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# Composting the City: Urban Farming in the Ethnographic Moment

Matthew William Abel  
*College of William and Mary*

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Composting the City: Urban Farming in the Ethnographic Moment

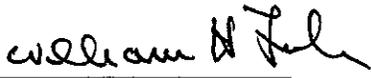
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
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The College of William and Mary

by

Matthew William Abel

Accepted for Highest Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

BRAD WEISS   
Type in the name, Director

WILLIAM H. FOSTER   
Type in the name

BRENT Z KAMP   
Type in the name

Williamsburg, VA  
April 26, 2016

# **Composting the City:**

Urban farming in the ethnographic moment

By Matthew Abel

## Table of Contents

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>ON THE MORAL ECONOMY OF ISSUES</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>CITY LEAF FARM</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<i>GROWING FOOD</i> .....	21
<i>CREATING COMMUNITY</i> .....	31
<i>SHIFTING CONCRETE</i> .....	44
<b>HARVESTING YIELDS</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>54</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>63</b>

## Acknowledgements

There are many people to thank in the formulation of an idea, let alone one that slithers its way onto paper, and I hope that this thesis will be treated in the style of its encompassing discipline: as a social fact, built more through relationships than my own sweat and toil. First among those to thank is my family. Thank you to my mom, whose hours spent proof-reading middle school book reports can never be repaid, and to my dad, whose compassion and kindness have cast light into every aspect of my life. Also, thank you to my siblings, Dan and Ana, who bear no obligation to read this paper, but who know that if they do, for whatever reason, they are fully obligated to make fun of me for it. I then must also go on to thank my friends, who continue to teach me, each in varying ways, the skill that is social life, and without whom my experience at this college would have been nothing but cold puddles and mosquito bites. I don't know what I'd do without you guys.

As for the more academic acknowledgements, I must thank my professors, who have tolerated and encouraged my brash intellectualism with such care. Special thanks go to Professors Fisher, Weiss, and Kaup, who have each contributed so much to my education. My thanks also go to the wonderful Charles Center, who funded much of the research presented in this project through a Monroe grant, and who have been a second home to me at the college. Finally, I must thank the staff and volunteers of City Leaf Farm, who have made all of this research possible. We arrive here, at the odd trick that is the practice of ethnography, through which one discovers her or himself indebted to a group of people just by virtue of sharing, in a brief and partial way, their existence. Although I must keep the names of my friends and informants confidential, I hope that they realize the debt that I owe them. I hope that this thesis will be received as nothing more than a perspective that I hope to share with them, which they

can (and perhaps should!) disagree with. However, it is a perspective that I hope acknowledges certain aspects of their work and everyday life that, I believe, often go unaccounted for. This thesis, if nothing more, should be viewed as a testament to the skill and confidence with which a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals navigate these truly extraordinary times.

The research presented was found to comply with institutional ethical standards through protocols PHSC-2013-11-26-9140-whfish and PHSC-2015-04-09-10313-blweis.

## Introduction

On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014, I attended a public markup of DC Council Bill B20-677, or the “Urban Farming and Food Security Amendment of 2014.” Not being one to attend legislative hearings alone, I had come with a friend; I sat next to Katelyn, the then-manager of City Leaf Farm. The hearing took place in Washington, DC at the Council Chamber of the John A. Wilson Building on Pennsylvania Avenue, a sizeable space populated by an impressive number of people, and Katelyn and I were both sitting in the pews, anxiously scribbling notes. I, the anthropologist, was attempting as best I could to jot down my observations on this modern ritual of representative government, while Katelyn was writing, last-minute, the testimony that she would momentarily present to the committee.

Katelyn and I had met through my undergraduate research at City Leaf Farm, a small half-acre urban agriculture site that grows food for primarily low-income residents in its surrounding neighborhood. The urban agriculture initiative, like many of its kind that seem to be “sprouting up” in North American cities, is located in what was, until very recently, a USDA-certified food desert, meaning that residents of the farm’s surrounding census tract qualified as having limited access to fresh food due to a lack of grocery stores within reasonable walking distance. The farm itself is located at the northern corner of this census tract, which I, in sticking with the traditional anthropological convention, will refer to by a fictional place name. Drawing on volunteer labor, the farm and its small staff work to provide organic, healthy produce to the residents of its surrounding census tract. Through its efforts to bring food to the food-scarce desert, the farming organization and its volunteers have created a half-acre space that

serves as a resource to many overlapping yet diverse social groups, both from the immediate area as well as the greater Washington region; it is a veritable urban oasis.

Katelyn was hired as the project's farm manager at the beginning of the 2014 growing season, and we were both, in this sense, new to our fields. Although Katelyn had only worked at the farm for a month before I arrived, she quickly became a key informant. Katelyn navigated the neighborhood's social life with a sense of courage and humbled authority that an aspiring anthropologist could perhaps only envy – one that seems to separate the “doers” of social life from its “knowers.” Good-humored and sympathetic, Katelyn was a life-long DC resident and an Ivy League graduate, and she was likely just as anthropologically adept as I was at the time (“Emic—etic, man,” she once told me. “Don't think I don't get it.”) I, just finishing my second year of study in anthropology at the South's self-proclaimed “public Ivy,” had come to the farm to investigate the relationship between urban agriculture and neighborhood change, and to explore the nebulous “social effects” of a sustainable food project.

City Leaf's staff was kind enough to allow me to work regularly at the farm as a volunteer, shoveling compost, weeding, coordinating other volunteers, and building new beds, while also conducting my undergraduate research in anthropology. During the summer and in several return visits afterwards, I logged over two hundred hours at this space in addition to what I suspect to be an equal, if not greater, amount of time spent conducting historical and archival research on the farm's surrounding neighborhood. These metrics amount less to an account of methodological rigor than a testament to the graciousness of my hosts, who have been willing to tolerate my academic curiosity for much longer than they may have initially expected; an aspiring anthropologist like myself, new to his field and temperamentally nervous, could not have asked for a more supportive and convivial group of informants. Like a sociological remora,

I spent the summer flitting beneath the shelter of my many kind informants, accompanying them on their various journeys, including the one that took me and Katelyn to that amorphous, disembodied world that anthropologists tend to approach with a mix of anxiety and disdain: the policy realm.

Like Katelyn, almost everyone who testified at the public hearing was affiliated with the urban agriculture and sustainable food movement in the District, and I observed as one by one these gardeners, self-proclaimed entrepreneurs, and organizers delivered their testimony to the committee members. The bill itself was quite modest in its ambitions. As Gail Taylor, a DC farmer and the legislation's lead proponent, said at the hearing, "This is just something to make my job a little bit easier." It sought to establish a government program to lease vacant land to potential urban agriculturalists, codify a tax abatement for private landowners with farms or gardens on their property, and create a tax credit for food donated from urban cultivars. In other words, it was an effort to incentivize urban food production and the management of otherwise vacant city land for the purposes of addressing a number of different public issues.

While witnesses both praised and critiqued portions of the legislation, many took the opportunity to publicly assert the value of urban farming. Although there was not always precise overlap as to what exactly this value was, it was generally agreed that urban farming did have *a* value that centered around a constellation of phrases: outdoor education, producing healthy food, promoting nutritional literacy, showing people where their food comes from, neighborhood beautification, increasing surrounding property values, managing vacant land, creating sustainable jobs, and building community. All of these proposed public benefits went far beyond mere food production, and I watched as they were invoked by farmers, gardeners, and activists as

reasons for why organized agriculture projects are an important resource to urbanites and therefore worthy of legislative support.

Of course, these claims to value were not without academic charter. Organized gardening projects had been hypothesized to increase property values in their surrounding neighborhoods (Voicu and Been 2008), help improve health through exercise and nutritional education (Zick et al. 2013), increase the connectivity between alienated spheres of social and economic life (Landman 1993), and cultivate a sense of “social citizenship” among marginalized populations (Baker’s 2004). Many of the hearing’s witnesses skillfully navigated this academic literature to lend support to both written and oral testimonies. They drew on published journal articles, case studies, policy analyses, and firsthand accounts to demonstrate that farms and gardens do more than just grow food.

At the time of the hearing, I was both impressed and intimidated by this chorus of voices, all of which seemed so skilled at translating their personal experiences into public value. I felt a sinking feeling as I realized that the last thing urban growers lacked was sociological imagination. What could an undergraduate anthropology student possibly contribute to them that they hadn’t already heard before? I admit that I momentarily entertained the idea of standing up to present my own testimony, drawn from my field experiences, thereby taking up the public anthropologists’ challenge to act as an advocate for my informants. Fancying myself an activist of sorts, I would have perhaps drawn connections between City Leaf Farm and academic literature on alternative food movements, suggesting the links between food justice and local food production. I would have presented about City Leaf’s embeddedness in a broader community and social context and suggested, along with others, that urban cultivars do a lot

more than just grow food. However, I ended up not feeling the courage (or perhaps just the hubris) to stand up and give my two cents.

Perhaps this is what some of my informants expected me to do – that I would eventually end up behind a witness stand of some sort, translating my modest ethnographic work into a testament to urban agriculture’s ability to address social ills. Or perhaps, as some seemed to desire, I would go on to provide a constructive critique of urban agriculture movements. For instance, when I arrived on my first day of fieldwork, City Leaf’s executive director told me with characteristic openness that if, during the course of my project, I found that City Leaf was not creating a community, this was something that the organization would want to know and to try to correct for. I was again, impressed but intimidated by this suggestion. Is the researcher, like a sentinel of social well-being, to ask whether projects are doing good and, if so, how much?

After two more years of study and an almost completed bachelor’s degree in anthropology (let’s cross our fingers), I have to admit that I am no closer to following Katelyn up to the witness stand than I was in 2014, just as I am no more comfortable perceiving my research as some sort of evaluative exercise. I wish to provide neither a critique nor a testament, nor do I hope to simply demonstrate that public issues are present in personal biographies. This is not what I hope to contribute here; I do not think that my informants need my diagnosis, nor do they need me to explain how the individual’s hip bone is connected to a structural thigh bone. It is not the quantity of sociological imagination that I hold at stake, but its boundaries. Like many ethnographic works, this thesis attempts to grind an axe while telling a story and, like many ethnographic works, this one runs the risk of accidentally mutilating the narrative in the process, or, conversely, becoming so caught up with the story that the axe is improperly sharpened. It is important, therefore, to state my goals at the outset.

First and foremost, this thesis is an attempt to present the social world that I encountered during my fieldwork in terms of its positive existence – in terms of what I observed and experienced through participation in City Leaf Farm’s social landscape. Through participant-observation at an urban agriculture project, I came to familiarize myself over the course of a summer with the social texture of a small urban space. Drawing heavily on field notes and interviews, I attempt to outline the everyday patterns of work and play that constituted the social life of the half-acre landscape. I ask how food is grown and circulated, how volunteers and staff perceive their work, and how this urban agriculture site forms part of a broader neighborhood and urban landscape? By contextualizing these patterns within the history of the farm’s surrounding landscape and the metabolism of a larger city, I attempt to demonstrate how City Leaf’s ethnographic moment, defined tautologically as the world that the ethnographer inhabits, is emergent from DC’s historical geography. In doing so, I draw freely from anthropological concepts and concerns like ritual, but only when they help clarify the ethnographic materials or contribute to the broader argument.

In addition to its ethnographic concerns, this thesis also puts forward an argument about value, or, more precisely, about the conditions of valuation that my informants repeatedly encountered in their attempts to construct and reproduce a social space. When the Urban Farming and Food Security Amendment was signed into law in early 2015, it had very little effect on my field site; City Leaf Farm is a non-profit organization built on District park land and therefore did not benefit directly from any of the tax incentives created by the bill. However, I begin with this hearing, and will later return to it, in part because of what it seems to miss: so little of these spaces, their day to day ins and outs and ethnographic realities are captured by statements like “promoting nutritional literacy.” Rather, this scene reflects the central

problematic of my investigation: contemporary urban agriculturalists, both in the non-profit and for-profit sector, have to live a challenging double life. On one hand, they are urban landscapes with actual ethnographic and ecological content, while on the other they are also institutions that must maintain a public and marketable face towards those who fund them, supply land, enable their day-to-day operations, and provide potential legislative support. As I continued to work with City Leaf Farm in the months following the hearing, I came to realize the degree to which the everyday ethnographic reality I experienced as a participant-observer was both enabled and limited by the type of relationship expressed in this hearing, in which the city's philanthropic laborers were moved to market not only the value of their own work, but its derivative – the potential benefits that their work as social *entrepreneurs* could yield toward the public good. Borrowing from garden-sociologist Miranda Martinez's (2011) argument, I conceptualize this relationship as manifesting a shift in thinking about the urban landscape in terms of its use-value, to thinking about space in terms of its exchange-value – from landscape-as-practice to landscape-as-representation.

In this paper, I argue that far too many claims regarding urban cultivars view them as resources that are meant to satisfy the demands of imagined “deserts” – or scarcities in public good. I suggest that viewing these spaces as resources obfuscates the social and physical labor that goes into their production and maintenance. To further the analogy, viewing projects as solutions to desertification – as solutions to a perceived lack, or utilitarian scarcity – makes it incredibly difficult to perceive what is actually being produced. I suggest that this outlook and its corollary evaluative stance limit our perception of what urban cultivars and urban spaces more broadly are, have been, and can be. By adopting a confrontational stance towards a theory of social entrepreneurship, which relies heavily on the notion of utilitarian scarcity, I hope to

demonstrate the limitations of this theory on its own terms and make a knowledge claim of some approximate truth (Reyna 2001). Using my own fieldwork, in addition to drawing on Martinez's analysis of New York gardens, I hope to demonstrate the limitations of this desert analogy.

Ultimately, I conclude that despite appeals to localism and totality on the part of my informants the farm-as-landscape is a materially open system, largely contingent on pulses and processes that exist at larger spatial and temporal scales. Through active engagement with and embeddedness within broader processes, City Leaf's small group of staff members and regular volunteers are able to produce and in some sense govern a half-acre urban space whose social texture is qualitatively distinct from that of its surroundings. They are able to produce a social world that is governed, if only contingently, not by relations of state coercion or commodity exchange, but by relations of trust, reciprocity, and productive consumption. I suggest that, far from managing *scarcity*, as the term food desert might connote – scarcities of food, social capital, or “community” – governance at City Leaf Farm consists of managing surplus – surpluses of social energy, volunteer labor, and grant funds. I demonstrate that, contrary to the theory of social entrepreneurship, management, and the labor that it necessitates, do not go away.

## On the Moral Economy of Issues

By the time I began my fieldwork, public attention had already spurred a significant body of work from researchers and intellectuals on urban farming, as well as a renewed interest in urban green space among policy circles. Central, it seems, to many of these works is the analogy of the food desert. Like research on redlining and housing development, early research on food deserts aimed to draw attention to the way class and racial inequalities have manifested themselves on the social landscape materially in terms of consumer-access. This research has allowed the US Department of Agriculture to categorize census tracts as food deserts according to their distance from grocery vendors as well as the income bracket of their constituents. Before proceeding, I should acknowledge that the following is in no way an attempt to discredit research in this vein. Rather, this section takes issue with what this term connotes, and the limitations these analogical connotations impose on the analyst's perception. What the term "food desert" has come to index by reference to a symbolically potent biome is *scarcity* – a scarcity of food, but also other less tangible resources, like community or social connectedness.

From the perspective of the desert analogy, urban agriculture is conceptualized as both the result of food desertification as well as its solution; collective cultivation is a way to produce not only food, but also community, political awareness, and nutritional understandings that are often perceived as scarce in less privileged, inner city areas. This has been made clear in popular media representations of community gardens, which are shown to grow not only vegetables but also friendships, environmental education, and neighborhood cohesion. Not a summer goes by without newspaper articles chronicling the legions of dirt-stained urbanites who descend upon their Edenic parcels to confront the city's innumerable social ills. It is important to note that the

potential value of a community food project, from the outset, is defined in terms of its relationship to the public sphere's moral economy of issues – that array of utilitarian scarcities that includes, but is not limited to, access to fresh food. Much of the scholarly discourse surrounding urban cultivars can be perceived as extending the desert analogy beyond purely caloric concerns. Nowhere is this clearer than among scholars who conceptualize agriculture projects in terms of their contribution towards social capital.

Drawing on Robert Putnam's theorization of civil society as comprised of "networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (1995, 2), these researchers have sought to demonstrate that community agriculture projects create social capital by building connections between friends, neighbors, members of different socio-demographic groups, and people across gradients of political power (Firth et al. 2011; Glover 2004; Kingsley and Townsend 2006). By analogy to economic capital, Putnam and his followers propose that investments in social capital through collective initiatives like gardening can yield benefits in democratic participation and collective action. Urban cultivars, by embodying both bonding and bridging forms of social capital, provide a public good that has, according to Putnam, become increasingly scarce in contemporary democratic society (Firth et al. 2011); they provide connectedness to the connection-scarce desert.

Colding and Barthel (2013) also conceptualize urban cultivars as resources, but of a different type. They classify community and allotment gardens, along with collectively-managed public parks, as "urban green commons," which contribute to social, ecological, and institutional diversity in urban environments. Using institutional economist Elinor Ostrom's theorization of common property systems (see Ostrom 2015), Colding and Barthel conceptualize urban cultivars as common pool resources, to which local communities hold diverse bundles of

rights, and which are managed by diverse, localized, institutional arrangements (2013, 159).

These urban green commons are hypothesized to then, through various cultural, biological, and political pathways, feedback into the resilience of the city as a whole. What underlies their analysis is the view that urban cultivars are valuable insofar as they provide a resource, whether this resource is food, social connectedness, or even, simply, urban green space. They are institutional arrangements, or systems of common property, insofar as they are able to manage resources by leveraging storages of social capital to address public issues.

The garden historian, Laura Lawson, recognizes this tendency to define gardens in instrumental terms as part of a historical relationship between urban planners and community gardening. She concludes that contemporary discourse surrounding urban agriculture is a continuation of a century-long approach to urban cultivars. She writes:

Wherever vacant or underutilized land mars the image of a healthy community, someone or some agency suggests building community gardens. And as in the past, the community garden is associated with multiple far-reaching benefits, including environmental restoration, community food security, economic development, public health, and cultural expression. Often the community garden is conceived as a first step, one that is relatively inexpensive compared to meeting larger community goals, such as building new housing, attracting employment, or addressing the legal issues of environmental injustices (2004, 169).

She argues that because garden-activists are periodically forced to justify the existence of their spaces as a means towards some sort of public ends, it has been difficult for gardens to persevere in the urban landscape beyond historical intermittency. When the instrumental value of an urban cultivar is displaced, or if another value is shown to supersede it, like, for example, the value of new housing construction, then its justification fades and the garden risks redevelopment.

Even the more politicized research on urban cultivars exhibits a similar pattern, and the critical geography journal *Antipode* has for several years hosted a particularly salient debate as to whether urban cultivars are sites of neoliberalization, or conversely, sites of resistance against

the increasing commodification of space. Some suggest that by whitening public spaces (Reynolds 2015), contributing to “ecogentrification” and neighborhood taming (Quastel 2009), devolving government management of public space onto community groups (Rosol 2012), or socializing gardeners with the logic of consumer choice (Pudup 2008), garden-activists have incidentally contributed to the process of neoliberalization. Other scholars have countered these arguments and demonstrated how gardeners can be said to resist neoliberalization by affording neighborhood residents a deeply rooted sense of “organic” or “DIY” citizenship (Eizenberg 2013; Crossan et al. 2016). These authors make an implicit argument for the value of these spaces based on the political contestation that they are shown to authorize, while their opponents make an argument for increased politicization and reflexivity about the role of gardens in broader structures of inequality.

Although this debate differs in its degree of politicization when compared with less critical academic writing, it shares a normative framing; “neoliberalizing” is equivalent to “doing bad” while resistance is equivalent to “doing good.” Gardening may fall on either side, or both (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014; McClintock 2014), but the research is entirely evaluative. The problem may be obesity, food security, neighborhood “decay,” the destruction of socio-biological diversity, or even political resolve, but there exists a general tendency to evaluate urban cultivars as a means towards some ends, regardless of how abstract, theorized, or politicized these ends may be. The potential *political* value of urban cultivars seems to be defined in terms of its satisfaction of some demand for opposition, whether to neoliberalism, capitalism, or other structural forces.

As Kato et al. (2014) recognize, the binary established by this debate, between the apolitical and the political, is likely irreconcilable. However, this literature has made one thing

strikingly clear: urban growing spaces have captivated the sociological imagination in their ability to “translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals” (Mills 2000). Gardens have become not just gardens, but also nodes in a broader array of public concerns and debates. Neoliberalism, food insecurity, and gentrification sprout betwixt the pole beans. This, I would suggest, is not necessarily a bad thing; however, in practice, this process of translating biography to history, at least from the perspective of the niche literature on urban cultivation, has been weighted to the desert – to perceived utilitarian scarcities in public good.

These approaches to urban cultivars, I argue, reflect an effort to fold urban agriculture into a discourse of social entrepreneurship as evidenced by a recent article featured on National Public Radio, which examines urban agriculture as an entrepreneurial effort to confront various social ills (Dimitri et al. 2016). The notion of *social* entrepreneurship, it is argued, is meant to demonstrate how urban agriculturalists’ idealism extends far beyond mere economic concerns through their engagement with what we might call a broader moral economy of issues. In a review article by Dacin et al., however, we can glimpse the economism that underlies the concept. “[T]he primary mission of the social entrepreneur,” they write, is “one of creating social value by providing solutions to social problems” (2011, 1205). Underlying the discourse of social entrepreneurship is a demand theory of social value – one that posits social value as created not through the work of anyone in particular but through the amelioration of social problems. Value comes from addressing issues, which are the manifestation of utilitarian scarcity. To complete the analogy, value comes from providing solutions to the solution-scarce desert.

In contrast to this approach, the following sections explore the ethnographic world of City Leaf Farm as a cultural and ecological moment that is not only constituted to fulfill a number of socially-defined needs, but also one that is actively brought into being. By recognizing my field site not as a static object of inquiry but as positive, practical activity, I seek to examine how the ethnographic moment at City Leaf Farm is emergent, as well as produced through my informants' interpretive and physical labor. Taking the cultural laborer as its starting point, I argue that practical activity, not social capital, "governs" the farm through productive engagement with the surpluses, not scarcities, of a broader city.

## City Leaf Farm

Danny and I are weeding a bed of lettuce underneath the peach trees. The mid-summer heat has killed off most of the spring crops on the farm, but this patch has remained sheltered by the shade. Danny is a former member of the Peace Corps and a well-respected volunteer. He has a quick wit and a healthy sense of irony, along with a perceptible sense of confidence about farm work that accompanied most seasoned volunteers. Like many of my informants, Danny seemed to view our interactions as an opportunity to philosophize about the structure and patterns of farm life. I, not being one to bottle up my own sociological musings, was always open to getting other people's "takes" on City Leaf and the broader neighborhood. We get into a conversation about how, just generally speaking, things are organized at the farm. Danny gestures out across the half-acre site to a group of volunteers, crouched down plucking weeds from the vegetable rows and chatting aimlessly with one another. "I was just talking to Johanna and saying how, when you think about this place and the way it's organized it's amazing that anything grows here," he says. "But food does grow. In fact, it grows really well."

It is hard to overemphasize the fertility of City Leaf Farm as a space. Peach trees poked their branches through the chain links in the farm's northern gate and over the course of the summer they became heavier and heavier with the weight of ripening fruit. As my fieldwork progressed, the canopy grew increasingly dense to the point of obscuring the farm from the view of the bordering street. The farm is nestled in the northern section of a neighborhood that we will call "Junipertown." Adjacent to the farm is a public park, which borders it on the east, while a public housing complex sits across the street to the north. To the south lies the neighborhood's

historic district, whose northern border stops just short of City Leaf, creeping up to encompass a pocket of row houses just beyond the farm's fence.

Junipertown is a quaint residential area and historically African-American community whose romantic architecture dates back to the late-nineteenth century, when it was constructed as one of Washington's first planned suburbs. Although the area is far too dense to be considered a suburb by modern standards, its large, romantic houses are unique to the city, and the neighborhood has, over the past twenty years, become an increasingly desirable place to live. Like many urban communities in the 1960s and 70s, Junipertown experienced a period of depressed real estate values, disinvestment, escalating drug violence, and social instability, often referred to unsatisfactorily as neighborhood "decay." It was during this time and the following decades that grocery chains closed down their branches in the area. More recently, the neighborhood and its surrounding area have experienced a wave of reinvestment and gentrification, as evidenced by the construction of a high-end grocery store several blocks from the farm. Nevertheless, high degrees of income inequality have persisted in the neighborhood, sustaining concerns for the food security and nutritional vulnerability of low-income residents, specifically those who live directly to the north of the farm in DC public housing.

Tucked between the public housing complex to the north and the gentrifying historic District to the south, the farm was originally established on the grounds of a former DC public elementary school. When it was announced in 2007 that the school would suddenly be closed, ostensibly due to low enrollment, the neighborhood's civic association invited the organization that became City Leaf Farm to begin cultivating the school's baseball field. As the farm staff often liked to tell tour groups, if you dig down anywhere on the farm more than a foot you can eventually find red clay – a subterranean testament to recesses gone by.

During my first day of fieldwork, the farm's executive organizer explained that the space occupies a liminal position with respect to the process of gentrification in Junipertown. To the south of the site is the rapidly gentrifying historic district, while to the north is one of Washington's earliest experiments in public housing – a New Deal-era mixture of apartments and townhomes. Although Junipertown has remained a majority African-American neighborhood despite dramatic increases in average income, she explained that some saw the farm and its primarily white participants as symbolic of the gentrification process on a city-wide level. As one resident of the public housing complex articulated, there is a common perception among residents that the city is transitioning from being the country's "Chocolate City" to becoming a "Latte Land;" increasingly whiter, younger professionals are moving to DC for jobs and settling in historically black communities. These changes and their racial dynamics have been the focus of several DC ethnographies, including Brett Williams's (1988) *Upscaling Downtown* and Sabiyha Prince's (2014) recent study of gentrification in Washington, which have cast light on the way shifting census data has become a lived experience for residents.

And indeed, I developed a sense of this transformation through my own fieldwork. My morning walks from the metro to the farm were accented with enough class and racial dynamics to make the sociological imagination din with observation, both in the built environment and among "the gentry" themselves. I would emerge from the metro station to a newly opened bakery and, after stopping in for a cup of coffee, I would walk down Main Street past all the shops. The stores seemed to alternate between beauty salons and carry-out shops on the one hand, replete with their very own street corner societies (Liebow 1967), and newly opened bars and restaurants on the other, serving craft beers labeled with clever, ironic names. I would then cross the boundary into Junipertown, where romantic-era houses stood like tall trees on both

sides of the street. There were almost always renovations occurring on the houses as I would walk by, and over the course of the summer I watched as peeling bricks gave way to newly painted colors. As I walked north into the neighborhood, the revitalized image of the preceding block would hit a point of inflection; the architecture would shift from romantic to proto-modernist and the restored picture of the preceding rowhouses would be interrupted by an aging apartment complex, whose front door hung off its hinges for the entire growing season.

In some sense, Danny was right; after two months of fieldwork at City leaf, I walked through the front gate each day somewhat unsure as to who I might encounter on the other side of the canopy and what they might be doing – unsure as to whether I would turn the corner to find a neighborhood cooking class, a thirty-person volunteer group from the Nature Conservatory, or a group of children trying to break into the refrigerator while no one was looking. But I would be entirely certain that collard greens, pole beans, peach trees, sweet potato vines, and kale leaves among others, will still be photosynthesizing, somewhere in the fray.

How does food come to grow in the city? From an institutional perspective, the answer is quite simple. Without bothering with any ethnographic niceties, City Leaf Farm could easily be viewed as a set of rules, regulations, norms, and organizational structures put in place for the purpose of governing and maintaining a common resource: a food-producing urban green space. City Leaf is a non-profit 501c(3) and institutes many of its goals through rules, programming, and systems of regulation. As an organization it has taken the form of what one might expect from a small non-profit in Washington, D.C. and faces a number of the same challenges – paying bills, organizing staff, ordering supplies, eliciting donations, and keeping up with grant applications. The organization is run by a board of directors, comprised of local community members and leaders in the DC sustainable food movement, that directs funding and votes on

major organizational changes. However, most of the day to day farm work is carried out by a small staff who organize programming, plan events, and balance the budget, in addition to coordinating volunteers and growing food at the farm itself.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of fieldwork, the staff included an executive director, a farm manager, an office coordinator, a youth coordinator, three summer internship coordinators, as well as an Americorps vista, who assisted with both administrative and practical responsibilities. Many of the administrative duties were conducted at a small office in northeast DC, which was shared with several other DC non-profits and businesses. Every Wednesday during the growing season, the staff would meet at a picnic table underneath the farm's shade structure to discuss the coming week. This meeting would proceed in the manner that one might expect from a weekly staff meeting: evaluations, goal-setting, assessment of the previous week's successes and failures, and coordinated planning for the next one. These conversations typically centered around one of the City Leaf's major programs: its Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) network, its youth education curriculum, volunteer programming, and public workshops and events.

Each of these programs had its own set of rules, norms, and protocols, painstakingly organized by the staff. Volunteers were to sign a release waiver before participating at the farm and large groups were to coordinate ahead of time before volunteering. Food was to be distributed through a fifteen-family CSA program, dispensed in weekly shares to participants, as well as through a market stand and documented donations to local businesses. Children were expected to arrive on time to the farm's afterschool outdoor education program, and lesson plans

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<sup>1</sup> I should note that my interactions with this Board of Directors was practically non-existent. Although one board member, who lived directly adjacent to the farm, was a frequent presence and a valued informant, most were entirely behind the curtain of everyday life at the farm. Established community members who led busy lives, they were a presence at fundraising events, and little more.

were meant to be organized in advance. But careful planning was often easier said than done; City Leaf Farm is located on public land and there is nothing besides a three-foot-tall, largely symbolic, fence to keep anybody or anything from coming in or out. Children from the neighboring apartments seemed to constantly occupy the playground that borders the farm during afternoons, and, much to the chagrin of staff and more regular volunteers, City Leaf often served as an extension of this playground. Volunteer groups would cancel last minute, while others would show up at the gates unannounced. Food would leave the farm through the CSA, but often in more informal, sometimes unsanctioned, ways too. Bureaucracy's hard lines tended to soften in the face of everyday cycles of produce and play, and staff dedicated surprisingly little time towards directly cultivating food. Instead they dedicated themselves almost entirely to managing these various uncertainties and perturbations. As Katelyn, the former farm manager put it, "I think most of what I do here is managing people – less actual labor." Or perhaps more telling: "Most of my job is just picking up shit."

Although farm life may have appeared chaotic and unpredictable under Danny's philosophic gaze, in reality it was simply embedded in a larger landscape. Production depended on forces and systems beyond the control of farm staff – ones that existed at larger scales of inquiry than the anthropologist and informant's shared ethnographic moment. Far from a rule-based institution governing a bounded, local resource, social and ecological texture at City Leaf Farm form what one might call a *materially open system*; its patterns of everyday work are best understood as a sort of controlled contingency – a system for attracting, limiting, and organizing the pulses of materials, people, and social groups that might enter or leave the farm's gate on a given day. Some of these materials were, quite bluntly, trash, and it is perhaps useful to begin

with the compost pile, which, as one staff member exclaimed to a group of school children, turns “garbage in to dirt.”

### *Growing Food*

Derrick stakes his pitchfork into the ground and bends down into the compost heap. He comes back up with an apple and shoots me a grin. “Feel this,” he says. He places the apple in my hands and I can feel its heat radiating through my gloves. I give it a little squeeze and it squishes like a tomato. “I thought it was a plum,” Derrick says with a laugh. He snatches back the rotting apple, splits it open with his hands, and raises an eyebrow before dropping it back into the heap. “It smells like baby diarrhea,” yells Alyssa from across the pile, interrupting our moment of intrigue. Derrick and I exchange a quick smile.

Churning the compost pile was one of my many responsibilities as a volunteer-observer at City Leaf and it was, or so I like to tell myself, one of the more important of City Leaf Farm’s day-to-day operations, despite its marginal position within the farm’s spatial layout; the compost piles were located in the northeast corner of the farm, next to the porta-john. Neighborhood residents, volunteers, and other frequent farm-goers would deposit their compost materials in trash cans just outside the gates of the farm, which often consisted of an assorted mixture of vegetable peels, coffee grounds, and rotten fruit. These materials, transported across oceans and highways through the (un)usual metabolic pathways of industrial agriculture and global commodity exchange, would then be periodically incorporated into the farm through a series of three compost piles to become the fuel of City Leaf’s localized production system. Besides a small batch of commercial compost that was trucked in at the beginning of the season, these piles supplied all of the fertilizer that the farm used for plant production.

Deposited materials were layered in the first pile, along with donated horse manure, cardboard, and farm waste, and then surrounded with straw. Once decomposition began to heat the pile, volunteers would dismantle and turn it, moving it to an adjacent space towards the south end of the farm. Turning the pile was crucial to replenish oxygen, otherwise the local environment becomes increasingly anaerobic, reducing the total rate of microbial respiration and slowing decomposition. This process of turning the pile would be repeated one more time before the compost was said to have finished curing, at which point it was hand-sifted and incorporated into the soil.

Most tasks at the farm, like composting, required a fairly limited set of skills beyond pitchforking and shoveling. This fact was reflected in the ethos with which many volunteers regarded their work. Back at the compost pile, Kara and Alyssa shared the following exchange:

A: It's not rocket science.

K: It's natural science.

A: The most natural science.

Unlike seemingly “hard” scientific processes, one could feel his or her way through the composting process. You knew it was right when it smelled right – when the compost “smelled like earth” or looked “really aesthetically pleasing.”

This somewhat cavalier attitude was characteristic of a broader philosophy of organic engagement, shared by many volunteers and staff members at the farm, which leaned on a certain vagueness in knowledge that can sometimes lead to contradiction. The compost needs more green matter, someone would tell me one day. The next day someone would tell me it needed more cardboard, or brown matter. “It's more of an art than a science,” explained one compost expert who had been contracted by the farm. “The material wants to decompose.” According to this philosophy, growing food is not rocket science, but is best learned through

experimentation; engagement was an ends in itself.

Like composting, garden beds were built through an equally labor intensive process in which volunteers hoe soil up into a peak and then flattened it with the back of a rake in order to form a proper raised bed. Beds were then seeded or planted with transplants, and then covered with a thin, translucent fabric to keep the soil hydrated and prevent birds from eating the seeds. These beds were then periodically weeded throughout the growing period. Although weeds were rarely allowed to entirely overtake a bed, they were a consistent presence that had to be met with discerning fingers that could distinguish between the good plants and the “bad” ones. Plants had to be cared for, trellised, protected from pests, and then harvested at the appropriate times.

As with many alternative agriculture initiatives, the philosophy of organic engagement required that no pesticides or herbicides be used at the farm. Methods of pest control and fertilization were limited to extremely labor intensive methods such as individually spraying each collard plant with soapy water, hand-weeding beds, or gently pouring fish emulsion on the roots of pepper seedlings. As the farm’s Americorps vista liked to explain, these methods of control were more about limitation than elimination, and drew on the agro-ecological notion of integrative pest management. The philosophy of organic engagement insured that there was never a shortage of simple, relatively unskilled tasks to be completed by the high number of volunteer laborers that cycled through the farm throughout the week. If the farm manager happened to be at a loss for what to assign volunteers to do, there was always weeding; these opportunistic organisms, by fixing themselves to the farm’s nutrient cycle, provided a continuous buffer of useful, but not entirely indispensable, labor to be completed at any time.

Although the process of growing food did require a large amount of labor for such a small space, it was not always in an entirely necessary way. By this, I mean that work was often

done for the sake of work itself, and not always in the name of producing more food per square foot. Tasks, usually written on a white board at the beginning of the day, could always be compressed or expanded to accommodate the number of volunteers present on the farm at a given time and their skill levels. From the perspective of maximizing produce yields per labor unit, this was perhaps a fairly inefficient strategy of food production in the short term. Derrick once told me within earshot of Katelyn, the farm manager, that she would probably have to stay a couple hours late at the farm replanting all the things volunteers planted in the wrong place. She laughed and agreed that she probably would.

In fact, other more production-focused urban farmers in D.C. expressed that they do not typically open their doors to unskilled volunteers. “I would rather do the work as a team than manage twenty volunteers to do the work that I could have done on my own while listening to a podcast,” said one such farmer. However, this perspective assumes that the main goal of the farm was food production through volunteerism, and fails to examine the ways volunteering and its sociality could be an end in itself – how every act of producing food at the farm was also an act of consuming the farm as a social space.

An impressive network of volunteers cycled through the farm during the week, both individually and as groups. City Leaf rarely lacked for helpers in a general sense, although there were times when the available volunteers were too few, or sometimes too many, to complete a given task; however, the burden of the staff was always to manage these pulses in order to complete the necessary work. Volunteers, were primarily young, white, and from neighborhoods outside of Junipertown, although the exceptions in this case are just as important as the rule; but in a general sense, food production was contingent on broader population flows that existed beyond the neighborhood level, as a young professional-managerial class continues to settle in

Washington, seeking employment with the federal government, lobbying firms, NGOs, and the expanding non-profit sector. Although volunteers came to the farm for a variety of motivations we can perhaps outline some general trends in their attitudes and patterns of work.

Drop-in volunteers almost always came during open hours, for they had either read about the farm in the paper or found out about it online. They usually came by just to "check things out." They had a prior interest in food justice politics, or sustainability. Ryan, a worker at a local auto shop, came to volunteer because of his experience organizing with Occupy DC. Many of these drop-ins would only come and volunteer once or twice, although many, like Ryan, kept up a regular volunteering schedule that fit with their workweek as well as their other commitments. Despite the fact that labor was unpaid, regular volunteers could generally be depended on to show up on specific days.

Volunteers who came to the farm more than once quickly move to an elevated status, and were assigned larger, more important roles. For instance, I was assigned the responsibility of running the farm's market stand and supervising the turning of the compost pile, just by virtue of my consistent presence. On my first Saturday at the farm, staff members put me in charge of a fairly sizable volunteer group. I mentioned how odd this was to Derrick since, after all, I'd been at the farm for less than a week, to which he responded, "Yeah watch out man. You show up a couple times and they'll start putting you in charge of stuff." After experiencing several Saturdays at the farm, I quickly came to realize that work was oftentimes less about maximizing food production than managing spikes in volunteer participation by drawing on volunteers with differing levels of experience.

Many volunteers adopted an attitude of intense play, curiosity, and experimentation; however, it would be overly simplistic to see the farm as simply a revolt against the workplace or

an embodiment of the work/leisure dichotomy. In fact, some volunteers, especially those who worked with the youth on the farm or enrolled in the regular volunteering program saw their participation as a way to acquire a skill set. Sometimes participation was even discussed as a way to boost competitiveness in the job market – as a great thing to put on one's resume. One of the staff members who coordinated frequently with volunteers expressed her enthusiasm and appreciation of those who offered their time. She said:

Volunteers are the most amazing people, because they are people who are using their free time to go and help something happen or whatever. And they came from all these different backgrounds and have all these different careers and professions... You could like pay to go to grad school, or you could volunteer for a program, become some sort of expert on something, and not pay for it at all.

However, these skills were clearly more managerial than horticultural. As Kara put it, “I haven’t learned very much about farming, but I still really really love it.”

For volunteers, coming to the farm was an escape from jobs, graduate school, and other commitments. In certain symbolic ways farm work inverted the norms of work life. It allowed white-collar workers to wear blue-collar dirt stains on their jeans, and, to use the anthropological phrase, farming was in this sense a ritual defilement (Douglas 2003). Once, a volunteer refused to wear gloves while moving slimy bunches of rotting straw. I asked her why she would try to do such a thing without gloves on, to which she responded, “I work all day in an office. When I come to the farm, I’m gonna play in the dirt!” Many others rejoiced in their communion with what they perceived to be a very proximate, obvious, labor process, which contrasted with their day jobs. “I can see my labor, right there,” said one volunteer, pointing to a bucket of recently uprooted weeds.

First time volunteers would often return a couple times, but only some would stay on with the farm for extended intervals. As Danny explained to me underneath the peach trees, a lot

of times volunteers start off really excited to work on the farm, especially if they are new to DC. But then they start to have other stuff going on and they make other commitments and their dedication sort of fades. He said that there always seemed to be a dedicated group of volunteers that take a genuine interest. Many of the volunteers who I came to know during the summer of 2014 have moved on to new cities or new life paths, and now when I return to the farm I find a new set of faces – a new set of experts who produce and reproduce the farm's constantly emergent social landscape.

In some sense work at City Leaf was indeed just that: work. Things were produced and sweat was certainly drawn from our pores, but the sociality of the situation differed greatly from what you would expect in a factory or a large scale farm. Volunteering usually peaked on Saturday morning in terms of both population and intensity, but the attitude toward work was in no way reluctant. There was no observable element of drudgery, except perhaps among staff members. Volunteers embodied the ethos of what could best be likened to a college mixer, or a professional networking event. Social relations were hyper-intensive and dilated as people would get to know each other while weeding a bed in thirty minutes or less, standing up and moving on to the next task only to find a new hoeing partner who might be invited out to happy hour after the day's end. Social life for a brief instant became outward-facing and, most of all, entrepreneurial; it was cast wide, but only occasionally deep. To say that this type of interaction was pure social indulgence would be a misrepresentation. It was exhausting. Although I would usually be somewhere in the fray, cross-pollinating and flitting between the different conversations and social coagulations that occurred simultaneously on the farm, there were days when I would have to bow out of the fray for a little bit. I would go, sit, and weed a bed under the peach trees so that I could get away from the conversations of these inexhaustible socialites.

In terms of the distribution of food, volunteers rarely consumed the fruits of their own labor; rather, produce took a number of local pathways. It was sometimes donated or sold to local businesses, while other times harvests were used in various planned events, such as cooking lessons and neighborhood luncheons. During the summer, the farm instituted a new program to sell produce at a designated time once a week through a market stand; but, the primary institutional arrangement for distributing food was the Community Supported Agriculture network. Common among many alternative agriculture initiatives, these distribution systems are comprised of shareholders who, by “buying in” at the beginning of the season, are insured a harvest of produce on a regular basis. City Leaf’s CSA had a little over a dozen members, who were entitled to a box of produce every week. The majority of these shares were reserved for low-income qualifying residents of the neighborhood, who could either pay a reduced price for the share, or provide two hours of work at the farm and receive the share in exchange for their time.

Just as the quantity of volunteers seemed to far exceed the amount of physical labor required to grow food, the amount of food produced far exceeded the amount required by the CSA, as evidenced by less formal pathways of food distribution. Over the course of the summer, food was often simply given to those neighborhood residents who asked for it. After all, as the staff members clearly recognized, anyone could walk into the farm and pick whatever they wanted at night, or when no one else was there. The general attitude was that at least someone was eating the food, which otherwise might go to waste. Donations were a way to try to involve neighborhood residents who might have otherwise felt alienated from the farm. Distributing food, therefore, much like growing food, was a matter of bringing various social relations into being, rather than satisfying some abstract demand for healthy food or social capital. The

production and consumption of food were intimately tied up in the project of creating and insuring the reproduction of social space.

Food, at City Leaf Farm, was not a scarce resource, but was in fact quite bountiful. This is not to say that food was not a valued product, but that it was valued in its producing, not in its satisfaction of some abstract demand. The system of governance, or simply the system of organization, at City Leaf, in terms of both its informal and formal mechanisms, did not arise through institutional control over a common-pool resource – whether food or urban green space. Instead, it emerged from the organization of productive social and physical labor, in the case of the former, and the need to report the various social products of this labor *a posteriori* to grant-funders, government agencies, and other guarantors of ethnographic space, in the case of the latter; but both forms of governance were at work. Governance at City Leaf Farm was not about managing scarcity, but surplus – surpluses of labor, nutrients, and food. If we were to reduce the complex ecology of the farm to a single “limiting factor,” it would not be nutritional intake or social capital, but an organizational scarcity: the limiting factor of production at City Leaf Farm was the labor of management itself.

From an anthropological perspective, growing food at City Leaf bears all the markers of ritual activity. It was periodic and offset from everyday city life, relative job hierarchies were dissolved among participants, and appeals to ecological and sociological totalities were frequent, as evidenced by the philosophy of organic engagement and the dedication to building a sense of “community.” In work, there was a general emphasis on instruction rather than technical skills, and volunteers tended to maintain a disregard for personal appearance, as well as an unselfish desire to help with almost any task (Turner 1969, 366). However, for staff and more regular volunteers, this encompassing sense of *communitas* rung hollow insofar as it disguised the work

that was a condition of producing the farm's social and ecological landscape. On a return visit during the fall, the most recent farm manager, explained. "People come and say things like, 'I love your space!' But they don't realize how much goes into all of this."

For staff members, volunteer labor was mainly a blessing, but sometimes a curse. I was always astounded and intimidated by the virtuosity and skill with which my informants and friends would work to organize the seemingly chaotic cycles of urban life. Staff devoted a large amount of time to accommodating volunteer groups, who were typically scheduled ahead of time and were not dependent on the farm's open hours. After all, these groups were large and provided a lot of labor, as well as the potential surpluses reaped from networking with other organizations. If accommodations could be made for professional groups, meet-up networks, or alumni associations that wanted to come volunteer at the farm, they often were. However, if a volunteer group were to suddenly cancel, then all the organizational labor that went in to a single volunteer day would be lost. As multiple staff members expressed to me, the majority of the job was really about managing flows of people and resources.

Equally significant was the amount of labor dedicated to internally monitoring and reporting the organization's programming outcomes. Produce had to be weighed before it was donated or sold and volunteer hours were tallied up at the end of each season. These metrics were used to report to potential grant-funders and board members on the outcomes of farm programming. An incredible amount of work consisted of institutional self-monitoring and City Leaf's staff recognized the need to sustain a constant flow of grant-funding, which required an opposite and greater flow of grant-applications. A large amount of time was also dedicated to documenting, managing, and photographing events for social media outreach, and on several occasions I was called upon to video and photograph various farm events.

To suggest that this type of work is inherently contrived ignores the reality of non-profit organizations; they are largely dependent on their ability to attract financial resources from governmental and non-governmental funders. Eliciting funds and support was likely the most indispensable aspect of everyday work. As one Board of Directors member pointed out during a visit, it is incredibly important for the organization to keep interest and participation in the farm high so that the land doesn't end up being slated for redevelopment. In this sense, one could comfortably assert that, at City Leaf, a degree of enterprise, self-evaluation, and reflexivity about the farm as an organization was a condition of ethnographic production in terms of its actual social content as a landscape. This is a point to which we will return.

### *Creating Community*

Anticipation begins to climb as the afterschool program volunteers trickle into the farm. One bikes in. One takes the metro. The third is still dressed in work cloths. They are all young women in their mid-twenties who I've come to recognize over the past month. They stand with their arms by their side, staring out across the bean trellises and pepper rows at the group of children playing on the neighborhood's jungle gym. Today, the kids have managed to run a water hose across the park to create a slip and slide out of DC Parks and Rec's less fluvial provisions. A volunteer checks her iPhone screen as it blinks to four thirty. She hesitantly walks over to the edge of the shade structure and rings the bell, marking the start of the afterschool program.

Three children turn to walk through the gate and onto the farm. The volunteers immediately start working with them to start the day's lesson and cook the beets that I picked for them that morning. They are well-behaved and curious, which brings us all great relief, but we

know from experience that three is plenty to offset the group's center of gravity. Within thirty minutes six other children have abandoned the slip and slide and clambered over the fence. Things turn a bit chaotic from here. Children fight over tasks and chopping privileges. One boy dumps an entire shaker of salt into the beets. Two girls locate the farm's water hose and start ambushing the volunteers. I end up having to escort a couple of the rowdier children off the farm, but they sneak back on. The afternoon reaches its climax with a plastic fork fight between two boys, as I struggle to wrench the implements out of their hands.

Admittedly, this ethnographic portrait is a collage, pieced together from multiple pages of field notes, but it adequately depicts a typical weekday afternoon at the farm. If Saturdays and Sundays were dominated by volunteer groups, convivially getting to know each other through shared cultivation, weekdays were when the children fully asserted their presence, and the public character of the weekend faded into a sense of neighborhood domesticity. On weekends, I could easily spend hours observing the social interactions contained within the farm's gate, but as the week moved on and the volunteer presence lowered in density, my perception would broaden; I would spend lazy afternoons weeding with perhaps one or two regular volunteers and looking out beyond the vegetable rows to observe the farm's surrounding landscape.

The farm occupied a fairly wide open, visible area of the city and I could sit from my usual lunch spot on top of a picnic bench and observe the entire corner of the neighborhood – the public housing residents chatting over lunch in the apartment courtyard, the twenty-something young professionals walking their dogs in the park, the volunteer group from a Washington real estate company churning the compost pile, and the teens hanging out on the corner. Despite their physical closeness, these groups remained fairly segregated from one another, obviating the common belief that spatial proximity necessitates direct social interaction.

The neighborhood kids, mostly elementary and middle school aged children from the public housing complex, were the only social group that moved fluidly between these spaces. They were, to some degree, a mediating force, drifting between the park, the courtyard, and the farm. Over the course of the season the kids became the subject of innumerable social dramas. Neighborhood residents expressed frustration when children were caught picking unripe vegetables out of allotment plots, just as farm staff members were equally distraught to find children breaking into the farm's outdoor refrigerator. Throughout the season, farm staff and volunteers found themselves the victims of numerous incidents of petty theft and vandalism – an iPhone theft, the mysterious destruction of the farm's new produce scale, and the demise of our "little free library." Through partnership with another organization, the farm worked to build a small, house-looking structure outside the gate to serve neighborhood free library, where residents could share and borrow books with one another. One day a staff member came to work to find the door torn off, and pages of *Good Night Moon* strewn about the park's playground. As one staff member explained, "At City Leaf, we don't have pests. We have kids." Despite these frustrations, staff and volunteers were almost always quick to forgive the children, or perhaps did not feel up to the task of chastising them. "Who am I to come into their community and tell them what to do?" shrugged one volunteer.

At one level, the neighborhood kids were a validation of the philanthropic principles that motivated farm work. Staff and regular volunteers were quick during interviews to recount stories of a child's eyes flashing with amazement, having discovered how potatoes grow, or how to make a kale salad. Without the children, the regular volunteer could quite easily go through an entire work day, socializing with other volunteers and contributing their work to an abstract community, without actually speaking with any residents of the neighborhood. The children's

presence and these moments of pedagogy were invaluable to volunteers who craved this proximity of interaction and the chance to “show people where their food comes from.” The children’s involvement, through the afterschool program and otherwise, authenticated the altruistic ideals that motivated volunteers and staff, and neighborhood kids were often made the subject of local newspaper articles, as well as City Leaf’s own blog posts and self-marketing.

On another level, the children complicated staff members and volunteers’ aspirations to fulfill what the garden-sociologist Miranda Martinez aptly dubbed a standard of “perpetual harmony” – a standard that holds controversies or disagreements within a space as material that could potentially be used to discredit its ability to create community, insofar as this community constituted a *public benefit*. In Martinez’s ethnographic study of Puerto Rican gardens in New York City’s Lower East Side, this standard was frequently invoked in community board hearings, where gardens organizers were required to justify the public benefits of their spaces in order to prevent their redevelopment as housing. In Martinez’s account, such a standard motivated garden organizers to search for “easily identifiable signs that a garden was working its civic magic” (2010, 91). As we will see, these signs became instrumental in development disputes.

At City Leaf, smiling children, attentive and inquisitive, were one such sign of perpetual harmony, and if they occasionally waxed devious or became a source of conflict, this could be managed for the sake of creating community in the everyday. But when community was on display as a public benefit, as when, for example, a tour group came to the farm, a group of rowdy children throwing unripe pears at one another was much less welcome. This was a continuous source of tension in the neighborhood. As local residents congregated in the public housing courtyard, the neighborhood’s outdoor spaces were transformed into the domestic realm

of a broader city and children played in the park, the farm, and the streets. However, from the perspective of a farm staffer, locked by circumstance and class into a semi-public frame of mind, domestic quarrels and neighborhood dramas could easily become matter out of place as community-as-praxis collided with community-as-value and lived experience became representation.

Fulfilling the standard of perpetual harmony was further complicated by racial and class tensions, which were aggravated by larger transformations in Junipertown and DC more broadly. Gentrification was a palpable feeling in the city, and most volunteers, visitors, and residents were acutely aware of these changes in some capacity or another. The anxieties and theorizations that they provoked frequently made their way into everyday farm talk. Sometimes this was done with a dry sense of irony. One day, a volunteer was chatting with a CSA shareholder; he was an outsider to Junipertown, but he was curious about changes in the neighborhood over the past several years. “Well that’s sort of the trend isn’t it?” he remarked with his arms crossed. “You build one of these urban farms and the neighborhood gets better so the rents go up. Eventually the value on the land gets so high that they knock down the garden and build something else there.” His interlocutor, an artist and neighborhood resident, laughed. “Thank God for DC rent stabilization.”

In another instance, I was picking Swiss chard with Sarah, a new resident of the public housing complex and a shareholder in the farm’s CSA. I was excited to speak with Sarah because it was fairly rare that I had the opportunity to converse with adults from this part of the neighborhood, let alone those who actually participated directly in City Leaf’s programming. Despite the farm’s proximity to the public housing complex, these spaces were fairly segregated, and this was precisely our topic of conversation.

“The only time white people come through there,” said Sarah, referring to the housing complex’s courtyard, “is when police walk through. Either that or when a scared white lady runs through holding her purse.” She laughed. When I told her about how I’d been walking through the courtyard and trying to talk to more people about what they think of the farm and the changes in the neighborhood, she laughed harder. “They were probably thinking, ‘What’s that white boy doing here?’” Little did Sarah know it, but she had outlined one of my biggest ethnographic frustrations of the summer. Although I did befriend several residents of the public housing complex and work with many of their children through the farm’s youth programming, almost all of these interactions related, either directly or indirectly, to my position as a participant-observer and regular volunteer at the farm.

However, those interactions that I did share with neighborhood residents were informative. Some older residents from the historic district asserted that changes in the neighborhood had done more good than bad, stating that crime and gang violence had been reduced. “Things have changed a lot,” said Diane, an elderly allotment plot owner and long-time resident. “But mostly for the better.” This outlook differed greatly from that of Marcus, who, while standing in the public housing courtyard, made a point of defensively asserting to me that the complex is part of Junipertown as well, despite the boundaries that seem to be increasingly palpable between the north and south sections of the neighborhood.

Those who were embedded in everyday farm life seemed to take the heightened sense of racialization that accompanied the neighborhood’s gentrification personally. The former farm manager and I were sitting at a picnic table underneath City Leaf’s shade structure after what proved to be a fairly exhausting work day. Katelyn was frustrated. She had attended a meeting with the Junipertown Civic Association the night before as a representative for the farm and,

despite being a lifelong resident of the District, she was upset by what she described as the “nativism” that neighborhoods in DC had developed. She said that at the meeting the group went around in a circle, stating their names and how long each resident had lived in Junipertown. Katelyn said that it seemed like the sole purpose of this exercise was to prove who really belonged to the neighborhood. She worried that others might think that the farm was an intrusion. “This place sticks up like a big white thumb,” she solemnly conceded.

Volunteers and staff were often aware that the presence of an urban farm with a largely young, white clientele in a majority black neighborhood resonated quite deeply, and perhaps alarmingly, with the shifts taking place in the city. Many participants shared a moral anxiety over what effect their presence may be having on the community. This awareness was demonstrated when volunteers explained that they “really try to be conscious of not being a gentrifier.” Another even decried the farm’s community-building goals as “contrived,” stating with some strong words that the people who lived in the neighborhood already knew what an authentic community looked like. Some also suggested that the farm could only exist unproblematically if the charter for its existence came from within the community itself, and was not imposed from the outside. One food justice worker, whose organization partnered with the farm, expressed these anxieties in the form of a conundrum, which she suggested was shared by many food activists in the city: “How do we improve a neighborhood without destroying the community?”

Comments like these expressed a certain hesitancy that resonates with the philosophy of organic engagement discussed in the previous section. Community, like nature, is already there, *a priori*, and productive engagement with a community requires a degree of caution but also enterprise, just as engagement with the natural world requires some degree of epistemological

uncertainty as well as experimentation. However, when this practical philosophy was tied to a language of evaluation and public benefit, of “improving a neighborhood,” questions of authenticity emerged as a paradox – by trying to cultivate a community of perpetual harmony, do volunteers not risk undermining that community’s very authenticity?

However, the discourse surrounding gentrification and neighborhood authenticity at City Leaf should be recognized for what it is: discourse. Commentary on gentrification often came at my prompting during informal interviews, or sometimes during moments of sociological speculation, usually held at the margins of everyday farm life; contradictions and paradoxes were readily admitted by my informants. For instance, I once explained some of my philosophical ponderings to Brendan as we left the farm, with all the enthusiasm of an academic who feels he has discovered in his object of inquiry a crucial paradox – How can people at the farm say that they are creating community, when community is supposed to already exist, authentically? And if it is so important that the farm serve such a community, how can we claim to be creating it as well? I asked. Brendan laughed. “Maybe we were never really authentic to begin with,” he said with a shrug, as we parted ways to carry on with our lives.

An overemphasis on the informants’ conflicting theorizations of gentrification risks casting an actually existing phenomenon as merely a question of hegemony slipping into ideology – as if the “gentrification question” boils down to people’s unconscious or conscious *attitudes* about gentrification. Questions of exclusion and of boundaries seem to dominate contemporary politicized discussions, both inside academia and out. Work in this vein focuses on different groups – often ethnic, racial, and class-based – and examines the way these groups overlap, blur, rigidify, include, or, conversely, exclude one another. Organized agriculture projects, geographically bounded and frequently located in areas with a great degree of

socioeconomic diversity, are obvious candidates for such analysis, and Kristen Reynolds (2015) has recently employed this framing in order to demonstrate how gardens have become embroiled in structures of racialization and exclusion. However, I would suggest that an excessively cartographic view of social life, as composed of groups occupying various bounded “territories” carved from sociological space, risks casting social processes like racialization as a blanket that can be spread equally across a city’s landscapes to be met with variegated degrees of resistance and compliance.

Additionally, the perceptions of participants and their anxieties should not be viewed as separate from or uninfluenced by alternative food movements’ own autocritique (Guthman 2007). Most volunteers, especially when prompted, were very aware of the various “problematics” of their presence; however, this was typically not grounds for disengagement. Although there certainly was a tendency towards white participants at the farm, there were numerous exceptions to the rule, including members of the farm’s own staff. An analysis based solely on racial identity does not entirely fit with the situation at City Leaf Farm, and leaves many relations unexamined, including the racial and ethnic diversity expressed at the farm itself, as well as the class differences that existed within Junipertown’s own African-American population. To clarify, this does not mean that racial identity was insignificant to participants at City Leaf and residents of Junipertown as a whole (in fact, it was very significant, especially with regard to neighborhood’s ability to formulate a historical identity), but that racialization can only be fully understood in motion – as a process intimately tied up with other structuring structures of everyday life.

In terms of practice, what was significant at City Leaf was not just a perceived lack of interaction with residents of the community and the anxieties surrounding this seeming lack of

participation, but also the texture of those interactions that *did* occur. The social dramas of the neighborhood kids were one such interaction, but there were also others. Some residents came by the farm frequently, but did not usually participate in the farm's programming directly. They would come by to chat, or to ask if they could take home a couple peaches when they were in season. The staff, by virtue of working in the neighborhood everyday and working closely with the children, developed relationships with local residents. The farm manager became especially close with a number of neighborhood residents, including James, a public housing resident who would often stand outside the gate of the farm, waiting for the mailman to come by and striking up conversations with staff and volunteers who he came to recognize. Although James would sometimes come to the farm to chat, he never spent any time volunteering and only took food home on a couple occasions. He told me that he preferred food that would "stick to his ribs," as opposed to the leafy greens and veggies offered by the farm. When I asked him about why he never liked to do any farm work when he visited, he responded that he used to work long hours on a farm when he was growing up in North Carolina and joked that if he tried picking vegetables with me he might start having flashbacks.

Regardless of his lack of formal participation, James was still a valued member of the farm's community of practice, as were many other residents who stopped by to chat, either at the farm or the street corners. He would come by to warn staff members if their cars might be ticketed, or if he was worried a volunteer's bike might be stolen. In this sense, there was no scarcity of community interaction or social connection at City Leaf Farm. Local interactions occurred frequently, although they did not always take the form of direct participation in farm programming or adopt the entrepreneurial ethos expressed so often by farm volunteers. Local relationships were not as plentiful as those between volunteers, but they took on a different

texture; relations with the community could only be perceived as scarce if they were being measured in terms of *participation in a project* – if they were forced to be demonstrated as an outcome. The young professionals who volunteered with the farm, on the other hand, were well-prepared to practice this public form of community. This distinction was further illuminated when James attended one of the farm's lunches, which was dedicated to celebrating the successes of City Leaf's summer youth interns.

Although City Leaf hosted many community lunches over the course of the season, which were open to neighborhood residents and volunteers alike, this lunch was specifically dedicated to the summer youth program, which had involved a group of DC teens who worked on the farm as an educational enrichment. This program had involved a significant partnership with the DC Council's efforts to stimulate teen employment in the city, and the farm's staff were especially dedicated to its success, as well as the success of the event itself. City Leaf's open hours were suspended for the day, and the parents of all the youth interns were invited to the farm to share a locally prepared lunch and watch a presentation put on by the interns. The farm's staff had worked with the interns to rehearse their presentations beforehand, and when the time finally came to present, the interns worked hard to convey the knowledge and skills they had learned over the preceding weeks at City Leaf – composting techniques, healthy recipes, basic nutrition, and the practice of organic agriculture. Parents, some of whom were visiting the farm for the first time, smiled at the accomplishments of their children, while staff, proud of their interns, worked to photograph and videotape the event. It was quite clear that what was being presented, in some sense, was an *outcome* – a lived experience of a program participant being translated into an affirmation of its public value.

Having seen a group of people congregating near the picnic tables, James had walked over to the farm. He stood next to me near the edge of the shade structure and asked me about what type of food we were serving. I recognized that James was just being sociable and trying to harp on the conversational tropes we had established over the course of the season, which were almost entirely gastronomical in focus. But I had to talk with him quietly. One of the youth interns was in the middle of giving a speech on composting, and I was receiving glares from a couple of the staff members to quiet down; everyone else was watching the presentation in silent attention. James started watching the presentation as well, supportively nodding and “mhmm”ing along with the points being made by the intern. He leaned over again to ask me about what we were having for desert. Very aware of his food preferences, I was afraid to tell him that it was fruit salad, fearing that this might cause an outburst of laughter at a desert that was unlikely to stick to a single one of his ribs. I simply shrugged, and James moved along to ask a staff member who was videotaping the speech. Despite James asking twice, the staff member did not respond, visibly irritated at being interrupted. I decided to intervene, pulling him aside to inform him that we were indeed having fruit salad for desert. James scoffed, seemingly disappointed and frustrated at being ignored, and when I turned around again he had left the farm. I wrote the following in my field diary that evening:

I can't deny that there is community on the farm, and that oftentimes people like James are included in that community. But he is also excluded by virtue of the events we have at the farm, the type of behavior that is expected, and the types of food we serve... The garden embodies this double nature. We grow collards and peaches, but sometimes only to show that we do. We have low-income residents come to the farm, but we still oddly exclude them at times (August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014).

What this account demonstrates, I believe, is that a space does not gain its “publicness” or “privateness” simply by legislative dictate, but through the types of social relations practiced there, which change periodically and can sometimes articulate in conflicting ways. To James,

other local residents, and many of the neighborhood kids, the farm was a domestic space with respect to a broader city, where one could come to hang out, stage conflicts, and express the sort of deep, centripetal sociality historically practiced in many of Washington's neighborhoods (Liebow 1967). This was the type of sociality expressed by James when he visited the farm. However, to volunteers and staff members, the farm alternated between serving as either a community of practice, whose entrepreneurial openness made room for neighborhood domesticity, or as a space of acute publicness, in which visitation necessitated *participation* in farm programming.

Some garden scholars have investigated and observed this latter notion of community, as expressed in the language of public benefit and social capital (Firth et al. 2011; Glover 2004; Kingsley and Townsend 2006). Considering the types of evidence used to support their arguments, this focus seems to make sense; this is an outlook that seems incredibly well-suited to interviews, in which the informant is brought to the margins of everyday life and may therefore be more prone to reflect on their work in terms of its public value. For instance, during interviews staff and regular volunteers were always quick to reflect on how farming was contributing to the community, whether through promoting environmental values, growing fresh produce, or providing a safe neighborhood space. If analyzed only through interview-data, City Leaf could easily be portrayed as the sum of these potential values, and perhaps when the various problematicities of conducting fieldwork in a gentrifying neighborhood came up, the farm could be portrayed as a microcosm of contestation in a broader political sphere. However, Miranda Martinez's ethnographic account of gardening reveals this language for what it is: as a framing that occurs under specific conditions.

*Shifting Concrete*

In Martinez's case study of New York community gardens, it is the challenge of government-led gentrification that brings about a particular mode of representation, which also seems to periodically articulate with the everyday ethnographic reality of City Leaf Farm presented thus far. In the case of the Lower East Side's Puerto Rican gardens, this is a mode of representation that emerges when gardeners are forced to go before a neighborhood community board in order to defend their spaces from development by the Guliani administration. She writes about these board hearings:

Retranslating garden reality into persuasive performance statistics was absolutely necessary when gardeners were testifying before the community board in order to counter the tacit comparison—"would it be more valuable as housing?"—that was being made as each garden was considered. The comparison is not unreasonable given the shortage of available housing, but it is significant because it represents a shift in thinking from "use" to "exchange." The standard being enforced is a calculation of services rendered to the general public in exchange for the use of the land. That shift implies that gardeners are being forced by the requirements of the venue to adopt the city administration's construction of the issue, rather than bringing to bear their own understanding of the garden's value. The standard of public service reinforces the bureaucratically derived right to control the use of the land in the name of the public, and it can be used to deny special right to a moral claimant, in favor of a generally constructed, "value neutral" public use... The issue became not memory, or attachment, or community need, but how reliably and consistently the claimant supplied a public benefit, and whether that benefit outweighed the possibility of new housing (Martinez 2010, 87-88).

It is the threat of development that causes residents to translate community-as-practice to community-as-utility – a value that is shown to be either scarce or plentiful in a given project.

What I would suggest that we witness here, both in the case of the Puerto Rican gardens, as well as the everyday patterns of social life at City Leaf Farm, is a significant social threshold, or limin. Both in the community board meetings of the lower east side and the farm's lunch celebration, we can glimpse an articulation between the everyday practices of constructing and governing an urban landscape and an evaluative realm of programming, outcomes, and metrics

that, following Pierre Bourdieu, we could refer to as the bureaucratic field (Bourdieu et al. 1994). This is a field whose shadows I frequently saw cast across the farm's landscape, as staff and regular volunteers became periodically reflexive about not only their work to build a space, but the way this work might be held to demonstrate, or conversely question, the public value of the organization. These moments of publicness had little to do with the legal designation of the space as city land; instead, its publicness was enacted.

Although dangerous, perhaps, to reduce a given social phenomena to a dyadic opposition, it seems that City Leaf Farm existed in two parallel forms: as an institution of civil society, whose existence was reproduced through engagement with an administrative world of programming, budgeting, filing reports, and grant funding, and as an actual, food-producing landscape, whose existence was reproduced through productive engagement with everyday cycles of materials, volunteers, produce, and neighborhood life that entered and exited the farm on a given day. This tension is most fully embodied in the complementary opposition between farm manager and farm executive. The latter must navigate an impersonal bureaucratic world with enterprise and enthusiasm so that the former can manage the everyday local actions of a half-acre space with some degree of confidence and stability. In order for the project to exist, its exchange-value must be demonstrated to a number of governmental and funding agencies. Martinez's account illuminates directly what is hidden in my own fieldwork – this mode of representation is one that occurs on edge of existential threat.

It seems clear from Martinez's account, as well as my own historical research, that the city's ground does truly stir beneath our feet. I can only present a distorted image of this history for fear of compromising the confidentiality of my informants; however, what seems relevant to ethnographic analysis is that the existence of a space like City Leaf Farm is in no way

guaranteed. Over the course of the past century and a half the immediate landscape surrounding City Leaf has witnessed numerous transformations involving both local and national actors and processes. Junipertown was originally developed in the late nineteenth century through two divergent pathways. The area south of the farm was constructed as one of the city's first streetcar suburbs, planned and built by wealthy real estate speculators who hoped to construct an enclave apart from the city for upper to middle class professionals. The area to the north, including the farm itself was constructed as tenements, which helped house the large influx of African-American freedmen and migrants who moved to Washington after the Civil War. It was the area to the north that was almost entirely redeveloped as public housing during the early phases of the New Deal, while it was the area to the south that became a beacon for DC's black middle class during the early twentieth century, only to gentrify rapidly during the beginning of the twenty-first.

Even a glanced examination of Junipertown's deeper history allows us to understand that urban landscapes are socially and materially open systems, characterized by regional, national, and global flows of people, capital, and resources. Within this context, in which property relations are both a means of capital accumulation and a mode of resistance against it, the redevelopment of City Leaf Farm to make way for some new development would not seem out of the ordinary. Here, the comments of the Board member presented in an earlier section, which suggested that those involved in the farm's organization were indeed aware of the risk of redevelopment, can be reflected on in a different light; insuring the farm's permanence as a space necessarily involved translating the space as practiced into the outcomes of the space as an organization.

Although it is difficult to speculate about the causes of gentrification without venturing into the realm of historical or political economic analysis – a realm where the ethnographer should perhaps venture with some caution and respect for other disciplines, as well as the confidentiality of her or his informants – it is equally dangerous to simply pluck gentrification from the realm of political economy and use the term freely in ethnographic writing. Sensitivity to scale is of the utmost importance; to suggest that urban gardens and their participants constitute a “leading edge,” or microcosm, of gentrification, neoliberalization, or some other broad-scale social process clearly conflates multiple scales of analysis. An excessive focus on the farm’s positionality “within” a social process obliterates its actual spatiality – it is reduced to a case study of a thing (e.g. an organized agriculture project), as opposed to a moment in a historically produced landscape.

Nonetheless, it would be a great mistake to examine a project like City Leaf Farm without understanding how everyday life and political action is limited – not determined, but limited – by property relations as well as by its organizers need to assert its public value to potential funders. It is at this point that we can refocus our sketch of City Leaf Farm in the rearview mirror and ask it a question. All of the concerns with authenticity, essentialization, representation, identity, and the symbolic ownership of space – concerns that I have passed by without entering – reflect back with their variegated and multi-vocal answers. What does it mean to try to create community, and for that matter a social movement, in a society where staking out your four lines in the dirt and convincing other people to respect them is a condition of ethnographic production? Where demonstrating the value of one’s work *as if it were* a commodity is a precondition for exercising one’s social and physical labor?

The significance of the *authenticity* of this value only emerges after the evaluative posturing – only when one tries to “improve a neighborhood” can one ask if these improvements are organic, *bona fide*, or truly stem from “within the community.” We see here that the ideal of authentic community shadows an alternative world to life on the market, in which all the things weeded out from exchange-value – relationships, natural processes, and even the interpretive and physical labor necessary to reproduce a given social milieu – are composted together and made the governing principle of social life. It becomes difficult to even think in terms of anything beyond the categories of either public goods or private commodities. Oddly, the philanthropic laborer finds her or himself alienated from their labor on both sides. We can find nothing of ourselves in the decontextualized abstraction of a value, yet we must always stand outside authenticity, seeking but never entering for risk of defiling it.

## Harvesting Yields

Perhaps, at this point, I may be permitted to return to the public hearing described at the beginning of this investigation. Katelyn has already presented her testimony and sat back down in the pews, visibly relieved. Gail Taylor, a DC farmer who works in northeast, is preparing to submit her testimony to the committee. She is sitting across from Councilman David Grosso, a co-sponsor of the bill, and the mood is cheerful. Ms. Taylor worked very closely with Councilman Grosso when drafting this legislation, but, after she finishes describing her farm and her support for the legislation, the councilman proceeds to ask her a really tough question.

“What is kind of the definition for you guys of what a successful farm is?” he asks. “How much money do you have to make? Where does the food have to go?”

“I think that’s kind of a hard question to ask,” says Gail. “I mean everybody knows I keep beating the drum of productive farm means that I’m growing a lot of vegetables, that I’m making enough money to pay myself and my crew a living wage, that there’s something tangible.... And yet, you know, every time at the farm there’s kind of this body and soul healing that happens that’s kind of intangible and surprises me.” She tells a story of a tender moment she had with a woman who lives in the neighborhood where her farm is located. “To me being a farmer and being successful in the city means that we’re touching people’s lives and healing their bodies and souls,” she says.

Councilman Grosso seems to agree, and shares his own story about the farm he grew up on in Loudon County. “To embrace urban farming is gonna take these other aspects that you’re talking about,” he says. “It’s not just about the bottom dollar, although that’s very important. It has to have more to it that makes it an integral part of the community.”

Gail smiles and responds. “Yeah and I don’t know how to write a report that says that.”

Grosso laughs and says, “Well you’re gonna have to figure it out.”

If we think back to the space that I have tried to describe, it is hard to imagine that very much of its vibrancy and ethnographic reality would be captured by such a report. Statements that promote the value of urban agriculture seem to leave out the hours spent chatting with neighborhood residents, chasing down kids with water hoses, or joking about the smell of the compost pile. Most importantly it leaves out the labor that is required to produce and negotiate such a world, which is perhaps part of what Gail Taylor glimpses at the bottom of the well, when she tells the story of her conversation with a local DC resident – the part that is not just the “bottom dollar,” but the one that heals our bodies and souls.

If we were to contrast this hearing with the one presented by Miranda Martinez, there is a critical distinction; these urban cultivators are not being put on trial. Unlike the Gulianni administrations ruthless initiative to buy up and develop garden plots, the council is not challenging the existence of their spaces. These advocates stand before a public trial not to defend their work, but because they chose to. Katelyn was not even permitted to testify on behalf of the farm, because the bill did not affect nonprofits. She was representing only herself – a concerned citizen. However, what manifests in the council chamber is a marketplace of sorts, but one in which the philanthropic laborer must barter not simply their value, but its derivative – their ability to accrue public benefit over time.

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate the limitations of the concept of social entrepreneurship in conceptualizing urban cultivars as spaces with ethnographic content. I have also tried, along the way, to express the limitations of research that attempts to evaluate the political potential of urban cultivars in terms of its resistance or compliance to neoliberal

restructuring. I do not wish to assert that scholars functioning under this framework have not contributed valuable work; however, when taken as a whole this sampling seems to illustrate a trend: contemporary politicized analysis seems to be less focused on analyzing the systems of resource distribution, prestige, and power that permeate the field site, but more about what the academic can capture and put in pre-labeled mason jars. To borrow an old anthropological cliché, it seems that the social sciences are butterfly collecting again (Leach 1961), but our purposes are no longer naturalistic; they are evaluative. Instead of ascending from the field site to conceptual sketches, as in the days of kinship analysis, the intellectual flow has reversed: the moral economy of issues has become the encyclopedia through which social phenomena are framed as research topics, conceptualized, and then theorized. Within this context, statements like Marit Rosol's assertion that "[t]he task for critical urban research is to analyze processes of neoliberalization 'on the ground'" (2010, 548) strike me as a limitation on our sociological capacities; it too easily suggests that the task of understanding the complex relationship between biography and public issues is simply a matter of identifying how the former is microcosmic of the latter and to what degree, as if the task of the analyst is simply a matter of sifting for gold.

However, I would also like to suggest that the insights gained through this excavation of City Leaf Farm *can* speak to theories of social entrepreneurship that are so often used to justify neoliberal policies, but perhaps in a much different way than initially expected. As cities have shifted away from what some scholars have referred to as managerial modes of urban governance (Harvey 1989), governments have increasingly drawn on a doctrine of social entrepreneurship, or a conviction that social value is produced by providing solutions to normatively-defined problems. This doctrine rests on an essentially financialized theory of social production; investments in social good can be gained or lost, and the role of the field

sciences is to take careful account of these positive, or potentially negative, yields. But embedded in this doctrine of social entrepreneurship is a social *theory*, which suggests that by unshackling those creative, supposedly market-oriented, qualities of human beings, societies can yield a net gain in public benefit and a net loss in the need for organized, planned governance. Although we must leave the question of public benefit alone, the social life of City Leaf Farm quite obviously discounts this theory of governance: management and organization do not go away. Entrepreneurial activity does not imply a decrease in management; if anything, it implies its increase.

As Katelyn presented her testimony to the committee and explained who City Leaf served, how much produce the space yielded, and what benefits it provided to the community, I realized that I had only experienced the outlines of this bureaucratic world – the world of the farm-as-institution. Although it was made abundantly visible to government officials, funding agencies, and board members, the farm-as-institution was largely hidden from my view as an ethnographer. Barricaded inside the farm's office space, or clasped inside the binders that held the farm's produce receipts and records of volunteer hours, it was beyond the traditional realm of anthropological engagement. However, this was a world that was entirely necessary for the farm to exist as a space in the city, and was, in this sense, a condition of ethnographic production – a condition for producing the type of social milieu that an ethnographer can inhabit with a degree of structure and continuity.

However, on the other side of Katelyn was a group of City Council members who, not being ethnographers, would fail to fully understand the farm-as-landscape – as a space that was defined not in terms of its relationship to issues, or scarcities in public benefit, but in fact by its constituents ability to productively engage with the surpluses of a larger city. As an

anthropologist, this was an ethnographic moment that I had learned to navigate and interpret through participation in a shared community of practice among people who collectively managed an urban space. The form of governance that emerged from City Leaf's cultural landscape was not an institutional apparatus, storage of capital, or a game, as political scientists are so wont to assume, but a system that is produced through sensuous engagement with the (built) environment and other social beings. Creating an ethnographic moment and managing an urban space is "work" insofar as this is synonymous with practical activity – playful at times, begrudged at others, but productive nonetheless. The institutional system – the non-profit with its micro-bureaucracy – was what insured that the project could exist within a highly intensified property regime, in which landscape was both a tool of accumulation and a mode of resistance against it. But the institution does not govern, people do; the ethnographic moment is relational, and therefore personal, all the way down.

## Conclusion

One day, while conducting an interview with an informant and fellow volunteer at the farm, I was interrupted by a group of elementary-aged kids who rushed onto the half-acre urban agriculture site. This was not an uncommon occurrence, and I half-suspected when I began that my interview might be cut short. It was difficult to finish most tasks at City Leaf without at least one or two interruptions, and the neighborhood children were not an altogether unwelcome one.

“Should we go talk to them?” asks Kara into the microphone. In the background the kids are yelling and laughing. It sounds like they may have gotten into the blackberry bushes.

“Yeah probably,” I say, followed by a quick jostle as I slide off a picnic table bench. The recorder clicks off.

This was one of a handful of recorded interviews that I solicited during my fieldwork in DC. Of all the people I interacted with during my three months of fieldwork, the neighborhood kids are perhaps the most sorely missed. Their frequent visits were simultaneously the most frustrating and the most rewarding aspect of working at City Leaf. The consistent presence of children at the farm brought volunteers and staff smiling faces and a sense of purpose in their work, but also a number of guerilla food fights, squashed bean plants, and incidents of petty theft. Sometimes visits from the children were supervised by the farming organization’s afterschool program, which was offered free of charge to neighborhood families. However, more often than not, their visits were unsanctioned.

When the kids disrupted my fieldwork, as they did the day my interview got cut short, they were perhaps a mild nuisance, but a valued one, which threw the limits of my own anthropological perception into sharp relief. Although their thriving youth culture was beyond

the boundaries of my study, it made itself known through frequent overflow onto the farm's landscape. At some point, while Kara and I were chasing the kids around the farm, pleading with them to stop throwing blackberries at each other, my digital recorder flicked back on in my pocket. In keeping with my ethical obligations as a researcher, I have had to delete this accidental recording, but I think it is acceptable to reflect autoethnographically on the soundscape that I encountered when I listened back to it for the first and only time.

Besides the smile on my face as I was reminded of the neighborhood kids' antics, I felt a remarkable sense of place as, over the crunching of my boots on wood mulch, I heard the sound of the ice cream truck that parked for what sometimes seemed like hours outside the public housing complex. The acute perceptibility of its tune triggered something for me. I was reminded quite viscerally of not only the farm, but the broader urban landscape in which it is embedded. I remembered the peach trees that shaded the farm's northern border and the smell of the steaming compost pile, as well as the painted shade structure where I would sometimes sit on top of a picnic table and look out over the rows of vegetables at the farm's small corner of the neighborhood. I recalled the public housing courtyard where residents would congregate around lawn chairs in the afternoon, the street corner societies that would spring up just outside the farm's gate, and the young professionals and volunteers from different parts of the city that cycled in and out of the farm throughout the week.

Far from hearing the scarcity of a "food desert" or the paucity of a neighborhood in "decay," like a sucking vacuum sound below the city's cracked pavement, I heard the sounds of a social world constantly in motion and actively produced. As I listened to this recording, I was pleasantly reminded of the farm's ethnographic moment – a discernable social world, suspended apart from others, but simultaneously embedded within broader social processes and spaces.

This ethnographic moment was not simply delineated through participant-observation, my mode of anthropological analysis, but also through the work of my informants, who, by exerting no small amount of interpretive and physical labor, produced a social world that I, as a participant and observer, could inhabit for a summer with some degree of structure, comfort, and continuity.

Perhaps it is this deep sense of place that leads some contemporary ethnographers, as well as their critics in other disciplines, to throw up their hands in the face of anthropological abstraction and claim that all one does through ethnography is construct narratives. After all, one might say, the complexity that an ethnographer encounters in the field is quite impossible to capture given the limits of one's own subjectivity. On this last point I would tend to agree. There is something quite irreducible about ethnographic practice that I will never be able to share with those who have not participated in it. I agree that the sensuousness embodied in ethnography is impossible to fully convey through written words. However, I do not believe that abstraction is synonymous with extraction, or that something new, empirically verifiable, and perhaps even analytically important cannot be produced through ethnographic engagement, although I should not claim to have done anything but approximate such a goal here.

Despite our shared mission to engineer a ceasefire in the summer fruit wars of 2014, the space that widened between me and Kara as we got up to chase the kids off the farm has come to reflect a highly-theorized point of contact between ethnographer and ethnographic "Other." This point of contact, the much-theorized *limin* of our discipline, has become the source of a great deal of anxiety for anthropologists, especially with regard to the now all-but-mythologized turn towards reflexivity. Twenty-one years ago, the anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes wrote that

Ethnography has had a rough time of it lately... One hears of anthropological observation as a hostile act that reduces our "subjects" to mere "objects" of our discriminating, incriminating, scientific gaze. Consequently, some postmodern anthropologists have given up the practice of descriptive ethnography altogether (1995, 417).

Despite more than two decades of these admonitions it does not appear as if ethnography has fled the scene; fieldwork continues to be a requirement for graduate programs and the methods of inquiry have not changed all that much beyond a sense of irony that now tends to accompany anthropologists as they use seemingly “old-school” methods in seemingly “new-school” places. Far from abandoning ethnography, a new generation of anthropologists is left to conduct it, anxious and unsure as to whether our field sites are cultures, institutions, texts, communities of practice, assemblages, or issues, and whether, through our participation and observation within them, we become social scientists, philosophers, co-collaborators, activists, consultants, or a combination of them all.

Having learned of some of these critiques and collective anxieties shortly before entering the field, I was well primed for total confusion. In particular, I remember the bemused look on Katelyn’s face as I expressed my guilt in the fact that I could extract knowledge from the farm and exert my ethnographic gaze over the lived experiences of its staff, volunteers, and neighborhood residents, while simultaneously being able to leave it all and go home at the end of the day. She kindly responded by expressing her confidence that there was a good reason for me to be there, even if that was just to think about all the things that no one else could think about because they were too busy running around and chasing after neighborhood kids or managing volunteers – that there was some purpose to my unique position as a participant-observer within the farm’s division of labor.

Certainly not a foreign culture by any stretch of the imagination, City Leaf is a space that occupied a small point along the lives of the volunteers, residents, and staff members whom I came to know, even if only fleetingly, over the course of a summer. Despite the fact that this landscape seemed to exist as a world in and of itself – as a gardening project, an institution, or a

neighborhood “green space” – it was embedded within broader lives and within a larger world history. Like Washington’s famous blossoming cherry trees, its existence was an import – it was carried in with the volunteers’ drawstring bags, the rotting compost materials, and the historical changes that swept the neighborhood, all to land squarely in the ethnographic present. This was the sensuous realm that I came to know only through practical engagement with the everyday life and work of my informants. To contemplate the social world of City Leaf Farm as a mere *object* would be to deny the conditions, and the human labor, that gave rise to its ethnographic content.

Instead of becoming paralyzed by anxieties of self-reflection and concerns over the assumptions that underlie our practice, I would like to suggest that its remedy is actually to conduct ethnography as best we can – ethnography that is reflexive not only in philosophical terms but in material terms and that is sensitive and respectful to the world our informants create. In other words, anthropologists should examine not only the ideological underpinnings of their practice, but also the communicative and physical labor, as well as the historical contingencies, that produces the ethnographic moment that our informants permit us to inhabit and observe.

In this thesis, I have attempted to take a confrontational stance against social scientists who are tempted to treat organized garden projects as solutions to broad-scale social problems, or microcosms of a significant process or issue. Drawing on the analogy of the food desert, I suggested that viewing a project as a response to some abstract demand for food, community, or even political consciousness, simplifies the reality of space, conflates multiple scales of analysis, and by doing so erases the social and physical labor of the informant from the academic product. It should be clarified that this is not a problem inherent to abstraction, but a problem of abstracting at one level – for example, at the level of global transformations in governance and economic policy – and then applying these abstractions to lower levels of analysis, by, for

instance, claiming through conceptual slippage that the ethnographic world of a garden space constitutes a neoliberalizing force, or is somehow derivative of neoliberalism as a whole. I should also clarify that the analogy of the food desert is a useful tool for drawing attention to the ways that inequality manifests itself in terms of consumer access, but it simply does not fit with my present purposes. What is currently at stake is not the quantity of our sociological imagination, but its boundaries – the limits of our perception. If anything, this thesis should be considered as an attempt to expand those boundaries, and the possibilities that they otherwise foreclose.

As Andrew Flachs (2013) has pointed out in his own undergraduate research on urban food production, gardening can be a very useful mechanism for gaining ethnographic entrée. He charmingly quips that “an earnest researcher willing to spread mulch will encounter few difficulties” (99). And indeed, as far as field sites go, gardens are certainly low-hanging fruit. Urban gardens seem to short-circuit the usual challenges of ethnographic fieldwork. Gaining entrée is as simple as showing up during volunteer hours and building rapport is as easy picking up a pitchfork. Social life makes itself easily available for consumption by the volunteer or researcher. After all, conversation is easy when one is flipping a compost pile or picking Swiss chard, and it is never hard to slip in an unstructured interview. Volunteerism seems to cast a spell of comradery over its participants and otherwise grueling labor becomes infused with an air of friendly openness. However, the ease of ethnographic consumption from the perspective of the researcher should not be conflated with the ease of ethnographic production on the part of the informant. Producing an ethnographic moment – a moment that a lowly undergraduate like myself can navigate and observe – requires a great deal of work. The conditions of our research practice as anthropologists cannot and should not be taken for granted. It takes labor to produce

an ethnographic product – not just the toil-over-the-earth labor but interpretive, social labor. At least at City Leaf Farm, it is a labor that necessarily implies an embeddedness within global flows of people and resources, as well as local flows of produce and play.

I began this thesis with the metaphor of the city as a “desert.” The form of utilitarian scarcity this connotes, and the suggestion that an urban farm or garden is an entrepreneurial response to that scarcity, ultimately does not seem to hold up as related to the everyday life of my informants. However, I realize that it would be slightly unsatisfactory for me to end without attempting to propose another metaphor in its place. I can only think of one that would satisfy my own theoretical commitments as well as the reality that I found at City Leaf Farm.

If I may be permitted to wax biological, composting, while from the perspective of humans is a fundamentally productive process insofar as it releases nutrients that can be used for fertilization, it is a consumptive process from the perspective of bacteria. Although decomposition would otherwise proceed slowly, continual poking and prodding by humans causes oxygen to circulate such that mesothermic bacteria consume at a rate that gives off enough heat to actually “cook” the compost, killing the very bacteria that led to this condition; the quantitative effect of repeated oxygenation transforms into a qualitative effect in species composition. Thermophilic, or heat-tolerant, bacteria are then free to multiply and continue respiring until readily available organic matter lowers to a slow-burn, at which point the mesophilic bacteria once again outcompete the heat-tolerant ones and finish “curing” the pile. Pulses of disturbances and their high frequency leads to a discernable transformation in the texture of the materials: trash becomes soil.

Through active engagement with and embeddedness within broader urban processes – neighborhood change, demographic shifts, cultural trends and growing interests in sustainable

food production, cycles of grant funding, neoliberal strategies of city governance, as well as everyday patterns of work and play – a small group of staff members and regular volunteers at City Leaf are able to produce and in some sense govern a small half-acre urban space whose sociological texture is qualitatively distinct from that of its surroundings. They are able to produce a social world that is governed, if only contingently, not by relations of state coercion or commodity exchange, but by relations of trust, reciprocity, and productive consumption. In fact, my anthropological presence at this farm for a summer and my ability to inhabit its constituent ethnographic moment without paying for it, or forcing my way into the social situation, is a testament to the existence of such a social space and the work my informants are doing to, in a purely metaphorical sense, compost the city.

To end with one last citation, I would like to acknowledge economic geographers Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, who so convincingly suggested that “one might represent economic practice as comprising a rich diversity of capitalist and noncapitalist activities and argue that the noncapitalist ones had until now been relatively ‘invisible’ because the concepts and discourses that could make them ‘visible’ have themselves been marginalized and suppressed” (Gibson-Graham 1996, xli). I would like to assert, along with many other voices, that anthropology has an important role to play in this post-capitalist project. Ethnographers have for quite some time, although often implicitly, asserted that somewhere beneath the two-dimensional maps people are also engaged in their own forms of sociological production. We have, so it seems to me, historically asserted that there is *something* to what we study, and that this something is in part produced by the people with whom we work. And I think that this is perhaps one of the most valuable assertions that we can make – that somewhere beneath the plat

lines and the paperwork, the reports and the yields, deep within the fundamental communism of everyday life, people are still constructing (and composting) worlds so that they can live in them.

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