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Tending the Flowers, Cultivating Community: Gardening on New York City Public Housing Sites

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Tending the Flowers, Cultivating Community:

Gardening on New York City Public Housing Sites

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Abstract

Residents of New York City public housing developments (NYCHA) who wish to garden may do so by planting their gardens on the community grounds of their housing development. This put them in a unique position. Though their gardens are on public grounds, their gardens cannot be considered to be “community gardens” in the common sense of the term, because their gardens are maintained by individuals with their own personal goals; yet, they are more than private home gardens, as the gardens are (and can only be) on community grounds. In order to find out why NYCHA residents garden, and how the public location of their gardens affects their gardening, I spent the summer of 2011 conducting ethnographic research among 5 NYCHA resident gardeners at 3 NYCHA housing developments. All the gardeners were women, ranging in age from 30 to 90 years old. Drawing from my ethnographic fieldwork and scholarly literature regarding class, gender, age, and cultural factors influential to gardening, as well as literature regarding the public/private dichotomy, I found that despite the public location of their gardens, NYCHA resident gardeners are able to use their gardens as personal places for self-expression and enjoyment unique to their personal backgrounds and how they respond to societal expectations, and that because of their public locations the gardens are also valuable to the gardeners by providing an outlet from which to practice the responsibility the gardeners feel they have for the improvement of their community.
Founded in 1934, The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) is the nation’s oldest and largest public housing agency. Currently 334 public housing developments are located throughout New York City’s five boroughs, giving home to nearly half a million people.¹ In the summer of 1963, NYCHA held its first Flower Garden Competition, with its newly created Tenant Garden Program providing a $25 allotment for seeds and supplies to gardeners who turned in a garden application to their development’s management office. Over 100 participants took part in the first competition. The competition was inspired by flower gardens planted and maintained by Chicago public housing’s janitorial crew. After the Vice Chairman of NYCHA saw the gardens maintained on Chicago public housing grounds during a business trip, he returned to New York with the recommendation that NYCHA residents should be encouraged to garden as well. It was hoped that NYCHA resident gardens would have aesthetically pleasing results while being an economically efficient means of grounds beautification.²

Since its inception, the Tenant Garden Program has grown immensely. Over the years it has grown to include vegetable and theme/children’s gardens in the competition. In 2002 it was renamed the Garden & Greening Program, and as the current name reflects, NYCHA has expanded its attitude toward the purpose of resident gardens, now also focusing on the ecological benefits of improved soil, air, and water quality, which the gardens contribute to, as part of the larger NYCHA Green Initiative.³ The program now offers a $40 reimbursement for gardening

³ Cultivating NYCHA grounds aids in soil remediation by adding compost, which improves the soil quality, improves air quality by the increase in plants on NYCHA grounds, and water quality by recently approved small scale rainwater harvesting, which helps prevent polluted runoff into the local water systems. As both the largest landlord in New York City and a city government agency, NYCHA is under a lot of pressure to comply with Mayor Bloomberg’s PlaNYC 2030, which includes a large environmental component. To learn more about NYCHA’s Green Agenda, see its “Green Guide” at http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/news/nycha_environmental.shtml. To
expenses and also provides seeds, bulbs, starter plants, tools, compost, raised beds for vegetable gardens (though with only two men and one truck, material delivery can take a while), and technical assistance from program staff. Currently, over 600 public housing residents garden in more than 100 NYCHA developments throughout the city.  

NYCHA also values the positive social impact the gardens have in its developments—specifically the increase of community pride and the decrease of vandalism that are correlated with their presence. As of now it is the housing management’s policy that these gardens are not permanent fixtures of the development grounds, for if a gardener stops maintaining her garden the area does not remain as a garden, but reverts back to its previous state under the care of grounds maintenance staff. According to program coordinator Robert Bennaton, this policy is unfortunate, because it makes it difficult for the development residents to cultivate “true long term stewardship and a sense of ownership of the grounds” (something that I found untrue among the gardeners that I spent time with). To solve that problem the Garden & Greening Program would eventually like to see the gardens become permanent designated green spaces

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4 Robert Bennaton, “The Re-greening of Public Housing,” in Restorative Commons: Creating Health and Well-being through Urban Landscapes, ed. Lindsay Campbell and Anne Wiesen (Newton Square: USDA Forest Service, 2009), 234; New York City Housing Authority. “2011 Gardens,” (internal, unpublished report, New York City Housing Authority, 2011). The exact number and location of all the gardeners and gardens is really unknown, as some gardeners do not submit a garden application for their garden and therefore are undocumented.

5 Lewis, 5. When I say NYCHA residents’ “community,” I am referring to the development buildings, grounds, and residents only, not their surrounding neighborhood as well. By their very design, NYCHA developments do not blend in well with the surrounding neighborhood, and this has an isolating effect on its residents. Often built on “super blocks” the size of four or more city blocks, many include senior centers, community centers, and after-school programs for children, creating a feeling of “community” one might find on a gated college campus. NYCHA Garden & Greening Program Community Coordinator Robert Bennaton admits to the obstacle of “overcoming physical and social barriers between public housing and their surrounding neighborhoods” in efforts to build relationships between resident gardeners and “local community resources” in an attempt to promote long-term stewardship of NYCHA gardens (234). For more information regarding NYCHA housing developments, see Nicholas Dagan Bloom’s Public Housing that Worked (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

maintained by community members, or what is more commonly known as “community gardens.”

A community garden, as opposed to a home garden, is a space permanently set aside by a community group (often on vacated land) working collaboratively for a specific goal (vegetable production, landscaped recreation space, etc.), and is therefore not dependent on any particular gardener for its existence, as it is a community space for anyone who wants to garden, often with a variance of gardeners over its span of existence. Until the time comes when the NYCHA resident gardens are designated as permanent green spaces maintained by resident groups on development grounds, the NYCHA resident gardeners are in a unique position. Though their gardens are on public grounds, their gardens cannot be considered to be “community gardens” in the common sense of the term, because the gardens are maintained by individuals with their own personal goals; yet, they are more than private home gardens, as the gardens are (and can only be) on community grounds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Community Gardens</strong></th>
<th><strong>Home Gardens</strong></th>
<th><strong>NYCHA Resident Gardens</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who gardens?</strong></td>
<td>Maintained by a collaborative community group</td>
<td>Maintained by an individual</td>
<td>Maintained by an individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where?</strong></td>
<td>On community grounds</td>
<td>On private property</td>
<td>On community grounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why?</strong></td>
<td>Shared goal for benefit of community</td>
<td>Individual and household needs</td>
<td>?</td>
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Working part-time in the NYCHA Garden & Greening Program’s office for the past two years, I would get many calls from resident gardeners seeking help for the problems they were experiencing with their gardens: people were throwing trash out building windows and it would

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7 Ibid., 234-236.
land in their gardens; their gardens were being vandalized and their plants were being stolen; they spent a lot of money on plants only to have grounds maintenance staff weed-whack it down; they were still waiting for the compost and tools they were promised months ago. Hearing how much of a struggle it was to plant and maintain gardens on development grounds made me wonder why these individuals even bothered to garden. Why do NYCHA residents garden? Are their goals for gardening affected by their specific class, age, gender, and cultural backgrounds? How does the public location of their gardens affect their desire to garden and the purpose of their gardens?

To answer these questions I spent the summer of 2011 (June-August) doing ethnographic research among five gardeners at three different NYCHA sites in New York City. While we were gardening I took the opportunity to ask them questions pertaining to their gardens: When and why did they first start gardening? What do they like about gardening? I also asked for their thoughts on their community and their roles within it. To put my experience with the gardeners into context, I supplement my findings with scholarly literature regarding class, gender, age, and cultural factors influential to gardening, as well as literature regarding the public/private dichotomy. In this paper, after first introducing the gardeners, I will talk about the solely personal reasons for their gardening—the creation of a “privileged space” and the ability for self-expression unique to the gardener’s class, age, gender and culture. After that I will contextualize the five gardeners in their public location, describing how the public location of their gardens gives them a place to practice the responsibility they feel toward their community. I then conclude that NYCHA gardeners use their gardens as a personal space for self-expression, while

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8 All of the developments were in the Bronx; however, I do not want to make it only a “Bronx thing,” because NYCHA housing developments are all over the city and almost identical in terms of design and population demographics. They also remain fairly isolated from their surrounding neighborhood, regardless of location. Again, see Nicholas Dagan Bloom’s Public Housing that Worked for more information regarding NYCHA’s housing developments.
also using the public position their gardens provide them as an outlet for community involvement and improvement.

The Gardeners

All of the gardeners I spent time with were women and mothers, in most cases grandmothers, ranging from 30 to 90 years old. None of them had more than a high school education. The first gardener I met was Julia. She comes from an Italian and Puerto Rican family and was born and raised in the Bronx. She has lived in her current housing development since 1987. She is now 50 years old, the mother of ten, and the grandmother of sixteen with four more on the way, and her children and grandchildren are always coming and going from her ground floor apartment. She has been in a common law marriage for the past twenty years. Julia is very proud of the fact that despite having only a ninth grade education she was able to take good care of her children through public assistance and eventually found a job working for NYCHA. She is now retired.

Though she had always kept houseplants, Julia had no prior gardening experience until a friend showed her how to cultivate tomatoes and peppers. She took such a liking to gardening with him that she planted her own vegetable and flower gardens. She has been gardening for thirteen years. In her vegetable garden, which includes a tool shed built for her by her husband and son, she grows tomatoes, peppers, collard greens, Swiss chard, broccoli, cabbage, lettuce, eggplant, strawberries, cucumbers, potatoes, onions, various herbs, raspberries, grapes, and a peach, apricot, plum and apple tree. Her large flower garden, technically a “theme/children’s garden,” is nearby, separated by another gardener’s plot. It includes marigolds, zinnias, lilies,

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9 All gardener names and other identifiers have been changed to maintain anonymity.
coleus, cock’s comb, hostas, ferns, hydrangeas, roses, and various types of perennials and “butterfly bushes” for which she does not know the name. It also features a “casita” that her husband and son built for her, where she keeps a radio and record player, a small refrigerator, craft supplies, hand tools, all her garden awards, and a futon.

Through Julia I met Maria, who lives in the same development. Maria is around 30 years old and has been in a common law marriage for about twelve years with the father of her two children. She comes from a Dominican family and she, too, was born and raised in the Bronx. She is currently unemployed and living off public assistance. She had no background in gardening, but she had always admired Julia’s gardens. Maria’s mother had also gardened before she had a stroke, and she encouraged Maria to take it up as well. This summer Maria decided that she wanted to have a garden just like Julia’s for herself (though Julia repeatedly told her it would take a lot of work). Maria had a spot picked out that she wanted to use, an area that was originally designed to be a community garden area—it already had a fence and small plots separated by cement pathways. It was never used and ended up being a home for broken bottles and giant weeds. Though it was late in the summer when Maria decided to garden, with Julia’s help she managed to clear out all the weeds and broken glass and to get some flowers and

Right: Julia’s vegetable garden. Left: One side of Julia’s flower garden, facing the casita her husband and son built for her. Photos used with permission from Lloyd Carter, NYCA.
vegetables in the ground. She planted eggplant, a blueberry bush, garlic, several grapevines, strawberries and tomatoes, along with a young peach tree, a rose bush, and cucumbers that Julia had given her.

The development in which Julia and Maria live is a low-density housing development, meaning it is smaller than average NYCHA housing developments, only three floors high instead of more than ten, and all the ground floor apartments have a small patio area outside their door. The next set of gardeners I worked with live in a high density housing development. Their development buildings are sixteen floors high and about 1,500 people live there, approximately 4 times the population of Julia and Maria’s development.10

Gloria, who is 79 years old, has lived in the same development for 49 years. Her parents moved from Puerto Rico to Long Island, where she was born. Shortly after her birth her family moved to the Bronx, where she has lived ever since. She has raised three sons and has been a foster parent for seven others boys. She started gardening about ten years ago to keep herself busy when she retired. She had no prior gardening experience, but with help from the Garden & Greening Program staff, and from viewing gardening television shows, she feels comfortable

cultivating flowers. She is not yet ready, however, to try her hand at growing vegetables. The area of her garden area that she maintains includes a central circle around which benches are situated. Within the circle are impatiens, marigolds, and pansies. In the outlying area there are larger plants such as hydrangeas, hostas, ferns, roses, and lilies.

Josephine has lived in the same development almost as long as Gloria has, and is slightly older, in her 90s. Josephine is an African American who grew up in Virginia and North Carolina, where she farmed with her parents and grandparents. When she was a teenager her parents moved to New York City to work in the shipyards, but she stayed back with her grandparents for a few years until eventually joining her parents in New York. Josephine is a great-grandmother many times over, though none of her children still live in New York. She has been gardening since the 1970s, she says, “to stay out of the way.” Apparently she had been causing “too much trouble” as a community activist. In reality gardening is something that she enjoys, and it links her to her farming past which is something she takes great pride in. She currently has a small fenced-in area where she maintains a flower garden. She grows hibiscus and hydrangeas, chrysanthemums, lilies, impatiens, marigolds, coleus, pansies, and cock’s comb, among others.
The last gardener with whom I had the chance to spend some time is Sarah. She lives in a different high-density housing development than Gloria and Josephine. Like Josephine, she is an African American who grew up farming in the South. She was raised on a farm in South Carolina until she was fourteen, when she moved to New York City with her mother and seven sisters. She is almost 60 years old and has lived in the same development since moving to New York. She started gardening in 1993. Even though she had two jobs and two children, she was helping her mother with her garden (her mother had moved out of the housing development) and Sarah “couldn’t resist any longer;” she had to have a garden of her own. Already growing 200 flowers in her apartment, she knew it was time to start gardening outside. Sarah still works, so she gardens early in the morning before she takes the bus at 4am, and on her days off work. She has a vegetable garden in the plot between the playground and the parking lot by her building. There she grows a large variety of vegetables, especially those that she liked to grow when she lived in South Carolina, like sweet potatoes, okra, lima beans, and collard greens. She also has four other small areas around the development that she beautifies with flowers, such as under a
shady tree where grass doesn’t grow, around a tree that used to be the favored place of relief for the local dogs, and by the housing development’s sign on the corner of the block.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{center}
Left: Sarah (front) and a friend in her vegetable garden. Below: Sarah has several places on development grounds that she beautifies with flowers, including the space below. Photos used with permission from photographer Lloyd Carter, NYCHA.
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\textit{The Garden as Personal Space for Creative Self Expression}

“This is \textit{not} a community garden,” Julia told me adamantly one sunny afternoon in July. She was telling me how she does not let anyone into her garden except her husband, children (though they rarely stepped foot in her garden), and her grandchildren (thankfully, though, she made an exception with me). I had been wondering about how she situated her garden in its public context. Home gardens, specifically those located in the backyard, are viewed as being

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{11} Though I only gardened with women, this by no means should indicate that all the gardeners at NYCHA housing developments are women. In some developments, children take part in gardening programs as part of an after-school and summer day care service provided by NYCHA. Men also garden, though in much fewer numbers than women. I did attempt to garden with one group of male gardeners, but they let me know very clearly that they did not want my help. Regardless, because of the large number of NYCHA resident gardeners who are women, and given the age range between the gardeners that I interviewed, I think they offer a good representation of the daily encounters, struggles, and motivations of the NYCHA gardener.
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directly linked to the house, as part of the domestic sphere. There, removed from the outside world and the public eye, a garden can serve as a personal paradise for the gardener, shaped and cultivated exactly how she desires.

Front yard gardens, however, are not seen as such intimate expressions of the home. Rather, Nicholas Blomley has shown that the front yard garden, because it’s location under the public gaze, is maintained just as much to meet the neighbors’ expectations as to please the gardener. This is by no means saying that a gardener would not have the same pride in a front yard garden as she would in a backyard garden, only that the gardener is more self-conscious about her front yard’s appearance to others, and is going to take into consideration what she thinks her neighbor would want to see, instead of only planting what she wishes. This is why most people do not have vegetables gardens in their front yard. Vegetables cultivation, which is an intimate function of the household, is not deemed appropriate to fall under the public gaze.

This summer, in fact, a woman made headlines when she was fined and taken to court for planting vegetables in her front yard. City officials did not think that it respected the city ordinance that mandated only “suitable” plants in the front yard.

With the above considerations in mind, would a gardener on NYCHA community grounds be able to experience the same intimacy in her garden as in a backyard garden, or would

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14 Blomley, “Borrowed View,” 646.
15 Ibid., 644.
the closest they be able to get to experiencing a private garden be more similar to having a front yard garden? I found that, indeed, the gardeners who wanted to were able to make their gardens very much their own private space, similar to a backyard garden. Julia, who rejoiced in the freedom of creativity that she found within her gardens’ fences said to me, “Lauren, in here we can do everything exactly the way we want!” Her statement showed that she did not care how her garden was viewed by others; it was purely for her own enjoyment. In planting a garden, Maria did not want to be concerned whether the rest of the development would enjoy it, but only wanted a garden for herself. After thinking it over, and encouragement from Julia, she decided to rise above whatever gossip would spread about her and pursue creating a garden area exactly how she wanted. Other gardeners, Josephine and Gloria, gardened because they enjoyed it, but also because it brought beauty to their development. Sarah did both. She planted flowers in various places around the development for the pleasure of others, because, she said, “Flowers make you comfortable to be in a place. I do it to show love.” Yet, she also has a vegetable garden that she planted for herself with vegetables that she likes. Two other women help her tend the vegetable garden. I met one who told me, “I used to garden, and when I heard Sarah was looking for a helper I volunteered.” Yet, Sarah controls what gets planted and how it is cultivated. The vegetable garden is her domain, and the women are there to help her maintain it.

Michael Pollen, in his book Second Nature describing his life’s experience with gardens, reflects on the area of ground where he planted seeds as a four-year-old as his first garden because it was “an enclosed and privileged space out-of-doors.”

17 “An enclosed and privileged space out-of-doors,” is the perfect description of these women’s gardens. Except for Sarah’s patches of flowers around the grounds for beautification, each of the women with whom I

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gardened had locking fences around their garden plots. The act of enclosure and cultivation has long been viewed as signifying possession in Western culture, dating from eleventh century England and playing a major part in justifying colonization of the New World. For these women, possessing the keys to their gated gardens meant symbolically possessing the space. Thus, they were not merely grounds maintenance staff that worked for free, but the possessors of plots that were all their own. Gloria, who even told me that her garden is a “community garden,” because it’s for the community’s enjoyment and she is just the one that maintains it, still controls when people have access to the garden because she is the only one with the key. The garden is only open when she is in it—which, during the summer, is usually all day every day, except when she is babysitting her grandchildren. One day when I was with her we went to get some coffee at the corner deli. There was a man sitting in the garden (which is big enough to fit about ten full length benches and a few tables) enjoying the cool morning breeze. When we left, she kicked him out of the garden and locked the gate behind her. So, her garden is for the enjoyment of the community, but only on her terms, as she is in complete control of the space.

In the book *Taste for Gardening: Classed and Gendered Practices*, Lisa Taylor cites Bourdieu’s theory that taste is socially constructed and has a central role in maintaining the dominant order, noting as well as his concepts of economic, social, and cultural capital, in order to frame the findings of her conducted interviews as she argues that there are innate differences in the processes and goals of gardening between the middle class and working class, the direct result of class positions. According to Taylor, since working class people are lacking in economic, cultural, and social capital (money, education and connections to the “right circles”), they are less likely to know the Latin names of plants, or be knowledgeable about the current and

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contemporary trends in gardening.\textsuperscript{19} Also, by keeping a “tidy” garden, they are able to “refuse pejorative associations about being working-class and to ensure that others recognize their respectability.”\textsuperscript{20} Taylor’s relation of Bourdieu’s forms of capital to the act of gardening may explain why none of the women with whom I gardened were very knowledgeable, or seemed to care, about the current trend of organic gardening practices. Also, similar to Taylor’s study, the NYCHA resident gardeners with whom I spent time didn’t know the Latin names for most of their plants, either.

What is really striking about Taylor’s claim is that she equates gardening with a feeling and expression of self-worth. This struck a chord with something Julia once said to me. When I asked why she thinks more people do not garden, she said, “It’s a lot easier to sit on the couch all day and watch novellas.” Her statement clearly showed that she viewed herself as different from residents that did not garden, and wanted to distance herself from the negative stereotype of lower class people as lazy and unproductive. However, she also resented that they might think of her as different or that she was trying to show she was better by gardening. She told me that one time she was protecting her daughter’s friend from her boyfriend’s abusive mother, and the mother shouted at Julia, “You just think you’re special because you have a garden.” Julia was extremely angered, hurt, and baffled by that accusation; however, the comment did not stop her from gardening. She told me that she just tries her best to avoid the gossip that goes on about her and her garden. Her words lead me to think that for Julia, and the other gardeners as well, the purpose of their gardening is not to show the other housing residents that they are superior, which is capable of causing unavoidable friction in such an enclosed community as a NYCHA

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 117.
housing development, but rather, gardening serves as a personal way of defying stereotypes, and expressing their full humanity as individuals. It’s the pride in Josephine’s voice when she told me, “Rob [one of the Garden & Greening community coordinators] always asks me ‘How do you get your impatiens to grow like that?’ He can’t get his to grow like I can.” Gardening is something these women excel at; it gives them a personal feeling of self-worth and accomplishment.

Though viewing their gardening from the perspective of their class positioning offers a necessary perspective, it also limits the complex self-identification of the NYCHA resident gardeners. Dividing people as middle class and working class does not take into consideration goals for gardening that might result from the specific age, gender, and cultural backgrounds of the gardeners. Mark Bhatti argues that “for some the need to carry on gardening can be seen as a form of resistance to ageing,” as a way of “resisting images of the docile, inactive body.”21 For the older resident gardeners, like Gloria and Josephine, it is a way for them to defy the stereotype that elderly people are inactive and unhealthy. They both loved to talk about how healthy and active they are. Gloria would always talk to me about the trips she would take her grandchildren on, to the zoo or to Coney Island. She preferred Coney Island to Orchard Beach—the water was a little colder, but the waves were bigger. Josephine wouldn’t even tell me how old she was, but Gloria (who herself was 79) told me that based on how old Josephine said she was when she moved into the development, she has to be at least 90 years old. Both of these women refuse to submit to normal expectations for women their age, and the gardening is an outlet for resistance to the stereotype.

21 Mark Bhatti, “Paradise,” 318-319, 322.
For those with previous gardening experiences, it’s a way to get in touch with their past, to partake in practices that are rooted in their personal past, their family history, and even cultural history. Mark Bhatti et al, when talking about gardening as a multi-sensorial experience, says: “Memories of gardens relate not only to what is remembered, but the senses greatly influence how the past can be revisited; the garden mediates memories of childhood… recollections of family members and key events. These ‘pre-loved’ gardens solicit some very vivid responses….The garden is also imagined and remembered through the body.”

When Sarah was talking to me about her vegetable garden, the conversation quickly turned from her present garden on housing grounds to her farming as a child in South Carolina, then to an anecdote about her aunt giving her family a piglet which she helped raise. For her, the act of gardening—hoeing the ground, picking fresh green beans—is indeed “mediating” between her experiences as a child and her present state. Yet it not only connects her to her childhood, but to a larger agrarian cultural history of farming and gardening that can be traced from African Americans of the rural South, back to the practices of Black slaves and sharecroppers. Sarah grew collard greens, okra, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, turnips and several types of beans, which she grew as a child in the South, and which are prevalent in Southern Black cuisine, still her favorite type of food.

Josephine is also proud of her agrarian past; that is how she knows how to garden so well. Though she has a flower and not a vegetable garden, her approach to gardening still draws heavily on the resourcefulness and self-reliance of her gardening experience in the rural South.

An unfamiliar observer might note that the old trash can, the many empty bleach and laundry

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detergent bottles, and the various pieces of wood in Josephine’s garden look trashy and suggest negligence. However, Richard Westmacott describes Josephine’s situation precisely when he describes the yards of African American gardeners in the rural South: “Piles of second-hand building materials and other miscellaneous items awaiting reuse were not trash. In fact, they could be interpreted as being symbolic of the resourcefulness and thriftiness of the gardeners.”

Josephine kept the big trash can in her garden as a place to store her garden supplies at times and at other times as a place to store water, in which she would dip her empty jugs in order to water her plants. The various pieces of wood were there in case she needed them to support a leaning plant. She was highly resourceful, using bricks that she found as borders for different groups of flowers, and hula hoops as arches for flowering vines to grow on. One technique particularly interesting was her use of aspirin as a way to treat plants that were going through shock, which she learned from her grandparents. She would toss a couple of aspirin pills down into the hole before she would transplant a herbaceous perennial that she had just split in two. She would often split a large plant if she only had one of it, because she liked things to be symmetrical, in pairs of twos, because “God made things in twos.” In this way, her garden was also an expression of her Christian faith.

As the previous examples show, these gardeners are creating spaces unique to their individual selves based on how they see themselves in terms of their class, age and culture. However, the garden, in Western culture, is traditionally considered a “private, domestic, feminine space” because of its location near the home, as opposed to the “male sphere of waged work and politics.”

Gardening is indeed a gendered leisure activity. Even in instances where

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24 Ibid., 112.
both men and women participate in gardening, gendered patterns appear. Tending the flowers and herbs is considered the more feminine garden chore, and is therefore most often relegated to women, and men would then take care of the vegetables, handle machinery, and do any “heavy work.”26 This division of labor is seen not only in the English suburb where Taylor conducts her ethnography but among African American gardeners that Richard Westmacott met in the rural South. By participating in, and in some ways reproducing patriarchal gender-norms through their gardening, are NYCHA women gardeners reinforcing oppressive gender roles? And by reinforcing these gender roles, can they truly be empowered individuals?

Raisborough and Bhatti say that although much feminist analysis of leisure reads resistance as “a counter to power relations that aim to maintain, reproduce, or repackage oppressive gender relations,” pairing it with empowerment and pitting it against reproduction, they argue that empowerment does not necessarily have to come from resistance, but women’s empowerment can also “stem from an active repositioning to contextualized gender-norms that escapes an easy categorization as resisting or reproducing gender relations.”27 In their analysis of a woman’s written auto/biography of her experience as a gardener, they argue that “[the gardener’s] story of creative positioning is also one of her empowerment. The garden becomes a site and source of her empowered agency as demonstrated through self-expression; rewards of commitment and discipline; pleasure; control of space and time and, importantly a social recognition as she takes up her position to the socially intelligible identities of gardener, wife, mother and neighbor.”28

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28 Ibid., 473.
From the view of Raisborough and Bhatti, the NYCHA women gardeners can be seen as both embracing the domestic act of gardening while also being empowered by it. Julia, for instance, while we were relaxing in her garden, was reflecting on where the course of her life has taken her. She told me that when she was younger she planned on joining the military with her brother. However, her life changed course when she became pregnant with her first child when she was sixteen years old. Despite this, Julia has no regrets, because she says she’s always been the “domestic type.” She loves children, and she enjoys knitting and gardening. Thus, it is clear that she thinks of gardening as a “domestic,” gender appropriate activity for a woman. At the same time, however, she values her time in the garden as a way to escape her family and have some peaceful time alone. The garden is her place. Maria is the same way, and told me and Julia that since she started gardening she loves to spend time in her garden, sometimes just sitting in it and thinking, but her family had started to complain that she spends too much time in their gardens and not enough time tending to them and their needs. To that Julia replied, “Just teach your kids how to cook. They’re old enough” (none of Maria’s children is over the age of twelve). Though Julia may sound tough, she really does love it when her grandchildren are in her garden (as long as they are not disruptive and do not make a mess). Her flower garden is, after all, technically a “children’s/theme garden.” She loves to watch them marvel at how the tiny seeds they plant grow into such big plants, and takes pride in their enthusiasm. Thus, her garden serves as both a place for her to be a nurturing grandmother and a place of escape from the very same role, depending on how she feels. Julia and Maria’s gardens, despite their cultural setting as “women’s places,” serve as an alternative option to disempowering situations.
The Garden as Location within Public Sphere

For these women, gardening on NYCHA grounds turns on its head the idea of keeping women docile and voiceless walled up in their garden. NYCHA residents’ gardens are located in the public sphere, the political sphere, the male sphere. To successfully garden in the public sphere, these women have to first conquer what Gillian Rose argues to be the “unease in and fear of public spaces…profoundly shaped by [women’s] inability to secure an undisputed right to occupy that space.” But once they conquer that potential fear, it does not mean that they are free of harassment by men. Gillian Rose is describing scholar Gill Valentine’s work when she says “women are seen as properly belonging to the domestic sphere, and she notes how vulnerable to men’s violence this makes women, both inside and outside the home: inside, it is no one else’s concern; outside, she deserved it.”

Indeed, Maria found this out the hard way. One day when we were hauling barrels of compost to her garden, a group of young men were sitting nearby and one repeatedly called out to her “Yo ma, you got a flat ass.” The first time she heard it she ignored it—she wasn’t sure if she had heard him correctly. The second time, she called him on it, and when he continued to jeer at her she began cursing back at him profusely. She was angered and insulted, and eventually was motivated to work even harder on her garden as a way to show she wasn’t intimidated by him. That day she discovered that even though she wanted to create a special place only for herself, she was under the public (male) gaze, and subject to objectification and harassment. Maria only started gardening at the end of the summer, however, so it will be interesting to see how she comes to terms with her position in the public sphere.

29 Rose, Feminism and Geography, 34.
30 Ibid., 35.
As for the other gardeners, who have been gardening for a while, they have come to embrace their public position. I observed that the public location of their gardens has the same effect as community gardens, which are shown to encourage women to become more active in their community and take on leadership roles. It seems that for the gardeners, to be comfortable enough to garden on public grounds gave them confidence to be a community leader, and vice versa. They not only gardened, but were very community-oriented. Mark Bhatti et al claim that “in ‘doing gardening’ gardeners are not just taking care of their plants, but also taking care of the self, and others.” Although this usually presents itself as “home-making,” as Bhatti is talking about home gardens, what happens when the “care and concern” generated by gardening takes place in a public setting? Their “care and concern,” then, does not flow into the adjacent home, but is directed toward the surrounding community. The resident gardeners often take it upon themselves to better the community by cleaning up public spaces beyond their garden, holding special events on development grounds for the children and development residents, and are members of community improvement organizations.

For Julia and Josephine, their community activism started before their gardening. Julia was her development’s Tenant Association president and fought to get a playground and a barbeque pit installed on development grounds, as well as fences installed to create a patio-like effect around the doors of the ground-floor apartments. Josephine is the reason her development has fenced plots for gardening in the first place, as she was the one who lobbied her development to install them. For Gloria and Sarah, their gardening came first, and once they settled into

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33 Ibid., 69.
34 Ibid., 70.
gardening they branched out to be more actively involved in community improvement other than beautifying the grounds. Regardless of which came first, gardening on public grounds only promotes community involvement and improvement as the gardens provide opportunities for community involvement that do not go ignored by the gardeners. Oscar Newman discovered this to be true in his social project of assigning gardens to different families in a NYCHA housing development. He found that the increase in resident gardening brought about an increase of community involvement and a decrease of crime on development grounds.  

Sarah loves to beautify the community grounds, and started gardening not only as a way to satisfy her itch for gardening but as a way to do just that. Now she even decorates the development grounds for different holidays, so the kids will “know the reason for the holiday.” Even though her vegetable garden provides her the personal satisfaction of growing food from her childhood, she gives a lot of vegetables away, and grows herbs specifically for that purpose. On Halloween she gives away hotdogs and books to the resident children afterschool. In a similar manner, Gloria uses her garden as a space to host a Family Day event each summer where she makes large quantities of food to serve to development residents who stop by.

Josephine told me that she started gardening to “stay out of the way”—she was raising “too much trouble” being on community boards and tenant organizations—but if that was really her goal, taking up gardening was not her wisest move. She will be in her garden all day, from daybreak until the afternoon, working in her little plot. And she does not keep to herself. To everyone that passes by she shouts out “Hi darlin’” and has a brief conversation before continuing with her hoeing, weeding and watering. In this way she stays on top of the local news

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and gossip, but also serves as a watchdog and messenger to her community. The very first day I met her, the first words out of her mouth were, “There was a predator in my building.” She told me how the day before two women had been raped on the development grounds, and earlier that morning children had come up to her saying that there was a man telling them to “lick his balls.” She approached him and told him that she would beat him up and cut off his balls if he ever came back, and he quickly ran off. She then spent the rest of the day in her garden telling all the women and girls who passed by what had happened and to be extra careful.

Julia, who claims that her garden is “not a community garden,” still uses her garden as a space from which to act in caring for her community. When she is watering her garden sometimes she will move outside of her garden fence and spray down the playground area, clearing away the cigarette butts and bottle caps, so “the kids will have a clean place to play.” She admits she has the reputation of being a “bitch” because she yells at people who are, to her, acting out of line. (She does have a tendency of walking around the development like an Army sergeant.) For instance, she reprimands people for smoking marijuana by the development playground; her reasoning is that “This place is for the children. If they want to grow up and smoke pot when they’re adults that’s up to them, but don’t smoke around them. They’re innocent.” She told me that one time she was working in her garden when she noticed children in the street playing in water spraying from the fire hydrant. They were harassing drivers who drove by, jumping on the hood of their cars and demanding money for “washing” their car. She walked up to them, confronted them about it and made them stop. Then she sat in her garden the rest of the day to make sure they would not come back out to the street and continue. If she didn’t have her garden and it was not located where it was, she wouldn’t have been able to do that. Indeed
that seems to be the case for all the gardeners. Their gardens play a central role in their ability to help and care for others.

Conclusion

From the gardeners’ experiences related in this paper, it could be said that they garden because it is a source of beauty, relaxation, exercise, food production, and self-worth. And while yes, their gardening does just that, that explanation for their actions only scratches the surface. On a deeper level, their gardens are places for their own personal expression as they position themselves within a society full of expectations and stereotypes regarding class, age, sex, and culture. Yes, by gardening they have a place for relaxation and solitude, but as such it is an “escape” from their daily lives as mothers and nurturers, lives that allow very little time spent for themselves. Yes, it is a source of beauty, exercise and accomplishment, but by being active, productive, and creating a beautiful place, they are defying negative stereotypes of their class and age, and expressing that they are fully human and not a stereotype. Yes, they garden as a means of food production, but it is not only a way to feed themselves and others, but a way to get in touch with their past, with a culture they grew up in, as a way to carry on tradition they take pride in. How they choose to garden is linked to how they see themselves as people, and this statement of identity is made even more powerful as they make it on public grounds. Regardless of whether they garden for themselves or the community, it is clear that there is a responsibility the gardeners feel to take care of their community, generated by and/or expressed in their gardening on community grounds. In that way their garden on community grounds is an invaluable place to them, not only as a place for themselves, but as a self-designed outlet for community involvement and improvement. By gardening on NYHCA grounds they are, indeed, cultivating community.
Bibliography


