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**Appropriating a People's Movement: The Relationship Between Gentrification and  
Community Gardens in New York City**

A Dissertation Presented

by

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to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

in

**Sociology**

Stony Brook University

**December 2016**

**Stony Brook University**

The Graduate School

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**Appropriating a People's Movement: The Relationship Between Community Gardens and**

**Gentrification in New York City**

by

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**Sociology**

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**2016**

In this dissertation, I study the intersection of community gardens with gentrification. In much of the gentrification scholarship, gentrification was studied from the macro level and was thought to result from changes in the housing market, hence being viewed as a top-down process in which the elite revitalized decaying urban neighborhoods by bringing capital into these areas and building higher end housing and services or was driven by consumer choices of privileged individuals (Smith 1979; Ley 1981). Some scholars maintained a connection between community gardens and gentrification, by insisting that gardens helped facilitate gentrification (Martinez 2010; Weissman 2012). I take this argument further by contending that gentrification was a much more complex process by examining the ways in which the low-income people's efforts in reclaiming their blighted and decaying neighborhoods by building community gardens in the 1970s and 1980s led to gentrification in the 1990s and beyond. Indeed, real estate developers were predators of the people's efforts and the people helped to subsidize the

revitalization of the city. The gardeners certainly did not cause gentrification to occur, but their efforts in revitalizing their neighborhoods had a significant role in the process of gentrification that has been overlooked by researchers. With this understanding, I argued that the city was indebted to community gardeners for their unpaid efforts in revitalizing the city and, since gentrification was permitted by city policies, that there needed to be stronger policy protections for the gardens.

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Chapter 1: The Relationship Between Community Gardens  
and Gentrification in NYC

## *Introduction*

This dissertation examines the relationship between community gardens and gentrification. Most gentrification scholarship has focused on the macro level, assuming that the housing market was a master independent variable; with gentrification viewed as a top-down process in which the elite revitalized decaying urban neighborhoods by bringing capital into these areas, building higher end housing, and instituting functional services—with these dynamics driven by the consumer choices of privileged individuals (Smith 1979; Ley 1980).

A few scholars have argued a causal connection between community gardens and gentrification, insisting that gardens helped facilitate gentrification (Martinez 2010; Weissman 2012). I extend this argument, viewing gentrification as a much more complex process in which the low-income residents of color have begun reclaiming their blighted and decaying neighborhoods, in considerable degree by building community gardens, and that the upgraded communities then attracted the attention of developers and economically privileged white gentrifiers. In this respect, real estate developers were predators, exploiting the sweat equity of low income residents, whose investment subsidized—without compensation—the “revitalization” of the city and their own displacement. Based on the evidence and analysis presented in this dissertation, I argue that New York (and other cities) is indebted to community gardeners for their unpaid efforts in revitalizing the city and, that there needs to be stronger



policy protections for the gardens and for the community residents who establish and nurture them.

### *Theory and Definitions*

I begin presenting this argument and evidence by defining some of the terms I use repeatedly in this project, in the context of New York City in the forty years up to 2010. First, I would like to specify what I mean by the terms urban agriculture, urban farms, and community gardens. During the period under study, urban agriculture, was an inclusive term referring to the process of growing, cultivating, and distributing food in a city (as opposed to a rural area). Urban farms were spaces where such activities of growing food occurred, with a substantial portion of the food sold as a commodity to non-participants. Community gardens were public spaces used to collectively grow food by a group of people, with the product primarily consumed by the local community. Whereas urban farms focused on the business of food production community gardens focused on supplying healthy food to the community; contributing to education, development, and environmental stewardship; and building collective relationships within the community. Urban farms tend to judge their success using quantitative measures such as such as pounds of vegetables grown and revenues generated, while community gardens focused on qualitative measures related to improving the community.

Central to my theoretical framework is the concept of power and how disenfranchised groups fight for equity and inclusion in society. This concept is foundational in terms such as “environmental racism” and “environmental justice.” Environmental racism is a sociological

term that refers to policies and practices that cause communities of color (usually also low-income communities) to suffer disproportionately from exposure to toxins in the air, water, land, and food. Communities of color were often targeted for the siting and placement of toxic facilities like waste transfer stations, incinerators, landfills, sewage treatment facilities; and, as a consequence, people of color were more likely than whites to live near a toxic facility. A relevant example was documented in a Commission for Racial Justice study, which found African-Americans were almost 80% more likely than whites (even when controlled for income) to live in a neighborhood where industrial pollution was considered to cause the greatest health risks (Bullard 2007). This study further found that three of the five largest waste facilities dealing with hazardous materials in the United States were located in low-income African-American communities. The same study found that 60% of African Americans and Latinos — and 50% of Native Americans — lived in areas near toxic waste sites. Native Americans were also more likely to live on polluted land (Bullard 2007).

Decades ago, scholars concluded that the lack of affordable, fresh produce was a form of environmental racism, illustrated by the fact that in many communities of color, there was a dearth of grocery stores, and the grocers that were available sold mostly packaged, processed food high in salt and sugar. Food-insecure communities were (and continue to be) places with high poverty rates and low access to healthy food (Story, Kaphingst, Robinson-O'Brien, & Glanz, 2008). The impact of industrialized, processed food on the environment was clearly deleterious; moreover, the impact of eating these types of food on people's health was equally harmful, especially to people of color. A New York Times editorial from 2009 argued that upwards of 750,000 New York City residents resided in what were known as “food deserts,” neighborhoods where it was near impossible to find a “fresh apple or unfried potato” (NYT

2009). The impact was that these communities suffered disproportionately from health problems like obesity, hypertension, high blood pressure, and diabetes (which many argue was a consequence of environmental racism). I would like to critique the use of this term, “food deserts” for a couple reasons. For one, food actually existed in desert regions, both in the wild as well as cultivated, evident by the indigenous peoples who lived in arid, desert geographies for thousands of years (Nabhan 2002). Secondly, the use of a natural geographical category to describe what was essentially a man-made condition was problematic because it elided the ways in which food deserts were created by policies. Moreover, food deserts were created as a result of racist redlining and zoning laws and tax incentives that created disinvestment in urban centers (by enabling the grocery stores to fly out to the suburbs when the whites left the city) while providing resources for suburban growth (McClintock, eds by Alkon and Agyeman 2011). “Food apartheid” refers to this deliberate creation of an unjust food system within marginalized communities (Sbicca 2012). In the article “Growing food justice by planting an anti-oppression foundation” Sociologist Joshua Sbicca said: “The term “food desert” has emerged as a term to describe a condition, which often leads food activists to lend charitable support to manage the symptoms of the condition, whereas a term such as “food apartheid” lends itself to an analysis of the structural causes behind the condition. This framing reflects anti-oppression ideology...” (Sbicca 2012: 461). Thus, food deserts were certainly not the result of a natural process but were indeed man-made, in the same way that I discuss the fiscal crisis of the late 1970s as being deliberately engineered by the economic elite in Chapter 2.

“Environmental justice” referred to an equitable distribution of environmental burdens benefits. When first developed, it sought to challenge and end the hegemonic practice in which the benefits of environmental degradation (e.g., degrading the environment to extract raw

materials for economic development) were privatized through corporate acquisition, but the costs were socialized through public responsibility for environmental restoration. “Food justice” referred to communities exercising their right to grow, sell and eat healthy food. Similar to the definition of environmental justice, food justice ensured that “the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly” (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010: 6). Healthy food is pure, nutritious, affordable, culturally-appropriate and grown locally with consideration and regard for the well-being of the land, workers and for the larger ecosystem to which we were connected. By “food justice” I also refer to movements that have attempted to address hunger by dealing with the underlining issues of racial and class disparity and the inequities in the food system related to economic and political oppression. “Autonomy” is central to this conceptualization of food justice, implying the self-reliance of communities in the sense of having control over their conditions of living and decisions that impact their lives.

The term “food sovereignty” was coined by an international network of indigenous farmers, peasants, fishers, women, and other rural peoples called Via Campesina (Via Campesina 2012). It referred to the right of people to control their own food, agriculture, livestock and fishing systems. The proposed policies based on ideas of food sovereignty were a response food choices and production dominated by large corporate powers and global market forces. Some principles of food sovereignty included community and direct democratic control of local resources, protecting the rights of nature, and access to pure food as a basic human right.

Theoretically, I have situated this project within Marxist environmental theories that have critiqued the unsustainable nature of capitalist production, which I utilized to point out the importance of community gardening as an alternative process of social and material production

(Schnaiberg 2002). I drew upon social movement literature such as political opportunity theory (McAdam 1982) to shed light on the ways in which individual actors transformed their communities through their involvement in community gardening. I examined the ways in which community gardens have been created when a political opportunity arises at the local level, which was the case with many of the community gardens that were built in the 1970s in New York City neighborhoods decimated by delinquent landlords and negligence from the local government. Community members founded urban agriculture sites by squatting on vacant and abandoned lots, eventually turning the space into a community garden or other community institution. I hypothesized that the urban blight and economic downturn of the 1970s presented a political opportunity for members to organize community gardens. In the period of gentrification, after the 1990s, with heightened commercial development interest in inner-city neighborhoods, there was less opportunity for community members to occupy vacant lots due to local government and capitalist real estate developers' control of public spaces, hence affording less political opportunity.

Certainly, capitalism's emphasis on relentless profit accumulation contributed to ecological degradation as a result of extractive industries centered on growth and modernization, which leads to greater waste, destruction, and pollution. Allan Schnaiberg (2002) developed a theoretical framework based on conflict theory called the Treadmill of Production that offered an explanation of the environmental problems encountered as a result of advanced capitalist social relations. The owners of the means of production sought to increase profits by expanding technology, searching for new markets, and seeking more natural resources and docile labor force, which then also drove the expansion of production and consumption. This process led to a cycle of production that required more production in order to generate profit accumulation,

particularly since all sectors of society (capital, the state, and labor) were dependent upon the model of economic growth (in terms of maximizing the bottom line) as addressing issues like unemployment and poverty alleviation (issues that were often caused by the very expansion in technology and industry in the first place). Growth put ever-increasing demands on the environment by extracting natural resources and energy (and also by replacing human labor with technology and chemicals), thereby generating waste and pollution. The treadmill model asserted that “economic expansion is generally viewed as the core of any viable social, economic or environmental policy” (Schnaiberg, Pellow and Weinberg 2002: 17). This model helped to explain the process by which New York City fell into a fiscal crisis as well as the plan that was created by the economic elite to capitalize off of the crisis in order to maximize profits, while externalizing the costs of waste, pollution, and destruction onto the people. It is crucial to note that racism permeated this economic model at its core.

In *Resisting Global Toxins* (2007), David Pellow added to Schnaiberg's analysis by including racial as well as class dynamics in the treadmill model. He found race was (and continues to be) a strong predictor of who was most likely to experience the costs of environmental degradation. Pellow argued that the treadmill model “was fundamentally rooted in a Marxist orientation that paid less attention to the dynamics of racism and culture in the division of social and environmental benefits and costs” (Pellow 2007: 22). This exclusive focus on class relations was likely to ignore the tendency of poor people and people of color suffering disproportionately from environmental costs than others, evident in the widespread practice of environmental racism.

Both Pellow’s and Schnaiberg’s ideas related to community gardens in one sense because the treadmill model disconnected people from being able to access fresh food in their

communities.<sup>1</sup>This separation was especially pronounced in low-income communities of color due to the combination of their lack of access to fresh food and quality healthcare, both of which were needed to mitigate the effects of the poor quality food available to them. In low-income urban areas in cities like New York, people of color suffer disproportionately from the health risks evident with industrially-produced food because they also often lack the basic healthcare needed to address the illnesses that result from this lack of quality, nutritious food since the typical profile of the uninsured in New York City was a low-income person of color (indeed, rates of uninsured persons were well-above the national average in predominantly low-income communities of color) (Urban Institute 2009). Hence these communities of color became more vulnerable to systems of oppression and the risks inherent in them because they lack proper food and healthcare. For these reasons, community gardens provided much needed access to fresh food and health promoting physical activity to low-income communities of color, which also made the destruction of gardens that much more egregious for these communities. The benefits of community gardens extended beyond the level of the individual to the collective as well.

In addition to providing a source of much needed life-sustaining food and physical activity, urban agriculture, including both gardens and farms, also provided an economic and social anchor in communities devastated by poverty and being encroached by gentrifying developers. By building community ties, community gardens inspired hope, unity, and collective strength to stand up against gentrifiers and other entities that sought to destroy communities. In some communities, such as in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, community gardens had in some ways facilitated gentrification by making the neighborhoods more

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“desirable” to middle-class white people and developers. The gardens helped to more importantly sustain community ties and networks that were built through these processes of community gardening so that community members organized and sustained attacks to their community (for instance from developers). Thus, community gardens, by using sustainable methods, worked to mitigate the negative effects of environmental racism both in terms of creating a healthier physical environment, as well as by providing the community with access to nutritious food as well as helping to strengthen and unify community to stand for their collective well-being.

The approach of Public Sociology helped to frame this project as well. Michael Burawoy, who was credited with being the founder of this approach, said that Public Sociology “endeavors to bring sociology into dialogue with audiences beyond the academy, an open dialogue in which both sides deepen their understanding of public issues” (Burawoy 2007). Public sociology sought to involve broader communities in important societal issues and encourages sociologists to participate in explicitly public and political issues. Moreover, public sociology has sought to “revitalize” the discipline by using its research methods and theories to work towards building a more just society.

Public sociology’s normative underpinning and political nature has generated controversy in the field, causing some sociologists to oppose the approach as unscientific (Burawoy 2007). Despite the controversy, this approach resonated with my research project. It was my primary intention to have this research be used as an advocacy tool by community garden activists and practitioners. Thus, I hope that this project would be used by activists on the ground as well as academics to advance policies that protect autonomous green spaces for community members. As an activist-academic, I would feel most satisfied as an academic to have this research help



support efforts to protect the autonomy of community gardens in the city and beyond, thereby drawing from the public sociological tradition.

There were some other theoretical frameworks that helped to shape my research methods in particular. In *Working the Boundaries*, anthropologist Nicholas DeGenova (2005) enunciated a decolonized ethnographic approach. DeGenova documented the initial resistance that Latino factory workers had towards him when he first began his fieldwork as a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago. The University of Chicago was well known to some of his participants as a center of neoliberal oppression, both due to the economic policies attributed to this school that created further inequality in Latin America as well as due to the colonial type of practices by anthropologists who were thought to use coercive and invasive techniques to get the ‘answers’ for which they were looking. DeGenova engaged in a self-reflective and self-critical process where he compared his own power and privilege vis-à-vis his research participants. DeGenova came to understand the disdain and mistrust he encountered in the field as a consequence of his elite status, and as a result, sought to critically examine the role of anthropology in building and maintaining colonial empires. He used these insights to develop an alternative approach to ethnography, one that applies principles of popular education as its core.

DeGenova adopted Paulo Freire’s educational approach to the practice of ethnography. A horizontal process of education that blurred the line between teacher and student, allowing for students to be active participants in their learning and not mere empty vessels, was similar to the kind of “decolonized” ethnography for which DeGenova argued. He said “as a colearner and a coworker, the ethnographer would not aspire to reify a circumscribed group of people as an other and objectify their ‘culture,’ but instead would aspire, with his or her ethnographic interlocutors, to meaningfully engage the world and collectively act within it” (2005: 25). I have applied this

decolonized method of ethnography to my qualitative field work in that I was both a participant in urban agriculture as well as a researcher, with community members in the field helping to shape my research questions and analysis. This process of action and reflection was intricately tied to my role as an educator, which drew from Freirean popular education practices that were participatory in nature.

Participatory action research (PAR) organically informed my research design (Freire 2000; Horton & Freire 1990; McIntyre 2007). PAR is a collective research method that sees knowledge as co-produced through cooperation with people, and includes collective investigation, analysis, and action. Moreover, as Paolo Freire viewed research as part of a circular process called praxis; in this praxis, action was linked to reflection and leads to more enlightened and intentional political action.

I applied these theoretical ideas into my research methods. As an activist and community gardener, my political analysis was readily evident in my involvement in social and environmental justice work. Further, my immersion in urban agriculture for the past several years, where I have been able to build relationships and trust with people in the field, has given me unique access to the field not afforded to most of the researchers and journalists studying urban agriculture and food justice issues. Methodologically, participatory research allowed me to develop more horizontal and reciprocal relationships in the field. While conducting research I worked in every aspect of food production activities – including planting seeds, preparing beds, composting, caring for goats and chickens, harvesting eggs, turning soil, harvesting vegetables, weeding, etc. I also participated in trainings, workshops, and meetings, engaging in advocacy and activist efforts. I linked reflection to action, by helping organize anti-racism trainings for Farm School members and women’s gatherings at one of the community gardens and urban

farms. This participation connected me to the field in ways not possible through observation alone and provided me with first-hand knowledge and lived experiences to draw on for data. Through participatory research I was positioned to uncover evidence that would not have been available through other qualitative methods, especially an appreciation for the struggles of farm work in the city (Creswell 2003). I was able to draw on people's experience and knowledge to gain a fuller comprehension of urban cultivation (Freire 2000; Horton & Freire 1990; McIntyre 2007). I have had the privilege of not just connecting with urban farmers and community gardeners as a researcher, but as a colleague, friend, and comrade. The relationships I have built and the conversations I have had with activists on the field have been foundational to my research project. Hence, as DeGenova pointed out, I cannot claim to "own" the knowledge produced in this project, because it has been produced in a collective effort of action and reflection.

### *Previous Studies on Urban Agriculture*

Urban agriculture has been studied many times by academics. Some of these studies of urban agriculture have examined it as a form of collective resistance. Monica White was a sociologist at Wayne State University and she has done extensive field work in urban farms (the term she used) in Detroit, Michigan, particularly with the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (White 2010). She studied the role of Black women in urban farming and situated the prevalence of urban farms in the depressed socio-economic context of Detroit. She argued that urban farming was a tool of collective resistance and provides a way for oppressed

peoples to build their own self-reliant, autonomous communities without having to rely on the state to provide for them. White also pointed out that collective action was not just activities like marches, boycotts, picketing, or protests, but that by engaging in urban farming, community members were also engaging in acts of resistance. Urban farmers in Detroit were using the acts of growing their own food as a way to combat and transform the oppression and devastation of their communities due to capitalist economic forces.

Black farmers in Detroit were also creating their own realization of human rights, without having to rely on external institutions to grant rights upon them. I build upon White's work by understanding urban farming as a collective tool of personal and social transformation that sought to create autonomous, self-reliant communities (which was a form of resistance that was an alternative from making demands on the state or other institutions for inclusion).

There were a number of studies that examine the beneficial social and community networks formed through urban agriculture (as was seen in Detroit) in other cities. Miranda Martinez has studied the community gardening movement of the Lower East Side (or Loisaida) of Manhattan. She focused on the Puerto Ricans in this neighborhood and their struggles to maintain autonomy through their organizing around community gardens. She painted a historical backdrop of the devastation of the Loisaida during the economic downturn of the 1970s. The redlining and lack of investment in inner-city neighborhoods enabled delinquent landlords to stop maintaining and even burn buildings they owned for insurance payments, which put community members in grave danger. A squatter's movement sprung forth where community members reclaimed abandoned lots and buildings and turned them into viable gardens and in some cases "sweat-equity," tenant owned cooperatives (Martinez 2010). Martinez described the *casita* gardens created by many of the Puerto Ricans as reflecting their cultural heritage. The

*casita* referred to a community-built structure that can serve as a meeting space for social, artistic, cultural, or other purposes and were adorned in ways that call forth the rural traditions of Puerto Rico. Martinez studied the changes in the Loisaida from the 1970s through the 1990s and the larger economic forces that impacted these changes. With Guiliani's reign as mayor and his attempts to auction all community gardens to private developers, Martinez examined the struggles that the Puerto Rican community underwent against gentrification and neoliberal economic interests and the "taming" of their neighborhood (Martinez 2010). She highlighted the community's successful efforts to save the Bello Amanecer Borincano garden from private interests and she suggests that the possibilities created by this victory extend beyond the community gardens and had the potential to help organize people to fight the pro-gentrification private developers. Although Martinez touched upon the issue of gentrification, she did not discuss it in any depth in her book, thus prompting my deeper investigation of the relationship between gentrification and community gardens in my research. Martinez did focus on the important contributions, however, that the gardens made to the cultural vibrancy of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, which was a topic shared by other scholars.

Community gardens served a number of vital functions in a low-income community of color, one of which was related to social ties. In the article "Culturing community development, neighborhood open space, and civic agriculture: The case of Latino community gardens in New York City" Laura Saldivar-Tanaka and Marianne E. Krasny discussed the role of Latino community gardens in three areas: community development (solving crime problems in the neighborhood), open space (providing a place to relax and enjoy nature), and civic agriculture (making space available to grow fresh food for the community) (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2003). The authors found that about 20% of the gardeners in their study participated in political

activism. These political activities helped to catalyze community organizing because of the skills the gardeners developed in transforming neglected urban areas into viable ecological spaces, often without any government support (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2003).

Furthermore, the authors made note that “community gardens in poor neighborhoods provide an alternative to traditionally designed and managed parks, which were often in wealthier neighborhoods and are inaccessible to poor residents” (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2003: 409).

Moreover, community gardens were “participatory landscapes” in the sense that community members play a role in designing and creating the space, as opposed to city parks that were more uniform and institutionalized. Overall, the researchers argued that the most important role that gardens play in these communities were in the realm of community development because they provided a space for members to interact socially as well as provide opportunities for leadership development and community organizing that had the potential to “spill over into other aspects of civic life” (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2003: 411). Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny’s work was related to my research in that I scrutinized the ways in which community gardens provided “qualitative” benefits to the community in the form of community development, youth education, and the strengthening of social ties, which I contrasted with the business focus of urban farms, which prioritized money and crop production over the community benefits. The preservation of culture was another benefit of community gardens and some urban agriculture projects.

Teresa Mares and Devon Pena noted in their studies of the South Central Farm in Los Angeles that many of the urban farmers hailed from indigenous communities in Central America and that the urban farm provided a connection to their culture. The urban farmers hailed from communities that have been dispossessed and displaced from their land due to neoliberal economic and trade policies (Mares and Pena, eds by Alkon and Agyeman 2011). Many of these

immigrant urban farmers said that they no longer had relatives farming in Central America and hence the heirloom seeds that trace back in their cultures for thousands of years were only being preserved “through seed saving, planting, and cultivation practices in the United States and Canada” (Mares and Pena, eds by Alkon and Agyeman 2011: 208). The authors argue that the South Central Farmers not only preserved traditional crop varieties but also their own “cultural identities” which was a significant motivation for them to participate in farming activities (Mares and Pena, eds by Alkon and Agyeman 2011: 208). I found in my research that many of the founders of the community gardens in New York City had ancestral roots to agriculture, hailing from the American South or the Caribbean in particular. Thus, gardening provided access to community members’ cultural heritage that seemed to be another “qualitative” benefit of community gardening that distinguished community gardening from urban farming (as I will discuss in Chapter 3). Other scholars have looked critically at the emphasis of market mechanisms in urban farms, especially in Brooklyn.

Evan Weissman’s doctoral dissertation utilized food growing projects in Brooklyn to better understand food politics. He completed a historical study of agriculture in Brooklyn beginning from European settlement to the early 2000s. Although sympathetic to the goals of food justice and urban agriculture, Weissman’s research looked critically at urban agriculture in the city. He argued that

*Brooklyn’s urban agriculture is limited by its neoliberal characteristics – ...an emphasis on market mechanisms as central to human wellbeing– and is thus undermined in helping to build a radical political movement around food issues. Although current trends indicate that urban agriculture works to (re)produce neoliberalism, it simultaneously produces political possibilities embodied by the assertion of public rights to cultivate the city and in the potential of food to serve as a tool for building solidarities en route to food justice (Weissman 2012: 3).*

Hence, Weissman was examining the ways in which urban agriculture in Brooklyn perpetuates neoliberal economic relations while attempting to change them. As a geographer, his

research methods include GIS mapping of the urban farm projects in the borough, historical analyses, in-depth interviews, and participant observation. Some of his research methods and interviewees overlap with my own. My work contrasted from Weissman's in that I focus on gentrification, a subject he did not address. I further engaged with racial justice issues in a way that Weissman did not.

In sum, Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman concluded *Cultivating Food Justice* by stating that “scholars have devoted little time to disentangling the effects of race, class, and geographic location” in the area of food and environmental justice (Alkon and Agyeman 2011: 337). These authors continued to encourage scholars to tackle these questions of how racial, spatial, and economic circumstances interplay in the studies of urban agriculture. Clearly, we saw that social ties were formed among community members around urban agriculture. These social ties opened up important questions about food justice. There has not been any published sociological work that has examined urban agriculture through a food justice perspective in the manner I have planned. Previous studies of urban farming have examined it as a form of collective resistance (White 2010). Other studies look at urban farming as a mechanism by which recent immigrant communities were able to connect with their ancestral cultures (Mares and Pena in Alkon and Agyeman, eds. 2011). Additionally, the work of Martinez or Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny examine the political activism that was possible as community members galvanize around building and protecting their gardens (Martinez 2010; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2003). I have contributed to this literature by studying urban agriculture as a vehicle for food and environmental justice in the struggle against gentrification. By examining the prevalence of urban farming in the city with a race, class, and gender lens, I was able to help strengthen efforts of food and environmental justice activists by making their analysis more inclusive of power and



oppression. By making food studies literature more racially conscious, they were better able to understand the functions and benefits of urban agriculture in marginalized communities.

## *Methods*

The methods I used included archival research and in-depth interviews and focus groups with past and present leaders of urban agriculture projects in New York City. I utilized snowball sampling, first interviewing long-time community gardeners in various parts of the city, then obtaining from them referrals to the leaders and activists in previously existing community gardens. I selected my pool of participants through snowball sampling as many participants referred me to other people to interview and I also had many contacts during my years in the field conducting participant observation. I contacted and interviewed the staff of government agencies and NGOs that have supported community gardens (including officials in borough president's office, city council members, and Green Thumb). GreenThumb was a government agency established in the 1970s that was part of the New York City Parks and Recreation department and provided programming and material support to over 500 community gardens and urban farms in New York City, which made it the largest community gardening program in the United States (GreenThumb 2012). My NGO contacts notably included Just Food, which supported local food initiatives in New York City such as Community Supported Agriculture programs and urban agriculture projects. Just Food had a program called New York City Farm School, of which I was a graduate. Farm School was the first certificate program in urban

farming and the school partners with various community gardens and urban farms across New York City (Just Food 2012). In addition to interviews with key officials, each of these organizations provided access to resources such as reports and databases with information about the urban farms and community gardens in the city.

My semi-structured interview schedule began with participants’ demographic background and community gardening experiences. I then asked them a series of open-ended questions regarding how community gardening has changed over the years in New York City. For those old enough, I asked them to discuss the impact of the austerity measures from the late 1970s and early 1980s on gardening; the impact of gentrification on community gardening, and the changes they thought would be needed about environmental justice in New York City.<sup>2</sup>

My snowball sampling yielded 37 formal interviews conducted from August 2012 to August 2015, either in person in various community gardens around the city (n=28) or over the phone (n=9). Although I wrote a questionnaire, the interviews were semi-structured, allowing for input from the participant. The following is a breakdown of the race, gender, class, and sexuality categories of respondents:

*Table 1. Demographic Profile of Interview Respondents*

Category	Number (n=37)	Percentage
Race		
Black	16	43%
Latino/a	4	10%
Asian	2	5%

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<sup>2</sup> My specific research questions can be found in the appendix at the end of this chapter.

Indigenous	1	2%
Interracial	1	2%
White	13	35%
Gender		
Women	23	62%
Men	14	37%
Sexuality		
LGBTQ	5	13%
Heterosexual	32	86%
Class		
Working-class	9	24%
Middle-class	28	75%

*Source: Field research 2015*

Participants self-identified in these categories when they responded to my demographic questions. I defined working-class as high school educated and middle-class as college educated (at least a four-year degree). Close to 65% of respondents were people of color (n=24) and most of these respondents were Black (African-American or Caribbean). Black women were the largest subgroup and most of these respondents were working-class. Roughly half of the participants were involved in community gardening in some way since the early 1980s, which I consider to be the early period. My sample was approximately representative of the demographics of the community gardeners in the city. I did focus on interviewing key leaders of community garden projects throughout the city.

I justified selecting key informants as my interviewees because this approach fit with my argument about the grassroots processes of gentrification. These key informants were the people on the ground who have been most involved in community gardening and urban agriculture in New York City, so their “subaltern” perspective fits with this “gentrification from below” argument I was making. I then triangulated the information from government and NGO interviews, news accounts, and archival records.

My archival data derived largely from published reports from the late 1970s and into the 1980s by “greening organizations” (organizations that provided technical assistance to community gardens), reporting on various aspects of the gardens. News accounts were located through Lexus Nexus searches, including over 100 useful newspaper articles (especially from the New York *Daily News*), especially during the period of the Giuliani auctions. These articles helped document the public perception of community gardens. Additional archival evidence included the documentary film about community gardening called *Green Streets*, which covered the period from late 1970s through the 1980s, as well as over 100 photographs from this time period illustrating the devastation of these neighborhoods during the period of the urban fiscal crisis and the transformational impact of the gardens on these neighborhoods.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) was the foundation of the evidence I gathered in my research. I conducted participant observation for three years (March 2011-Dec 2013) as a student in all five boroughs, but especially in Brooklyn, lower Manhattan, and the South Bronx, in Farm School New York City and active participant in various farms and gardens<sup>3</sup>. During these three

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<sup>3</sup> These community gardens and urban farms were: Hattie Carthan in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, the Youth Farm at the High School for Public Service in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, EcoStation’s Bushwick Campus Farm in Bushwick, Brooklyn, Earth Matter on Governor’s Island and the Lower East Side, and Taqwa Community Farm

years, I took regular field notes and journaled my reflections, observations, and impressions from the field. Most importantly, my analysis was shaped by conversations with leaders on the ground and hence the participants helped guide my research questions.

### *Significance*

This research project seeks to provide information and analysis to both the academic community and active urban agriculturalists. It challenges and complicates the gentrification scholarship by focusing on the subaltern, or working-class perspective of gentrification, in order to advocate for policy changes that would compensate community gardeners for their efforts in revitalizing the city. This work contributes to social movement discourse because I examine the contradictory role of political opportunity at the local government level, a departure from the predominant perspective that focuses political opportunity at the state and national levels of government. My approach thus vivifies a social agency perspective on political opportunity theory.

My most important ambition for this project is that it become a useful tool for on-the-ground activists seeking to build a sustainable movement for urban agriculture. Most narrowly, I hope it contributes to enacting public policies that protect the autonomy of communities growing food in their neighborhoods.

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in Highbridge, Bronx.

## *Dissertation outline*

This dissertation is organized in a chronological order. Chapter 2 provides the historical background to the New York City fiscal crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. As key element in this background was the policy of “planned shrinkage” and the systemic neglect of inner city communities of color by the government. It was this deliberate neglect that inspired the early community gardening movement. Low-income people of color cleaned up decay caused by “planned shrinkage,” built community gardens, and frustrated the elite effort to kick them out of the city. I argue that the community members found political opportunity in the fiscal crisis, and seized it to reclaim their neighborhoods.

Chapter 3 continues the chronological history of community gardens in New York City, examining the political economy of the city from the 1990s to the 2000s, focusing on New York City as the capital of the neoliberal, global economy. I then scrutinize Mayor Giuliani’s attempts to auction all the gardens to developers—and the ensuing battle with garden activists—in this context. I argue that Giuliani’s attempts to eliminate the gardens actually transformed the urban agriculture into a united movement for food and environmental justice—another instance in which the gardeners found opportunity in the crisis. Finally, I examine the racism inherent in the process of gentrification and how that has harmed the communities who built and fought for the gardens.

Chapter 4 begins with a brief review of gentrification scholarship, focusing on its description of gentrification as a process instigated by powerful forces at the top and/or dictated

by capitalist consumer preferences. I then review an actual process of gentrification, as documented in Chapters 2 and 3. I focus on the initial efforts of low-income people of color, centered around community gardens, and the pattern in which developers became predators who appropriated the people's efforts, with the help of the state. I used quantitative evidence, as well as my qualitative research to demonstrate a causal relationship between community gardens and increase in property values, especially in the poorest neighborhoods. These increases then became the impetus for government intervention to facilitate developer appropriation of community property. I make the case that the city owes the community gardeners reparations for their unpaid efforts that helped to revitalize the decaying city.

Chapter 5 offers a summary of main ideas, avenues for future research, and policy recommendations. This chapter most explicitly utilizes the public sociology framework, presenting this research as a tool for advocating for fairer policies protecting community gardens and urban farms, particularly for marginalized communities.

## *Appendix*

Specifically, my main research questions were:

- 1). What was the relationship between gentrification and community gardens in NYC? My sub-questions are:
- 2). How did the urban fiscal crisis of the 1970s create opportunity for the community gardening movement to flourish in the late '70s and early '80s?
- 3). How was the community gardening movement impacted by the Giuliani administration?
- 4). How did NYC as a “global city” and the neoliberal economic system impact community gardens?
- 5). How was gentrification a grassroots, bottom up process?
- 6). How did the people revitalize their decaying neighborhoods? What contribution did they make to the revitalization of NYC?
- 7). How did their unpaid efforts subsidize gentrification?
- 8). What policy measures can be taken to protect the gardens?
- 9). To what extent do gardeners believe they have been wronged by city administrators and gentrifiers? For those who feel wronged: what measures do they suggest should/could be taken to rectify the situation?



## CHAPTER 2: THE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY OF THE NYC'S FISCAL CRISIS

## *INTRODUCTION*

In the 1970s, many major cities in the United States, like New York City, were experiencing a fiscal crisis of enormous proportions. The causal factors of this fiscal crisis included the oil embargo of the mid-1970s, which triggered a global recession and the decline in manufacturing industries that led to inflation and rising unemployment. New York City, which almost filed for bankruptcy during this time period, experienced tremendous amounts of urban blight and decay, evident from a decline of city services resulting in vacant, rubble-filled lots with burnt-out and neglected buildings. It was against this backdrop that the first<sup>4</sup> community gardens emerged, as community members sought to reclaim and improve their neighborhoods by squatting on vacant lots and transforming them from trash dumps into spaces that served and benefited the community (Martinez 2010; Weissman 2012).

Indeed, I argue that the fiscal crisis of the 1970s created a political opportunity for these community members that birthed the modern community gardening movement. In this chapter, I discuss political opportunity theory, give a historical account of the 1970s fiscal crisis, describe the emergence of the first community gardens notably in the Lower East Side of Manhattan,

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<sup>4</sup> By “first” I am referring to the first community gardens that have continued to exist in some form until today in the city. To be sure, urban agriculture and community gardens existed in various forms since the original establishment of New York City. The native peoples of Manhattan, for instance, engaged in subsistence agriculture, and much of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens were farmland before the turn of the century; during the World War II period, thousands of “Victory Gardens” (that provided food for families during the war rationing of food) were situated throughout the city. My historical account begins in the 1970s when the ‘modern’ community gardening movement first formed.

Central Brooklyn, and the South Bronx, and conclude by explaining how we can apply political opportunity theory to our understanding of these early community gardens.

### ***The Political Opportunity of Community Gardening***

One important sociological theory was political opportunity theory. Political opportunity theory said that some movements were able to be successful when the political or economic contexts were conducive to such social movement activity. Possible political opportunities included instability in the alignment of elites or conflicts between elites, declining capacity of the state to repress dissent, access to elite allies, and increased access to political decision-making power (McAdam 1982). This theory further stated that social movement actors were able to take advantage of events occurring in the political or economic realm that could help them achieve their goals. For instance, the civil rights movement was a paramount example of a social movement finding political opportunity in the Cold War by taking strategic advantage of the conflict between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. by emphasizing the hypocrisy of American propaganda against communism because of the apartheid racism upheld by the U.S. government.

This theory sought to understand social movements by studying them at the macro or institutional level in society. It was typically used to understand social movement interactions with governmental power at a national or even global level. I used this theory to elucidate an understanding of the community gardening movement and its interactions with the local level of government.

I would like to examine the ways in which urban farms were created when a political opportunity arises at the local level, which was the case with many of the community gardens that were built in the 1970s in New York City neighborhoods decimated by delinquent landlords and negligence from the local government. Many urban farms were created by community members squatting on vacant and abandoned lots, eventually turning the space into a community garden. In sum, I hypothesized the following:

- The urban blight and economic downturn of the 1970s was part of a deliberate plan by the economic elite to force out the working-class people of color from the city by slashing funds for city services thereby attempting to make the neighborhoods uninhabitable as part of an overall economy that served the elite at the expense of the working people. William Tabb analyzed this policy of “planned shrinkage” at length in his definitive work on the disinvestment of New York City, and I found his argument was confirmed by my own research, hence I will study Tabb’s work in this chapter.
- The disinvestment in the city presented a political opportunity for members to organize community gardens.
- During the subsequent era of massive gentrification, commercial developers’ interest in inner-city neighborhoods increased exponentially.
- As a result, there was less opportunity for community members to occupy vacant lots due to local government and capitalist real estate developers’ control of public spaces.
- Hence, community members found less political opportunity. This argument contributes to social movement discourses because I examine the role of political

opportunity at the local government level, whereas much of the literature in this area focuses on state and national levels of government.

### ***Early Neoliberalism: The Urban Fiscal Crisis***

I would like to present the work of a few scholars who have studied the political economy of New York City in the 1970s from a “subaltern” perspective. By “subaltern” I mean a perspective that focuses on the impacts of the political economy on the marginalized segments of society, with their interests at the center, rather than the interests of the elite. These perspectives challenged mainstream ones that were traditionally top-down in their orientation. That being said, I chose to articulate the analysis that best informs my research, which was a unique and often suppressed subaltern perspective. Several industrial cities in the U.S. underwent a fiscal crisis in the 1970s. William Tabb, in his book entitled *The Long Default: New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis*, analyzed the reasons behind this crisis in New York City. The economic elite disliked the “redistributive liberalism” of the 1960s, including the War on Poverty, where the government devoted spending on social welfare programs aimed at empowering the most marginalized members of society. Hence the elite implemented a plan of taking resources away from the most disenfranchised members of society in order to cushion the middle class and elite from the financial crisis. Thus, the elite used cuts to city services in order to transfer wealth away from the communities most in need towards those in power. (Tabb 1982). Moreover, in early 1975, the banks stopped lending to the city and sold-off their holdings of New York City securities, flooding the market, thus depriving the city of viable options for borrowing (Freeman

2000; Harvey 2005; Tabb 1982). At the same time, the 1960s saw an influx of poor Blacks and Puerto Ricans into the city, due to mechanization of agriculture in the South and the destruction of the agricultural base in Puerto Rico, which added to the fears the elite had of a growing working-class population. Indeed, it was these specific marginalized groups of people, who started the community gardens in New York City as a means of community preservation in times of austerity.

Based on my interview data, I was able to conclusively state that the founders of the community gardens in New York City during this time period were low-income and working-class people of color. All of the participants, whether they were relatively new to community gardening or an “old-timer,” shared the same historical narrative about the gardens: that the community gardens were started predominantly by low-income African-American women who were committed to improving their deteriorating neighborhoods (Personal Interviews John Ameroso July 7, 2015; Marisa DeDominicis May 15, 2015; Nancy Kohn May 10, 2015; Andy Stone May 4, 2015; Lenny Librizzi Feb 23, 2015). As John Ameroso, retired Cornell University extension agent who helped start many of the community gardens in the 1970s and 1980s said, regarding the demographics of the founding gardeners: “80% would be Black, and 80% of that would be Black women. The other 20% would be a mix of Hispanic, mostly Puerto Rican, and whites. Even though we had a lot of white community gardens, [there were] not as many as there were Black and Latino ones” (Personal Interview John Ameroso July 7, 2015). Karen Washington, long-time community gardener and activist, commented that people of color could not “fly” to the suburbs, like the whites, so they stayed and worked to improve their neighborhoods through building the gardens (Personal Interview Karen Washington, July 14, 2015).

During my interviews with the founders of community gardens, many had commented that the majority of these Black women had migrated from the American South during the Great Migration.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, I gathered that many of the founders were somehow connected to the land in their Southern roots and that these connections were more positive. For instance, many of the participants recounted that their ancestors in the South owned land and were not sharecroppers (Personal Interviews: Sharon Sockwell June 25, 2015; Redelia June 30, 2015; Traci Nottingham June 23, 2015; Anonymous July 8, 2015; Demetrice Mills July 10, 2015). Because their ancestry had greater autonomy over the land and their farming practices, they were more inclined to view farming in a positive manner. Many of the founding gardeners had a connection with the land and growing their own vegetables, so starting a garden was a natural effort for them. As Onika Abraham, director of Farm School NYC shared, “My father is West Indian, my mom is from the South. When I was growing up in the Lower East Side, there was a large Caribbean community and we just grew stuff in the city. This is how people survived. I remember there being a lot of Latino folks and Southerners like my Mom reconnecting to what they did at home” (Personal Interview May 20, 2015). Demetrice Mills, president of the Brooklyn Queens Land Trust, and long-time gardener in central Brooklyn, said that “yes, all of us [founding gardeners] were from the South.... The mayor at the time [in the 1970s] said that because the gardeners are from the South, they know how to farm. I’m from the South, from North Carolina. Ever since slavery, we had our DNA tracked and we came from Cameroon and Sierra Leone, and we were farmers. And to this day we are farmers. So that's in our blood”

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<sup>5</sup> One elder African-American woman and gardener shared that she migrated to Brooklyn from Alabama in the 1960s and she found that many New Yorkers, particularly in the Jewish community, were sympathetic to the oppression Black people were leaving during the era of Jim Crow segregation, hence being a pull factor for migration to the city.

(Personal Interview July 10, 2015). Andy Stone, director of the Trust for Public Land's Parks for People NYC Program and long-time garden supporter, said, "I think that the strong-hold of the community garden movement was very much in low-income areas with low income gardeners. Very much Latino and African American communities; they were definitely the largest numbers of community gardeners" (Personal Interview, Andy Stone, May 4, 2015). The city's marginalization of the community gardeners was certainly impacted by the race as well as class of the gardeners.

Anti-poor political agendas and the fiscal crisis led the city to disinvest in these very communities and I would like to emphasize that this disinvestment was not necessarily inevitable. Neil Smith contends that "there is nothing natural or inevitable about disinvestment" (1996: 193). Smith argued that abandonment and gentrification were needed parts of global cycles of capitalist profit making, which required relentless growth to continue. Growth was the driving force of capital, produced by a complex web of actors in the state and private sectors. Amy Starecheski, in her dissertation about squatting in New York City, asserted, "Cycles of disinvestment and gentrification provide opportunities for growth within the limited space of the inner city. The Lower East Side has long been a pocket of entrenched disenfranchisement within walking distance of the concentrated capital of Wall Street and Midtown Manhattan, and the history of this neighborhood shows how uneven development creates poverty and abandonment alongside tremendous wealth" (Starecheski 2013: 64). The economic downturn of the late 1970s provided an opportunity for the economic elite to pursue policies of disinvestment and later gentrification in order to facilitate economic growth that benefited the upper classes while harming the people. Thus, a political agenda that prioritized wealth accumulation for the elite while harming the working-class shaped the disinvestment of the inner cities. The social



movements of the 1960s that were led by people of color further stirred fear within the ranks of the elite.

Some scholars have argued that the political organizing of the 1960s additionally impacted the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. These scholars argued that it was political motivation rather than economics that sparked the disinvestment of inner city communities, which lent support to Tabb's argument. The community organizing and riots of the 1960s, led by groups like the Black Panthers and Young Lords, in which communities were demanding liberation, justice, autonomy, and equality, caused the elite to devise mechanisms to suppress political rebellion in the future. Starecheski said, "The spatial deconcentration analysis posited that government agencies, responding to the inner city riots and rebellions of the late 1960s, decided to deconcentrate poor people of color to diminish their capacity to organize and rebel" (Starecheski 2013: 65). The Kerner Commission, whose goal was to figure out how the federal government could act to prevent future riots, concluded that "the concentration of poor people in degraded inner city housing must be ended" (Kerner 1967). In addition to attempts to deconcentrate the communities of color in the city, New York State senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan advocated for "benign neglect" of inner city neighborhoods oppressed by decades of institutionalized racism and this neglect resulted in cuts to needed services. Sociologist William Ryan, in his classic *Blaming the Victim* criticized Moynihan and these types of policies because of how they maintained systems of oppression. Ryan said that "blaming the victim is an ideological process... a set of ideas and concepts deriving from systematically motivated but unintended distortions of reality... rooted in a class-based interest in maintaining the status quo... [and with] a rich ancestry in American thought about social problems and how to deal with them" (Ryan 1971: 10).

These urban policymakers intended to force poor people of color out much of the city by allowing their neighborhoods to become uninhabitable. Historian Joshua Freeman discussed the actions of New York City officials, foundation and business leaders and even union officials and how they prioritized development in the central business district “while leaving outlying areas, including those undergoing devastation, to fend for themselves” (Freeman 2000: 277). This analysis of deliberate neglect had particularly informed political squatters, who saw themselves as “helping to preserve inner city housing stock and protect communities of color from repression and displacement” (Starechecki 2013: 67). Thus, in this critique, which will be further illustrated by the policy of “planned shrinkage” that follows, it was clear that the government deliberately cut social services (both basic municipal services as well as social welfare programs) for the poor people of color to drive them out of the city and to ensure that they would not organize and protest in unity with each other.

These political motivations further informed the Structural Adjustment type of loan conditions that New York City agreed to in order to receive federal aid, such as greatly reducing and cutting social welfare programs that were aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty. These programs were developed and strengthened in the 1960s War Against Poverty and civil rights victories and were eventually gutted, with services cut the most in communities of color, to create a city that catered to the economic elite. Starecheski says “The banks that bailed the city out [in the late 1970s] insisted on a shift in priorities as a condition of their help: the city would now focus on making money, in particular by attracting wealthy residents and businesses. New York City now aimed to profit from its stock of real estate” (Starecheski 2013: 68). Without structural support, such as laws requiring landlords to maintain properties, housing with low-

income tenants eventually became abandoned by their owners, and then came under city ownership, which then led to a process of privatization.

In the 1970s, Tabb said the policies shifted towards “neoconservative privatization” in which addressing the root causes of poverty were no longer a priority of the government. Governments hence enacted austerity programs similar to Structural Adjustment Programs imposed on countries in the Global South, with the assumption that the “free market” would solve the problems of poverty (without taking into account the externalized costs associated with any privileged benefits resultant from the privatization of the economy). Some of the factors triggering the austerity measures included economic growth of Europe and Japan and a weakening of the U.S. dollar globally (Tabb 1982). Industrial cities like New York experienced greater economic decline due to the shifting of the manufacturing activities to the South along with the rise of “Sunbelt states” and new technologically-based industries. These events that were occurring at the macro level of the political economy had profound impacts on the micro level in the city, which I will focus on in the next section.

### ***Inequality and Austerity***

As the U.S. economy went into a serious recession in 1974, with declining real estate taxes, rising unemployment, and a shifting of resources towards the elite, New York City’s tax base was unable to maintain the cost of its growing expenditures. The city solicited aid from the federal level and, by 1980, devoted 20% of its locally raised revenues towards servicing its debt. The rise of neoliberalism signaled a shift from a more social democratic culture to one of

individualism and laissez faire that culminated in the Reagan era, which was a tactic that was politically and economically engineered by the elite to make the economy serve their interests. Indeed, when Reagan began his term as President, he cited government spending as the problem and austerity as the solution: "...the taxing power of the government...must not be used to bring about social change. We tried that and...it doesn't work" (quoted in Tabb 1982: 9). Reagan went on to implement his plan for dismantling the social welfare programs that had been enacted in the 1960s. The new budget favored bankers and the economic elite by giving incentives, tax cuts, and subsidies to the corporate sector. He contended that by privatizing the economy and allowing services to be bought on the market-- rather than provided by the government—that this would allow the benefits of this economy to “trickle down” to the most marginalized.

The privatization of the economy actually began before Reagan took office, in New York State.<sup>6</sup> Joshua Freeman (2000), Harvey (2005), Tabb (1982), and Weissman (2012) all provided convincing evidence that the economic crisis provided an opportunity for the elite to restructure New York City wholly to their favor. In 1975, Governor Hugh Carey and a group of Wall Street bankers formulated a plan to this end. Carey created the Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC) to direct the city's finances and appointed Felix Rohatyn, executive from the investment firm Lazard Frères, in charge (Phillips-Fein 2013). Rohatyn, along with other corporate executives—including David Rockefeller from Chase Bank and William Spencer for First National City bank—bundled NYC's debt and sold it to financial firms, thereby taking advantage

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<sup>6</sup> David Harvey explains: “The management of the New York fiscal crisis pioneered the way for neoliberal practices” that would later flourish under Reagan (Harvey 2005: 48).

of the economic situation for their own purposes without regard of its impact on the people of the City. This group pushed for the stripping of the mayor's power, and hence a loss of any attempt at democratic control, budget cuts, and the creation of an advisory control group to ensure that the city operated according to their wishes. Their main goal was to implement austerity measures while retaining industry and jobs in the city and most importantly, creating a local government that favored corporate interests. As Tabb stated, "programs geared to protect the poor and the environment from unscrupulous business practices were ended lest their 'anti-business' activities hurt the city's economic base" (Tabb 1982: 30). Weissman pointed out that "financial institutions engineered the bailout of New York City by claiming all tax revenues to service the city's debt and exerted *direct oversight* of the city's operations and contracts through the creation of the 'Emergency Financial Control Board' (EFCB)" (Weissman 2012: 121; emphasis in the original). The EFCB instituted austerity measures that would support the interests of capital and cut social programs viewed as antithetical to business (Freeman 2000; Harvey 2005; Tabb 1982). These austerity measures certainly did prove detrimental to the well-being of the poor and working-class people in the city and the effects of these measures have been continuous.

The mid-1970s saw a wide array of cutbacks in government programs and departments, resultant from the Rohatyn-era, which created the backdrop for the urban blight and decay that was becoming rampant in the city. From 1975-76, according to Tabb, austerity measures taken by the city included:

- Jobs for city workers were cut by 15%;
- Public school funding was slashed by more than 25%;
- The sanitation department was cut by roughly the same amount, and the police department reduced its staff by about 14% (Tabb 1982: 30).

- People of color were especially impacted, which was evident by the fact that 15,000 public school teachers and aides (which accounted for 20% of the union membership) were laid off, many of whom were Black and Latino (Tabb 1982: 30).
- It was also during this time that the City University of New York, once the model example of social democracy in education, ended almost 130 years of being a tuition-free institution.<sup>7</sup>
- The city's extensive public hospital system was impacted as well, evident from the number of hospitals that were shut down in this period and the hospitals that remained open had greatly reduced staffing.
- I would like to note that the parks and recreation department payrolls were cut by 25% as well, which has implications for the community garden movement that was burgeoning during this time (Tabb 1982: 30).
- The cuts to the sanitation department, along with protests from sanitation workers who went on strike to protest the layoffs, resulted in large piles of trash sitting for days on city streets, amounting to tens of thousands of tons of garbage that made navigating the city difficult and unpleasant (Phillips-Fein 2013).
- Many firehouses were shut down and it took the fire department four times as long to respond to calls, which was particularly disturbing given the high numbers of arsons occurring around the city at this time.

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<sup>7</sup> Probably not coincidentally, CUNY began charging students tuition around the same time that they began admitting greater numbers of Blacks and Latinos into the college system for the first time.

- Libraries were closed down, along with youth programs, senior centers, and other community spaces that benefited the most marginalized members. These cuts were felt the most in communities of color, such as the disproportionate cuts to fire and sanitation services led to fires creating burned out and trash-filled lots, which were prevalent in these communities. The austerity measures, along with the high unemployment, created the backdrop for the emergence of the community gardening movement.

These austerity measures had an even greater disproportionate impact on youth of color in these communities. One of my interviewees, John Miller, a long-time gardener, social worker, and elder from Brooklyn, NY, had an additional perspective on the impacts of austerity measures in New York City neighborhoods and its spark of community gardening movements. In regards to the reason why so many gardens were created in the late '70s and early '80s in the city, he said that this was largely due to the availability of land and the need for civil order. He repeated these two reasons as central for the growth of the community gardening movement. Because the city did not have the ability to 'police' troubled areas, the gardens helped to keep order (without having to spend money on having police officers patrol the streets). The loss of manufacturing jobs (and hence income) greatly impacted communities of color because he says that this forced families to need at least two incomes in order to survive. John contended that this was when mothers (who used to watch their children and the neighbor's children after the youth returned from school) were forced to work longer hours outside the home.<sup>8</sup> Hence, "since mothers are not

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<sup>8</sup> Although it is worthy to note that historically women of color have always worked outside the home and so taking on these second shifts were embedded in the expectations for these women, further evident by the fact that white women were twice as likely to be stay-at-home mothers than Black women (Kreider and Elliott 2010).

supervising the youth, their absence after school creates (along with cuts to social services that means no more after-school programs) greater chaos with the youth along with the crack epidemic and the homicide rate being so high” (Personal Interview, John Miller, Sept. 10, 2012). John went on to say that “the mothers maintained safety and family life. The absence of mothers also created the need for more after school programs (that the government was cutting the funding for)” (Personal Interview, John Miller, Sept. 10, 2012). John stressed that women being in the workforce and not available to take care of the youth in the community helped create the opportunity for community gardens. He also felt that this absence of women between the hours of three and six p.m. (during after school hours) further led to the increase of youth development as a field. Community gardening programs helped to fill this void by engaging the youth during these after school hours; John said that not having children in gardens “is a terrible thing” (Personal Interview, John Miller, Sept. 10, 2012). In addition to serving the youth, the dire need for gardens was exacerbated by the fact that residents were often subjected to substandard and dangerous living conditions, from which the gardens provided some safety and respite.

As a result of deliberate neglect on the part of landlords, decent and affordable housing became a serious issue by the mid-1970s. By 1975, almost half of all New Yorkers lived in “slumlord” type of housing—that is, dilapidated units, apartments with holes in the ceilings or walls, broken plumbing, poorly maintained halls, lack of proper heating, were overcrowded, or they had incomes of less than \$15,000 per year and paid more than 25% of their income on rent (Tabb 1982). Moreover, many landlords failed to pay mortgages, which resulted in abandonment of buildings. In many cases, landlords may have opted to have the building burned down in order to collect insurance monies. Indeed, in 1980, two arsonists “admitted to having started 46 fires for 13 landlords who owned more than 400 buildings through at least 45 corporations” in New



York City (Tabb 1982: 95). Budget cuts further removed 51 firefighting units in the mid-1970s, including 3,600 firefighters (Weissman 2012). According to a *New York Times* article from this time period, the total number of fires reported in the city increased dramatically from 154,869 in 1966 to 422,840 in 1976, while total structural fires increased from 36,666 to 56,127 and “serious major fires” jumped from 2,135 to 5,176. The South Bronx and Central Brooklyn experienced the most fires—which again were not surprisingly two of the areas with the highest levels of disinvestment (Stetson 1977). The cuts to fire service and increased insurance claims represented another form of privatization in that a public resource like firefighting was turned into private property—in the form of insurance payouts to landlords.

My interviews and archival data demonstrated this disinvestment and systemic neglect. In the documentary film about community gardens in New York City called “Green Streets,” (1989) one community member described her Manhattan community garden and neighborhood by saying: “This site [which was a burned out abandoned building] was strewn with garbage. This was all, from here to the end was rocks the size of my chest. There were contractors dumping it here rather than taking it to New Jersey, saving them thousands of dollars. In the meantime, we looked like post-war Berlin” (Green Streets 1989). The Neighborhood Open Space Coalition, in a 1985 report entitled the “Struggle for Space” also used this analogy to post-war Berlin by comparing it to the South Bronx of the 1980s. The authors described the South Bronx as having the most “open space than any city in the world” where one could see for miles without interruptions (NOSC 1985: 10). Another person in the film poetically said: “Destruction is everywhere. Rats and roaches are crawling here and there. Disease and pollution are everywhere. Cats and dogs are pissing everywhere. And there’s the beauty of people who are planting trees and laying grass and changing the environment for better living structures here and

there. If you are ever walking by, look at the kids who are there watching, these are our future generations that will really feel, that's if people nowadays do not destroy the beauty that will soon be theirs" (Green Streets 1989).

In the document *City Farmers: Tales from the Field*, former GreenThumb director Jane Weissman collected hundreds of testimonies from community gardeners. One of the gardeners recounted: "When we first began our community garden, it meant changing an eyesore of a burnt-out building into something beautiful. Now, each morning I wake up to a dream come true. It also changed our mischievous teenagers to a positive junior block association, learning parliamentary procedure and conducting their own meetings instead of destroying the block" (Tales from the Field, 1993: 14). Martha Hinton, community gardener in the Bronx, testified: "I never want to leave it. My garden has changed my life because I am no longer bored. It fills by day with something new and exciting every day. I can't count the number of people that stop to admire and give me praise for turning a dump yard into a beautiful show place. It's even more special to me because it's where I go to think and relax. It's my paradise" (Tales from the Field 1993: 16). These excerpts demonstrate the accomplishments of the community members who turned derelict lots—which were abandoned and burned out buildings-- into green oases in order to improve their communities.

I collected hundreds of photographs taken or collected by John Ameroso, retired Cornell University extension agent, from the late 1970s through the 1980s. Many of these photos were taken before the community gardens were built and depicted the debris and trash that accumulated in these neighborhoods. These first four pictures captured what the lots looked like before the gardens were built, with trash and debris evident. These pictures conveyed what it was like for gardeners to grow in "rubble soils" where a building was just razed on the lot. In Figure

3, a row of green beans is visible in the photo. These gardens were built before GreenThumb was established and supplied soil and other materials to the gardeners, hence the community pooled together resources to create these gardens (Personal Interview, John Ameroso, July 7, 2016).

Figure 4 was taken shortly before President Jimmy Carter visited the South Bronx, which, as one *New York Times* article articulated drew “the world’s attention to the neglect and abandonment that made the borough a symbol of urban decay” (Fernandez 2007).



*Figure, 1977, Vacant lot, Harlem, By Marilyn Schrut,*



*Figure 1, 1977, Vacant lot, Spanish Harlem, By J. Ameroso.*



*Figure 2, 1977, Vacant lot, East Side Manhattan, By Marilyn Schrut..*



*Figure 3, 1977, Vacant lot, South Bronx, By J. Ameroso.*

The following are pictures of gardens in the more active stage of development. Figure 5 was of a garden at Hoyt and Schermerhorn in Brooklyn, where the community brought in soil to put on the asphalt.



*Figure 4, Summer 1976, Garden, Brooklyn, By J. Ameroso*



*Figure 5, 1978, Youth Group, Harlem, by J. Ameroso*



*Figure 6, 1983, Housing Authority garden contest, Brooklyn, by J. Ameroso*

The level of abandonment from property owners during this time period was part of a targeted plan of structural neglect. Neil Smith (1996) examined the structural disinvestment in the Lower East Side. By mapping tax arrears data, he found that the neglect and abandonment focused on the northern end of the neighborhood and then continued to the east and west, which indicated the process of redlining. Miranda Martinez (2010), in her studies of the community gardens of the Lower East Side, refers to the actions of the delinquent landlords as part of a “planned program of economically rational disinvestment that left low-income families in dangerous, decrepit housing, often without heat, and endangered by arson. In the throes of the

fiscal crisis, elected officials and administrators pursued policies that exacerbated the abandonment and arson” (Martinez 2010: 15). One significant causal factor in this source of urban disinvestment was the practice of redlining, which was rampant in this time period.

Currently illegal, redlining has been a persistent form of structural racism and inequality in urban America. Redlining occurs when banks do not provide financing to land owners or business owners in certain urban (typically poor and people of color) neighborhoods or rate neighborhoods in part based on their racial composition (as ramified by the Home Owners Loan Corporation) (Hillier 2003). The impact of this practice was that there was a lack of investment in these areas and hence less viable for building owners to maintain their properties. The New York State Banking Department reported that in the mid-1970s, savings banks in the suburban areas invested 62% of their total deposits into mortgage loans, while savings banks in the city put in only 15% into mortgages (Tabb 1982). “Planned shrinkage,” like redlining, was part of a deliberate strategy of financial cutbacks in city services that targeted the poor and working-class neighborhoods in order to concentrate scarce funds in middle-class neighborhoods (Martinez 2010). In 1976, Roger Starr, the former Housing and Development administrator under Mayor Beame, proposed cutbacks like fire, policing, transportation, and hospitals and that these cutbacks should target areas of the city that were no longer considered “viable” in order to allow more funding for the more privileged neighborhoods. Although these policies were disavowed by Mayor Beame, they were in essence what happened (Martinez 2010). Hence, planned shrinkage was part of a highly discriminatory policy by the government.

## *Planned Shrinkage to Gentrification*

Before I examine the history of the first community gardens in New York City and their relationship to park land, I would like to discuss the term “planned shrinkage.” William Tabb uses this term to describe the impact of the austerity measures on the low-income residents of the city. As New York City, along with other older industrial cities, lost its manufacturing base, the elite used austerity measures to restructure the city for their own benefit. The economic elite used the fiscal crisis to mold New York City to their own liking, which brought about a transformation of the city from a manufacturing center to an information and technology center. Jobs have shifted from blue collar factory work to white collar professional work. These professionals, who work in areas like finance, real estate, and the law, command higher salaries and were hence able to pay higher rents and housing costs. Tabb pointed out that the economic elite saw the former manufacturing workers as surplus labor that were no longer needed in a city that was being transformed into a “global city:”

*Mayors and downtown interests seeks to transform the city by forcing out the low-income industrial workforce, with its growing unemployment and need for services, to make room for young, college-educated, professional-technical-communications-management people. The “surplus” labor is encouraged to leave because it does not meet the needs of the new job market. Old loft buildings become offices for consulting firms and dwelling units for lawyers and designers, more suitable to the new economic function of the city (Tabb 1982: 70).*

Thus, the city engineered planned shrinkage to create the structural impetus for gentrification to occur in neighborhoods after the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s (although gentrification did not really take off until a decade or so later).

However, the working-class people did not flee passively. Indeed, they organized to reclaim their neighborhoods that were left to decay by the landlords and the city. Illustrated by popular slogans at the time such as the Lower East Side mantra of “This Land is Ours:” the city government, due to their disinvestment of services for marginalized people and neighborhoods, lost the (moral and perhaps even legal) right to decide what would happen to the local land (Martinez 2010). Although the elite attempted to eliminate the poor from the population of the city through austerity measures because they were considered to be in the way of the city’s transformation, the people did not respond to the austerity passively. I argue that the neighborhood revitalization efforts of the people were eventually coopted by the elite for the benefit of the well-to-do.

### ***“Outsourcing” of government duties to the people***

As the city funneled resources away from communities of color in order to benefit the elite, they were not in a position to stop community members from reclaiming vacant lots so that they could perform the duties that were typically under the government domain. For instance, in response to cuts to the police force and rising crime rates, Tabb said: “the city promoted a voluntary auxiliary force which in 1981 had 6,000 members. The actual hours worked by the volunteers was the equivalent of year’s working time for 416 regular officers” (Tabb 1982: 42). As delinquent landlords abandoned buildings and the city consequently took over ownership of these buildings, the city was unwilling to maintain or manage this amount of housing.



Begrudgingly, the city implemented programs that turned the maintenance of buildings over to the community members through cooperative and nonprofit ownership. Through these “sweat equity” programs, tenants were able to maintain ownership over their apartment in exchange for improving and maintaining their buildings on a volunteer basis.<sup>9</sup> It was crucial to note that it was quite difficult for community people to get the city to allow them to develop this ‘sweat equity’ as the city made these programs onerous for the tenants. Many of the participants of my research who were active during this time period said that it was difficult to get support or resources from the city (like utilities, fences, sanitation pickups) and everything they accomplished they had to do themselves (Personal Interviews: Marisa DeDominicis May 15, 2015; Karen Washington May 6, 2014; Nina Talley May 10, 2015). In regards to the Parks Department, in an attempt to ameliorate the decaying parks, this department turned over more of its operations to private contractors or nonprofit organizations, like the New York Zoological Society who took over maintaining the city zoos. Community groups did volunteer work to pick up the trash in parks like Central Park (Tabb 1982). The first community gardeners, although not particularly encouraged by the city, did ultimately play a similar role in that they helped to build city park space (since many community gardens eventually ended up getting status under the Parks and Recreation Department after community members organized and demanded such inclusion).

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<sup>9</sup> The homesteading movement took off during this time as well, where community members took over abandoned buildings as squatters and rehabilitated them. Many of these homesteaders were able to fight to stay in their apartments for several years and some buildings became converted into housing cooperatives or affordable housing nonprofits after much community organizing.

Many of the participants in my study discussed how the impacts of the cuts to the parks department helped to fuel the community gardening movement. Denise Williams, a community gardener in central Brooklyn, shared with me the history of her garden:

*Ms. Marshall, the lady who started the garden, she was a very nosy lady. She knows what's going on in her community...She was looking out her window and saw this was a big empty lot. She would always see people dumping garbage and all kinds of stuff here. So she complained about it to the Assembly person and they suggested she start a community garden. And she got a group of people together and they came down, they started cleaning up the lot (Personal Interview, Denise Williams, June 28, 2015).*

This was an example of a local elected official who encouraged a community member to clean out a trash-filled lot and turn it into a green space, as opposed to demanding that the city undertake this task, which was further an example of how the community members filled the gaps created by the neglect of the city. John Ameroso discussed the impacts of the budget cuts on the gardeners and how it created a void that allowed the gardeners to reclaim land in an autonomous manner. He said:

*So, in that actuality, it was there, but gardeners got the burnt end of it [budget cuts] because they got less assistance. But, there were no problems. I had some slides showing the Baltic Street garden in 1977, sanitation brought a truck there on Saturday mornings so we could put garbage in it. Also with Sanitation, if you bugged them hard enough, you could get guys to come and bulldoze, back in the day. So, it was never a problem with sanitation. It wasn't really a problem with anything because nobody cared. You could run the hydrant, no one cared. You could do what you wanted. You didn't have to get a lease, because nobody cared. Getting insurance for your site, why bother, no one cared. In some cases, it was a free for all...(Personal Interview July 7, 2015).*

In sum, gardeners filled a void that was created by the disinvestment in services for urban areas.

Nancy Kohn, the director of GreenThumb in 2015, talked about how their department has been largely underfunded since its inception and have received budget cuts over the last few years. To be sure, GreenThumb has historically been funded not by the city, but by the federal government via a community development block grant. She shared that perhaps the city ought to pay community gardeners for their efforts because the gardeners provided free labor to the city

and the city has benefited from it (by having public green space available to the community and visitors) (Personal Interview, Nancy Kohn, May 10, 2015). In the report, the *Struggle for Space* (1985), the authors quoted another government official and former GreenThumb representative from the 1980s. She said that “I’m seeing the gardens fill a need in devastated neighborhoods, not just to grow food, but to clean up an ugly piece of property” (Neighborhood Open Space Coalition 1985: 6). The authors went on to point out that parkland made up 13% of New York City’s terrain but only 0.7% of the city’s budget. Another interviewee in this report testified: “What the City was unable to provide for its people, the communities have created for themselves” which underscores the necessity of the contributions of the gardeners and how their efforts substituted for the services that had historically been provided by the city, and thus subsidized the city budget. The community gardeners were able to find opportunity in this era of urban neglect by reclaiming the land for community purposes.

### ***The First Community Gardens***

It was against this backdrop that the first community gardens emerged. Evan Weissman, in his dissertation entitled “Cultivating the City: Urban Agriculture and Agrarian Questions in Brooklyn, NY” utilized a GIS analysis to assess the process of diffusion: “Community gardens first sprouted in the same neighborhoods abandoned by capital and then left by the city government for dead: the Lower East Side, the South Bronx, and north and central Brooklyn” (Weissman 2012: 124). These “left for dead,” (Weissman 2012: 124) neighborhoods featured

more than 25,000 vacant lots, littered with garbage and/or utilized as centers for drug use, pick-up areas for sex workers, and “chop shops” for stripping down stolen car parts (Ferguson 1999). Since the city—as part of its withdrawal of resources and services from these same communities—engaged in negligible monitoring of these sites, created opportunities to the people residing in these communities to undertake creative initiatives.

Martinez (2010) found that the majority of gardens in the Lower East Side were concentrated in the eastern “Loisaida” area, which was also one of the worst areas of disinvestment and devastation. She says: “All of the gardens, more than eighty of them, replaced buildings that collapsed or burned, most during the 1970s and 1980s” (Martinez 2010: 32). The more vacant lots exist in a community, the greater the number of community gardens. Further, the areas with the highest concentrations of gardens and farms experience the greatest inequality and social and health disparities. In their report, Five Borough Farms<sup>10</sup> said that it was in these neighborhoods where urban agriculture was making the greatest impact. They stated:

*For although interest in urban agriculture cuts across all demographic and geographic lines, the city’s farms and gardens are clustered in places that were hardest hit by decades of disinvestment: Bedford Stuyvesant and Brownsville, the South Bronx and East Harlem. Residents in these areas face a familiar litany of challenges: limited access to healthy food options, underperforming schools, high incidence of diabetes, high unemployment rates, and twice as many vacant lots on average than in the city’s wealthy neighborhoods. Urban agriculture gives people one way to turn abandoned parcels of land into a community asset that addresses many pressing needs. As one funder explained: “I really [have seen] a reframing of proposals, from that deficit-based ‘we don’t have this, we have all these terrible things’ to ‘we have this potential strength in all these things that can be tied into urban agriculture’ (Five Borough Farm 2013: 25).*

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<sup>10</sup> In 2014, Five Borough Farms, published their research, which was a project initiated by the Design for Public Space (a nonprofit organization that works collaboratively with city agencies, community groups, and private sector experts to improve public space in New York City). In their report, they examined the benefits of urban agriculture using qualitative and quantitative data and in collaboration with the NYC Parks and Recreation Department, Farming Concrete (another research project aimed at measuring the quantity of produce grown in New York City gardens and farms), and Added Value (an urban farm in Red Hook, Brooklyn).

Another New York City neighborhood with high levels of disinvestment and abandoned lots, the Lower East Side in Manhattan, is noted as the birthplace of the modern community gardening movement by many garden activists.

Writing in the periodical *Avant Gardening*, journalist Sarah Ferguson (1999) recorded the history of this early community gardening movement. She highlighted the efforts of Liz Christy, a community gardener, artist, activist, and founder of a group called Green Guerillas. Beginning in 1973, the group became known for throwing “seed bombs” (balloons filled with compost, seeds, and water) over the wire fencing and into vacant lots as a symbolic way to reclaim them. Amos Taylor, another early member of Green Guerillas, said that “it was a form of civil disobedience. We were basically saying to the government, if you won't do it, we will” (Ferguson 1999). Although at first the city was antagonistic to the group’s efforts, they eventually gave them a lease in 1974, especially after the group received positive media attention showcasing their work. With few resources, they were able to transform a decrepit lot into a lush garden. The Green Guerillas set up trainings and offered resources to other gardeners to take over vacant lots around the city. The gardeners, in their commitment to reclaiming their neighborhoods, helped to inspire other forms of social change as well such as homesteading and community safety patrolling.

The media was receptive to their efforts, which helped galvanize support for the gardens. For instance, in 1973, a *New York Times* article praised community gardening as “a practical solution for urban vacant lots.” One gardener in this article said “the communal garden is one of the solutions for solving the ever-increasing problem of derelict vacant lots that blight the city.” Other important issues that community gardens helped tackle included issues of food access, urban abandonment, the lack of public green space, and community development as these were

the initial motivations behind community gardening (Weissman 2012). Because the city did not compensate community members for their toils in improving their neighborhoods in these various ways, I would like to argue that the volunteer efforts in building the early community gardens helped supplement government funding for the city's fiscal crisis. Not only have the efforts of the community gardeners been erased or made invisible by the city, but the race of the gardeners has also been ignored by even those sympathetic to community gardening in the city.

Many writers of this history focused on the efforts of Liz Christy (a white woman living in the Lower East Side) and described her as a 'founder' of the community gardening movement, which I argue was inaccurate given my research (Weissman 2012; Ferguson 2007). One of the community gardening leaders, Karen Washington, was a long-time community gardener, activist, and woman of color from the Bronx (and one of my former Farm School NYC teachers). She began gardening in the 1980s in the Tremont area of the Bronx when she noticed an empty lot in her neighborhood was becoming a garbage site and thus joined efforts with her neighbors to transform the lot into a garden (Telephone Interview, Karen Washington, May 6, 2014). Although Karen has great admiration for Liz Christy and her accomplishments, she took issue with the historical narrative that focuses on people like Christy as the founders of the community gardening movement. Karen insisted that people of color played the primary and major role in building community gardens around the city in the 1970s and 1980s (which I triangulated through my own data collection) and it was crucial to acknowledge their contributions in the history. Karen contended that "urban agriculture is not new...in the early community gardening movement, the low-income people of color could not escape the city like the people with money who left and went to the suburbs in order to flee the crime, crack, etc...then you also had the influx of immigrants and that caused the people with money to flee even more" (Telephone

Interview, Karen Washington, May 6, 2014). Since these low-income people of color did not have the means to flee the decaying city, they were the ones who stayed and built the gardens that transformed their neighborhoods. Many of the earlier gardeners could not speak English and did not have the privileges that people like Christy had, hence their role in this history gets forgotten, which was especially critical given that many of these earlier gardeners were elders at the time of this writing and many have passed or were retired. Karen concluded this point by saying, “As long as there is blood flowing through my veins I will make sure these folks are not forgotten” (Telephone Interview, Karen Washington, May 6, 2014).

Marisa DeDominicis was co-director of Earth Matter, a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing large-scale composting initiatives in New York City. She was also my mentor during my apprenticeship in Farm School NYC. Marisa was a long-time community gardener, activist, and was a squatter in the Lower East Side for twenty years, starting in the early 1980s. In a personal interview, she told me about how there were so many vacant lots in this part of the city that one could walk from Houston Street to 14<sup>th</sup> Street by simply cutting through all the vacant lots, without having to walk on the sidewalks. Marisa further said that the people of color communities were the moving force in building the community gardens of this era and that “more than 80% of the gardens were started and run by people of color” (Personal Interview, Marisa DeDominicis, May 11, 2015). She recounted her own experience of being the first squatter to occupy a building on 13<sup>th</sup> Street after the police cleared the drug dealers out of the building following a murder that took place there. Other squatters joined Marisa after she moved in, and subsequently took over other buildings on the same street. The buildings were certainly uninhabitable in the beginning, as they were damp, fire damaged, and lacked walls, flooring, electrical systems, heat, and windows. Marisa was committed to organizing the long-time

residents of the neighborhood in reclaiming the abandoned buildings in order to eventually make legal claims to this housing. Marisa and the other squatters poured countless hours of sweat equity into making the buildings comfortable and decent; “squatting was my life,” she stated. Hence, rehabilitation of housing occurred along with the building of community gardens. Marisa reported that the squatters had to fight the city in order to rehabilitate the housing, because of the government’s neglect and resistance to the squatters. She went further to say that it was after the gardens were built and the buildings cleaned up that the developers started to take interest and began building condos in the area in the 1990s (Personal Interview, Marisa DeDominicis, May 11, 2015).

People of color were certainly reclaiming abandoned properties and making them available for community use. Political organizing groups like the Puerto Rican Young Lords and Black Panthers, also took over buildings--the Panthers in Brooklyn and the Lords in the South Bronx. Sarah Farley, a former civil rights organizer from the South, was involved in the reclaiming spaces, directing squatters in the Lower East Side to “first start gardens, then squat buildings” (Starecheski 2013: 18). Activist Sandro Dernini says that “Mrs. Sarah Farley, a charismatic leader of the homesteader community organization L.A.N.D. “organized out of a burned building at 523 East 6<sup>th</sup> Street, and that Nuyorican Poets Café co-founder Miguel Pinero<sup>11</sup> hung out in the space” (Dernini 1984). The white squatters that began occupying abandoned buildings in the Lower East Side in the early 1980s were drawing upon Latino-led organizing

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<sup>11</sup> Pinero was a celebrated playwright, poet, and actor born in Puerto Rico and raised in the Lower East Side. Having grown up in poverty, he committed numerous acts of robbery and was imprisoned several times. One of his works was made into a Broadway play and he received an Obie award for his play *Short Eye*.



traditions. These efforts of low-income persons and people of color, although not recognized by the city, had a monetary value that benefited the city as a whole.

In 2007, Sarah Ferguson wrote “A Brief History of Grassroots Greening in NYC” that appeared in the *New Village: Building Sustainable Cultures* periodical. She wrote about how President Jimmy Carter toured the devastated areas of the South Bronx in the late 1970s and pledged half a million dollars for new parks and recreation facilities, which was part of a \$10 million proposal for immediate aid to the city (Ferguson 2007). Ferguson said:

*That proposal eventually led to the allocation of \$1.2 million in federal and New York State funds for community garden and parks development in the South Bronx. The grant required a 50 percent match of local funds--monies the bankrupt city government could ill afford. So, in one of the first official recognitions of the value of sweat equity, gardeners tallied up their volunteer hours--as well as the bricks, beams, and fallen telephone poles they'd recycled from their devastated community, and even the compost they generated--in order to come up with \$300,000 (Ferguson 2007).*

The monetary value of the toils of the community gardens became apparent in this instance. The city needed to invest \$1.2 million in order to match the federal aid and would have been hard pressed to do had the community gardeners not stepped in with their “sweat equity” efforts. The community development efforts did not stop with the creation and sustainability of gardens, but branched out into other improvements as well. Amos Taylor, a community garden member who Ferguson interviewed, said that “once people succeeded with the garden, they went on to other things like fixing the schools, housing, creating jobs, whatever was needed,” hence the gardens catalyzed other sectors of community development exponentially. Thus, the city was indebted to the gardeners not just for their work on the gardens but also for larger community development efforts happening around the city.

As the number of gardens around the city increased despite the obstacles put in place by the city, the city eventually gave into community demands and created a program called Green

Thumb, which was housed under the department of Parks and Recreation. In 1978, the city began offering leases to community gardens for \$1 a year. The response from gardeners around the city was mixed. Some gardeners felt relieved that the city was finally recognizing their efforts and hence had pressured the local government to legitimize them in this way. Former Green Thumb director, Jane Weisman, said "they realized they were squatting and wanted some recognition of their right to be there" (Ferguson 2007).

However, not all gardeners saw the creation of Green Thumb as a success. These other gardeners found it to be a bureaucratic way to control the grassroots reclamation of abandoned land. To be sure, city policies certainly did not view the gardeners as having the primary rights to their gardens, evident from the fact that all leases from the start were issued on a "temporary" basis. Moreover, in order to even secure a lease with Green Thumb and enter the program, gardeners had to agree to vacate their plots within a month if the land was ever selected for development. In order to address the lack of long-term security this clause caused, in 1983, the city began issuing some five and ten-year leases. Nonetheless, property interests reigned supreme and any gardens occupying land valued at over \$20,000 could not receive a long-term lease (Ferguson 2007). It was important to reiterate that the Green Thumb program operated for the vast majority of its history without a budget from the city. The only material contribution that the city made to Green Thumb was land, which did not cost the city anything. Green Thumb receives its funding from the Community Development Block Grants given under the U.S. Housing and Urban Development department. The New York City Parks and Recreation department did not allocate funds to this Green Thumb program until the year before this dissertation was completed (2015). Thus, GreenThumb did not receive any city funding for the vast majority of its more than thirty-year history. This point becomes particularly significant

when I discuss my “gentrification from below” hypothesis in Chapter 4. The gardeners’ efforts seemed to have fit into the city’s future plans for these neighborhoods by building institutional resistance to the gardens and the continued presence of gardeners in the neighborhood. It was in this way that perhaps the city even planned for the gentrification that was to occur in the following years via the appropriation of the community gardens (which included the sweat equity and pooled material resources of the community).

The community gardeners were committed to their neighborhoods for the long haul. In their 1985 report, the Neighborhood Open Space Coalition asserted the permanency of garden sites, demonstrated by the fact that the members had planted trees, painted murals, and built infrastructure that demonstrated how these spaces were not interim or temporary (NOSC 1985). Indeed, “Housing rehabilitation, litter campaigns, street tree plantings, and anti-crime alerts fostered a growing sense of pride in the decayed areas where the long-term residents had neither the resources nor the inclination to move” (NOSC 1985: 23). Hattie Carthan, legendary community garden founder in Bedford-Stuyvesant, expressed this logic forcefully: “I had no money to move and no inclination to move. I moved here for the duration” (Green Streets 1989). Other community members from the film communicated: “It’s a wonderful thing that they want to beautify the Bronx because I live here and I love it and I don’t want to go” (Green Streets 1989). Thus, the community members did not view themselves as temporary residents and hence their efforts were part of a long term vision. Although gardeners knew that many of their gardens were given a lease on an interim basis (underscored by the clause that the gardens could be surrendered to development if the lot became desirable to a developer), (Personal Interview, Rasheed Hislop, June 17, 2015) such displacement did not seem likely in the beginning. For instance, one gardener stated that “The city owns the land. They gave us a lease, as long as no

one is interested in building anything over here. And as you can see from this area that no one in their right mind would want to build anything over here” (Green Streets 1989). This comment demonstrated that, although gardeners knew that legally the gardens were considered interim by the city, they did not actually believe that the real estate interests would ever become interested in investing in the devastated areas where the gardens were developing. Finally, Marisa, former squatter and community gardener, said that because gardeners used their own resources to build the gardens, this helped to increase their confidence in their (permanent) ownership of the gardens: “Instead of looking at it as temporary and a year to year lease, it built up the momentum.” And then, she reported, their confidence was crushed when the city expropriated the gardens: “When they started to take gardens away, people's attitudes shifts” (Personal Interview, Marisa DeDominicis, May 11, 2015).

### ***Conclusion: Political Opportunity From Above and Below***

Political opportunity theory was typically used to understand social movement efforts when they engage with power structures at a national or global level. Some scholars used political opportunity theory to explain how the economic elite found opportunity in the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s and used the crisis to restructure the city to favor their own capitalist ends (Klein 2007). As John Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells argued: “Core economic institutions like commercial banks, investment banks, corporate law firms, and real estate developers, for

example, had the incentive, the means, and the structural and political position to gain government support for their development goals. The economic and fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s clearly made the political environment more receptive to their interests” (quoted in Weissman 2012: 121). I would like to complicate this analysis by pointing out how (instead of fleeing) the community also found opportunity in the broken political and financial system that left their neighborhoods devastated during this time, and took advantage of it in order to rebuild their community on their own terms. Hence, the urban financial crisis actually triggered a power struggle over exploiting the elite’s opportunity versus the people’s opportunity.

One of the manifestations of this political opportunity seized by the people was the proliferation of community gardens around the city, which although not explicitly political in the beginning, certainly became political in the 1990s as a result of Giuliani’s efforts to auction off hundreds of them to developers (as I will discuss in the next chapter). As Karen Washington stated, the community gardens were initially a “win-win” situation for the community members and the city (though the city only reluctantly supported them) because it saved the city resources (“free” parkland) and helped make the neighborhoods more desirable to live in. Hence the city outsourced the parks department services to the people. In the next chapter, I will explore how the Giuliani regime’s attempts to sell all community gardens to developers helped to galvanize the gardeners into a larger movement for social, environmental, and food justice.

## Chapter 3: Community Gardens in the Age of Advanced Neoliberalism

*“This is a free-market economy; welcome to the era after communism.”—former NYC mayor Rudy Giuliani (1999) said at a press conference in response to activists fighting to protect hundreds of community gardens from his efforts to auction them for real estate development (Kifner 1999).*

## *Introduction*

The urban fiscal crisis of the 1970s and 1980s that led to the corporate takeover of New York City's economy and politics paved the way for the advanced neoliberalism of the 1990s and all-out gentrification of the city. In this chapter, I examine the political economy of New York City in the 1990s, including the real estate boom and positioning New York as a "global" city. I studied the auctioning of community gardens orchestrated by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, and how his attempts to sell hundreds of the city's gardens to developers impacted the burgeoning food justice movement. I argue that Giuliani targeted the garden lots in his auction attempts because these lots were more profitable to the city than the thousands of vacant lots the city owned at the time. I further contend that the city's community gardeners found opportunity in Giuliani's auctioning attempts, as it helped to catalyze their previously isolated gardening endeavors into a united front for justice against a government protecting the interests of the economic elite. Hence, I examine how community gardening transformed into an urban agriculture movement with values of justice at its center. I looked at how gentrification impacted the city's urban agriculture leadership, which, initially pioneered by low-income, people of color, was subsequently spear-headed by the mostly white, privileged elite, thus was more "top-down" rather than "bottom-up." Furthermore, urban agriculture in the contemporary era depends much more on permission from institutions in order to function, as opposed to the squatting efforts of the gardeners in the earlier era. Consequently, urban agriculture found opportunity in the

privatization efforts by growing into something larger than it was originally to the point where it became something else entirely.

### *The Era of Advanced Neoliberalism*

In order to understand the more recent community gardening efforts, it was important to discuss the ways in which an advanced neoliberal economy functions. In the contemporary globalized era where neoliberal economic policies dominate, capitalism was more easily able to penetrate global boundaries and influence social relations. Although neoliberalism varies depending on the country in question, some typical characteristics of neoliberalism were as follows: privatization and commodification of public services as well as what remains of global and community commons; dismantling of existing public health, social, and environmental programs; state deregulation to facilitate unrestricted movement of capital and subdue labor; conversion of national economies, including formerly self-reliant ones, to socially harmful export-oriented production; hyper promotion of economic growth, and unrestricted exploitation of people and the environment to feed that growth; and opening of markets to foreign-produced goods (Cavanagh 2004). International institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) were dominated by the corporate interests of rich Northern countries and impose various trade regulations and structural adjustment policies that press for these changes.



New York City experienced similar structural adjustment policies after the city received aid from banks following the urban fiscal crisis, evident from the slashing of government services especially in communities of color. After gutting its social welfare programs, New York City's priorities shifted, in order to cater to the global economic elite. Saskia Sassen discussed the rise of these "global cities" as centers of economic production, trade, and finance (Sassen 1998). These global cities functioned as "command posts" vital in integrating the ever increasingly expansive global economy, and were consequently concentrated with 'high-value, high-skill' jobs. For instance, high-salaried individuals worked in areas like business, finance, and law as corporate attorneys, marketing specialists, consultants, accountants, and investment bankers. These high-wage jobs then propagated low-paid jobs because the highly paid professionals relied on the services provided by low-wage workers such as domestic labor, taxi driver, restaurant, and grocery delivery (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007). These low-wage workers were typically recent immigrants and the widespread use of immigrant labor to support the lifestyle of highly paid professionals was another way in which employment in New York City transformed.

Multiple factors determined the nature of work in the global city. As Karl Marx predicted, advances in technology and the cheapening of labor has caused an erosion of formerly middle-class jobs, either by replacing workers with machines or off-shoring manufacturing jobs to countries with cheaper labor (Marx 1977).<sup>12</sup> So, not only were low-paid jobs being created through the growth of highly paid jobs, but also through the cheapening of labor. For instance,

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<sup>12</sup> Harry Braverman claims that scientific management, in which capitalists seek greater and greater control over labor through intensifying the division of labor, has caused a de-skilling of workers that stupefies work and requires less and less training and expertise, which then cheapens labor as well (130-1).

during the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the U.S., unionized factory jobs afforded many U.S. citizens the chance of having a middle-class lifestyle. Conversely, with the rise of neoliberalism, most of these jobs no longer existed in the U.S. and were increasingly being replaced by lower-skilled service sector jobs, causing the polarization of the workforce, with highly-paid jobs at one end and a much greater and ever-growing number of low-paid jobs at the other. The impact that this polarization of the workforces had on the contemporary urban agriculture efforts was that many members of the low-income communities of color were unable to take leadership roles within the urban agricultural sites. As a result of the increased costs of city life, members of the aforementioned community were less able to commit time to these roles due to their own work and schedule constraints. Hence, we see more people from the gentrifying groups in leadership roles in many of the newer gardens in the city in the post-Giuliani period and well into the 2000s. It was in this backdrop of New York as a “global” city that the auctioning and transformation of community gardens took place.

### ***Giuliani and the auctioning of the community gardens***

The Giuliani auctions were a pivotal period in the history of the modern community gardens in New York City. In his doctoral dissertation on urban agriculture in Brooklyn entitled “Cultivating the City: Urban Agriculture and the Agrarian Question in Brooklyn, NY” Evan Weissman observed: “During the first period of restructuring (1970s), community gardens

emerged; in the second period (1990s) they became threatened and were vigorously fought for” (Weissman 2012: 121). In the 1970s and 1980s, community members, who chose to maintain roots in the city as well as having been cast away by the city officials, seized the opportunity to rebuild their neighborhoods in a grassroots, bottom-up, and justice-based approach to urban development. After New York City had successfully been remade in the interests of corporate capitalist economic relations, the real estate market experienced a boom, with property values increasing tremendously across the city.<sup>13</sup> By the late 1990s, although there were several hundred community gardens around the city, very few had any significant long-term protection. In 1999, former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani placed 114 community gardens of the roughly 600 city gardens on the auction block, in an example of neoliberal privatizing common spaces and public lands, and using market mechanisms to determine property rights. Giuliani framed the elimination of the community gardens as necessary in order to build affordable housing in the city. In doing so, he created a division between two groups that were commonly allies and this division exists to this day, in which affordable housing advocates were pitted against community gardening advocates (Weissman 2012). However, Giuliani’s efforts had an unintended consequence of uniting the previously disparate community gardeners in a movement where they insisted on their right to “cultivate the city” (Staeheli, Mitchell, and Gibson 2012).

Community gardening in New York City was in peril soon after Giuliani became mayor in 1993. He began by denying any new requests for community gardens, and subsequently conducted an inventory of city-owned lots (Weissman 2012). Giuliani transferred management of many community gardens from the Parks Department to the Department of Housing

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<sup>13</sup> In the next chapter, I will examine in greater depth the ways in which the community gardens worked to increase the property values of neighborhoods in New York City.

Preservation and Development, and also sold many of the lots (Weissman 2012). He eroded public control over community gardens by eliminating the leases Green Thumb had granted, and replaced them with “license agreements” that further limited legal rights to the land (Ferguson 1999; Lawson 2005; Von Hassell 2002; Zukin 2010). As discussed in Chapter 2, community gardens were the most concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods and Giuliani took advantage of this economic inequality.

Lots were sold sporadically and in the poorest neighborhoods, in the name of affordable housing. In 1997, Fran Reiter, the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development and Planning told a reporter bluntly: “the bottom line is, we’re going to build wherever we can, whenever we can . . . Do we sacrifice gardens to build housing? You’re damn right we do” (qtd in Raver 1997). Community gardeners, activists, and some local elected officials began mobilizing and organizing in response to the actions and rhetoric of the Giuliani administration (Ferguson 1999; Lawson 2005; Von Hassell 2002; Zukin 2010).

Community garden activists contended that communities of color were targeted for development during the Giuliani-era. The Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF) filed an injunction to save the gardens in Harlem based on the grounds that destroying the gardens disproportionately hurt communities of color (Amsterdam News 1999). The attorneys argued that because these gardens received federal material support (since GreenThumb was funded solely by a federal Community Development Block Grant), their destruction would signal a breach of a federal contract. PRLDEF filed their complaint under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which forbids discrimination against minority groups by recipients of federal funds in any of their programs and activities. They cited that since the mayor's office received \$30,000 in federal funds from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (in addition to

the funds the Department of Recreation/GreenThumb received from the CDBG), the plaintiffs demanded that the city to comply with this regulation.

In the fight to save the Prospect Heights Community Garden, activists used a similar line of reason to garner the support of the local community board. The gardeners pointed out the law that said that there must be a certain percentage of green space per resident in New York City and that the City was well below that requirement (Personal Interview Traci Nottingham June 23, 2015). The city and developers continued to prioritize housing over gardens when gardens fulfilled a legal and human right as well. A Brooklyn judge even dismissed the city's plea to revoke a ban on developing on garden lots. The judge cited the poor conditions of Brooklyn parks (especially in neighborhoods of color) and offered to negotiate both sides (*Daily News* 2001). To be sure, another *Daily News* article discussed the “overburdened” Department of Parks and Recreation in regards to maintaining Brooklyn parks and that parks in the poorest neighborhoods were the most neglected, even citing some park locations as potential community gardens (*Daily News* 2006).

Youth of color were also disproportionately impacted by the planned auction. The *New York Amsterdam News* published an article called “Our Gardens are Schools, Don’t Close Them” in May of 1999:

*On May 13, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani will close 114 schools in New York City. Then he's going to auction them off to the highest bidder. Significantly, these schools are in some of New York's most neglected neighborhoods. A child who grows up in New York and whose parents don't have the means to venture out to the country - and there are many of them - hasn't much of a clue, really, where his or her food comes from. He or she sees the produce in the supermarket and probably has some vague assumptions about its origins. In a garden, a New York child sees the tomatoes, peppers, egg-plants and lettuce slowly emerging from the earth's body -- no more anonymity. Comprehending the connection between their food and the earth cannot help but make them better, more caring citizens. Growing food is about taking care of yourself. If you*

*care about your plants and the fruit they bear, you care about yourself (New York Amsterdam News 1999 emphasis added).*

Another *Amsterdam News* article went further, asserting that the destruction of community gardens was racist policy. The author quoted Leslie Lowe, head of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance:

*The lawsuit her group and others filed to block the auction from taking place does not just concern keeping 63 gardens. "It is about the fact that Black and brown communities across the city have few parks and open space resources than their white counterparts," said Lowe. She charged that the city has been buying up land in Queens and Staten Island to turn them into parks, thereby taking the space off the tax roll. "In our communities, they are selling the gardens, one of the few green resources we have, supposedly because of the revenue," Lowe declared. "The city has a \$2.1 billion surplus, so why is it telling Black and brown kids that their parents have to buy a park for them when it is purchasing park land for kids in Queens and Staten Island?" Lowe asked (New York Amsterdam News 1999).*

It was clear that the Giuliani auctions were not simply about neoliberal capitalist financial aims, but also about systemic racism.

Community gardeners and activists organized direct actions at City Hall to protest the comments made by the Deputy Mayor Fran Reiter saying that gardens ought to be forsaken for housing. In February 1997, roughly 200 protesters gathered at City Hall and demanded an end to the sale of community gardens. Evan Weissman who wrote his doctoral dissertation on urban agriculture in Brooklyn, said the protesters were “Relying on the colorful tactics of street theater – including giant puppets and armfuls of freshly harvested produce – the gardeners delivered hundreds of letters from garden supporters and gifts from the gardens (flowers, fruits, and vegetables) to Deputy Mayor Reiter” (Weissman 2012: 137). The gardeners offered to help conduct an inventory of the city’s community gardens and demanded that the city recognize the value that the gardens bring both to the city and to its residents. The Giuliani administration did

not respond to the protests of the gardeners, and continued with their sales of the garden lots (Raver 1997).

Tension between the city and the community garden activists continued to escalate as Giuliani continued his campaign to auction the gardens. In September of 1997, gardeners from the Lower East Side united with gardeners in Harlem and filed a lawsuit against the city for failing to conduct a public review in the proposed auction. The court ruled in favor of Giuliani, declaring that the gardeners did not have the right to challenge the land use determinations because they did not have a “legally cognizable interest” in the property. As Weissman described, “because the community gardeners did not *own* the garden lots, they had no legal standing to challenge Giuliani’s development plans in court” (2012: 138). Giuliani, emboldened by these recent events, ordered a secret emergency transfer of almost all Green Thumb licenses from the Parks department to the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, while preparing for an all-out garden sale that nullified Green Thumb licenses (Weissman 2012).

Gardeners increased their protests through creative forms of direct action. In July 1998, protestors released 10,000 crickets in the auditorium of police headquarters in lower Manhattan, where one of the garden lot auctions was taking place. The auction continued despite the crickets, and one spokesperson referred to it as the “most successful [auction] the city has had” (Waldman 1998). Notwithstanding this and other defeats, the protest movement gathered momentum, forming new coalitions that strengthened their cause. After it was publicly declared that 114 garden lots would be auctioned to the highest bidder (and hence not be made available for affordable housing), gardeners created the New York City Community Gardener Coalition, an umbrella group of gardeners around the city that would remain a prominent force well into the time of the writing of this dissertation. The gardeners’ activism surged ahead as they forged

alliances with other community groups, enrolled the support of the media, celebrities, and elected officials, while filing multiple lawsuits, and engaging in demonstrations (Ferguson 1999; Lawson 2005; Von Hassell 2002; Zukin 2010). Many of the activists were arrested for sit-ins at City Hall and for disrupting traffic in lower Manhattan (Herszernhorn 1999).

As a consequence of direct actions, coalitions, and lawsuits, the community gardeners' movement began to gain institutional support by demonstrating that Giuliani was targeting the gardens under the cover of encouraging development. A conservation organization called the Trust for Public Land offered the city \$2 million for 70 of the gardens slated for the auction, but to no avail (Weissman 2012); but Giuliani asserted that the lots ought to be sold to the highest bidder for development purposes. He revealed his intention to target the gardens by referring to them as "an exercise in communism." When the New York Community Gardens Coalition pointed out that the city owned some 11,000 vacant lots that they could choose for development (NYCGC 2010), Giuliani doubled down on his defense of targeting the gardens by infamously responded "This is a free-market economy. Welcome to the era after communism" (qtd. in Kifner 1999).

The gardeners began to acquire support in Albany. State Senator Velmanette Montgomery (D- Brooklyn), citing a Senate Report on the gardens, called on the Mayor to "keep the oversight of community gardens where it belongs -- under the direction of the Parks Department." The *New York Beacon* reported:

*In her letter to Mayor Giuliani, Montgomery said, "While I agree that the City must expand the availability of affordable housing, it shouldn't sacrifice community gardens in the process. If the creation of more housing is what you are striving for, then the City should turn its attention to some 14,000 vacant lots that are not home to community gardens. Develop them. Don't demolish the gardens."*

*"Before the City targets the gardens for destruction," Montgomery said, "it should understand that community gardens cultivate more than plants; they cultivate whole neighborhoods."*



*A March 1998 report by the State Senate Democratic Conference entitled, "Rooted in Community" underscores this point, based on a survey of respondents who cherish -- and toil over -- community gardens Citywide. Montgomery explained that the report finds community gardens to be "community-creating" places, hosting a rich spectrum of activities and events -- attracting all generations representing over 50 ethnic groups throughout the City to enjoy. Among the hundreds of gardens examined, each had distinctive physical attributes, including: bird houses, gazebos; barbecues and picnic areas; amphitheaters; sculptures; murals and veteran's monuments, just to name a few. Excavating the gardens for housing will destroy more than flowers, trees, benches, but a community spirit, which compels neighbors to do good for one another. (NY Beacon 1998).*

This targeting controversy marked the beginning of positive coverage for the movement in the commercial media. *The New York Times* registered support for gardeners with an editorial that referred to the auctioning of the gardens as “neighborhood violence” (NYT Editorial 1999). *The Daily News* began reporting the arguments and analyses of the protestors, including this provocative quote from Lower East Side activist David Levy: “In Harlem, there are a lot of lots in burned-out buildings. Why isn't he selling off those empty buildings? What is it? A vendetta?” (*Daily News* 1999; *Daily News* 1997).

This controversy raised an interesting question: why was the Giuliani administration so focused on selling the garden lots for development if the city had access to thousands of other lots that were already vacant? This targeting pointed to the importance of the community gardens in increasing the property values of their neighborhoods, hence making the auctioning of their lots a more profitable move for the city.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the *Daily News* published an opinion-editorial where they strongly criticized the Mayor’s plans to auction the gardens and extolled the ways that gardens improved their locations: “Gardens lend class to everything around them. A building is a better building with a garden by its side. It's a tangible sign that some people care enough to

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<sup>14</sup> I will come back to this question in Chapter 4.

do this and other people care enough to respect it. In the same way a vacant lot filled with trash makes everything around it a little shabbier, a garden makes everything around it a little brighter” (NY Daily News 1999). The *New York Beacon* expressed a similar sentiment by pointing out the fact that gardens had been developed in devastated areas: “Historically, community gardens haven't just popped up because someone's looking for a place to plant their tomatoes. Gardens happen because of the real need to improve communities.... Rather than picking them off one-by-one, as has happened since the Koch administration, a large group of well-established and passionately stewarded gardens were threatened" (NY Beacon 2000).

The *Daily News* quoted activists who saw the targeting as exploiting the gardeners’ labor. Anastasia Pardalis, the spokesperson for the New York City Coalition for the Preservation of Gardens told the *Daily News*: "The city used us to clean, maintain, and keep the neighborhoods safe. Now that these communities are thriving, they want to take them back. We understand the need for housing, but the gardens help improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers." Another volunteer, Todd Edelman, said in the same article that the city should be happy that residents worked free-of charge to help beautify their communities. "No matter what happens, we will always fight to have . . . greenery in New York.... This is unfair. I believe the city has a lot of other land they could develop" (*NY Daily News* 1997).

Political opportunity theory helps understand how the community gardeners were able to get support from local level politicians as well as the attorney general in their campaign to stop Giuliani’s attack on the gardens. In addition to the supportive newspaper articles, the efforts of nonprofit organizations, and the intervention of the state senate, Attorney General Elliot Spitzer became an ally of the gardeners. The community gardeners saw an opportunity in Spitzer that would help their cause and lobbied hard to get his support. Former A.G. Spitzer had well-known

political aspirations, including a desire to run for governor of New York State. He therefore needed to differentiate himself from the Republican Governor Georges Pataki (Weissman 2012), who had portrayed himself as an environmentalist. The campaign to save the gardens presented a chance for Spitzer build his environmental credentials while simultaneously undermining the Governor's claims. Indeed, Spitzer publicly credited the lobbying efforts of the Green Guerillas for his involvement in the struggle to save the gardens (Zurkin 2010). Hence, this struggle between two powerful figures was one way in which the garden activists found opportunity in the political structure.

In the spring of 1999, shortly before the scheduled auctioning of the garden lots, Spitzer filed a lawsuit against Giuliani for violating state environmental laws by failing to conduct the proper environmental impact review of public land before putting the land up for sale (NYT 1999). Spitzer claimed, the lots were gardens and parkland, and any sale must be approved by the New York State Legislature.<sup>15</sup> Heartened by their growing traction, the activists began criticizing, the connections between the Giuliani administration and the real estate lobby. Giuliani thus became the target of the activists' organizing efforts with the newspaper *The Daily News* as a strategic ally. For instance, this newspaper reported that Giuliani accepted \$32,000 in campaign contributions from a developer who built on garden lots, Donald Capoccia of BFC Partners (*NY Daily News* 2000). Giuliani's anti-garden actions were not just in favor with developers, but with Republicans more generally. The *Daily News* observed that "Giuliani was not going to ingratiate himself with his fellow Republicans by ceding public land to a bunch of plant lovers. The garden on DeKalb Ave. remained officially designated as surplus, was to be

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<sup>15</sup> New York State Environmental Protection Act, Environmental Conservation Law §54-0901 *et seq.*

auctioned on May 13 as Parcel 363, Lot 43, Block 2099. The minimum price was set at \$ 24,000” (*NY Daily News* 1999). Giuliani’s actions further undermined democratic processes due to his ignoring the voices of local elected community boards. The *Daily News* said:

*Local elected officials, especially in Brooklyn, are outraged that the Giuliani administration did not consult them about which local parcels would go on the block. In the past, the city had sought community advice on property transfers or sales. "In 1998, community boards and gardeners were basically taken out of the loop," said Craig Hammerman, district manager of Community Board 6 in Brooklyn. "No notice. No consultation." Howard Golden, the Brooklyn borough president, recently released a report showing that lots sold by the city usually remain garbage-strewn eyesores for years"<sup>16</sup> (emphasis mine). Based on my study, once auctioned, most vacant lots not only remain underdeveloped, but become dumping grounds for unauthorized vehicles and garbage," said Golden. City officials say the sale is an opportunity to expand the tax base and cash in on the city's surging real estate market. According to a Daily News analysis of city records, the least the city could make from sales of the 126 gardens is \$ 3,620,000 (*NY Daily News* 1999).*

Local level political structures attempted to reclaim democratic processes. The City Council vowed to oppose any efforts by the mayor to auction the city’s community gardens without local feedback, and discussed a resolution to preserve the city’s remaining community gardens. State legislatures were also trying to protect as many community gardens as possible. State Senator Velmanette Montgomery introduced a bill with Assemblywoman Joan Millman, both Brooklyn Democrats, that would have allowed not-for-profit groups (like land trusts) to purchase gardens using state funds (which eventually passed and created a pathway for non-profit land trusts like the Trust for Public Land to purchase gardens. Montgomery said: "The ruination of community gardens will destroy more than flowers, trees and branches.... It will repress a community spirit that compels neighbors to do good for one another with a hoe, a trowel and a great deal of tender, loving care" (*NY Daily News* 1999).

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<sup>16</sup> This comment leads to my argument that the city targeted community gardens as part of institutionalized racism, which I will explore in greater depth in Chapter 4.

The Attorney General's actions forced the Mayor to finally engage in last-minute negotiations with the Trust for Public Land (TPL), the conservation organization that the Mayor had previously ignored. The city initially started negotiations with TPL to make the lawsuits disappear (Barry 1999). TPL did not, however, have the authority to drop the lawsuits. Instead it pressed the Mayor for the right to purchase as many of the garden lots as they could afford (they raised millions of dollars in order to preserve the gardens in trust). The State Supreme Court, troubled by the city's destruction of a popular community garden, which was conducted secretly before the break of dawn just one day before the scheduled auction, ordered a temporary restraining order that halted the garden auction (Barry 1999). TPL was able to purchase 62 of the gardens for \$3 million dollars, which left the remaining 52 gardens temporarily under the protection of the Supreme Court but still under threat of destruction.

TPL collaborated with another organization, the New York Restoration Project (NYRP), which was founded by Bette Midler in 1995 with a focus on cleaning up parks in the city. Galvanized upon learning of Giuliani's plans to auction 114 gardens to developers in 1999, the celebrity actress and singer contributed her own personal funds towards saving the garden lots. The NYRP purchased the remaining 52 gardens for a total of \$1.2 million dollars. Weissman said "Although NYRP had already contributed some \$1 million to TPL for their garden purchase, Midler had reportedly been resolved to ensure no garden was sold for development" (2012: 143). Hence the city received a total of \$4.2 million dollars to permanently stop the gardens from being sold to developers and since these gardens were now in trust, they would be protected indefinitely.

The TPL and NYRP purchasing of gardens on the auction block was considered a failure in some key respects. The main reason why the purchasing of the gardens by these nonprofit

organizations was considered a failure was because it was a private, market response to the issue of protecting public space. As the Green Guerillas (1999) stated: “[F]orcing supporters of community gardens to pay the City millions of dollars to secure a future for community gardeners is bad public policy. We simply cannot allow this to become the model for garden preservation in New York City. Community gardeners and garden supporters must continue to press on with demands for public policies that preserve and protect community gardens without private money. Gardens deserve nothing less” (Green Guerillas 1999).

Although the purchasing of the gardens from the land trusts was not viewed by all gardeners as a positive precedent, an agreement that gardeners reached with Bloomberg was considered to be a genuine victory. In 2002, Michael Bloomberg became mayor of New York City, marking a shift in the city’s relations to the community gardens as the overtly hostile reign of Giuliani came to an end. Bloomberg began negotiating with Spitzer to come to an agreement to end the lawsuit against the city. In 2002, Bloomberg and Spitzer signed a Community Gardens Agreement that ended the long battle by temporarily protecting the gardens (Weissman 2012). The Agreement stated that 400 gardens would be transferred to the Parks department under the GreenThumb program, another roughly 30 gardens would be developed immediately, and another 110 gardens would be up for sale (Weissman 2012).<sup>17</sup> The Agreement did provide some protection measures for the gardens that were to be developed or sold, such as providing for alternative sites for the gardens that were destroyed, requiring an environmental review for any gardens for sale, and providing notice of any garden action to the Community Board of the garden according to the GreenThumb records (Weissman 2012). Thus, the Agreement with

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<sup>17</sup> These 430 gardens were separate from the 114 gardens that were purchased by the TPL and NYRP.

Bloomberg at least insured public protection of the gardens and allowed for the community to have some say in garden actions, through political (and not market) mechanisms. As former GreenThumb director Jane Weissman (2002) explained to the *New York Times* at the time of the Agreement: “It preserves almost 200 community gardens . . . but even more important, it sets out a process that’s fair, that’s equitable, that is going to provide notification and will give gardeners a chance to find support for their gardens.”<sup>18</sup>

The Community Gardens Coalition drafted a Community Garden Law (in 2002, after the agreement negotiated with Spitzer was set to expire) that aimed at protecting community gardens in the city. This draft legislation, which was written by gardeners, activists, lawyers, and elected officials, described the environmental, health, and quality of life importance of community gardens. The draft law specifically demanded that “In recognition of the importance of such places to the City and its quality of life, the legislature hereby finds and declares community gardens as parkland of the City of New York and further finds that such community gardens cannot be sold or developed” (NYS Assembly 2016). These activists requested that any community gardens under lease by the City for at least six months prior to the passage of the law be declared parkland and not be developed or sold. The Coalition was lobbying elected officials like NYC Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and Parks Chair Mark Levine to adopt this legislation. As of the writing of this dissertation, this law had yet to pass. This organized effort to

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<sup>18</sup> The Agreement expired in September 2010, leaving the community gardens in a state of uncertainty again.

pass legislation that protected the community gardens was one example of the impact of Giuliani's sabotage attempts.

Giuliani's auctioning efforts had impacted the community gardening movement in more ways than one. On one level, his attempts served to organize previously separate gardens into a united front and build the movement for food justice. Karen Washington, long-time community garden activist, and head of the Community Garden Preservation Coalition, described Giuliani's attacks as "a wake-up call.... Going through the process, it was the worst thing; but in retrospect, it turned out to be the best thing [for community gardening in New York City]" (Personal Interview, Karen Washington, May 6, 2014). After communities heard in the newspapers that the city was going to auction over a hundred community gardens (especially in communities of color), and some would be bulldozed at night, the gardeners started organizing block parties in order to get the word out to build cohesive actions. Washington reported that, although the city tried to demolish one garden at a time, the people "galvanized" to stop the city. She continued by saying "Giuliani made community gardening political and as a result, the people started planning strategic political organizing to protect the gardens" (Personal Interview, Karen Washington, May 6, 2014). Before Giuliani, she said that community gardening was "volunteer" work, done to make communities better, and after the auctioning attempts, gardening became political: "we are part of political systems and we learned that people power means something because Giuliani went after one garden at a time, and we learned that in unity we had strength" (Personal Interview, Karen Washington, May 6, 2014). Washington believed that it was the efforts of the gardeners that helped to protect the gardens by having the injunction placed on the auctions.

Washington was not the only garden activist who believed that the Giuliani emergency transformed the gardens in a beneficial manner. Anya, a former technical assistance provider for



Green Guerillas, described the Giuliani crisis as a “watershed” event for community gardening in New York City: “In the gardens I go to, people there talk about that time, and that was their turning point. Because the controversy made them think really hard about what gardeners do, and having to say it loud made them realize the things they have accomplished, or could accomplish. Then some of them became more ambitious” (qtd in Martinez 2010: 100). Giuliani’s auctioning efforts helped to catalyze a movement that transformed gardeners with isolated lots around the city to a unified front that not only slowed and stopped the auctions, but also transformed community gardening into a visionary movement for urban agriculture.

Marisa DeDominicis, former squatter and community gardener activist, reiterated this sentiment by recounting:

*You mentioned the auctioning. How did that transform the community gardens? It galvanized people. It totally made people recognize the issue. A lot of people didn't know gardens were public, year to year, and that they could be taken away from them. They didn't realize the legality and tenuousness of it. They started to see gardens going. Like the ABC garden was a big one that went, the 10th Street Garden between A and B also. We had all these demos to save them. As time went on, and more and more gardens were getting demolished and removed, our garden got bulldozed.*

*The more people started waking up and realizing, there was one on 7th street, there were people on the tree standing guard. So we had our fair share of being able to say that your time would come next, so people became more vocal and able to organize around that (Personal Interview, Marisa DeDominicis, July 11, 2015).*

Nancy Kohn, Director of GreenThumb from 2013-2015, echoed this point of view in regards to the Giuliani auctions:

*They completely transformed the gardens. That was a pivotal time. Because now knowing how it turned out, you have to be grateful for what happened. It put community gardens on a map in a different way than it was on the map before. I think it still has a long way to go because community gardens aren't even on the city map, they are mapped as vacant lots still. So, we have a long way to go. But, I think it sort of shows the voice of the people, what really matters to NYers, it really brought together people who didn't expect to be brought together. For instance,*

*Bette Midler came out and became the face of that whole situation. It was an interesting situation and I would have loved to have been here during that time. But I think on one hand, you have the community gardeners themselves formed the CGC, they are suing the city nonstop. It was clear what they wanted. It was a long battle. There were protests often. Bette Midler comes in and decides to buy a bunch of community gardens and I guess with timing, with Bloomberg coming into the administration, it was like that, all these gardens were saved. I think it was a pivotal time. I think we've in a different time that community gardeners have to stand up in a way that they hadn't before. It's a new generation of gardeners who haven't faced that threat of their gardens being taken away. So, we are in an interesting time. But yea, I think it was pivotal for the people at GT and the community gardeners in NYC (Personal Interview, Nancy Kohn, May 10, 2015).*

Andy Stone, Director of the Trust for Public Land's Parks for the People—NYC Program, described the Giuliani actions as a “quantum leap in political activity” that united formerly disparate gardeners into a unified and active movement (Personal Interview, Andy Stone, May 4, 2015).

### ***Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture in the Age of Gentrification***

Since the 1990s, the nature of community gardening in the city shifted. The shift of adding community gardens to the land trusts had an impact. TRL and NYRP were both large nonprofit organizations, hence were privately operated and managed, and their purchase of these gardens marked a vertical shift in the community gardening movement. This means that the gardens were starting to become more ‘top-down’ in their structure in that a big institution ultimately owned the garden and determined its operations and procedures. This structure was markedly different from the preceding era where the community members squatted on the land

and ran the gardens on their own terms. I will discuss the implications of this vertical shift in more depth in Chapter 4.

The intentions of urban farms marked another shift from community gardens. The endeavors of urban farms aimed to produce a higher quantity of food (like a full production farm) and had specific monetary goals. Examples of these types of projects included rooftop and hydroponic farms, which overcome sparse city space by growing food on the roofs of building and indoors. Urban farms differed from community gardens in one main regard: the urban farms focused on the production of food for profit while community gardens used food production as a vehicle to “grow community” (Personal Interview, Andy Stone, May 2015). This emphasis on the market aspect of food production did not come about until after the Giuliani era. Evan Weissman, the geographer at Syracuse University, claimed in his dissertation on urban agriculture in Brooklyn, that “The evolution of community gardens vis-à-vis neoliberalism is reflected in the shift from gardening as a struggle against roll-back neoliberalization [during the urban fiscal crisis] to gardening as the (re)production of roll-out neoliberalization [during the era of gentrification]” (Weissman 2012: 162). Weissman argued that the privatization of community gardens (evident by their increased ownership by nonprofit organizations) and reliance on corporate funding were “emblematic of the roll-out neoliberalization of community gardens” (Weissman 2012: 162). Weissman articulated several differences between community gardens and urban farms. For one, urban farms operated on private property (owned by a nonprofit, private institution, or individual) as opposed to being located on public lands like community gardens. Moreover, community gardens were run communally by members while urban farms were managed by paid farmers. Community gardens grew food that was often exchanged in the “sharing” economy, meaning that community members would give the harvest away freely to

those in need, bartered it, or would grow food for their own personal subsistence. On the other hand, urban farms produced food for sale, not for personal consumption (Weissman 2012).

Many of my interviewees talked about the problems with this emphasis on the business aspect of growing food. Freda Hooper, founder of a community garden in the Bronx, commented that urban farms were less personal, while community gardens were more family oriented and inclusive. The business aspect of urban farms was alienating to her (Personal Interview, Freda Hooper, June 18, 2015). This view was shared by many, who chose to share the bounty they produced with the community free of cost, or barter them, or just consume them directly for personal sustenance (Personal Interviews: Nina Talley, May 10, 2015; Denise Williams, June 28, 2015; Sharon Sockwell, June 25, 2015). Rafael Mutis was expelled from the garden he helped start in the Bronx because he disagreed with the increasingly commodified nature of food production. He complained “food is seen as a commodity because land is seen as a commodity. Any piece of land, the greedy developers are salivating over so they can make more money.” Mutis claimed that he and the other founders had started the garden out of a desire to improve the health of their community and not to make money:

*What we were trying to do in Morning Glory was not about commodifying food. People could come in and work, but not to individualize it either, like this plot is yours and whatever you grow in it you eat. But instead it's like, we work together and we build community together. And we'll share with each other, like having community events, having dinners, barbeques, to be able to share the produce that we all grew together. So it's really complicated and unfortunately that green capitalist narrative is winning out right now. I'm not indigenous, but I do see land in the indigenous ways, and for our access to the land to be taken away after so many years of labor was really tragic (Personal Interview, Rafael Mutis, July 2015).*

The comparison that Mutis provided to the indigenous principles of land not being a commodity resonated with another participant. This anonymous participant, contended that they found that proponents of urban agriculture often argued that urban agriculture was more efficient

and productive than community gardening. This participant then went on to say that she found this similar to accounts of Europeans criticizing Natives for not being efficient or productive with the land:

*It reminds me of the ways that settlers characterized indigenous life. That native people weren't really productive with the land. They're not really productive. They are wanderers. They are nomadic. They are not settled, not productive, not making good use of the land, in fact, they are wasting the land. And the parallel that I see is that these community gardeners are putting a little bit but they are not really growing anything, they are not productive, they can't do this to scale, on and on and on.... You see at the core of this, a very kind of class- and race-based discourse that people may not be aware that they are articulating. One question in this discourse deals with the appropriateness and suitability of who is entitled to use the land, about how people use resources and therefore who is best poised to use the resources. I think that's a lot of what this is about (Personal Interview, Anonymous, July 2015).*

The newer crop of urban farmers, as a further illustration of their privileged backgrounds, were able to access resources and funding from wealthy investors or philanthropists for urban agriculture endeavors (like hydroponics or roof-top farming) that typically required thousands upon thousands of dollars to start-up. Those kinds of resources were traditionally inaccessible to most low-income people of color who lacked networks to such sources of wealth. One urban agriculture venture, called Eagle Street Rooftop Farm, which opened in 2009, cost roughly \$60,000 to install, and this sum was paid for by a green construction builder to use the farm as a demonstration site (Weissman 2012). Brooklyn Grange, another rooftop farm, opened in Long Island City, Queens in 2010. Its founder, Ben Flanner, had explicit aims to make Brooklyn Grange a commercially lucrative farm, especially because the project had “debt and investors” (Rosenwasser 2010). Brooklyn Grange started with upwards of \$200,000 in capital investments, from lenders, investors, and funders, hence its financial viability was paramount (Weissman 2010). Gotham Greens in Brooklyn, was founded by entrepreneurs associated with JP Morgan (Weissman 2012). As Weissman articulated, since “investors are looking for a return and loans must be repaid” community gardens, whose projects were concerned with non-monetary issues

such as community security, food justice, youth education, health, and equality, were less likely to be able to receive such investment funds (Weissman 2010: 198). Other urban farms, like Added Value, East New York Farms! EcoStation, and BK Farmyards, operated as not-for-profit organizations. Not-for-profits, in their structure, were often inaccessible to working-class community members in that one needed a formal and advanced education in order to navigate their extensive administrative and legal requirements. Some activists went so far as to contend that non-profits replicated colonial power relations due to the reporting requirements of the state over the organization (INCITE 2009).

Detroit urban farmer Patrick Crouch engaged with the contradictions of privilege, power, and oppression in his article “Evolution or Gentrification: Do Urban Farms Lead to Higher Rents.” Urban agriculture was distinctive in its focus on the business aspect of food production. Crouch argued that the entrepreneurial spirit of urban agriculture could perpetuate gentrification. “Because there’s often a profit motive, it’s easier to justify the land use to city officials and developers, because it can mean jobs and economic development, thus bringing new value to that land, and making those communities ripe for gentrification” (Crouch 2012). Particularly when the urban agriculture projects operated within the confines of market principles (for instance, at a neighborhood farmer’s market, where food was sold and hence assigned an exchange value), they could contribute to the gentrification of that area.

Urban agriculture in the era of advanced gentrification was confined by the dictates of neoliberalism and global capitalism. Some striking differences between community gardens and urban farms in the era of gentrification were that the urban farms, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, had more market and entrepreneurial intentions, as compared to the initial community gardens, that were not organized around the central goal of market sales and profit accumulation.

For instance, the intentions of the earlier gardens centered around community safety, cleaning up the neighborhood, and food production, and the direct consumption of the gardeners and community members. John Ameroso, retired Cornell University agricultural extension agent, recounted that the motivation of the early community gardens was “mainly [about] taking back their block and their neighborhood from the dumping and whatever else was going on in those neighborhoods. It was more of a sociological phenomenon [than a food production phenomenon...]” (Personal Interview, John Ameroso, July 7, 2015). Andy Stone, director at Trust for Public Land, who supported the early gardens corroborated this sentiment:

*Rather than a desire to grow food or this or that, it was really that people had pride in their neighborhoods, which were declining, and they wanted to create something good out of an eyesore. So, some people started doing that. Community gardens emerged with the cuts to city services and tremendous amount of neighborhood decline. The community gardens movement grew out of this period of extreme neighborhood decline. People having a stake in their neighborhood, the neighborhood self-help movement was used [as a model] too (Personal Interview, Andy Stone, May 4, 2015).*

Marisa DeDominicis remarked on the impact of the illegal dumping as a motivating factor for the gardens by saying: “From the city's point-of-view, gardens stopped illegal dumping. The gardens were the only way to keep illegal activity out. We called it pest control. There was so much vacancy, people [from outside the neighborhood] didn't care and respect the properties a lot. Hence, many lots filled with trash. The community gardens really were a huge way of making the places feel special” (Personal Interview, Marisa DeDominicis, May 15, 2015). The social movements piece was echoed by Nancy Kohn, Director of GreenThumb: “When I think of community gardening, the first thing I think of is the social movement piece. And the efforts for the community members that lived there then to really make their neighborhoods better and increase the quality of life in their neighborhoods and for the residents that lived there. And I feel like they still do that today. It's different in some cases as more neighborhoods become more

transient, but generally I think that is still very alive within our community gardens” (Personal Interview, Nancy Kohn, May 10, 2015).

Rasheed Hislop, Deputy Director of GreenThumb in 2015, took this social movement piece further by adding:

*When community gardens started out, it was really about a reclamation. People were definitely in a position where a lot of people felt lost in terms of not having control over their surroundings and their environment. The white owners of buildings, like in the Bronx especially, made it look like a war zone. You see a building that looks bombed, some areas of the Lower East Side, areas with some of the largest concentration of gardens. I think in general the city, had a lack of social safety net, support in terms of public stewardship, a public gathering space where they actually created something new that was actually adapted to their circumstances built by people knowing it better than anybody else. The fires were set and the next thing you know there's these massive vacant lots, but community gardeners remain— better still, reclaiming space by starting a garden without any permission to do so on public land. I think that was important because it was an act of revolution against the system that clearly in that moment wasn't supporting the community. And so it was more really direct action, as well as a way to open up spaces to take over, for people to have ownership over their communities (Personal Interview, Rasheed Hislop, June 17, 2015).*

In this earlier era of community gardening, communities were able to reclaim vacant lots without permission from the owners because of the neglect of the owning class. The gardeners built vibrant gardens with little financial capital. The urban agriculture endeavors in the post-Giuliani-era of gentrification could not squat and reclaim vacant lots, due closer scrutiny over land in the city and the skyrocketing property values. Developers had stronger interests in retaining their possession over vacant lots in the city; in order for newer urban farms to develop, they typically solicited permission from an institution like a city agency that regulated the land or from a private landowner. Indeed, one of the first steps in starting a community garden, according to the organization 596acres, a group that provided legal assistance to the more recent urban agriculture endeavors, was calling or emailing the owner after one identified a potential lot for the project (596acres.org 2015). These projects were also usually incorporated as a 501-c-3



not-for-profit and received some forms of foundation funding, which further made them inaccessible to people unskilled in writing grant proposals or submitting written reports to foundations (INCITE 2009). These institutions repeatedly “called the shots” and dictated the rules, regulations, goals, and other activities of the gardens and farms. For instance, in 2008, the Parks Department required gardens to expand their open hours from ten to twenty per week. The intention of this rule change was to make gardens more “park-like” by making them more accessible to the general public. However, this requirement proved to be a burden to many gardeners, many of whom work full-time jobs and were already overextended in their commitments (Martinez 2010). If a garden was not in compliance with Parks rules, that constituted grounds for it to be seized and subject to possible development (Martinez 2010).

Magali Regis, Vice President of the New York City Community Gardening Coalition at in 2015, spoke about how an “inactive” garden was grounds for development:

*It would be harder for them to justify that the gardens be developed if they are active. If you really show that you're a community garden and that it's not a private social club. If you insure that there is programming, for seniors, for churches, for schools, for community to get involved, for social events, a lot of gardens are very active socially, with plays, dance performances, festivals, etc. then you can really show, 'hey, don't even think of touching this.' But the gardens that are closed-off, not a lot of membership, they are more at risk. Because if they see it's always closed, never anyone in there, maybe it doesn't have as much chance of survival when the developers come (Personal Interview, Magali Regis, May 2015).*

Rasheed Hislop reiterated these sentiments in response to my question regarding what community gardens can do to protect themselves from development. He argued that the gardeners should organize the community and reach out to elected officials, like the community board, for support. With the right kind of community support, Hislop contended, community gardens would be saved from development (Personal Interview May 2015). Ironically, though, there was an example of a community garden that was in the grips of an embattled fight to save it from

development the summer during which I was conducting my field research. The Board Walk Community Garden that was located in Coney Island was one example of a popular community garden with an active membership that was nonetheless destroyed by a developer. The developer prevailed despite the local community board vote in support of the garden and against the development (NYCCGC 2015). Indeed, even if a community garden was actively supported by the community they were still at-risk for development. Gardens that were located in mostly communities of color continued to face additional burdens.

It was important to analyze the contradictory racial dynamics of urban agriculture. Most of the urban agriculture initiatives created in the post-Giuliani era of gentrification were white-led, but located in predominantly people of color communities.<sup>19</sup> Washington cited the inherent racism in the assumptions made by the newer urban farmers, assuming that the older community gardeners did not know what they were doing. Karen Washington critiqued: “Urban agriculture has shifted focus towards efforts like rooftop farms, hydroponics, aquaponics, and all those approaches take lots of lots of money (thousands of dollars) that people of color don’t have...They [the more recent urban farmers] make it seem like growing on the ground in soil is dangerous because of contaminants, but they don’t realize that community gardens build raised beds and create and bring in compost...” (Personal Interview May 6, 2013). It was thus worthy to analyze the shift in the racial and class make-up of urban farmers in the post-Giuliani period.

The later urban farmers—arriving after 2000—reflected racial and class demographics consistent with those of the gentrifiers and not from the New York City neighborhoods most

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<sup>19</sup> Researchers from Temple University, Mahbubur Meenar and Brandon Hoover, described this as a “white, top-down activity” in their work on community gardens in Philadelphia (2012).

devastated by institutionalized oppression. As geographer Evan Weissman reported in his doctoral dissertation on urban agriculture in Brooklyn, “The farmers of both the commercial and charitable projects are all white, middle-class, idealistic, and beautiful. They are a popular bunch, widely recognized not only around their neighborhoods but at any and all food-related events, as I sarcastically wrote in my fieldnotes: “urban farmers are rock stars and it is super cool to know them!” (Weissman 2012: 186; Stein 2010).

Karen Washington pointed to racist assumptions that many privileged white people make when they enter communities of color. The privileged urban farmers assumed that the long-time residents of these communities did not have the “right” knowledge of urban farming, perhaps because they did not get formal degrees in urban agriculture, as many of the younger urban farmers had (Personal interviews: Redelia, June 30, 2015; Traci Nottingham, June 23, 2015; Anonymous, July 8, 2015; Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015). Instead of recognizing the importance of ancestral and cultural knowledge, the privileged farmers ignored the older gardeners’ experiences and assumed they did not know to take certain precautions like soil testing as Washington previously stated. Washington said that “urban agriculture is turning into a white hippie movement...they [the newer urban farmers] are coming into established gardens and coopting the work that those gardeners had done in the past...these [newer urban farmers] weren’t even born at that time...the elders of color that started these gardens have either passed on or retiring.... [Many of the newcomers] have no idea what the history is about.” Washington ended by stressing that “urban agriculture is not new;” it had been happening for decades (Personal Interview May 6, 2014).

In the article “White Spaces in Black and Latino Places” Brandon Hoover called for a critical race theory analysis of urban agriculture, given that much of the academic literature

focused uncritically on the benefits of urban agriculture. Brandon Hoover said that “urban agriculture is largely championed by a middle-class white populace as part of the alternative food movement, rather than being understood as having historical roots in predominately black and/or Latino neighborhoods. As a result, urban agriculture generally created white spaces in otherwise black or Latino places” (2013: 109). One issue with these racial dynamics was that the white urban farmers failed to acknowledge the ancestral agricultural knowledge of the community members, as Washington previously described. For instance, as Hoover stated, those in urban agriculture “have neglected to understand the vast history, cultural knowledge, and agricultural heritage possessed by landless Asian migrant farm workers, southern black families who farmed in the city after migrating north, and Latino immigrants who left their land due to neoliberal agricultural policy, in search of better livelihoods” (2012: 113). These racial dynamics certainly acted to further alienate the community members from the urban farm.

Carolyn Finney (2014) studied the participation of people in the national parks system through a critical race lens. She found that whites explain the marginal participation of African-Americans in the national park system as divergent value systems, the absence of interest, or not having the financial means to travel to the parks. When Finney asked African-American respondents directly why they participate less in the national parks, African-Americans cited exclusionary practices, conservation groups’ lack of commitment in black communities, and white privilege as reasons. This dovetailed with a lack of visual and textual representation of African-Americans related to the environment in the media.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In a ten-year period of *Outside* magazine, only 2.2 percent of pictures with persons had people of color represented (Finney, 2006).

Likewise, if people of color routinely saw white urban farmers, they experienced similar distance and alienation from wanting to participate as active farmers. This was a motivation of some people of color to get more involved in urban agriculture, so that they could inspire youth to be part of these projects (Personal Interview, Anonymous, March 23, 2015). To be sure, in many of the food justice courses I took in the Farm School, participants would share that engaging youth of color was a challenge in their community because, to these youth, urban farming was viewed as a “white” activity. This was also the motivation for Karen Washington to document the history of the founders of the modern community gardens, so that the future generations would be able to know that these founders were mostly women of color. Including people of color in leadership positions in these urban agriculture projects proved crucial in making these spaces racially inclusive. An application of critical race theory became relevant to analyzing urban agriculture, especially the question of participation by people of color.

### ***Conclusion: Impacts of Advanced Neoliberalism on Community Gardens***

In this chapter, I examined the political economy of New York City after the fiscal crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, including New York’s triumph as a global headquarter of neoliberal capitalism. The Giuliani administration’s selling off of community gardens to real

estate developers signaled the all-out gentrification of many New York City neighborhoods, but it also presented opportunities for the gardeners to transform their work into a movement for food justice, which was especially important in the fight against gentrification. I further examined how gentrification impacted the community gardens by shifting the focus to urban agriculture—with urban farms being more “white, top-down” in their structure. The auctioning of the gardens further signaled a blatant use of authoritarian force that aimed to expel the long-time people of color residents from their neighborhoods. “Planned shrinkage” was not as victorious in ridding the inner city of the working-class people of color as the city had originally intended, thus the Giuliani administration escalated these efforts by using force to squash the gardens, open the way for high-end real estate development and gentrification. However, similarly to how “planned shrinkage” had the unintended consequences of vibrant community gardens being built by the long-time residents, Giuliani’s auctioning efforts helped to galvanize previously insulated community gardens into a united movement for justice, a movement that dared to dream of equality and urban agriculture on a larger city-wide scale. In the next chapter, I will delve deeper into the relationship between community gardens and gentrification.

## Chapter 4: Gentrification and the Appropriation of Community-Built Wealth

## *Introduction*

In this chapter, I present a brief literature review of gentrification scholarship, showing that much of it described gentrification as being instigated by powerful forces at the top, or was dictated by capitalist consumer preferences. I then outline my argument for the process of gentrification: that it was actually rooted in the grassroots efforts of low-income people of color and that developers were like predators who came in and appropriated the people's efforts, with the help of the state. I used data from NYU law school researchers who did an hedonic regression analysis showing a positive relationship between community gardens and increase in property values, especially in the poorest neighborhoods. I analyzed the data from my interviews to support this "bottom-up" process of gentrification, and pointed out how city policies helped perpetuate gentrification. In the words of the NYC Community Gardening Coalition (in response to the announcement that the 6<sup>th</sup> annual Brooklyn Real Estate Summit was to be held at the Brooklyn Museum, in the traditionally African-American (and increasingly gentrified) neighborhood of Crown Heights:

*NYCCGC and our membership are strong proponents for the construction of \*truly\* affordable housing, and we applaud the Mayor for working to create direly-needed affordable and low-income housing through the five boroughs. However, we see no benefit to the community when developers are allowed to build on sites that are active community gardens, consistently providing significant benefits to their neighborhoods.*



*Community Gardens have for decades been an integral part of the fabric of New York City. These gardens are living symbols of unity built by neighbors who joined together to turn abandoned, trash-strewn lots into vibrant community oases. Community gardens in NYC represent a truly holistic, resilient, cost-effective neighborhood-based source of sustainable food production, increasing people's access to locally grown fresh produce, while negating effects of climate change by reducing carbon emissions (NYCCGC 2015).*

My argument was that the revitalization of NYC began not with the real estate developers or city planners, but with the low-income people of color community members themselves in the '70s and '80s. As the community members built the gardens, their neighborhoods became much more desirable places to live, hence attracting the bohemian groups and eventually the communities' efforts got appropriated by the elite. Hence, gentrification was not just about the displacement and destruction of communities of color, but also about the theft of community built wealth. The elite tried to remove the low-income communities of color in the '70s through planned shrinkage, which was not successful because the people stayed, reclaimed, and rebuilt their neighborhoods. Community gardening, which was a grassroots movement that pooled together the resources of the community (also referred to as guerilla gardening), had more recently become coopted into a top-down urban agriculture movement led by do-gooder whites within the nonprofit industrial complex where outsiders get funding to run the garden projects. The city benefited from the efforts of the community gardeners because of the increased value the gardens brought to decaying urban neighborhoods but the city offered no protections for the gardens (and no acknowledgement of the contribution that the gardens have made to the city), with the result being that even well-established gardens could be developed at any time. Hence I argue that the city was obliged to protect the gardens and urban planning needed to protect both housing and green spaces for the community.

In much of the gentrification scholarship, gentrification was studied from the macro level and was thought to result from changes in the housing market. Hence it is viewed as a process in

which the elite revitalized decaying urban neighborhoods by bringing capital into these areas and building higher end housing and amenities like health food stores and gourmet restaurants (Smith 1979; Ley 1980; Mele 2000). Many scholars have examined the niche marketing techniques used by developers to attract the “creative class” (well-educated, privileged people who were artists, bohemians, and musicians) to once devastated neighborhoods that the developers have rebranded. Many scholars argued that the notion of consumer choice drives gentrification, because middle-class people choose to embrace life in the central city again, living in brownstones as a matter of taste (Martinez 2010). Some critical scholars pointed out the market mechanisms shaping gentrification were pro-actively created by the capitalist class in order to ensure profit maximization. Thus, in this view, gentrification was part of a deliberate plan of capitalist growth (Starecheski 2013). Some scholars maintained a connection between community gardens and gentrification, by insisting that gardens facilitated gentrification (Martinez 2010; Weissman 2012). I add that gentrification was not about market forces or the “invisible hand” shaping it, but about planned appropriation efforts. I argue that gentrification was part of a deliberate plan of capitalist growth, and although the capitalist class made such plans, their growth depended also on the blood, sweat, and tears of the people in the poorest communities, whose unpaid efforts subsidized neoliberal gentrification.

## *Gentrification: Literature Review*

Scholarly studies of gentrification have increased in the last few decades. The concept was first introduced by British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe her studies of the displacement of working-class people by the middle-class in parts of London:

*One by one, many of the working class neighbourhoods of London have been invaded by the middle-classes—upper and lower. Shabby, modest [mews](#) and cottages—two rooms up and two down—have been taken over, when their [leases](#) have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences.... Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly, until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed (Glass 1964).*

Since then, urban scholars have attempted to establish theoretical frames to explain this concept (Mathema 2013). Scholars Davidson and Lees defined it in a comprehensive manner. They contended that this gentrification four elements, which render it applicable in a variety of contexts:

- (1) reinvestment of capital;
- (2) social upgrading of locale by incoming high-income groups;
- (3) landscape change; and
- (4) direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups (Davidson and Lees 2005: 1170).

In his article “Disappearing Acts,” Robin D. G. Kelley discussed these stages of gentrification in Harlem. Utilizing historical methods, such as newspaper archives, and census data on the demographic changes in Harlem, Kelley pointed out how what was once the “Negro Mecca” became a yuppie mecca (Kelley 2007). He elaborated that when Black people moved

into white neighborhoods, it was called integration and resulted in whites either fighting by staging violence against the Black newcomers or fleeing to suburban neighborhoods; in either case, the property values of the neighborhood tended to decrease. Kelley said that the changes in Harlem have “put a completely different spin on white flight” because many of these whites were priced out of more expensive parts of Manhattan, thus finding the lower rents in Harlem attractive:

*Whites moving into black communities tend to push property values up, thus pricing many longtime black residents out. It's funny how we never call this process integration: instead we use the presumably race-neutral "gentrification." In Harlem, as with all other urban neighborhoods experiencing gentrification, white home buyers who move into predominantly black neighborhoods earn significantly more money than established residents, whereas black families who move into white neighborhoods tend to have the same incomes (Kelley 2007: 66).*

Kelley described the “empowerment zone” enacted by the Clinton administration in Harlem, which resulted in millions of dollars of tax credits designated to support corporate investment in the area. Giuliani helped make 125<sup>th</sup> more attractive to corporations like Starbucks and the Gap by increased policing of the area including the displacement of the street vendors, a group Kelley described as a “truly diasporic entrepreneurial class with merchants hailing from West Africa and the Caribbean operating alongside native-born African Americans” (Kelley 2007: 67). Kelley argued that the increases in property values in Harlem were by themselves not necessarily a detrimental change, but because so many people from the community did not own property and were consequently displaced when rents increased dramatically, the community was thus harmed by the increased property values. Hence, land ownership was a core idea of Black leaders like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, who preached Black ownership of property in Harlem (Kelley 2007). This idea of community control of land was one that I discussed more in my final chapter as policy alternatives that could have protected New York City neighborhoods.

Kelley situated the gentrification of Harlem within a larger political economy, which other scholars have done as well. In Chapter 2, I examined the work of Amy Starecheski, who studied the political economy of disinvestment and gentrification, and conducted extensive ethnographies of squatters from the Lower East Side during the period of urban disinvestment. She was especially interested in why so much of the housing stock was dilapidated and uninhabitable, given the need for affordable housing even in the late 1970s in New York City. She asked the question: “how did housing with plenty of use value come to have no exchange value” (Starecheski 2014: 64). She argued against “the idea that consumer choice drives gentrification, as middle-class people decide to love the central city again, embracing brownstone renovation as a matter of taste” and instead pointed out how gentrification was part of a deliberate plan of capitalist growth (2013: 65). Gentrification was not about market forces or the invisible hand shaping it, but about planned and unrecognized cooptation efforts. My work complements Starecheski’s in that I also utilize qualitative data, including interviewing one of the participants of her study. Furthermore, I agree that gentrification was part of a deliberate plan of capitalist growth, which rested on an appropriation of community built resources.

My argument contended that the efforts of the community gardeners in cleaning up their neighborhoods helped to make these places more “profitable” (or desirable) from the standpoint of the developers. It was in this manner that my research added to the analysis provided by scholars like Neil Smith in that he ignored the role that the community members played in this process of gentrification and viewed them as victims rather than as agents. Geographer Neil Smith stressed the role of various investors and state actors in driving gentrification. Utilizing a Marxist theoretical perspective and quantitative data from government sources from various cities, he argued that gentrification happened because of a discrepancy between the potential

rental profits from a centrally located building and the actual monetary gains from its current use, which he referred to as the “rent gap” (Smith 1979). Developers invested funds in building new construction projects in disinvested neighborhoods when it makes sense in capitalist terms—i.e., if they believed the revenue they could have generated from the new developments would be greater than the amount of capital they invested in it.

The actors involved in instigating gentrification were not just the private capitalist firms or investment bankers, but also included the state. In “The Changing State of Gentrification,” Neil Smith and Jason Hackworth argued that gentrification was just as much a result of state policies as it was of capitalists’ search for greater wealth accumulation. The authors discussed the history of gentrification, dubbing its sporadic occurrence in the late 1960s to 1970s in particular neighborhoods “the first wave.” During the second period of gentrification, from the late 1970s through the late 1980s, the authors declared that “the process becomes implanted in hitherto disinvested central city neighbourhoods” (Hackworth and Smith 2000: 467). It was during this “second wave,” that we saw gentrification beginning to take hold in urban neighborhoods in New York City. It was important to note that second wave of gentrification took off after the gardens were built and after the artist class began moving in, and was followed by investment flows from capitalist firms. The authors used case studies of three New York City neighborhoods in their analysis and how local policies facilitated gentrification in each area: Clinton (Manhattan), Long Island City (Queens), and DUMBO (Brooklyn). Paula Segal, attorney with 596 Acres, an organization that provided resources for start-up community gardens, reiterated a similar sentiment in my communication with her: “Gentrification - which materializes as displacement - is a policy-driven process. I don't buy the ‘you participate in your own forced relocation by making your home nice’ argument. Red lining, subprime lending and

government giveaways to private developers are at the root of how uneven neighborhood change in NYC has been” (Email, Paula Segal, February 11, 2015).

Smith and Hackworth discussed the role that government policies played in creating the stage for gentrification to occur. They said that generating of tax revenues has been a crucial source of funding for local municipalities due to the fact that federal funds had become increasingly scarce during the 1980s. As a result, many local cities agreed to partner with capitalist firms in a pro-business manner. Moreover, in addition to the necessity of tax income, cities needed to seem welcoming to the interests of capitalist business in order to uphold a beneficial credit rating (Gaffikin & Warf 1993, Sassen 1996, Sinclair 1994). Especially after the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, where cities like New York hovered near or achieved full bankruptcy (Tabb 1982), “the lending community has become more demanding of municipalities to maintain a businesslike ledger sheet. Losing a good credit rating was to be devastating for an urban regime that has leveraged the future of a given city on the redevelopment of its downtown or the gentrification of a given neighbourhood” (Hackworth and Smith 2000: 468). Following subsequent decreases in federal aid, the necessity to borrow monies for redevelopment only continued to be amplified during the third-wave, which started in the early to mid-1990s. These local governments additionally looked to the middle class as a source of needed tax revenue; hence, as the authors stated “in order to retain the fiscal viability necessary to keep receiving such loans, many cities have, more unabashedly than in the past, turned to the attraction and retention of the middle class to increase tax revenue” (qtd. in Hackworth and Smith: 2000: 469; Varady & Raffel 1995).

Similar to how the fiscal crisis of NYC put the city in a situation where they had to agree to Structural Adjustment Program-type of conditions in order to receive aid, this trend became the norm among cities nationwide. So as to continue receiving secure loans from the banks, the local governments chose to slash affordable housing, in order to create housing for the well-to-do. Thus, in sum, gentrification occurred due to the support that developers received from the state, which related to the sentiments expressed by Aissia Richardson during an online discussion about this topic in 2014: “The issue isn't the gardens, the issue is the long term planning by municipalities and their land use policies. Gentrification doesn't happen because people beautify, gentrification happens when HUD has housing grant money, financing is available, tax abatements and tax credits are plentiful, and developers grease the hands of politicians. In the words of James Baldwin, "Urban renewal is Negro removal." Today you can substitute “negro removal” for any low income community of color” (Online discussion, Aissia Richardson, October 5, 2014.<sup>21</sup> In sum, Smith offered a critique of gentrification that honed in on the structural actors and this “supply-side” approach was further criticized by other scholars.

David Ley was critical of Smith’s “rent gap” argument, mainly because it was difficult to measure empirically. Ley’s approach was dubbed “consumption-side” because he argued that gentrification occurred due to the changing preferences and tastes of middle-class people, which came about as a result of shifts in the economy. Ley used a mixed methods approach, integrating quantitative data to study the demographics of the urban newcomers as well as data from

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<sup>21</sup> Since the role of state policies helped to shape gentrification, I turned my attention towards policy recommendations that the state ought to enact in order to protect the gardens in my final chapter.



newspapers, surveys, and electoral data to analyze the cultural characteristics of gentrification within a historical lens (Ley traced the movement of people with privilege back to the city to the late 1960s hippie movements). As manufacturing jobs were outsourced to Global South countries and industrial cities transformed into globalized service-based centers for multinational corporations, the new urban workers, who were much more highly-paid than the manufacturing workers, had particular preferences for housing and amenities that was the impetus for gentrification (Ley 1996).<sup>22</sup> Ley applied a humanistic approach towards studying geography and this approach was one that my research drew upon as well in that I studied the role that the long-time community members had in this process of gentrification. It was in this manner that my work differed from Ley's in that he focused on the role of the gentrifiers as being the main agents as opposed to the long-time community members.

Chris Hamnett, argued that theories of gentrification ought to have been more comprehensive, instead of being juxtaposed between production-side or consumption-side, calling for an "integrated theory of gentrification," that did not focus solely on exploitable housing in prime locations or the changing tastes of middle-class people (1991). Hamnett engaged in a literature review of the dominant strands of thought within this gentrification debate (supply-side vs. demand-side) and developed his own "integrated" theory.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Smith criticized Ley's approach for ignoring the structural causes of gentrification and focusing too much on individual choices. Smith said: "To explain gentrification according to the gentrifier's actions, while ignoring the role of builders, developers, landlords, mortgage lenders, government agencies, real estate agents, and tenants is excessively narrow. A broader theory of gentrification must take the role of producers as well as consumers into account" (Smith 1979: 540).

<sup>23</sup> Hamnett took issue with Smith because Smith focused too much on the production-side explanation of gentrification. Smith believed that the need for producers to earn profit was a "more decisive initiative behind gentrification than consumer preference" and held that the consumer choices of gentrifiers was of secondary importance; rather than explaining why gentrification occurs in the first place, the consumer choices "are of primary importance in determining the final form and character of revitalized areas" (1979: 540). Smith held that

Hamnett outlined a process that explains how gentrification occurs whereby he integrated the competing schools of thought. He described the following four requirements for gentrification to occur:

- 1). There must be a “suitable area for gentrification” (structural and rent gap theory)
- 2). There must be a “supply of potential gentrifiers” (consumer-based theory)
- 3). There must be an “existence of attractive central and inner city environments”
- 4). There must be a “cultural preference for inner city residence by a certain segment of the service class” (1991: 186).

Hamnett believed that a more holistic explanation of gentrification has to involve an understanding of the gentry themselves, especially where they come from and why they gentrify as well as a study of the areas that they gentrify and how the “properties to be gentrified are produced” along with the linkage between the two (1991: 186). Hamnett named the gentrifiers as the “key actors” in gentrification, with real estate developers, mortgage lenders, and developers as secondary. I would like to insert my own analysis of gentrification and add that gentrification occurred in certain neighborhoods where there was a rent gap in significant part because of the efforts of the community gardeners in making those neighborhoods more desirable to capitalists.

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gentrification could be explained ultimately at the structural level and the individual preferences of privileged consumers could also be shaped by structural influences. Hamnett pointed out what he believed to be a shortcoming in Smith’s analysis, namely that the “rent gap” was a necessary but not sufficient condition for gentrification to occur. He went on to argue that the rent gap has existed in neighborhoods where gentrification did not follow, but instead deterioration and abandonment (Hamnett 1991). Hamnett said “the existence of the rent gap can lead to a variety of results including redevelopment or further decline” (1991: 181).

To be sure, the actions of the “gentry” certainly did have a crucial role in gentrification because, as a result of the globalizing of the city, neighborhoods that were in close proximity to downtown urban areas became more enticing to white-collar workers with access to financial capital. As Beauregard stated, “the gentrifiers are often...the agents of gentrification process and thus provide the motives and aspirations that shape it” (1986: 41). Smith did acknowledge the role of individual choices in the article “The Reassertion of Economics: The 1990s Gentrification of the Lower East Side (LES),” where he studied the groups of artists who began making residences and opening art galleries in this neighborhood and how their actions contributed to the “chic” image of LES and its increase in property values.

My analysis concentrates on the role of the gardeners in making neighborhoods like the Lower East Side desirable to the artist classes, which scholars had largely ignored. My research demonstrated that the community gardeners built desirable neighborhoods that had appeal to outsiders and this led to their displacement. Smith did mention the gardens briefly in some of his work, stating that the gardens were tolerated by the city when the land values and capitalist investment in the neighborhood were low as a “bulwark against the homeless encampments that sprouted on many vacant lots,” but many were auctioned off as real estate development increased in the area (1999: 649).

Now since I have discussed the definition of gentrification (and its complexities) and examined the processes that drove gentrification, I would like to briefly consider some problems with the term itself. Neil Smith, in this piece entitled *Gentrification and Uneven Development*, discussed some of the problems with the language used to describe the process of gentrification:

*"Revitalization" and "renaissance" suggest that the neighborhoods involved were somehow de-vitalized or culturally moribund. While this is sometimes the case, it is often true that very vital working class communities are de-vitalized through gentrification. Open doors, street games, and stoop-sitting are replaced with iron bars, guard dogs, high wooden fences, and a scorn for the streets. The idea of "urban pioneers" is as insulting as the idea of the original "pioneers" in*

*the West. Now, as then, it implies that no one lives in the areas being pioneered-no one worthy of notice, at least (1982: 140).*

Smith made an essential point; referring to “the hipsters” as the “pioneers” or “tamers” was racist language (because it erases the lives and experiences of the community people who were there in those neighborhoods before the arrival of the gentrifiers). Many of the participants in my study compared the displacement of the long-time residents to that of the Indigenous peoples, which I analyzed in the following sections, and this frontier language certainly offered yet another problematic parallel to settler colonialism. Likewise, my contribution to this debate brought light to the efforts of the community members to improve their neighborhoods before gentrification occurred in their spaces, which has been elided in the literature. Other scholars have touched upon the contributions of community members in the process of neighborhood revitalization their research but not as thoroughly as in my analysis.

Miranda Martinez interviewed community gardeners in the Lower East Side in her book *Power at the Roots*. She provided an account of a neighborhood with a substantial amount of conflict and displacement by focusing on a study of the community gardens and the Latinos of the Lower East Side. She documented the transformation of the neighborhood through in-depth interviews with long-time residents. A longtime resident, established leader, and community gardener from the Lower East Side has stated: “I can’t believe what we went through. Sometimes it’s like a dream what we lived through. You could go by that park, and see a person getting stabbed in broad daylight. And to make that garden we had to go through the bushes picking up syringes so the kids could use it. And it was all so these people [new arriving gentry] could have it. We did all that, so they could come in!” (qtd. In Martinez 2010: 23)

Although Martinez touched upon the efforts of the long-time community members that led to gentrification, her analysis was nonetheless “top-down” in that it focused on the actions of

the privileged as the starting point of gentrification. She said “The rediscovery of charm or historicity in dilapidated housing stock is the primary draw bringing affluent young home buyers to marginal neighborhoods. As they settle in, better-off newcomers make their mark on local landscapes in a number of ways, often with negative implications for long-time residents” (57). Martinez went on to juxtapose the tensions that arose between the “gentry” and the community members in regards to increased policing of these neighborhoods, needed to help the privileged groups feel “safer” at the expense of increased harassment of youth of color, as well as increased property taxes and higher costs of services that disadvantage the community members as well. Martinez thus touched upon this relationship between gentrification and community gardens in her book very briefly. My research supplements Martinez’s through my interviews with gardeners in other neighborhoods besides the Lower East Side.

Other scholars have further discussed the role that the community played in community improvements before gentrification. In “The Right to Stay Put, Revisited” researchers Kathey Newman and Elvin K. Wyly used a mixed methods approach to analyze the impact of gentrification on displacing long-time NYC community members. The researchers conducted a quantitative analysis of the New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey as well as qualitative interviews with 33 community organizers and residents in seven gentrifying neighborhoods. Their analysis shed light on the wide extent of displacement as a result of gentrification as well as the creative methods used to resist displacement by activists in the face of emphasizing market-oriented deregulation. Newman and Wyly found that many of these long-time residents were “frustrated that after years of fighting to improve their neighbourhoods during periods of severe disinvestment, now that the neighbourhoods are improving, these residents will not be able to stay” (2006: 45). One of their interviewees, who was a resident of the Lower East Side,

had mixed feelings about gentrification, recognizing its “benefits” as well as its detrimental consequences. About gentrification, this resident said: “I’ve never had a problem with it. I’ve welcomed it. But we feel a little bit cheated. We were here when no one wanted to be here. Landlords were selling buildings for \$10,000 to \$12,000. Now that it’s gotten better, we want to be here too. We don’t want to wind up moving. It is so unfair... We made it better for our community and ourselves. We are here because we had nowhere else to go” (qtd. in Newman and Wyly, 2006: 45). This resident’s statement echoed the sentiments that other community members have shared, as well as the contradictory forces at play in the community revitalization efforts. As Newman and Wyly said “For decades, community residents of inner city neighborhoods built organizations and fought to revitalize their communities. Now that these communities are improving, they find it increasingly difficult to remain” (2006: 45). These sentiments underscore the importance of having policies in place that protect the improvements made by the community members in their neighborhoods, like the gardens, while also protecting the long-time members from forced displacement. Thus, I continue on this line of research as presented by Newman and Wyly, particularly in Chapter 5, where I discuss policies that would protect New York City neighborhoods for the people.

## *Community Gardens and Gentrification*

In their groundbreaking study on the effects of community gardens on property values, researchers Vicky Been and Ioan Voicu did a hedonic regression analysis showing a positive relationship between community gardens and increase in property values, especially in the poorest neighborhoods. The researchers drew from a previous study examining the initial investment costs associated with opening a garden earlier, conducted by Fox, Koepfel and Kellam (1985), considered to be “the most comprehensive cost analysis of New York City community gardens (Been and Voicu 2004: 27). These researchers used data from the NYC Department of Finance that contained confidential information on the sales prices of single-family homes, apartment buildings, and condos during the period from 1974-2003 for their regression analysis. They compared this data to information from the Council on the Environment of New York City, which contained records on all the community gardens in the city. Been and Voicu further included demographic census data as well as facts regarding the location and characteristics of public housing in the city. A crucial aspect of their analysis involved classifying properties in the vicinity of garden sites. They used GIS techniques to measure the distance between garden sites and each sale property that appeared in their database. Based on these measurements, the researchers established a variable that recognized properties within 1000 feet of a garden (Been and Voicu 2004). A “continuous distance variable” specified the distance from the closest garden site to the property sold (Been and Voicu 2004: 18). Most of the sales in their database took place in the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, mostly because

those areas contain a relatively greater amount of smaller properties, such as apartments or one and two family homes, which sold faster than larger properties (Been and Voicu 2004). Most of the gardens that the researchers included were relatively new (62% were established after the mid-1980s), 95% of the gardens were on publically-owned land, and the median size of the gardens was roughly 6000 square feet (Been and Voicu 2004). The majority of the gardens were situated in the Bronx, Brooklyn, or Manhattan, with Brooklyn containing nearly 43% of the gardens (Been and Voicu 2004).

The researchers compared census tracts that had at least one garden to census tracts that had no gardens. They found that:

*As compared to the average census tract without gardens, tracts with gardens had much lower mean family incomes, much higher poverty rates (twice as high) and unemployment rates, lower educational attainment, much lower homeownership rates (2.5 times lower), and higher vacancy rates. The tracts with gardens housed much greater shares of Hispanic and Black residents than the average tract without gardens. Finally, other demographic statistics indicate that the garden neighborhoods had smaller shares of foreign-born population, a younger population, and smaller shares of residents with stable neighborhood tenure<sup>24</sup> (Been and Voicu 2004: 20).*

Been and Voicu analyzed the net tax benefits of community gardens for the city, concluding that the city ought to subsidize community gardens because of their net tax benefit for the city. The city incurred little to no expense to start or maintain a garden, because the startup costs and maintenance costs have been raised through community efforts or nonprofit support.<sup>25</sup> The results of the hedonic regression analysis demonstrated that community gardens

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<sup>24</sup> This finding that neighborhoods with gardens had smaller shares of residents with stable neighborhood tenure could be due to gentrification and the displacement of community members that has been taking place especially during the latter time period of this study.

<sup>25</sup> The researchers examined data on properties sold within 1000 feet of a community garden and assigned each property a “pre-opening price” based on what it would have sold for before the garden was established within 1000 feet of it. They then conducted a regression analysis where they estimated the impact of the community garden on the price of the property. Been and Voicu found that the net tax benefit of the gardens came out to \$512,000 per garden



helped to positively augment the property values in neighborhoods, especially the most depressed neighborhoods. These researchers found specifically that a garden raises neighboring property values by as much as 9.4 percentage points within five years of the garden's establishment (Been and Voicu 2004). Although the qualitative benefits of community gardens on a marginalized neighborhood were evident (in terms of neighborhood beautification and contributions to the quality of life), this study helped to document quantitatively the positive impact that community gardens had on property values.

I would add to this NYU study by pointing out that the gardeners toiled to help improve the city on a volunteer basis and the city benefited from their unpaid labor. A Daily News article from the late 1990s called "Gardens Face Uprooting, Community Oases on City-Owned Land Eyed for Housing, Store" quoted both gardeners and city officials. One gardener, Duane, said through good planning, there was "room for both affordable housing and community gardens" (Daily News 1997). Another gardener, Pardalis, said specifically: "The city used us to clean, maintain, and keep the neighborhoods safe. Now that these communities are thriving, they want to take them back." (Daily News 1997). In the article "Fight to Save Gardens" activists with the Coalition for the Preservation of Gardens were quoted as saying that "the city should be happy that residents worked free of charge to help beautify their communities" (Daily News 1998). The fact that the labor of the gardeners was a benefit to the city was illustrated by an award given to an elder African-American community gardener, William Harris, who started a garden over 25 years ago in Harlem. As stated in the *New York Amsterdam News*, "Commissioner John Doherty

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(after deducting for public subsidies given to the garden for its opening and maintenance). Thus, the researchers advocated for greater public investment in community gardens.

of the Department of Sanitation presented Harris with the Partner in a Cleaner New York Certificate of Appreciation for transforming the abandoned lot into a garden” (NY Amsterdam News 2004). Assistant Commissioner of Sanitation, Maria Termini said, "Normally we give the certificates to cleanup programs, but this was a gardening, cleanup, and beautification project all-in-one" (NY Amsterdam News 2004). *The Nation* aired an eight-week podcast, in 2016, on the topic of gentrification entitled “There’s Goes the Neighborhood,” where they interviewed various stakeholders in gentrying neighborhoods around the city. They spoke to one developer with several developments in central Brooklyn and was considered to be an “active” player in real estate in the area who reported: “Buy the ugly-duckling building on a good looking block, you pay less and you get the classy surroundings for free. That’s what Isaac did in 2011” (Wright 2016). As I reported in Chapter 3, *The Daily News* advocated for gardens during the Giuliani crisis in part because the ways in which “gardens lend class to everything around them. A building is better with a garden by its side” (Hinckley 1999). These testimonies attested to the ways in which gardens improved city blocks for developers as well. It was worth reiterating that the city received these improvements virtually free of charge.

It was well-established that the city did not invest financial resources in the community gardens for most of its modern history. Evan Weissman, in his dissertation on urban agriculture in Brooklyn, discussed the lack of financial investment the city made in the gardens. He argued although the city agency GreenThumb was situated within the Department of Parks and Recreation and assumed credit for the program’s success, the city did not earmark any material resources for the program other than land (Weismann 2012). As the community gardeners became aware of the vital role that their work played in the quality of life in the city, they, along with GreenThumb staff began to publically demand that the city financially support the program

with tax revenues. Eddie Stone, head of the GreenThumb program, said that “[Our budget] could be covered by the City, Bloomberg could pay for this [GreenThumb] many times over” (Weissman 2012: 133). Another community gardening activist, Jon Crow of the New York City Community Garden Coalition (the group that was formed during the campaign to save the gardens during the Giuliani period) captured the sentiments of many gardeners when he reasoned: “In GreenThumb's 30+ years the City has not spent a dime for all the good work it does. It's time that our City Council members and the Mayor spend some of New York City's Tax Levy Money to protect GreenThumb from whatever happens in D.C! We're talking a tiny fraction of the City's total budget, but in the hands of GreenThumb it can do so much to help support gardening efforts citywide” (Cooper 2010). Additional scholars have analyzed the monetary savings that the gardeners serviced provided to the city.

In the article *Community Gardens as Contested Space*, author Karen Schmelzkopf discussed the ways in which the community gardeners in New York City provided services to the city for free. The author interviewed gardeners in the Lower East Side and analyzed data from GreenThumb. Schmelzkopf described the formation of Operation Green Thumb, the city agency, housed under the Department of Parks and Recreation, which provided support to gardens and leased vacant city land to gardeners. Schmelzkopf argued that gardens, as opposed to city-developed parks, were economically a good deal for the city since they were labor intensive and the unpaid labor of the community accounted for the vast majority of the investment in a garden project: “the surrounding locales gain some socially generated equity from the gardens because open space is maintained and because a lot with a garden on it is much more pleasant than is one filled with garbage and weeds. And there is anecdotal evidence of increased stability on the

street, with more people around and increased neighborhood friendliness making the vicinity relatively safer than blocks with no gardens” (1996: 366).

The researcher claimed that the community gardening movement became an important response to the budget cuts of local services that the city tolerated due to the fact that the gardens cost the city very little and the benefits of the gardens were felt both on the city landscape and on the quality of life in the neighborhoods (Schmelzkopf 1996). Jane Weissman, Director of GreenThumb from 1984 until 1998, recounted that gardens were a “bargain” vis-à-vis city-developed parks because of how labor-intensive these green spaces were and with gardens, the community labor represented 80% of the investment in the project (qtd. in Schmelzkopf 1996). This information supports my argument that the city benefited from the efforts of the community gardeners.

Though these studies did not always explicitly acknowledge the significance of their findings, this research demonstrates that gentrification was not simply a top-down process, rendering the community members as passive victims. Instead, the appropriation of community built wealth became a routine and significant component of the gentrification process. When the elite deliberately disinvested in inner-city neighborhoods, community members did not just languish, but they instead reclaimed their neighborhoods and made them desirable places to live. The ‘artist’ class, also known as hipsters, were the first group of outsiders to move in to these neighborhoods, surely attracted by the gardens in some part. Lastly, the real estate speculators and developers, with the help of the local government, saw opportunities for increased profits in these urban areas and hence took advantage of the ground work laid out by the community in

making the neighborhoods desirable places to live. In the next section, I will discuss in greater depth this analysis and utilize data from my research to support my claims.

### ***Community Gardens Increase Real Estate Values***

Interviews with key informants document the role of community gardens in the rising property values that animated gentrification, and then led to the displacement of the community members who had built the gardens during the period of urban abandonment. One participant powerfully summarized the relationship between community gardens and displacement:

*People are incredibly fearful of gentrification and they think, if we build a community garden, then the neighborhood will be gentrified and we will all be kicked out of our house and rents will skyrocket...which is not an unfair assumption... And in many ways that is true. In the room where they are screening the film Green Streets, they talk about the “vicious cycle”—the only place where you can build a community garden is a place where you can actually get vacant land and the only place where you can get vacant land is a place where the real estate isn’t valuable and when you build that community garden it’s a wonderful thing because it does amazing things for the community, makes the community nicer, it increases the value of the neighborhood. And those community gardens never own that land. Then real estate developers pull the lease from the garden and its lost, so it’s vicious (Participant, GreenThumb GrowTogether Conference March 2015).*

According to participants in the 1980s documentary entitled “Green Streets,” which highlighted New York City community gardens:

*The process of making this park [community garden] will undoubtedly raise the real estate value. And the job of the Trust for Public Land and Bronx Frontiers is to make sure that people have legal ownership of that very thing that raises the real estate prices. I know that the people on this block, many of them don’t see it as a transient experience. Diverse group of people who have lived here for 40-50 years.*

*The only force that I could see moving them out is that if real estate prices rose tremendously in the neighborhood and they were still excluded from the job market that will drive them out. So, that's a battle that surely is going to be fought. It's frustrating because there has been no end of difficulties in getting money cooperation from city and state authorities but it's really come together on the level of the block here. We can look on what we've done here and say we did it ourselves (Green Streets 1992).*

One of my participants, John Ameroso, who, beginning in the 1970s, helped start many of the community gardens in New York City, recounted:

*Here's how that runs. If you live near a park and it's a good park, your property values go up. But if you make that park better, your prop values go up. There's a lot of small parks throughout Brooklyn that could be made better and then their property values would go up. If those people took involvement in those parks, but that doesn't seem to be happening. The thing with a community garden, yea, it made a property of that block go better because there used to be all these empty lots and then they became community gardens that would be used. It makes it more friendly for someone to come in and buy. I'm not going to go into a block if I see empty lots with garbage in them. Who would buy in places there? So, these places got built up, however it looks as a garden, if it's a community garden or a pocket park, its still raises the values and made it more attractive for people to move there, which in turn, raises the value. So, it was a factor. Of course, it's a no brainer almost. It raises the value because it beautifies the place (Personal Interview, John Ameroso, July, 7 2015).*

Magali, Regis, a board member of the New York City Community Gardening Coalition, told me that the gardens were being used as selling points by landlords and real estate agents:

*Well, what's happening is that a lot of the buildings that face gardens are being used by the building owners to get more money for those apartments? Hey, next door to a garden, faces a garden. So, in that sense, the neighborhoods become nicer and safer. It's an asset having that next to me or in my block. It's definitely what you have on a checklist, to move in a neighborhood or not, access to public space, if there is a park near you. Those things matter...I see people who are living in their communities really far from parks, see these gardens as just an oasis from the urban grind and turn them into these really beautiful green spaces. And they don't do it ...just... for themselves.... As these gardens become more and more beautiful, it's made the neighborhood safer and attracted developers and all that. And we are basically the victims of our success (Personal Interview, Magali Regis, May 13, 2015).*



*Image: Liz Christy Garden, Lower East Side, NY*

Many people have observed that the gardens helped to increase property values in their neighborhoods. The neighborhoods became more desirable and more people wanted to live in them after the gardens were built. Some respondents said that the gardeners were victims of their own success (because gardens had real estate appeal and then displace the gardeners). My research, corroborated by Evan Weismann’s doctoral research as well, showed that the poorest neighborhoods (with the most vacant lots) had the most gardens and then subsequently the most gentrification. Certainly, it was established that green spaces like gardens helped to attract newcomers to inner-city neighborhoods. The moderator of a talk by Spike Lee (that I transcribe subsequently in this section) on the issue of gentrification made an excellent point by saying that it was the Black people who maintained the neighborhoods that the white folks were moving back into and found desirable,<sup>26</sup> which supports my analysis overall regarding the contributions

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<sup>26</sup> “Black people that have paid those taxes, that have fought to keep the crime down on their blocks, and all the other things they did to maintain... because the white folks are not moving back because it's the ghetto, they're moving back because they are beautiful blocks full of beautiful brownstones that have been well maintained by people of color” (Coscarelli 2014).

that the community gardeners made towards making NYC neighborhoods desirable. The toils of the community gardeners helped to make these neighborhoods desirable to newcomer residents that worked to perpetuate gentrification. To be sure, the real estate industry sought to invest in neighborhoods with growing populations of young newcomers.

The authors of the book *Zillow Talk: The New Rules of Real Estate*, Stan Humphries and Spencer Rascoff, real estate experts with backgrounds in finance and government, discussed the ways in which increased numbers of young newcomers could be used to identify a neighborhood poised for gentrification. They commented that neighborhoods with sizable populations of “hipsters” were a signal of a neighborhood that was going to be gentrified by developers and real estate investors (Humphries and Rascoff 2015).<sup>27</sup> I learned that this group of young, white, idealistic types were certainly very much interested in greening efforts like community gardens and urban farms. For instance, during my tenure in Farm School NYC, a certificate program in urban agriculture, including a stint on the admissions committee, I noticed that many of the participants as well as many of the people who applied for the program would have fit the ‘hipster’ category in terms of their race and class. The former director of Farm School NYC, Jane Hodge, said many times that most of the applicants to this program were young white people, many of whom were recent residents of NYC neighborhoods (Personal Interview, Jane Hodge, January 20, 2015).

In the gentrification literature, the artist class was typically identified as the “frontier” people who were the first to gentrify a neighborhood (Ley 1996). In my analysis, the artists and

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<sup>27</sup> I did not have the capacity to interview “hipsters” during my field research, but many of the activists I spoke with described their experiences with this group of people.



hipsters from the dominant racial group were rather synonymous. It was important to note that this group of people were moving into these neighborhoods because of how well-kept and well-maintained they were and this maintenance work was done by people of color, a point articulated clearly by the lifelong Brooklyn resident who interviewed Spike Lee in the transcript I posted later in this section (Coscarelli 2014). Several of my interviewees conveyed that it was common for the newcomer residents to take an eager interest in the garden to the point that the membership body of many gardens that were traditionally Black, like in Bedford-Stuyvesant, had become mostly white (Personal Interviews: Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015; Nina Talley, May 10, 2015; Anonymous, July 8, 2015; Sharon Sockwell, June 25, 2015; Tracey Nottingham, June 23, 2015). Thus, my research demonstrated that the gardens had huge appeal to the artist/hipster groups, hence attracting them to these neighborhoods that consequently became gentrified by the real estate industry.

The real estate industry found the presences of hipsters, as well as the presence of gardens, opportunistic. Marisa DeDominicis, long-time Lower East Side squatter and community gardener, revealed a story of how her friend saw a realtor giving a tour of a luxury apartment to a prospective buyer in their neighborhood and the realtor highlighted their community garden, which was next to the luxury building, as an amenity by pointing out ‘how great it would be to live next to this garden.’ The friend was incensed that the realtor was attempting to profit from the blood, sweat, and tears of the gardeners (Personal Interview, Marisa DeDominicis, July 11, 2015). The relationship between real estate, or housing, and community gardens was complex. The city and developers typically juxtaposed housing versus gardens when both were sorely needed.

One can argue that green spaces were needed more than housing because there was a severely disproportionate amount of community green spaces vis-à-vis housing. The garden activist who made this claim did so in order to support one garden that was at risk for becoming a land trust. They pointed out a law that said that there must be a certain percentage of green space per resident in NYC and that NYC was well below that requirement. The city and developers continued to prioritize housing over gardens when gardens fulfilled a legal and human right as well. Certainly, the gardeners had a valid legal claim to protect the gardens and the fact that this law was ignored demonstrated the selective enforcement of a law that benefited the developers over a law that benefited the community due to the political commitment of the local government to the developers. Demetrice Mills of the Brooklyn Queens Land Trust remarked that “Developer's come and want to put in affordable housing, do this or that, but what does the community get out of it? Maybe we don't need housing” (Personal Interview, Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015). This was especially telling given that affordable housing was the pretext used to justify the construction of housing that resulted in increased rents and displacement:

Ray Figuero, the President of the New York City Community Gardening Coalition, argued that

*Affordable housing has been a disingenuous subterfuge for what is going on in our communities. Now with the new administration, there is a focus on building 200,000 units of ostensibly affordable housing. That is a very deceptive use of the word affordable. Affordability is based on the demographics of the metro area, the Standard Metro Statistical Area, which includes the suburbs. If you look at the average medium income, it's like \$70,000 [which is well above the average medium income for the South Bronx where Ray is located]. There are concessions in that criteria (Personal Interview, Ray Figuero, June 14, 2015).*

According to New York City's housing plan, the local government defined “low-income” as having an income between \$41,951 and \$67,120 (Housing Plan 2015). The median family income for Mott Haven (the neighborhood in the Bronx where Ray Figuero's garden was located) was \$23,763, which was almost \$20,000 less than the definition of “low-income” as per

the city (City Data 2016). Hence, when developers allotted apartment units as “affordable,” the rent for these units was based on an income much higher than the incomes of the people of the South Bronx.

The article “Beyond Atlantic Yard Housing Deal, Some Big Shifts” journalist Norman Order offered examples from Brooklyn that illustrated this point. The Barclay Center, when completed in 2012, did not deliver on its initial plans of affordable housing units, which was a significant selling point when the project was first proposed in 2003 (Order 2014). Moreover, the developer for the Atlantic Yards project, Forest City Ratner, changed its initial agreement of how the affordable housing would be assigned. In the end, over half of the 600 units of affordable housing became slated for families earning more than \$100,000 a year, which contradicted the original Housing Memorandum of Understanding because it previously stated that half of the units would be slotted for families whose earnings were capped at \$50,000 a year (Order 2014). Order contended: “However, the mayor did not acknowledge that the city compromised by agreeing to far more middle-income affordable units, which reap higher rents for the developer, despite de Blasio’s testimony in 2006 that the CBA “must be adhered to” (Order 2014). In addition to higher-income families being privileged in this era of gentrification, inequalities existed along racial lines as well. Racism has been especially rife in this process of gentrification, which makes it worthy of further consideration.

## *Racism of Gentrification: Macro and Micro levels*

The inherent racism that was present in gentrification was a recurrent theme that surfaced during my interviews with community gardeners. As it was the general consensus from my interviews and archival data that the founders of the community gardens in the 1970s were overwhelmingly working-class women of color, as I already established in Chapter 2. The subsequent shift in racial demographics of community gardens and the city more generally since that time period has come with a great deal of oppression. The racism inherent within gentrification enraged movie director and Brooklyn native Spike Lee, who gave a talk at the Pratt Institute during Black history month in 2014. Lee offered an impassioned and insightful speech against the benefits of gentrification and what he called the “Christopher Columbus syndrome” (Coscarelli 2014). When asked by the moderator if gentrification could actually have benefited the Black middle-class, by increasing homeowner’s property values, Lee became angered and began his case against gentrification. I provide extensive excerpts from the talk (as transcribed in *New York* magazine) because many of the arguments Lee made resonated with my analysis:

Moderator: You mentioned gentrification with some slightly negative connotations and I wondered if you'd ever looked at it from the other side? Which is that, if your family was still in that \$40,000 home that's now worth \$3.5 million to \$4 million...

Lee: Let me, let me, let me, let me just kill you right now.

There was a bullshit article in the *New York Times* saying the good of gentrification. I don't believe that.

Here's the thing: I grew up here in Fort Greene. I grew up here in New York. It's changed. And why does it take an influx of white New Yorkers in the south Bronx, in Harlem, in Bed Stuy, in Crown Heights for the facilities to get better? The garbage wasn't picked up every motherfuckin' day when I was living in 165 Washington Park. P.S 20 was not good. Neither was P.S 11. Rothschild 294.

Then comes the motherfuckin' Christopher Columbus Syndrome. You can't discover this! We been here. You just can't come and bogart. There were brothers playing motherfuckin' African drums in Mount Morris Park for 40 years and now they can't do it anymore because the new inhabitants said the drums are loud. My father's a great jazz musician. He bought a house in 1968, and the motherfuckin' people moved in last year and called the cops on my father. He's not — he doesn't even play electric bass! It's acoustic! We bought the motherfuckin' house in 1968 and now you call the cops? In 2013? Get the fuck outta here!

Nah. You can't do that. You can't just come in the neighborhood and start bogarting and say, like you're motherfuckin' Columbus and kill off the Native Americans. Or what they do in Brazil, what they did to the indigenous people. *You have to come with respect. There's a code. There's people.*

You can't just — here's another thing: When Michael Jackson died they wanted to have a party for him in motherfuckin' Fort Greene Park and all of a sudden the white people in Fort Greene said, "Wait a minute! We can't have black people having a party for Michael Jackson to celebrate his life. Who's coming to the neighborhood? They're gonna leave lots of garbage." Garbage? Have you seen Fort Greene Park in the morning? It's like the motherfuckin' Westminster Dog Show. There's 20,000 dogs running around. Whoa. So we had to move it to Prospect Park!

I mean, they just move in the neighborhood. You just can't come in the neighborhood. I'm for democracy and letting everybody live but you gotta have some respect. *You can't just come in when people have a culture that's been laid down for generations and you come in and now shit gotta change because you're here? Get the fuck outta here. Can't do that!*

And then! [to the moderator] Whoa whoa whoa. And then! So you're talking about the people's property change? But what about the people who are renting? They can't afford it anymore! You can't afford it. People want live in Fort Greene. People wanna live in Clinton Hill. The Lower East Side, they move to Williamsburg, they can't even afford fuckin', motherfuckin' Williamsburg now because of motherfuckin' hipsters. What do they call Bushwick now? What's the word? [Audience: East Williamsburg]

That's another thing: Motherfuckin'... These real estate motherfuckers are changing names! Stuyvestant Heights? 110th to 125th, there's another name for Harlem. What is it? What? What is it? No, no, not Morningside Heights. There's a new one. [Audience: SpaHa] What the fuck is that? How you changin' names?

Modterator: I let you talk, now let me talk. My one sole point though is wealth creation in the African-American community, something that we've traditionally been locked out – you bought a house in the ghetto and in three generations the house was worth nothing in the ghetto. So, for those homeowners that did stick it in Bed Stuy – my parents moved in it was an all Jewish neighborhood there, so I've seen it through everything – so for those people that did stick in, now we have an opportunity for wealth creation that we've been locked out of. So now while it may not help the renters, and everything you said was absolutely true, what about that one aspect of wealth creation for *Black people that have paid those taxes, that have fought to keep the crime down on their blocks, and all the other things they did to maintain... because the white folks are not moving back because it's the ghetto, they're moving back because they are beautiful blocks full of beautiful brownstones that have been well maintained by people of color* (Coscarelli 2014).

Lee made several important points in his speech that lend further credence to the concerns raised by many of gardeners I interviewed. He compared the ways in which the white gentrifiers moved into NYC neighborhoods to Christopher Columbus and the displacement of the indigenous peoples, which was a point I will elaborate on below. Lee said he was all for letting outsiders move into these neighborhoods, but that they needed to respect the culture and the people who have been living there for generations. This concern was raised by many of my participants who have said that the gentrifiers did not interact with them, that the newcomers lacked community intentions, and that they often started urban agriculture projects without consulting the community or knowing the community history (Personal Interviews: Jane Hodge, January 20, 2015; Sharon Sockwell, June 25, 2015; Nina Talley, May 10, 2015; Traci Nottingham, June 23, 2015; Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015).

Many of the long-time residents talked about how the white newcomers did not share the space with them but instead wanted to take over and push them out. They talked about how the white people did not interact with the long-standing residents and instead isolated themselves, which destroyed the community-oriented atmosphere that many people have described existed before gentrification. Nina Talley, a long-time community gardener from Harlem, remarked:

*Gentrification is extremely threatening to me. I have people who come now in the garden. If a white person comes up and I am alone, they just look and won't come in. If another white person is with me, then they will come in. So it's not wanting to be included. It's wanting to move in. I had someone come here the other day. It was a man who just started. My first interaction with him was he was here on NY Cares Day. The first time he came, he saw another white person and went up to him and said 'Hi, I'm Joe, I'm new and I came because whenever I walk by here I don't see anything growing...' and I'm saying, there are two phone numbers there, call and inquire, it's always this assumption that they need to save something, like we need saving. Not asking the history or anything, just making the assumption that nothing is happening until they show up. I will say that anything that goes into this garden has come out of our pockets. There's been no funding whatsoever (Personal Interview, Nina Talley, May 10, 2015).*

Nina commented on how the newcomer whites did not interact with the community and the isolation they encountered:

*Why are you [gentrifiers] living here if you don't interact with people? The main thing about gentrification is that we are here. We are not going. And you don't want to interact. There is a community structure in Harlem, in Bed-Stuy, they are neighbors, they chat, they come together, they have conversations. We have that and that is from our heritage. You are the newbie. And we are not looking at you like, oh my god, the great white horse is here, no, you are in our world. We spend half our time getting them out of the stereotype mentality. I'm tired of educating and proving the stereotype is wrong (Personal Interview, Nina Talley, May 10, 2015).*

Another long-time community gardener who did not want to use their name recounted:

*Dominant groups [white people] really have a hard time sharing. They just do. They just do. And I suppose it can be unlearned, but that is their work and unless they are willing to do, I don't know if it can happen. I've never felt that white people shouldn't have or shouldn't move into these neighborhoods. I welcomed our white neighbors. The problem is people are reluctant to co-exist. They don't come in with the intention of co-existing. You can even feel the energy of people waiting for you to leave. You can feel it. Particularly if you are spiritually attuned, you can feel it (Personal Interview, Anonymous, July 8, 2015).*

This gardener's observations about the newcomers' assumptions that the people of color ought to vacate the neighborhood was an illustration of the policy of Planned Shrinkage that I discussed in Chapter 2. This policy, encouraged by city officials during the period of the urban fiscal crisis from the late 1970s, sought to rid the city of the working-class communities of color so that the city could be remade for the white and wealthy. The legacies of this policy were felt

by community members during the era of gentrification. Hence, the historical intentionality of the displacement of the working-class people of color became apparent.

Historical mistrust was a common sentiment among the long-time residents of color in regards to challenges in working with the white gardeners. One long-time community member, who was of Puerto Rican descent and lived in the Lower East Side her whole life, revealed: “it was the white man who burned down your building to collect insurance money, the white man will kick you out, the white man will tear down your garden...because they have...” (Personal Interview, Tai Gilbert, January 23, 2015). Other gardeners reiterated that when a white person entered the garden, they would hesitate to trust them because of a fear that the whites would take over the space and displace the people of color. I interviewed many anti-racist white gardeners and urban farmer activists who echoed these sentiments. They talked about the problems with the newcomer white folks who would come in with a ‘great idea’ and want to start a garden or farm, but they did not listen to and connect with the long-time residents of color. The newcomers did not acknowledge the history already there and how their efforts could have exacerbated gentrification (Personal Interviews: Jane Hodge, January 20, 2015; Bee Ayer, January 25, 2015). In this sense, they communicated that whites took over community land without community input.

One gardener of color discussed the appropriation of knowledge that the white newcomers did when they took knowledge from the elder gardeners of color and then seized gardening projects without the input of the community or recognizing from where that knowledge came. For instance, Nina Talley, an elder community gardener in Harlem, related stories of newcomer whites acting in ways that encroached upon the processes already in place in the garden structure. There was one white couple that volunteered in the garden for an afternoon,



Nina disclosed, and right after that first encounter the couple went back to their home and created a Facebook page for the garden with their pictures on it, making it seem as though they were the leaders of the garden. Although Nina and the garden leadership were not necessarily opposed to the idea of starting a social media page, she expressed concerns because these newcomers acted unilaterally without going through the process to make such a decision with the garden's leadership. She relayed that as a result of these types of encounters, the long-standing community gardeners lacked trust with the whites (Personal Interview, Nina Talley, May 10, 2015). Traci Nottingham and her mother Redelia, long-time African-American gardeners in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, recounted similar encounters with white gardeners who made them feel unwelcomed and unwanted in the garden (Personal Interviews: Traci Nottingham, June 23, 2015; Redelia, June 30, 2015).

A great deal of the mistrust gardeners of color had of white people was based on certain acts committed by the white newcomers. Two urban farmers talked about how the newcomer whites would call GreenThumb (the NYC agency that oversaw the gardens) to complain about the garden leadership (typically the long-time residents of color leading the garden), saying the garden leaders were rude and that they did not keep the garden not open, that they were not utilizing the space, and hence they asked GreenThumb to change leaders (Personal Interviews: Arian Rivera, January 22, 2015; Tai Gilbert, January 23, 2015). Moreover, some participants reiterated the fact that white newcomers complained to GreenThumb regarding 'noise' when gardeners had community events like block parties in the garden. One participant said that the neighborhood block parties were like family reunions to those in his African-American community in Bed-Stuy and newcomers complained about the noise from these parties. Drumming was also an important part of the culture of many gardeners and this was an activity

that was forbidden after neighborhoods like the Lower East Side were gentrified (Personal Interview, Marisa DeDominicis, July 11, 2015; Demetrice Mills, July, 10 2015). Melissa Checker, in her article entitled “Wiped Out by the “Greenwave”: Environmental Gentrification and the Paradoxical Politics of Urban Sustainability,” recounted the story of a drum circle in Harlem’s Mount Morris Park. Community members had a tradition of drumming in this park (dating back to the 1970s) until 10 p.m. during summer nights, as a way to provide a safe space for children to play while on summer break since the drumming was effective at curbing the sale of drugs in the park at nighttime. When a new high-rise luxury condominium was built that overlooked this park, newcomers began complaining about the noise from the drum circles. Checker reported “In the past, when neighbors complained, the drummers moved peacefully. However, this time the police got involved, and they ordered the drummers to relocate twice” (Checker 2011: 223). Not only did the actions of the newcomer residents work to destroy a community tradition, but these newcomers further undermined the safety of the youth of color and community-based efforts at maintaining public safety. Moreover, the fact that the newcomers did not ask the drummers directly to relocate, but instead involved the police (an oppressive institution in the African-American community), further undermined the safety of the community for the long-time residents as well as the very fabric of community relations in the neighborhood.

I interviewed the staff of GreenThumb, including the deputy director and director in 2015 and they corroborated receiving these type of complaint calls from newcomers (Personal Interviews: Rasheed Hislop, June 17, 2015; Nancy Kohn, May 10, 2015). I found these instances to be examples of white privilege because the whites did not feel any obligation or desire to work with the community and support their leadership. One community gardener, an African-

American woman and long-time resident of central Brooklyn, recounted the sentiments of the community members when whites entered the garden: “They feel like, you'll hear it whispered, ‘don't let the white people in’ you know, that's what they say. You find that to be true. I know one gentleman, his garden was in the Park Slope area, and he told me that's what happened over there. They [white people] came and they took over” (Personal Interview, Denise Williams, June 28, 2015).

The former director of Farm School New York City, Jane Hodge, commented that in the era of gentrification, urban agriculture had increased in visibility and that the ones who received the attention were newcomer whites. She found this frustrating as it elides the work of the long-time residents of color. The *New York Post* ran a few articles defaming people of color run community gardens during the summer of 2015, which lent credence to the Hodge’s comments. The articles had photos of black gardeners in Brooklyn growing “toxic” food that the *Post* claims was high in lead. They ran the story three times over a few months. One participant thought the *Post* was doing that to create the case to destroy more gardens for development by dismissing their contributions and even defaming them. I noticed that the articles did not discuss any white run urban farms, only people of color run community gardens. East New York Farms (one of the gardens criticized in the *Post* articles) wrote a public response to the *Post* article where they criticized the articles as being inaccurate and a misrepresentation of the facts (East New York Farms! 2015). David Vigil, East New York Farms! Project Director, argued that Gary Buiso, the writer of the *Post* article, used one example of a carrot that tested positive for lead found in one of their gardens, but failed to mention that the level of lead fell within the European Union’s guidance value for lead in vegetables (the U.S. had no such guidance value for lead in vegetables) (East New York Farms! 2015). Vigil went on to describe the ways in which the

gardeners were aware of the lead issue and were actively taking measures to remediate and improve soils through tests and the use of compost. It was interesting to note that the predominant “face” of urban agriculture was a young white person (as per a 2010 *New York* magazine article on the subject) whereas the faces of “contaminated” and “toxic” community gardens were people of color.<sup>28</sup>

Based on my own participant observation, I noticed that many urban farms were not typically under the same kind of threat of displacement, probably because they were created after the destruction of a community garden. In the same way that developers changed the names of neighborhoods like Harlem (SoHa or NoHa) or the South Bronx (SoBro) in order to make the neighborhood more desirable to gentrifiers, urban agriculture (led by whites) was a ‘new name’ that was used to replace community gardens (led by people of color). Karen Washington remarked that there was nothing new about urban agriculture (except for the term itself), as people had been growing food for decades in New York City (Personal Interview, Karen Washington, May 6, 2014). On a related note, many participants talked about how the people getting the attention and compensation to do this urban agriculture were increasingly white. Anandi Premllal, urban farmer of Indo-Caribbean origin, communicated her experiences in starting up greening projects in the city: “All these young white kids get funding for these warehouse projects that I have been unable to access, even though I have several certificates (in urban agriculture and permaculture design). Many of the land trusts are white, male oriented, and are missing the community feel with the heart of what is there. How do we diversify and create

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<sup>28</sup> “What an Urban Farmer Looks Like” showed illustrated seven urban farmers and gardeners in the city and only one was a person of color, although all the urban farms in the article were located in predominantly communities of color (Stein 2010).

equity? How do I and other urban farmers of color get access and info that a white person typically will have?” (Personal Interview, Anandi Premlall, March 15, 2015).

One participant shared a story of how she was recounting the history of their garden in Brooklyn to a group of newer members, one of whom was a white newcomer. That particular garden was on a piece of property that was previously owned by a successful middle-class African-American family. The white newcomer was surprised and said that she thought there was a “crack house” on the lot before the garden. This participant revealed this story as an example of how the white people had a ‘single story’ of the community and more disturbingly, an illustration of the impact of institutionalized racism in the form of racist housing policies perpetuated by the government and developers, which fostered these kinds of stereotypes and racist ideas (Personal Interview, Anonymous, July 8, 2015).

Institutionalized racism disrupts any potential benefits African-American homeowners may have been able to receive as a result of gentrification. Spike Lee contested one supposed benefit of gentrification to the home owning Black middle-class (whose properties values increased) by pointing out that the number of Black homeowners in these neighborhoods was small. Moreover, these homeowners consisted of mostly elderly people, who were often pushed into selling their homes for less than the market value (Coscarelli 2014). In *The Nation's* pod cast series on gentrification called “There Goes the Neighborhood,” they gave an example of an elderly African-American homeowner in Brooklyn who was deceived into selling her home to a developer for one dollar (Wright 2016). Demetrice Mills, long-time resident and African-American gardener in Brooklyn who was the head of the Brooklyn Queens Land Trust, disclosed experiences of real estate speculators who contacted him with cash offers on his home that were

well below the market value of his property: “I got calls from people offering me \$500, 000 for our house. I say to them, ‘can I tell you something, you're an idiot, I want to tell you that I think you're stupid! You try to rip people off from their homes, when you know these homes are selling for \$2 million, \$500,000 is a slap in my face and a slap in yours. Why are you trying to rip people off? Give people a good deal’” (Personal Interview, Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015).

The racism embedded within gentrification became equally apparent when considering another institution, in regards to the presence municipal services. Lee criticized the fact that neighborhood services like garbage pickup and public education improved when the whites moved in, which was a criticism that came up in my interviews as well. Onika Abraham commented that the racism of gentrification was further evident by the appearance of the neighborhood and the city’s investment in services, a phenomenon mentioned by many of the long-time community members (Personal Interviews: Traci Nottingham, June 23, 2015; Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015; Nina Talley, May 10, 2015; Sharon Sockwell, June 25, 2015).

Onika specifically stated:

*Things we asked for as a homeowner in Bed Stuy, we went to Community Board meetings, asking them to fix street lights, and nothing would happen for years. Then, the tax structure changes, certain other kinds of people show up, white people show up, with even if they don't have money, they have influence in a way people of color don't. Why did it take white people moving into this neighborhood to make them fix the street? That's so dehumanizing for people. I wish that weren't the case...Most frustrating thing with gentrification is that sense and that reality that white people bring with them this power and privilege that no other people have access to (Personal Interview, Onika Abraham, May15, 2015).*

The changes in city services marked one way that gentrification impacted neighborhoods and many gardeners commented that the very fabric of their communities were destroyed as a result of gentrification.

The individualism of the newcomers was another recurrent theme in my research. As Lee reported, as well as many of the community gardeners and long-time residents, that the newcomers were more individualistic and how this worked against the community-oriented intentions of the earlier period. The unwillingness of the whites to join the community flowed from and intensified the individualistic orientations of the white gentrifiers. The long-time community members contended that gentrification destroyed community and made community building more difficult. Because of rising housing costs, many of the newcomers lived with roommates and were younger, such as college students or recent college graduates. Hence, the concept of a family furthering its roots in previously established neighborhoods was replaced with younger, transient individuals with less ties or long-term interest in the community. This also contributed to the challenges of building community because the newcomers had less of a stake in the community as compared to the older residents. Demetrice Mills, the President of the Brooklyn-Queens Land Trust and long-time resident of Bed-Stuy commented on the connection between gentrification and the disintegration of community: “So, the neighborhoods are not a community anymore with gentrification. It's not...It's not a community. People are not coming together. But if you are chasing people out of their homes because they can't afford to keep it up because they are elderly, they are on a fixed income, so therefore they either pass away or sell it, then where are they to go? Gentrification not only divides and changes a neighborhood, it separates families” (Personal Interview, Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015).

Farm School NYC Director Onika Abraham remarked:

*I think the challenge has to do with gentrification and people being priced out of their neighborhood. I know in my neighborhood, it is much more transient than ever before. There was a tenant in the basement apartment for 8 years and every year there has been another tenant in that apartment. The sense of community is so different. That is one example multiplied by hundreds. The sense of place and commitment is different. I find that to be a real challenge.*

*And we are losing that sense of wanting to build and it's becoming much more of a responsibility of a lot fewer people who are there for the long haul (Personal Interview, Onika Abraham, May 15, 2015).*

Airbnb, a short-term housing rental website where people rent parts of their apartment to tourists and short term visitors, exemplifies of the newly transient nature of New York City neighborhoods. In 2015, Airbnb listed over a million rooms in 192 countries on its online platform. New York City, with more than 25,000 listings per night, was the website's largest market. A majority of the Brooklyn available listings were in gentrified neighborhoods (Airbnb-NY 2016) (out of over 300 listings, more than 95% of the ones I searched were in central and northern Brooklyn—areas that had been quite gentrified (Airbnb-NY 2016). The popularity of Airbnb has caused a great deal of controversy from various sources.<sup>29</sup> As rental prices skyrocketed in the city, making housing unaffordable for most people, programs like Airbnb invited both tenants and landlords to participate, with the impact of creating a more transient environment in the city. Unscrupulous landlords turned entire buildings into short-term rentals, creating illegal hotels and depriving residents of rental housing (Sreenivasan 2015). State Senator Liz Krueger testified that her constituents were reporting that “There’s something strange going on in my building. The apartments seem to be being rented out on a nightly basis. There are groups of tourists wandering in and out with luggage, with keys to the buildings,” thus amplifying the transition to a transient rather than stable community (Sreenivasan 2015). Hence, by using this brief study of Airbnb practices in New York, it became clearer how gentrification

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<sup>29</sup> For residents, Airbnb had contradictory impacts. On the one hand, programs like Airbnb helped NYC residents by allowing them to generate additional income to help pay their rent. For instance, one Airbnb user said “Airbnb affords me as an artist to be an artist. I use part of this income to survive on” (Sreenivasan 2015). Another Airbnb user said “Financially, it really helps my family. Rents here have skyrocketed in the 10 years that we’ve been here” (Sreenivasan 2015).



destroyed a community that was committed to the city and was there for the long-haul, and did not replace it with another community, but instead has made the city inviting to persons with short-term interests in it.

Differences in how community members perceived safety vis-à-vis the newcomers illustrated yet another example of racism. The issue of safety came up in my interviews, with respondents remarking on how contradictory they felt the newcomers were by having fears of a neighborhood that they themselves choose to move into. Sharon Sockwell, the Vice President of the New York City Community Gardening Coalition, testified “If you feel it's not safe, then why are you buying a house in this community? He [white newcomer] didn't ask me. If he asked me, then I would have told him. Then, ‘why are you investing in a community that you feel may not be safe?’ So, then you say to yourself, why do you want to live here? Are you going to stay isolated to yourself or are you going to be a neighbor?” (Personal Interview, Sharon Sockwell, June 25, 2015). In some ways, this narrative harkened back to the idea of Planned Shrinkage in that the whites did not feel safe in the midst of a largely Black community and hence eagerly awaited the expulsion of this community from the neighborhood. Another view spoke to the lack of historical understanding that the whites had when entering these neighborhoods and assumed they were entered an almost “table rasa.” The Black residents had worked for many years to counter violence and to create safe spaces in the community, with the gardens being a testament to those efforts. Thus, when the whites entered these neighborhoods and felt “unsafe” they seemed to be assuming that the Black residents tolerated violence, which illustrated yet another racist assumption. I co-facilitated a workshop on the topic of gentrification at the GreenThumb Grow Together conference in early 2015. Some of the participants of that workshop remarked that NYPD policies such as “Stop and Frisk” (where youth of color were routinely racially

profiled for no reason) were part and parcel of gentrification because these policies worked to police neighborhoods, terrorize communities of color, under the guise of creating safety for the newcomers. Institutionalized racism manifested itself in other ways as well, such as the destruction of Black-owned spaces, like community gardens, but also Black-owned businesses.

Sharon Sockwell, community gardener, commented on how gentrification destroyed not just bonds between community members but also destroyed community-owned businesses. She said: “So the gentrification on one hand, it brings the upgrade with the stores, but by the same token, is the money actually staying in the neighborhood or [is it being funneled out]? Are you patronizing the mom and pop stores or are you trying to make it all corporate? So then money comes out [out of the neighborhood]?” (Personal Interview, Sharon Sockwell, June 25, 2015). Sharon asked these rhetorical questions to the hypothetical newcomer on the block and these questions called attention to this additional way in which gentrification harmed Black wealth (in addition to the destruction of community gardens, deed theft, and selling of homes well below market value). Robin Kelley echoed these concerns regarding the viability of Black-owned businesses in his article. He commented that the majority of Harlem’s business were owned by outsiders when he conducted interviews of small business owners as well as the president of the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce in 2007. One Harlem small business owner said “So the money that was staying in the community is now leaving it, and we’re losing control” (Kelley 2007: 67). Kelley quoted Lloyd Williams, president of the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce, who conveyed that “The number of people from this community who own anything on 125<sup>th</sup> Street you can count on one hand and still have a number of fingers left” (Kelley 2007: 67). In addition to the loss of community owned and built wealth resultant from gentrification, the widespread displacement of the long-standing community was a repeated theme from my

research, which many community members found to have similarities with the displacement of Native Americans.

### ***Parallels with indigenous displacement***

In my research, I found a comparison between the displacement of people of color under gentrification with the displacement of indigenous people during settler colonialism to be a poignant one. One participant, who was of African-American and Native origins, remarked, “I see gentrification on the same continuum as the dispossession of indigenous people in this country. Land being taken so the dominant group can benefit, profit, whatever. The assumption that what they [the gentrifiers] are bringing is better and higher quality. Yes, amenities come with you, but that is because your life is valued more” (Personal Interview, Anonymous, July 8, 2015). Moreover, some participants revealed stories (that were also written about in local news outlets) of how some elderly African-Americans’ homes were stolen by ruthless speculators filing fake deeds in many of the most gentrified neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy (Wright 2016; Albritton 2016). *Our Times Press* reported: “Brownstoners of Bedford Stuyvesant, an organization that enjoys an amazing 38-year history of service, convened a powerful workshop in response to the community’s call for relief in the face of the onslaught of property fraud. The Brownstoners in conjunction with their diverse partners, brought community leaders together to address the issue of stolen property and fraud by lawbreakers intent on “stealing the neighborhood.” And offered relief to hundreds seeking solutions” (2016).

The workshop, which was attended by a few hundred mostly senior African-American homeowners, had presentations from several city officials where they instructed the group on how to be on the defensive against deed theft. *Our Times Press* staff writer Akosua Albritton reported that Detective Teresa Russo of NYC Sheriff's Deed Fraud Unit presented information in this workshop:

*Det. Teresa Russo implored the audience not to believe "Jesus comes in a white Mercedes and \$20,000 in a paper bag". She said the real estate scams went by the names: "loan modification", "short sale", "cash for keys" and "foreclosure rescues". Russo cautioned against signing any papers without first having them reviewed by a lawyer of one's own selection. Once anyone signs a deed to another, they are susceptible to receiving an eviction notice and door locks being changed.*

*Richard Flateau (real estate broker) provided the profile of the typical prey for a real estate predator: "People who are senior citizens, empty houses and houses with deferred maintenance, and financially distressed [owners and properties]." Flateau explained that predators may "look for the weak link within a family. This weak link can be someone with an addiction" (Albritton 2016).*

In addition to the false deeds, other elder African-American home owners have been taken advantage of by speculators who have offered cash to buy their homes for a small fraction of their homes' market value, as I discussed previously. These occurrences seemed to offer parallels between gentrification and the history of Native peoples in that their land was also stolen through fake treaties or sold for much less than its value.

I have examined various ways in which the community members were oppressed by racist institutions and how the community's assets were stolen or ignored by the forces of gentrification. These oppressions did not singularly define the community, though. Community members repeatedly communicated that they found the narrative of their communities as being 'broken' especially before gentrification as inappropriate and not an accurate reflection of their lives. Native American educator and activist Eve Tuck reported in "Suspending Damage," that

many activist communities focus on the disenfranchisement and marginalization of oppressed groups as a way to make demands for social change, which she referred to as damage-centered research. This has the impact of making it seem as though oppressed communities were broken and lacking. Tuck said: “the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community. Here’s a more applied definition of damage-centered research: research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation. I believe that for many well-meaning people, it is actually a de facto reliance on a potentially problematic theory of change that leads to damage-centered research. In a damage-centered framework, pain and loss are documented in order to obtain particular political or material gains” (Tuck 2009: 414). Urban farms fit into the latter of two modalities in this research (and in the activism that it generated): either demanding reparations from the oppressive system that was creating the immiseration or autonomous self-help initiatives that sought to rebuild the damage independently. This emphasis on rebuilding the damage autonomously was further consistent with the long history of Black Nationalism in North America.

Tuck argued for a new way of communicating about oppressed groups, which she terms “desire-centered research.” She noted that “Such an axiology is intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression” (Tuck 2009: 420). I find Tuck’s work to resonate with an asset-based approach to community development (as opposed to a deficit-based approach) where a community group builds a program based on the strengths and talents of the community rather than focusing on

what they were lacking. This asset-based approach was a method used by many community gardening groups while the newer urban agriculture projects often take a deficit-based approach by assuming the community was devoid of resources and needed assistance.

My research has demonstrated that these communities have been historically marginalized by state institutions. Despite being underserved, these communities had virtues that were also being actively destroyed by the urban disinvestment prompted partially by the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. It was that decay which undermined the viability of the communities and motivated residents to reclaim and rebuild their communities themselves—very much in line with the Black power movements and civil rights struggles that occurred prior to the founding of the community gardens. This idea was illustrated in the words of an elder African-American gardener William Harris, who turned a trash-filled lot into a garden in Harlem, said "I began the garden wanting to teach young people in the community respect for the land and the community in which they live ... It is important that the young people learn how to grow vegetables so they can do for themselves" (NY Amsterdam News 2004).

Many long-term residents, who have lived in these communities since the 1970s or 1980s, spoke about how these communities were good places to live before gentrification. For instance, people who have lived in parts of Central Brooklyn or the Lower East Side since the 1970s described life in those earlier periods as very community-oriented, with people looking out for each other and caring for each other. Many respondents resent the narrative that these NYC neighborhoods were dangerous and terrible places to live before gentrification. One garden in a yet-to-be gentrified part of the Bronx was described by one participant as a great neighborhood where people looked out for each other and cared for each other. Demetrice Mills said: This

neighborhood [Bedford-Stuyvesant] was always good” [in response to gentrifiers saying they have improved these neighborhoods]. “Everyone up and down the street, we looked out for each other, for each other's houses, for our children, if your child were to start running out of the gate, someone else would bring them back. Now, with a lot of the new faces, that ain't there. They walk by, and don't even say hello. They don't even look at you (Personal Interview, Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015).

My interview with Farm School New York City Director Onika Abraham provided rich elaboration of this idea. As a Black woman who was raised in the Lower East Side, with parents from the American South and the Caribbean, she observed:

*The dominant narrative about these neighborhoods is often very different than the lived experience. You know, so, I grew up in the Lower East Side in the '80s and '90s and the narrative about my neighborhood was very different than how I lived it. There were people, you know, all over the news about shootings and drugs and heroine dens, and all this stuff and the vast majority of people who live in poor neighborhoods do not do any of those things, it just happens to be what they have to step over each day because of the lack of investment, that you talked about. And the disinvestment that you talked about in the neighborhoods. These were working communities, people who loved each other, and wanted to make their neighborhoods a beautiful place. I think it was less a sense of desperation and sense of this is how we do, this is what we do, connect back to our culture. My father is West Indian, my mom is from the South, when I was growing up in the Lower East Side, there was a large Caribbean community and we just grew stuff in the city. This is how people survived. I just react a little bit to this narrative of desperation because it's this outsider view point of community that doesn't really jive with what is going on there and that's my experience of Bed-Stuy since I got there...Even back in the '90s, the dominant narrative about Bed-Stuy in the '90s was really horrible. They made it sound like every time you stepped inside the community your life was at risk, people were getting shot all the time, but that was not my experience. We would go there, we had tenants there, old ladies in the house, I'm not saying everything was wonderful, but there was not this sense that, no one wanted to be there or everyone was scared (Personal Interview, Onika Abraham, May 15, 2015).*

I have hence scrutinized the ways in which racism was embedded within gentrification and some similarities between the displacement of long-time community members and the displacement of the Indigenous peoples. I will turn my attention towards grasping the ways in which gentrification has changed the fundamental nature of community gardening in the city.

## *Neoliberal gentrification and urban agriculture*

In city greening policies, quantitative measures of urban agriculture success were privileged over the qualitative benefits of community gardens. These policies would decide which projects would get access to land and other resources, and their metrics to determine success were based on numbers. The quantitative measures focused on how much food was being produced and how much dollar revenue was being generated per square foot. There were many qualitative benefits to community gardens, like educating youth, horticultural therapy, social and community gathering, holding onto ancestral cultural legacies, and environmental stewardship, among other benefits. These benefits never figured in the official evaluations.

Denise Williams, a long-time gardener in Central Brooklyn, illustrated these qualitative benefits when she declared that the community garden had restored her health. When she first started going to the garden, she suffered from disabling health problems that prevented her from working. She credited her toils in the garden as the reason why her ailments improved to the point that she was able to secure employment as an aide in the local library, where she had been working for several years (Personal Interview, Denise Williams, June 28, 2015):

*When I joined the garden, I was under the impression that I would never work again. I had a sleep disorder, which led to me having fibromyalgia. I started developing anxieties. It wasn't just the physical problems, anxiety, and depression as well. All I needed was something like this [the*



*garden.] I would come out here for 4-5 hours just cleaning. I didn't even have a bed yet. I would pull weeds, rake, etc. If I could do that, then I thought to myself, I could get a part time job. A friend of mine worked at the library, she said her supervisor was looking for part time staff, and so I said wow. Carmen [the garden president] was another one. She was on anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications and she wasn't working when she joined the garden either. Both of us were on these meds. Now she works full time. That is a true testament (Personal Interview, Denise Williams, June 28, 2015).*

Thus, Denise was a testament to the healing powers of gardening and how that has a benefit for both the individual as well as the community (less unemployment). Other long-time gardeners reported that the cost of organic food was cost prohibitive to their communities and hence the gardens provided access to fresh, clean food that they otherwise would not have had (Personal Interview, Nina Talley, May 10, 2015).

The qualitative benefits of community gardens did not get measured when numbers were the primary focus. One participant recounted that urban farms were less personal and less cultural than community gardens. The gardens were criticized if they did not look “professional” and this ignored how aesthetics were not the central goal of many gardens but cultural connections were instead. For instance, the *casita* gardens were based on replicating the ecological and social life as it appeared in Puerto Rico. As I described in Chapter 1, the *casita* referred to a community-built structure that can serve as a meeting space for social, artistic, cultural, or other purposes and were adorned in ways that call forth the rural traditions of Puerto Rico (Martinez 2010). *Casita* gardens would be criticized by newcomers for having structures that took space away from food production or for not being as neatly landscaped (Personal Interview, Tai Gilbert, January 23, 2015). The judgment of *casita* gardens was one example of the marginalization of the qualitative benefits of gardens.

A central aspect of these qualitative benefits from community gardens were their centrality in creating and sustaining a sharing economy; the gardeners routinely gave produce to

people in the community who were in need. Community gardener and activist Rafael Mutis argued that in commodifying their crops, urban agriculturalists fetishized food (Personal Interview, Rafael Mutis, July 18, 2015). The problem with this fetishization was that it turned the production of food into a commodity that could be bought and sold on the market, thereby losing the significance of the non-monetary motivations to grow food, such as community building and improvement. Moreover, since the farms were using public land, it was not legitimate (and in some cases illegal) to sell a product that belonged to the community. Some participants thought that people had always grown food in the city, but urban agriculture was just a new term, in the same way that neighborhoods got new names when they were being gentrified. Urban agriculture was chic and trendy and just a “rebranding” of work that was going on before it, and then also appropriating the product for private, individual, and non-communal use. Similar to how the Indigenous peoples viewed land as a common and not as private property, growing food was seen as part of the commons as well, and the relationships built around its production were not to be relegated to mere business transactions because they ran much deeper. This move away from prioritizing monetary accumulation above all other goals was one way that the community could have created alternative and more just forms of development.

### ***Community-led, grassroots development***

Alternative development paths existed that integrated both affordable housing and community gardens in a holistic manner. Thus, the city unnecessarily pitted housing against gardens when the two were not mutually exclusive. Giuliani spokesperson Colleen Roche told

the Daily News, in regards to the activists protesting the garden auctions, that ““These are the same people who tomorrow will be first on line to protest a lack of affordable housing or lack of jobs in the city. They can't have it both ways" (Daily News 1999). Another Daily News article stated: “As 30 gardeners arrested Wednesday for protesting the May auction were arraigned yesterday in Manhattan Criminal Court, Giuliani said returning vacant lots to the tax rolls will promote economic development in poor neighborhoods. "The reality is, we need more housing in the city," he said. "If you keep these properties tied up, [minority neighbor-hoods] will never move to a higher level of more housing, more commercial development, more jobs" (Daily News 1999). However, my research argued that grassroots, people-led development benefited the community significantly more than corporate-led, top-down development. The participants in my study pointed out that the community did not benefit when locally-owned businesses were displaced by chain-stores (with profits going towards headquarters usually situated outside of the city) (Personal Interview, Sharon Sockwell, June 25, 2015). Indeed, attorneys for the gardeners, during the lawsuits filed by the Trust for Public Land, argued that privatization did not benefit the community, hence building housing or businesses on garden lots did not bring about a community benefit. In the article “A Fair Deal for Community Gardens” from the New Voice of NY, the attorneys said: “

*We agree the selling of public-owned land can be beneficial to neighborhoods, especially if the property is used to build much-needed affordable housing. However, it is unclear what the land will be used for. Initially the mayor said the land would only go to housing, but he later took back that statement.*

*Business that generate jobs could improve the community, but the residents' concerns that the property would be sold and their gardens ruined, with nothing to show for it, are valid. Privatization does not equal affluence (Fair Deal 1999).*

It became evident that Giuliani was wrong in that the people in the community failed to receive any benefit from the construction of housing due to the displacement and housing insecurity

endemic that became the community. Other participants argued that the community did not need new housing, but rather repairs and improved services to existing housing stock (Personal Interviews: Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015; Onika Abraham, May 15, 2015; Ray Figuero, June 14, 2015). In my interview with Ray Figuero, President of the New York City Community Gardening Coalition (NYCCGC), he described in-depth the problems with the city planning boards, comprised of unelected real estate tycoons, and how these boards countered the wishes of the local (and elected) community boards (Personal Interview, Ray Figuero, June 14, 2015). For instance, the NYCCGC filed a lawsuit against the city for what they deemed was the illegal destruction of a community garden in Coney Island. This garden was destroyed for a development project and the local community board voted against the development and in protection of the garden. Thus, this was an example of the city planners ignoring the wishes of the community in favor of developers, which was a common theme during this era. In the Daily News article “She Raises the Roof Over Building Plans” Brooklyn-based anti-gentrification activist Patti Hagan, was quoted as saying that: “The biggest misconception about her is that she's antidevelopment. "I'm for appropriate development that fits into the context of the neighborhood," she said. "I'm also for development that responds to the needs of the community” (Son 2004). The problem with undemocratic development was that it did not take into account the needs of the community because the community was never consulted in the development process. In the next chapter, I explored the ways in which a community in Boston was able to fight gentrification through the use of community land trusts, which embodied the democratic process since the community members were the ones running the trust and had a direct say in the decision-making process.

## *Conclusion*

Until this point, I have studied the development of community gardens in New York City since the 1970s and how they were transformed into a movement for urban agriculture after the late 1990s. I have been examining the larger political economy of New York City, from urban neglect to widespread capitalist development, during these time periods and its impact on community gardening. In this chapter, I honed in on the intersection of community gardens and urban agriculture with gentrification. I presented evidence in a way that challenges current and predominant assumptions on gentrification. I argued that gentrification was not simply a top-down process instigated by those with privilege or by wealthy institutions, but was actually a much more complex process with grassroots foundations. I provided a brief literature review of gentrification studies. I then introduced an analysis conducted by faculty at New York University's law school in which they estimated the impact of community gardens on neighborhood property values using an hedonic regression model; they found that gardens have significant positive effects, especially in the poorest neighborhoods, on property values. I finally presented my own analysis concerning the process of gentrification, arguing that it started as a grassroots effort and later was coopted by wealthy and powerful interests; I analyzed data from my interviews and newspaper research to better understand the role of racism and class oppression in gentrification.

I found that gardeners were committed to their communities for the long haul. This helps explain why the gardeners would erupt in protest to protect gardens slated for development even

if there was an initial agreement that the garden was temporary. To the gardeners, their garden was not an interim or temporary activity. Many founders of gardens said that they had no desire to move and many of them could not move (they could not “fly” like the white people to the suburbs nor did many of them even have that desire), so they built gardens as a way to make improvements in their neighborhoods places while in the midst of the urban crisis.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that gentrification was not simply a top-down process in which the privileged classes or wealthy institutions revitalized decaying urban neighborhoods, but was instead a more complex process with grassroots beginnings. Through interviews with community garden leaders and archival research, I have demonstrated that gentrification involved the appropriation of community assets and community-built wealth by the elite. The working-class communities of color were the first to revitalize neighborhoods that were devastated by the urban fiscal crisis and their efforts helped to increase property values and attract outsiders to New York City neighborhoods. The community members were not opposed to having the outsiders move into their neighborhoods, but it was the ensuing displacement of the long-time residents that has been at the root of the injustices of gentrification. Appropriation was facilitated by the fact that the community members did not have legal ownership over the properties that they were improving, nor did the local government support their efforts, thus making them vulnerable to displacement.

In this final chapter, I summarize my major findings from each chapter and offer policy recommendations. I further discuss the significance of this dissertation and offer avenues of potential future research. As one urban agriculture activist stated:

*The issue isn't the gardens, the issue is the long term planning by municipalities and their land use policies. Gentrification doesn't happen because people beautify, gentrification happens when HUD gives housing grant money, financing, tax abatements, and tax credits to the economic elite and developers who grease the hands of politicians. In the words of James Baldwin, 'Urban renewal is Negro removal.'—Urban Farmer (Interview August 2014).*



I argue that because policies were not in place to protect community members and their collective, nor ensuring democratic ownership over the gardens and housing, this ultimately facilitated their displacement as a result.

### *Summary of previous chapters*

The ways in which city policies have impacted the long-term residents of New York City has been a major focus in this dissertation. In Chapter 2, I examined the urban fiscal crisis of the late 1970s and how the economic elite manufactured urban decay by deliberately disinvesting in inner city neighborhoods. The long-term residents, mainly working-class people of color, did not vacate their neighborhoods, as the policy *planned shrinkage* envisioned, but instead reclaimed abandoned spaces by building community gardens and cooperative housing. Thus, the community members, led by the working-class women of color, created and sustained vibrant communities. To be sure, the intentions of these early community gardens was more about building healthy communities and improving the neighborhoods rather than simply growing food.

In Chapter 3, I examined how the Giuliani administration auctions impacted the community gardens by galvanizing them into a larger movement for environmental justice. I also argued that community gardening shifted into urban agriculture, which became a popular catch

phrase that the city promoted, mostly because urban agriculture had an explicit business focus that was less personal, and because it was led by young, idealistic whites who worked within a nonprofit model. This model of urban agriculture contrasted with the vision of community gardens, which centered on an autonomous model of community development led by working-class women of color.

In Chapter 4, I argued that community gardens helped to increase the property values of the disinvested neighborhoods and that the city was indebted to the community gardeners for the free labor they provided that helped to improve the neighborhoods. This supported my alternative view of gentrification whereby the revitalization of New York City did not begin with the developers or gentrifiers, but instead with the long-term community residents themselves. Institutional gentrification thus became the appropriation of community-built wealth. A quote from Joshua, a long-time East New York resident of Caribbean descent, encapsulated this argument well: “When everybody gave up on the neighborhood, we didn’t, we stood in the neighborhood, we worked it out, and we made it the better place that everybody wants to invest in now” (Wright 2016).

Gentrification scholarship, including leftist perspectives, has ignored the contribution that the long-time community members to this process, treating them as simply passive victims. My research demonstrated that because city policies prioritized the needs of the developers and economic elite over the rights of the community, that displacement ensued as a result of the community development initiated by the long-time residents. The residents certainly did not cause gentrification by making improvements in their community, to be sure, the policies in place that protected the rights of capital over the rights of the people were the cause.

## *Community Land Trusts*

One policy that has become popular since the 1990s in various cities across the country as a way to fight gentrification has been the use of community land trusts. In this chapter, I focused on community land trusts as an alternative policy that aims to protect the land for the social good and not simply for profit maximization. Hence, community land trusts offer one possible alternative that has the potential to protect communities from the onslaught of gentrification. Indeed, *YES! Magazine* published an article entitled “How One Boston Neighborhood Stopped Gentrification in Its Tracks” (Loh 2015). According to Penn Loh, the author: “a community land trust (CLT) is a nonprofit organization governed by community members that stewards land for long-term public benefit” (Loh 2015). Loh described the neighborhood of Dudley Street in Boston, which like the Lower East Side, South Bronx, and Central Brooklyn, underwent massive disinvestment and white flight during the period of the urban fiscal crisis of the late 1970s. By the 1980s, more than 20% of the land in this neighborhood was vacant—equivalent to some 1300 vacant lots (Loh 2015). Community members organized the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) as a community land trust that took democratic ownership over the land and also guided its development. This organization was able to secure hundreds of units of permanent affordable housing, along with permanently protected green spaces like community gardens, urban farms, and parks. As the land was never

resold under a CLT, and was instead held in a public commons, it was therefore protected from the injustices of the real estate market (Loh 2015). By examining the history of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, it was evident that the founders of this organization were quite visionary in their scope.

According to the DSNI website, the organization was “birthed in 1984 out of the passion, ingenuity and determination of Dudley residents seeking to reclaim a neighborhood that had been ravaged by disinvestment, arson fires, and dumping” (DSNI 2016). They created a mandate of development without displacement, which has guided their work. Their mission statement said:

*When many had given up, DSNI dared to gather neighbors to create a comprehensive plan and a shared vision for a new, vibrant urban village. To fulfill the community mandate for development without displacement, DSNI gained eminent domain authority, purchased vacant land, and protected affordability and family stability through a community land trust. The once garbage-strewn vacant lots have been rebuilt with quality affordable houses, parks and playgrounds, gardens, community facilities, and new businesses. Through our Board structure, residents lead an effort that includes all neighborhood stakeholders in a democratically-elected, community accountable process. Together, we have created greater civic participation, economic opportunity, community connections, and opportunities for youth. We have built community across our diversity – of language, race & ethnicity, age. We have invested in our young people and the youth in turn have invested in the community (DSNI 2016).*

The organization realized this vision by successfully pressuring the city to adopt their plan to place the vacant lots into a community trust, and they were further successful in winning the right to use eminent domain to take blighted land away from private owners and redevelop it for community use (Loh 2015). This was an example of the use of eminent domain to strengthen a community as opposed to destroying it, which was evident during the foreclosure crisis.

Although communities of color were especially hurt when the housing market collapsed in 2008,

residents of this neighborhood were relatively unaffected. Loh reported that “a 2011 study of foreclosures on CLT housing found that only 0.46 percent of CLT owners were in foreclosure proceedings compared to 4.63 percent in the conventional market. These low rates were attributable not just to affordability but to the CLT’s role in working with both the homeowner and banks to address issues as they arose” (Loh 2015).

The CLT protected affordable housing by capping the percentage increase amount at which a house could be sold in the future, thereby passing on affordable housing to future generations.<sup>30</sup> The governance structure of the Dudley Street land trust allowed it to be authentically accountable to the community because of the representation of community members, leaseholders, and elected officials on the board.<sup>31</sup> The Dudley Street Initiative and the land trust incorporate regular community events such as block parties, in their programs, thereby fostering a strong sense of community. Lastly, the land trust was in the process of acquiring thousands of additional vacant lots from the city that would be used permanently for urban farms, hence protecting both affordable housing and green spaces.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative was an interesting example of a community using land for the public benefit rather than allowing land to be used to maximize profits by speculators. Loh described that “across the country, communities are using this form of ownership to make collective decisions about a common good—the land. In a way the CLT is a

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<sup>30</sup>In Portland, laws such as a cap on property taxes, similar to the cap on the resale of a home in Dudley Street, have allowed many residents of color to retain their property in neighborhoods in which they reside.

<sup>31</sup> Although land trusts like the Trust for Public Land and the New York Restoration Project own hundreds of community gardens in New York City, many community members said that the boards of these nonprofit land trusts did not reflect the community and operated without community input (Bee Ayer Personal Interview 2015; others...).

return to more traditional and indigenous ideas about land as commons—that it cannot be owned solely for individual benefit” (Loh 2015).

This comparison to indigenous land uses was striking, given the parallels community members have drawn between gentrification and indigenous displacement, which I discussed in Chapter 4. Although not a perfect comparison, there were many similarities between how the Native Americans were displaced from their lands using force and deception and the ways in which long-time, mostly Black and Latino, community members have been displaced under gentrification. Thus, having land trusts that view land from an indigenous perspective seems like it would have merit in the fight against gentrification. Community land trusts have been used by community members in other cities as a way to stop or prevent gentrification, thereby protecting the neighborhoods for the people in a holistic manner, with green spaces and affordable housing protected simultaneously (and not treated as competitive values).

The New York City Community Gardening Coalition (NYCCGC) recommended creating a Community Garden Partnership that would have operated like a community land trust and would have further elevated the voices of the community gardeners in the decision-making process. According to my conversations with NYCCGC board members, as well as internal documents, the Community Garden Partnership would have created a public and non-profit structure that granted 99+ year leases to gardens while ensuring that 75% of the structure’s governing board were community gardeners (Mara Gittleman Personal Interview 2014; Policies v1 2014). This structure would have ensured that community gardeners were the majority decision makers in an accessible, democratic, and binding process. Moreover, an important criteria for the NYCCGC was that this structure provide full accountability to community gardeners—particularly in regards to giving full disclosure and transparency in land transactions.

In this partnership, new gardens could have been added to the partnership, thereby expanding the number of community gardens in the city, and the city would have retained ownership of the gardens. In addition, it's important to ensure the racial, economic, and gender diversity in the board by requiring that the board members resemble the demographics of the communities that the gardens were located and prioritize the working-class people of color in the leadership. In many ways, this Community Garden Partnership, which has yet to be enacted although remained a goal of the NYCCGC, resembled the Community Land Trusts that Boston enacted in the Dudley Street neighborhood. These types of structures could have helped to ensure that the community retained collective ownership over the land, thus not allowing for the land to be given to developers. Numerous other policies have been proposed that would achieve the goal of protecting affordable housing for working-class community members.

The Poverty and Race Research Action Council published a literature review on gentrification where they summarized various policy suggestions (Poverty & Race 2013). Some researchers have offered market-based policy recommendations that could assist the most vulnerable long-time renters and homeowners to remain in their homes by offering protections from skyrocketing rents and property taxes. For instance, in the article *The Gentrification Trigger*, Rachel Godsil proposed that these residents be given “special vouchers designed to cover the increases in housing prices” (Poverty & Race 2013). Godsil reiterated in her article that the city “should be using rental vouchers or low-interest loans to restore the autonomy of in place residents, providing them with viable, self-determining options to remain or exit the neighborhood” (Godsil 2013). Karen Chapple (2009) suggested that the city utilize additional rent control programs in gentrifying neighborhoods to assist low-income renters to remain in their communities.

The proposal of rent control was a fascinating one, given the fact that rent control has almost been entirely abolished in New York City. According to a 2014 Housing Survey conducted by the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development, there were approximately 27,000 rent controlled apartments in New York City (a mere 1.2% of all rental stock), down from over two million in the early 1950s (Gaumer 2015). The trend was toward zero rent-control, according to the NYC Rent Guidelines Board (NYCRGB 2016). This destruction of the rent-control program has made marginalized populations even more vulnerable to the predatory mechanism of gentrification. Thus, a resurrection of rent-controlled apartments would help to protect affordable housing in New York City communities.

In addition to shifting the conduct of real estate, banking was another institution that needed to change in order to serve people's interest. In the Nation magazine's podcast series *There Goes the Neighborhood*, edited by Kai Wright, the journalists talked about how banks gave mortgage loans to developers with the understanding that the developers would be able to successfully push out the long-term residents in order to make space for more affluent tenants (Wright 2016). In one example, the Pinnacle group, a large landlord and developer with buildings all over the boroughs, was sued by tenants in one of its West Harlem buildings for illegal harassment and violation of the rent stabilization laws. The Pinnacle group had a long record of removing rent-stabilized tenants in order to bring in market-rate tenants. Kim Powell, one of the Harlem tenants, who was also an attorney, was cautioned when she learned that Wells Fargo gave the Pinnacle group a blanket mortgage of \$34 million for 10 of their buildings along Riverside Drive in Harlem, which was exorbitantly high compared to the relatively modest rents these buildings collected (Wright 2016). (For instance, she knew that her building brought in approximately \$28,000 a month in rent and if the other buildings garnered comparable rents, then



the Pinnacle group’s yearly rental income would have been around \$3.3 million for those 10 buildings.) The fact that they were given a mortgage for about 10 times that amount drove Powell to file a class-action lawsuit against the investors under the Racketeering Influence Corruption Act (RICO) because it was evident that the bank mortgage was predicated on the company forcing out the rent-stabilized tenants and replacing them with market ones (Wright 2016). Although the tenants won the lawsuit, which required the Pinnacle group to follow the rent stabilization laws and set up a fund to compensate tenants who were illegally harassed, the judgment left no external oversight to ensure that the company obeyed the law. Thus, community-owned banks, which invested in the community as a whole rather than the profit-margins of speculators, and which invested in inner-city neighborhoods for the community, were another option in helping to curb the tide of gentrification.

By removing land and resources from the dictates of the capitalist market, communities were able to protect both affordable housing and much needed green spaces for the people. Because capitalism incentivizes luxury housing that was accessible to only the highest income earners, both real estate developers and even the city<sup>32</sup> had little motivation to provide affordable housing that working-class and low income peoples could afford. Just as society needed working people of all incomes in order to function—workers who performed jobs from domestic workers, taxi drivers, grocery delivery workers, and restaurant workers, to teachers, fire fighters, and municipal employees (i.e., not just the highest wage earners like investment bankers or corporate attorneys)—then society had an obligation to provide housing for all people. Community members and other stakeholders determined how the land was to be used under the CLT model,

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<sup>32</sup> Cities generally relied on property taxes to fund services and this type of tax structure privileged higher real estate values, which again had the consequence of destroying affordable housing and gardens.

thereby ensuring that the people's needs would be met. Land was thus used for the common good rather than for the profit accumulation for the elite. Policies such as caps on property taxes as well as on the resale prices of properties helped to ensure that affordable housing remained accessible to future generations. Other policies like housing vouchers and a return of the rent-control program could have supported vulnerable tenants in maintaining housing autonomy. In addition to the land being controlled by the community, banks that were also directly accountable to the community under a democratic leadership (like neighborhood cooperatives) would have also helped to ensure that financial resources were invested in ways that strengthened the community rather than destroying it. These kinds of institutional and policy changes would have the potential to significantly impact racial, social, and economic justice in urban areas. In addition to structural changes, inter-personal shifted needed to have occurred in order to stop the oppression that came with gentrification.

### ***Anti-racist consciousness Dialogues for Healing***

A persistent and common theme of my interviews was the painful and oppressive racism that was embedded within gentrification. When I was in the urban agriculture program at Farm School NYC, we were required to take a food justice course and as part of that course, I helped to organize a weekend long anti-racism training that has since become a mainstay of the food justice course. Although challenging for many of the participants, there was a general consensus

that it was primordial for urban farmers and community gardeners to have had an anti-racist analysis when doing their work. White urban farmer Bee Ayer described the “new generation of [her] white racial group as not being aware of how their actions impact others and the community” (Personal Interview, Bee Ayer, January 25, 2015). She liked what groups like 596 acres was doing, but most of the people starting community gardens and urban farms through this organization were white, which she felt was a shortcoming. She said that “unless these community gardens and urban farms are explicitly anti-racist in their language, organization, and work structure, then they are just perpetuating racism” (Personal Interview, Bee Ayer, January 25, 2015). Several community members talked about the need for the white newcomers to be trained in anti-racist consciousness, which would help transform some of the injustices that came with gentrification. For instance, with an anti-racist analysis, the white newcomers would understand that the communities to which they were relocating had people with knowledge, culture, and histories and they would be able to respect the leadership of the people most directly impacted by issues like food injustice—thus building community rather than destroying it. Several community members said that GreenThumb needed to host these types of anti-racism trainings and make it a mandatory requirement to be a community garden organizer in the City (Personal Interviews: Karen Washington, May 6, 2014; Redelia, June 30, 2015; Traci Nottingham, June 23, 2015; Anonymous, July 8, 2015), which was an example of a community recommendation to address the issue of gentrification. Community dialogue had proven to help heal the wounds caused by gentrification in another U.S. city: Portland, Oregon.

In Portland, community organizers in gentrifying neighborhoods attempted to improve community relations through social dialogue and communication. In the article “Listening through white ears: cross-racial dialogue as a strategy to address the racial effects of

gentrification” sociologist Emily Drew studied the “Restorative Listening Project” (Drew 2011). This project engaged the community in dialogues about race and the impact of gentrification on their communities. Organizers viewed story telling among community residents regarding the racial history of the neighborhood as a crucial aspect in fostering non-oppressive relationships (Drew 2011). Drew contended that the Restorative Listening Project “uses dialogue as a strategy for consciousness raising and ‘antiracist place-making’ in Portland’s Northeast neighborhoods”:

*Through conversations about race and gentrification, the RLP attempts to mitigate the relational effects of gentrification and construct “antiracist place” by (1) positioning people of color as knowledge producers about the institutional and interpersonal effects of racism in the neighborhood, (2) confronting the tactics of white denial, and (3) promoting consciousness about the racial harms of gentrification. By doing so, the project promotes a shared awareness of racism among the residents that attempts to reduce the racial tensions caused by gentrification in this Portland neighborhood (Drew 2011: 3).*

Organizers of the RLP hoped that if the long-time residents of the neighborhood could speak collectively in a space where whites would listen to and respect their perspectives – as well as begin to become aware of how their unearned privilege hurt the community members – then perhaps social transformation could begin to take root.

Several of the grievances shared by the African-American community members in these RLP sessions overlapped with concerns the community members I spoke with articulated. For instance, members repeated that the sense of community has changed since the arrival of the white newcomers in that the newcomers do not speak with, greet, or even make eye contact with the residents (Personal Interviews: Sharon Sockwell, June 25, 2015; Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015; Anonymous, July 8, 2015). Drew said that in Portland, the African-American community members expressed frustration with the racism of gentrification and the unequal distribution of resources it signaled. For instance, the Black residents noted that after the whites moved in, city

services in the neighborhood improved and whites were able to access home improvement loans that were denied to the Black residents (Drew 2011).

Drew further articulated that “at each dialogue, the speakers, almost exclusively African American, described their daily experiences with gentrification explaining that the racism is manifest through seemingly small, “everyday” interactions—micro-aggressions--with their new white neighbors, [like] white people’s unwillingness to greet or acknowledge them, or make eye contact” (Drew 2011: 3). The Black residents felt as though the whites entered into their neighborhood, imposed their values, and took over – a complaint many of the community gardeners made as well – by doing things like calling the police when Blacks had a block party despite the fact that whites would have their own loud gatherings as well and not think that the effort would be reciprocated onto them (Drew 2011).

The RJP’s founders recounted that part of the motivation of organizing such a project was a result of the reality that “nowhere else is it possible or safe for people of color to have the authority to say these things to whites ...to describe how we deal with—are forced to deal with—people who don’t look like us” (Drew 2011: 8). African-Americans produced knowledge through this project in a rather classic sociological manner—by linking their personal biographies and neighborhood histories to the “macro processes of economic and social dislocation” such as rising unemployment in the post-industrial economy, institutionalized racism, and the disinvestment in urban communities (Drew 2011: 8). One African-American community member shared in her presentation about how gentrification destroyed any sense of respite from the daily realities of institutionalized racism, by bringing that racism up close and personal in their neighborhood:

*You know, I always knew white folks got things you didn’t deserve, and better treatment than we do. But when you were miles away from me, I only had to see your privileges at the job, on the news, or out in public. I knew you were living well because of racism, but it was something I just*

*knew and did not see in my personal life. But once you moved into the neighborhood, our neighborhood, I get it shoved right in my face, right under my nose. Now I have to see it all day at work, and on nights and weekends at home. Now I'm not free anywhere from experiencing your racism (Drew 2011: 8).*

These dialogues aimed to create a sense of healing, which was sorely needed, given how painful the topic of gentrification had become. I witnessed community members expressing rage, resentment, hopelessness, anger, fear, and sadness when discussing this issue.

The expression of emotions and deep, sincere communication has proven to help heal. Similar to other forums like the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa (Overcoming Apartheid 2016), the process in which oppressed people shared openly about the pain of oppression, with people from the dominant groups listening, certainly has the power to heal. As one participant of the RLP testified: “It is healing for us to acknowledge the pain. It’s not important whether or not the white people listen or accept what we say. It is important that we tell these stories for our own healing, instead of holding this stuff inside our whole lives, with no outlet, causing all kinds of mental and physical anguish” (Drew 2011: 12).

Several of the community members shared with me the pain and anguish they experienced as a result of typically unintentional racist comments and behaviors of the newcomers in their neighborhoods—such as being treated like they did not belong in their own community by being asked if they lived in the neighborhood or if they wanted to sell their houses (Personal Interview, Anonymous, July 8, 2015) and being treated as if they were invisible and did not matter (Personal Interviews: Sharon Sockwell, June 25, 2015; Redelia, June 30, 2015; Traci Nottingham, June 23, 2015; Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015). I recommended that GreenThumb, since they received complaints from gentrifiers regarding the older leadership of the gardens, host similar types of dialogues like the Restorative Listening Project. These dialogues could include anti-racism training and analysis so that the participants would be able to

situate their own experiences within a larger political framework of how power and privilege operate in their communities.

By 2015, Farm School NYC had established intensive anti-racism training as part of their curriculum, and had begun offering food justice dialogues, where participants continued their analysis through readings, discussions, and film screenings. Hence, Farm School could also facilitate such RLP-like dialogues with the larger communities of long-time residents and newcomers. In this way, the garden could become a focal point for anti-racist consciousness raising. Similar to how Farm School required its students to complete intensive anti-racism trainings, GreenThumb could also require such trainings of all community gardeners—particularly so that the newcomers could listen to and respect the voices of the long-time residents. Having a space for community members to air grievances was a crucial aspect of the healing power of dialogue.

Although community members aired a number of grievances regarding the appearance of newcomers to their communities, community members reiterated that they were not opposed to the newcomers moving into their neighborhoods. They were against the ways in which the newbies were not open to building community with them, and were instead seeming to want to take over space rather than share space (Personal Interviews: Sharon Sockwell, June 25, 2015; Karen Washington, May 6, 2014; Marisa DeDominicis, July 11, 2015). One resident in the *TGN* podcast said, “In the black community, people say ‘hi’ and ‘good morning’ so make an effort to know your neighbor, because if you ever need help, they will be the ones to help you” (Wright 2016). I would add some additional advice to the newcomers, which could have supported them in shifting their behaviors and attitudes by adhering to the following: listening to the perspectives of the long-time residents, acknowledging the history and culture of the community (and that this

culture existed long before the newcomers arrived), and joining community groups that followed the leadership of the people most directly impacted by the injustices. An integral element of this process would be for the newcomers to engage in a power analysis whereby they recognize the unearned privileges granted to them as a result of their race and engage critically in the fallacy of “frontier-ism” and their role in gentrification. As one pastor from a church in East New York said in regards to how newcomers could fairly enter the neighborhood: “Join the community, listen to the community, become part of the fabric of it, not on your own or apart from us, but join the battle to keep the neighborhood family friendly. You are not just obtaining real estate, you are joining a community” (Wright 2016).

### *Significance*

There were a number of ways in which this research project proved to be significant. This research challenged and complicated the gentrification scholarship by focusing on the subaltern, or working-class, perspective of gentrification in order to advocate for policy changes that would compensate community gardeners for their efforts in revitalizing the city and prevent their displacement. Most of the gentrification literature (including critical perspectives from the left) has viewed gentrification as a top-down process in which the main actors were individuals with class or racial privilege (the gentry), real estate developers, or their government partners, hence rendering the community members as silent or invisible “victims” of gentrification. The



literature tended to only focus on community members after-the-fact as they struggled with displacement or higher costs of living, but they did not view the community as actors in the process of gentrification itself. I have shown that community members were the initial actors in rehabilitating their neighborhoods, and their efforts were coopted by the elite, thereby creating the opportunity for gentrification to occur. Thus, by studying the agency and power of the working-class communities of color in regards to gentrification, this research offers a grassroots model of gentrification that challenges the classical and traditional leftist analyzes of gentrification. Furthermore, I argue that gentrification was a theft of community-based wealth, which has systematically targeted and further marginalized communities of color.

### *Avenues for Future Research*

In contributing to a growing field of study, this research left a number of questions unanswered. One question that community members asked repeatedly dealt with the impact of displacement on individual community members. For instance, community members would ask where were people going after being displaced from their neighborhood (Personal Interviews: Onika Abrahams, May 15, 2015; Demetrice Mills, July 10, 2015)? Some people spoke about people moving back down to the American South (ironically where most of the founding community gardeners hailed after fleeing Jim Crow) (Spike Lee 2014). What were their lives like after they relocated? Did they own or rent?

What were the long-term impacts of displacement on the community? *The Nation* conducted a nine-week podcast series on the topic of gentrification in New York City called *There Goes the Neighborhood* (Wright 2016). Public Advocate Leticia James was quoted in one of the *TGN* podcasts speaking about the topic of deed theft. She said that the deed theft that occurred during the era of massive gentrification in which ruthless speculators forged fake documents to steal homes from elderly African-Americans in parts of Brooklyn, or paid them well under the market worth of their home, was the of the largest forms of wealth theft for the African-American community since Reconstruction (Wright 2016). The editor of the podcast, Kai Wright, pointed out that between the recession of 2008 and 2013, Black America lost half of its wealth. (Wright 2016). Given the centrality of home ownership to wealth, what impact did this theft have on Black communities in New York City and even nationally? How did this theft of Black wealth (in regards to both the community gardens and privately owned homes) have on racial wealth inequality in the U.S.? What about the loss of the Black population in New York City? What impact did that have on the city's culture and social environment? These were all questions that would be important areas to study further.

## *Conclusion*

One quote from a community gardener has stuck with me throughout the course of this project: “When we grow corn here, it means we are here to stay” (2014). Not only did the policy of “planned shrinkage” fail to make the people disappear from the city, but the fact that the community members stayed and built gardens illustrated their long-term commitment to their community. As the gardens improved the neighborhoods and became desirable places to live, these areas became ripe for appropriation by greedy developers and their political lackeys. Hence the revitalization of New York City neighborhoods began with the people themselves and not the elite. The Giuliani-era assault on the gardens helped to organize the gardeners into a sustained movement for food and environmental justice.<sup>33</sup> Community gardens and New York City neighborhoods continued to face enormous challenges in regards to unjust displacement and dislocation from their homes. The fact that the gardeners did not have collective legal ownership over the gardens allowed their efforts to fall prey to developers. Community land trusts offered

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<sup>33</sup> A Daily News op-ed from the Giuliani-era succulently stated: “The mayor, who has built his reputation largely on quality-of-life declarations, should take Polaroid snapshots of New York's community gardens, and the next time he goes out talking to people in Iowa, or Syracuse, he should say, "Look what the people of my city do”” (*Daily News* 1999).

an alternative path that had the potential to create just, healthy communities with the leadership of the people at the center. The benefits of community gardens have been immense and their continued survival ensured holistic neighborhoods that allowed for the social and environmental well-being of the community. The community gardeners were visionaries. They saw the possibility of a green, vibrant oasis coming out of the ashes of rubble and trash. Not everyone saw what was possible with the inner city. It was after they built the gardens that others realized that these places could be beautiful and not eye sores, which was also when outsiders started seeing the potential of these neighborhoods. The gardens helped to increase the community's sense of pride in their neighborhoods and shifted the perspective of the people. For that, the city owes a great deal to these community gardeners.

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