz 194). The garden in Englewood also had a specific focus on fighting racial profiling, gun violence, and economic disinvestment while encouraging healing, solidarity, and resilience in the community. However, there have been criticisms that community gardening cultivates self-sufficient and color-blind neoliberal citizens under the guise of progressive “green solutions”; community gardening initiatives often ignore the history of community gardeners’ resilience against Othering, identify participants as “others” and offer a philanthropic solution to societal problems, and/or shift the state’s responsibility to make a just society onto gardeners (Guthman

¹ The names of the gardeners that appear in this article are pseudonyms.

443; Pudup 1238; McClintock 9). After all, was the garden in Englewood a futile consolation to Ruth, unable to bring about substantial social and political change? Did it act as a blithe hope as she navigated her unjust living conditions?

Although these are apt criticisms of white saviorism in community gardens and community gardening's seeming indifference to political action, they fail to account for more nuanced potential of community gardening experienced by gardeners and community members. Viewing from the on-the-ground perspectives of community gardeners in Englewood, I illustrate how community gardening, seemingly personal and non-political, restores the connections among the mind, body, community, and nature that was lost in the making of "structural" violence such as racial segregation, disinvestment, food injustice, and crime/physical violence. By getting to the root of such injustices, community gardening imagines a new future: a community of reconciliation and resilience.

THE SPACE

There are intricate connections between the individual, space, and society: configuration of a space follows social norms, spatial configuration shapes individual experiences, and individuals create and reinforce social norms (Gerber 14). The Cartesian dichotomy of nature and culture (society) allowed human societies to conquer nature while placing "pristine nature" on a pedestal. Spaces that harbored elaborate connections among lives and non-lives have been altered to prioritize capital-producing activities over indigenous ways of life (Povinelli) and enabled "uneven development" bent on accumulating capital in various landscapes, exemplified by the concentration of mass-production in rural areas and Third World countries, concentration of consumption and market activities in cities, and urban issues such as gentrification and uneven distribution of resources (Smith 2).

Chicago's development as a commercial urban center is a case in point. Like any other "frontier" cities in the Great West, the beginning of the city of Chicago was driven by capitalists who saw market opportunities there. Land was developed to maintain an economic relationship between the city as a consumer/wholesaler and the country as a supplier (Cronon 54). The city's population grew twenty-fold and its land value two thousand times in the first few years of development in the 1830s (52). Complex webs of ecosystems and human lifeways that dotted the land became a grid of purchasable plots (102), dozens of native grasses were cleared for a few marketable crops like wheat and corn (99), and woodlands were lumbered for shipment to Chicago (101). By the turn of the century, Chicago was an established "gateway city" of the Midwest – processing grain, lumber, and meat from the countryside and supplying industrial products to smaller towns and mature economies in New York and Europe (52).

Development for profit often results in exploitation of nature and humans, as exemplified by the history of Englewood. Initially populated by German and Irish immigrant workers, Englewood was a predominantly white and commercially important area until the 1940s with the second largest shopping center in the city and a population of about 90,000 (Chicago Historical Society 1). Following the nationwide segregation and deindustrialization in the post-World War II period, Englewood was quickly populated by African Americans from the South who could not find housing elsewhere in the city and the exodus of middle-class whites to the suburbs followed (Roberts and Stamz 87). While investment was flowing to the more profitable (white, upper- middle-class) areas in the city, Englewood's housing stock plummeted despite incoming waves of black migration, the shopping center deteriorated, businesses moved out, and the population decreased by more than 50% (Chicago Historical Society 1). The attempt to revive the shopping center was unsuccessful and construction projects such as the Dan Ryan

Expressway displaced over a thousand residents (Roberts and Stamz 99). Today, residents in Englewood are 94.6% African-American and 59.8% have a yearly income of less than \$25,000 (citywide percentage is 26.7%) (The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning 5). 34.1% of its population in the labor force is unemployed (14) and 21.5% of its land is vacant lots (9). The current landscape of Englewood is what is left of the exploited space. Just seven miles South from downtown Chicago, boarded-up houses, pawn shops, liquor stores, and vacant lots are strewn over the neighborhood and weeds grow over cracked sidewalks as tall grasses. The area is devoid of corporate presence, the major supplier of resources in cities.

WHAT THE LAND GIVES US BECOMES US

Food tells a story of the land that happened to be unprofitable and thus undesirable. The land that was once covered with sought-after businesses is now abandoned and seems to have lost the ability to nourish lives. Arthurine, the director of a production farm in Englewood describes food experience in the neighborhood:

Englewood spans from 55th Street to 75th street, the Expressway to Damen. And they have two grocery stores – Aldi and a Whole Foods. And often I tell people the unemployment rate in West Englewood is forty-four percent. And that was before COVID. So you can only imagine that Whole Foods may not be the most affordable place for many people in this community, so they're left with that Aldi. And you and I both know that's not enough produce to feed this entire neighborhood. They deserve more and they deserve better. And often in communities like this the produce that you see, it won't look like this [points to the plants surrounding her]...sometimes rotten, sometimes all mold over, sometimes they receive the last when other neighborhoods get the first. So that type of produce, that type of food, that little access you know feeds into

the fact that there are corner stores on every block and all you can find are dollar-chips and dollar-pops where that's more affordable. Every fast-food chain is in this neighborhood. And so then people will tell you that they're just not healthy and they don't wanna be healthy. But really they're not providing a lot of opportunity for folks to have healthy choices. And so if you eat this as a kid and you grow up eating chips and pop, when you're an adult you'll eat that, and how that affects your health is you know not only obesity but also the low-nutrient foods you're putting into your body will definitely create some of these, you know, disparities and health challenges that you see in our community. Not just obesity but heart disease, hypertension, diabetes – all these things start with what you eat. It's, it's one of those things that you can change with what you eat but is also rooted in what you eat. So if you start like that, when you become an adult you also teach your children to eat like that. And that's how you get generational um opportunities where you just have health challenges from generation to generation to generation, so...

Built on the contaminated soil of urban land, many community gardens and urban farms have grown fresh produce for the community, including the farm mentioned above that has started to donate about 50% of its harvest to the community instead of selling it to more affluent neighborhoods in the city. A living example of transition from “dollar-chips and dollar-pops” to wholesome eating is Gary, one of the farmers who work for Arthurine; he still remembers the day when he first had a swiss chard sandwich and experienced how vegetables can be actually delicious. He acknowledges that exposure to gardening has changed his eating habits.

Growing food nourishes the body, but if community gardening were merely about supplying groceries, it would be an suboptimal alternative to continued investment to ensure the residents have access to fresh produce and earn enough incomes to purchase it. Growing vegetables is much more than that; In fact, growing crops in the Englewood community is a historical expression of power and resilience. According to Judith Carney, West Africans that were sold to the Americas as slaves brought with themselves the skill and knowledge for cultivating rice and the lifeways associated with it (2). Even though their skill, knowledge, and lifeways were exploited to generate capital for profiteers, the history of farming in black communities that have roots in the South like Englewood symbolizes sovereignty over production of nature. In an interview with Leonard, a food justice activist in Englewood, he recounted his childhood in Englewood after World War II when local stores carried seasonal produce and wild game. Community residents, many of whom had migrated from the South, went back frequently to gain fresh fruits and vegetables as well as maintained their own production gardens. Leonard's own grandfather would send huge boxes of produce he had grown in the South; Leonard, an elderly man himself, still remembers a boxful of lemons the size of grapefruit. Food consumption followed seasonality for the most part, with a few exceptions such as canning and making relishes. He sees gardening as "reclaiming indigeneity," tapping into the history of "the close relationship that people had all over this planet to the way the sun works, the way that stars work, [and] the seasons" through growing and caring for plants. In the same vein, Sue, a gardener at the Englewood garden where I met Ruth, identifies the meaning of the garden as "exposure" to nature and reconnecting young residents to the "ancestral knowledge" of growing that the elderly have. She acknowledges that the produce grown in the garden is too little to feed the residents on the block, but she also recognizes the power of having a choice to

carve out one's own healthy relationship with nature starting from small activities such as eating and growing. In the land where healthy food is not marketable, making the land produce healthy food is not a suboptimal survival strategy but a resistance to a commodified food experience and reconciliation with the body, history, and land.

A STRANGE BEAUTY THAT BINDS US TOGETHER

Community gardens' off-the-grid charm and serenity offer healing as one gardener admits: "Gardening helps me connect with myself. I can let go of everything outside this fence when I'm here." Candice, a three-time cancer survivor and garden leader in Englewood also identifies community gardening as key to her recovery. Reconnection and healing within oneself in community gardens is also communal by nature. Candice has started a support network for cancer patients as well as other ill gardeners:

But we find that we ... these green gathering spaces, like the gardens, is where people are flocking to, not only for gardening, but camaraderie... just being in green space. We've got four of our residents involved in uh, the project that have been, uh, breast cancer. And they have been saying that coming to the garden was the biggest piece of their recovery. Who knew that gardens could play that kind of integral role in the recovery of breast cancer patients? Who knew? Right? So, it's not just providing food, in a food scarce area, it's also providing *a safe haven, a green place, where people can feel welcomed and supported* in the community (italics by author).

Formerly local drug dealers' lot, Candice's community garden has brought about peace and resilience that no landscaping company could replicate. A few years ago, she had the joy of hearing from the police district commander that daily crime reports on the block had gone down significantly since the garden came about.

In the garden where I met Ruth, virtues like wisdom and patience were painted on signs, stones, and wood stumps (Fig. 1). The chickens in the garden were named after figures related to black rights or women's rights such as Nina Simone and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The garden was a meeting place for the elderly women's council, town hall meetings, communal



Figure 1 A wooden sign at the entrance. "Deep Peace of the running water to you // Deep Peace of the quiet earth to you // Moon and stars pour their healing light on you // DEEP PEACE Deep Peace"

healing events, and other gatherings. At the events, people often chanted "We just live life" or had a resident recite a poem about how one needs to love and be reconciled to oneself first in order to fight for change in the community. The warmth rubbed off on visitors, too. On my visits, I was always offered to taste the food or take some of the produce home. In an interview, a Latina gardening intern said that the garden was "a place where like I receive[d] the most hugs every day."

IT'S AN AFFECTUAL LIFE

Community gardening addresses social issues such as lack of fresh food, crime and violence, and lack of green space. However, seeing it from a distance as a grassroots solution to these problems does not do justice to what the process of community gardening involves. "Making and growing" (Jepson 148), the processes of living that community gardening brings about, gives new meaning to land other than human use for capital and revives the senses and lifeways that have been erased by the capital-centered view of nature. Ebube, a gardener in Englewood said in an interview:

Gardening, for me, allows you to interact with the earth, it allows you to know that there's a part of the process that you don't control. You can wish or work for a certain outcome, but don't be rigid about making it happen. When you study it [gardening], you become one with it. You know, I tell people now that nothing I do is driven by the things that drive people in this world: time, gender, sex, money... If you are driven by those things and don't get them, other things happen and you get unhappy. So you have a duty to make yourself happy. A deeper form of happiness is joy. Like, when I got a chance to stick my hand in the dirt and play with worms... I had no knowledge of what worms do, I was always told they were slimy creatures, but wasn't taught to appreciate what they do for the soil and what they do as a part of the ecological process. I understood that later in life, but not as a child growing up. Gardening, to me, is a non-thinking exercise. I mean, there's a certain level of activity that requires a thinking process, but sometimes you have to let go of that. You don't control the seasons. You don't control photosynthesis. All you control is how you manage your time with the garden. No matter how much attention you pay to it or how good the equipment is that you have, the results can still be negative because you don't control certain outcomes. So you have to gracefully surrender.

The lack of fresh food, fear of violence, and depreciating landscape in Englewood are the flip side of the desirable rhythm of life, or "affect" of urban life. In city life where we medicate ourselves by "composing ourselves patiently toward fulfilling the promise of living not too intensely the good life of ... a decaffeinate sublime" (Berlant 100), we occupy the tightly knit urban lattice yet dream of cloistered backyard kingdoms, tranquil family lives, trendy leisure venues, and professional workplaces. Happiness is always set in the future while at present we

work to keep alive the mirage of future happiness. In that way, one is spurred on to be “productive” and “profitable” yet perceive it as great freedom to have a happy dream to work towards (Foucault 12). All physical and mental senses are reduced to “the sense of having” and nature has “lost its mere utility by use becoming human use” to generate profit (Marx 162). When even our longing for “being lost in nature” translates to green spaces in neighborhoods that are worth the investment, community gardening invites the gardener to commit to simple but faithful care for the lives that inhabit the garden. The more the gardener gets to know the garden, the more apparent it becomes that one cannot “own” or “control” the garden; the promise of having transforms into the sense of knowing and humbly accepting the beauty of what is at present.

While the affect of disconnection, profit-making, and exploitation works through everyday life, the space-making and growing exercise of community gardening attempts to reconfigure society through attaching new meaning and affect to abandoned urban spaces. Community gardening invites the gardener to reexamine the nebula of anxiety and hope that the gardener lives by. Reconnecting with oneself coincides with reconnecting with nature, which situates the gardener in a reality where productivity and profitability cannot be controlled. Also, connection with nature and the community amidst the lack of fresh food, communal amenities, and public infrastructure in Englewood is an act of reclaiming ancestral lifeways that operated without capital’s mediation between humans and nature.

Community gardening may seem ineffective compared to the “capital first” mindset that is entrenched in society and shapes daily affectual encounters. Nevertheless, the everyday experience of making and growing is a new way of living that breaks off from the ubiquitous affect of production, from what and how we eat to what space we occupy. From an ecological

perspective, transformation from one equilibrium between nature and society to another involves seeing a crisis as a window of opportunity and making incremental changes, which can lead to global transformation (Folk et al. 7). Community gardening may be one of the incremental changes that can uproot the affect of the settler mindset and construct spaces where all lives interact and coexist.

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