



Gated gardens: Effects of urbanization on community formation and commons management in community gardens

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ABSTRACT

Community gardens are often positioned as spaces where urban people can build community, reclaim common space, and reassert a “right to the city” in urban landscapes that are shaped by gentrification and the privatization of space. However, the literature on urban agriculture often focuses on the struggles of gardens to endure external political-economic processes, largely overlooking within-garden tensions relating to social inequality and resource access. In this study we examined how the pressures associated with urbanization are inscribed in three community garden landscapes in the central coast of California—a region undergoing massive urban transformation in recent decades. The cases reveal that social tensions from urbanization permeate garden boundaries to influence the production of space and the social relations within the garden. Specifically, the resource struggles and social inequities in these regions are made visible in the gardens through conflicts over membership rules, resource management, and theft of produce. The analysis of these conflicts illustrates how extreme real estate valuation and gentrification shapes the particular ways in which the urban commons are managed, including the forms of inclusion and exclusion, claims-making, and racialization of resources that are employed. Uncovering and complicating our understanding of the struggles of and tensions within community gardens is a necessary step in the pursuit of “just sustainability” within changing cityscapes.

1. Introduction

“Give me the flowers or I will call the police,” Lori shouted, brandishing a pair of garden shears.

“Get the fuck away from me.” The middle aged woman she was addressing was undeterred, maintaining her grasp on the bunch of pink roses in one hand and a pair of children’s Crayola scissors in the other.

“Give me the flowers, drop the scissors, and I am calling the police. You are not welcome here,” Lori insisted.

“Get the fuck away from me lady.” The woman shoves Lori, but in the process falls to the ground herself. She drops both flowers and scissors. In what feels like a blink of an eye, she scrambles back up and briskly walks out the the gate down the street, turning into a driveway.

“Hi, I’d like to report an incidence of theft...Yes...I’m at Mayston Community Garden.”

This incident—observed during participant observation in a Santa Cruz urban garden—displays a side of community gardening that is not often discussed in contemporary scholarship. Garden shears are not

conventionally thought of as weapons, nor roses as sites of neighborhood contestation. Yet, in gardens, where—as one gardener explained—the “worst kind of pest is the two-legged kind,” garden shears can take on a completely different role in what (or who) they prune. Fruits, vegetables, and flowers that are cultivated and cared for in community gardens represent more than toil and sweat—they internalize the politics of place within and outside the garden gate. The ways in which gardeners use particular “weapons,” from garden shears to personal fences to rules and regulations, reveal the nuanced strategies and practices by which they proclaim a right to community membership, a right to common resources, and a right to space in the city.

Urban community gardens are situated in landscapes where capitalist urbanization transforms nature and social relations (Williams, 1973; Harvey, 1989). Urbanization can broadly be described by land conversion into impervious cover, and by distinct socioeconomic and sociopolitical processes (Grimm et al., 2008). Urban political ecologists (e.g., Heynen et al., 2006a) characterize urbanization processes by: capital accumulation and the externalization of nature (*sensu Marx*, 1976; Harvey, 1982; Cronon, 1991); uneven geographic (both physical, socioeconomic) development (Smith, 1982); and the exclusion and marginalization of some social groups for the benefit of others

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(Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Swyngedouw and Kaika, 2000). Capitalist urbanization is thus a socio-environmental process of political and economic changes based around material production and exchange that transform humanity's relationship to nature to produce the distinct spatial form and social relations of urban landscapes (cities) (Swyngedouw and Kaika, 2000; Heynen et al., 2006a; Angelo, 2016). Specifically, because capitalist urbanization processes tend to emphasize difference in socioeconomic status, unequal power relations between social groups are woven into the social and political fabric of cities (Heynen et al., 2006a). The enclosure of common city spaces in pursuit of capital accumulation frequently results in dispossession and marginalization of underprivileged groups (Harvey, 2003; De Angelis, 2003; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2013, 2015). Cities may, for instance, perpetuate racialized inequality through land use planning and policies that privilege high income homeowners at the expense of low income minorities (Barracough, 2009). Furthermore, gentrification processes of capital investment and displacement of the poor by new affluent classes frequently reorder neighborhood socioeconomics and demographics (Lees et al., 2007; Slater, 2011). Urbanization, in short, is a pervasive spatial and social process of changing land use and shifting property and power relations (Brenner and Schmid, 2003) that shapes social life (Angelo, 2016).

Urban land transformation does not go uncontested, however. Urban green spaces such as community gardens—collective or allotment style managed spaces for fruit, vegetable and flower cultivation—can be central sites for urban residents to reclaim the urban environment by carving out common spaces and new forms of community (Schmelzkopf, 1995; Von Hassell, 2002; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004; Kingsley and Townsend, 2006; Rosol, 2010). In community gardens, residents can grow food and reconnect with nature in a social environment in the context of biodiversity loss, food insecurity and social alienation due to urbanization (Okvat and Zautra, 2011; Guitart et al., 2012). Geographers often theoretically situate gardeners' claiming of space, commons, and natural resources within Henri Lefebvre's (1991, 1996) theories of urban space, including the "right to the city" (see Barron, 2016 for a thorough summary). Here, commoning—collective community ownership and land management—can be "a mechanism for redistribution through which underprivileged residents compensate themselves for uneven urban development" (Eizenberg, 2012: 779). Through commoning, it is argued, community gardening can challenge neoliberal property regimes of urban environments (Blomley, 2005, 2004) and provide residents an opportunity to resist privatization and engage in political discourse and community governance for a more just urban society (Follmann and Viehoff, 2015).

The struggles of community gardens to persist and maintain their commons in the city is captured in a rich literature (e.g., Barracough, 2009; Irazabal and Punja, 2009; Schmelzkopf, 2002; Staeheli, 2008), but this work tends to focus on the tensions between gardens and external political-economic processes while largely overlooking the within-garden tensions that result from surrounding urban pressures. Depictions of the "community garden" as a singular actor faced with urban stressors can obscure the nuanced ways in which those stressors infiltrate commons management within gardens and differentially shape the garden experiences of various social groups. Some limited scholarship has examined how gardens create community through enclosure or by playing on racial and ethnic difference, thus producing exclusionary spaces that belie idealized notions of community garden inclusivity (Kurtz, 2001; Glover, 2004; Tan and Neo, 2009; Beilin and Hunter, 2011; Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Neo and Chua, 2017). Some work has also situated city commons establishment, governance and maintenance within place-based urban political economies (Rosol, 2010, 2012) and has revealed how community garden social networks are entangled in uneven urban landscapes of social and political inequality (Domene and Sauri, 2007; Milbourne, 2012). Concerns about garden persistence in a changing political and biophysical context, it

has been shown, can shape both community garden internal governance processes and external representation and relations with the city (Gröning, 2005; Spilková, 2017; Spilková and Vágner, 2017; Rosol, 2012). This literature enriches our understanding of community gardens by exploring them through different social perspectives and geographic scales, but it touches only tangentially on the multi-layered and intersectional ways in which urban pressures are internalized within the gardens themselves.

This article explores the varied ways in which city-scale urbanization processes manifest within urban gardens, altering how garden communities are delineated and how communal resources are managed. We draw from fieldwork on the social life of three community gardens in two rapidly gentrifying urban regions in California's Silicon Valley. We conducted semi-structured interviews with gardeners and garden managers at each of the gardens (approximately 10 at each, 32 total) in the summer of 2017 to ask gardeners about the benefits, challenges, and nuances of community garden participation. In addition, we used participant observation at garden events (e.g., public community events, barbecues and potlucks), and reviewed each of the garden's rules and regulations to gain insight into community dynamics and to better understand the governance structures of the gardens. To protect participant confidentiality, all garden and gardener names are pseudonyms.

Our analysis situates gardens within their respective complex gentrifying city landscapes, furthering the argument that broader urban dynamics such as racialized othering (Glover, 2004) and enclosure (Neo and Chua, 2017) can complicate urban agriculture's commons management and thus its potential to achieve food justice and enact the "right to the city" (McClintock, 2017). We draw on an urban political ecology framework that necessitates discussions of power, race, and unequal control of resources in the socio-ecological arrangements of cities (Heynen et al., 2006a, 2006b; Quastel, 2009), as well as research on the conflict and exclusion often entailed in commons governance (Dietz et al., 2003; De Angelis, 2010; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). In the three gardens we studied, the urban stressors which pervade the Silicon Valley region manifested themselves particularly in tensions over the boundaries of the garden community and over access to the garden's common resources. The configurations of community and of commons management that emerge in each garden as a strategy for coping with these tensions are quite different; facing similar challenges, these gardens react differently. In the garden we call Grovesdale, the need to demonstrate the garden's value in the face of mounting commercial pressures on real estate has led to an exclusive membership regime and the removal of problematic common trees to make room for new member plots. In this case, both community-building and commons management occurs as a top-down process, with power centralized in the hands of garden managers. In Arborway Community Garden, tensions emerge over management of common land and water resources, giving rise to community fissures along lines of race and ethnicity. This case illuminates the racialization of space and natural resources within the garden that muddles portrayals by gardeners (and some scholars e.g., Baker, 2004; Lyson, 2004) of community gardens as oases of biodiversity and human diversity. Finally, in Mayston Community Garden, the social inequality surrounding the garden is internalized through heated battles with non-garden members over theft of garden produce. In this case, community building is a grassroots process, but one centered around the exclusion of non-members.

Our exploration of these three cases reveals that community gardens are not simply a bulwark against growing inequality and the privatization of urban space; these tensions also manifest *inside* the gardens through multi-layered conflicts over such seemingly mundane topics as membership rules, water rationing, and theft of produce. Through our analysis of the complicated lives of these gardens, we illustrate what Staeheli (2008), building on Foucault (1982) calls the "agonisms"—the struggles and reciprocal adversarial interactions among members—embedded in community delineation and commons management

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