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A Green Strand in the Urban Fabric

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A small patch of land presses urgently against its blacktop boundaries. The variety of vibrant plants and crops grow wildly while in seek of expansion and prosperity. Sounds of cars rushing past the nearby streets are accompanied by the buzzing of insects and chirping of birds as they carry on their daily tasks. Often, there is sharp and piercing interjection of power tools and sounds of construction one would commonly hear in the busy streets of a city. Multi-textured plants bob and ebb through the wind, with the lighter ones almost appearing to be dancing and the heavier ones to be sleeping. Piled in one corner are pulled out plant bodies under the name of “invasive” while bees swarm around picking at their lifeless form, as if they were mourning their once companion. The carefully molded ecosystem living within has found flourishing and livelihood within these boxed bounds, however, one begins to wonder of what beings had once found home here before.

Throughout this paper, I will be examining the relationship between human and non humans within the context of a community garden. Specifically, I have drawn my data and observations from a local garden located in Santa Ana that lies within the wealthy county of Orange. The relationships explored in this space can be analyzed as contradictory, where relationships and flourishing are encouraged for some and discouraged for others. By observing the political ecologies and epistemologies taking place within this space, I will be able to address the socio-economic and political fabrics that establish species interconnectedness. Through a multispecies lens, I intend on determining how ideologies surrounding sustainability and community-making cultivate the garden, and how this creation lies imbedded in contradictory relationships. Both the topic of contradiction and political ecologies manifest stark similarities

between racism, classism, and speciesism, intertwining themselves in terminologies that further shape policy making, national and local security concerns, and the creation of laws.

The Intersectionalities of Urban Sustainability

sus·tain·a·bil·i·ty /sə ˌstɑːnə ˈbɪlədē/

(noun): 1. the ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level

2. avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance

Although the definition of sustainability serves as a catchall term, I argue that urban sustainability differs from rural ideologies, in that metropolitan societies present unique and significant challenges for city-dwellers, such as depletion of resources and destruction of land, that spark their curation of “sustainability”. These definitions, though with sincere intentions, reject any large scale and re-definitive modes of structural change that may encroach on their comfortability and established lifestyles. In this, there is hopes for an “all-knowing” and nobel prize winning scientist to produce a gadget or equation that will wipe all environmental destruction without having to interrupt the cadence of the city.

The cadence and tempo of a city is often complex, as it involves a variety of beats influenced by the economic and political conductors. These entanglements often shape and influence ideologies, in this case of a “tech-savvy” restorative approach to environmental justice and overall agricultural reform. This approach relies heavily on the notion that “science” is not only an essential part of sustainability, but is the only correct means of creating long lasting change. This exclusionary mode of production can leave definitions and control in the hands of

the elite, who prosper from economic and political gains that are encouraged by these “scientific”-based notions. I use quotations in reference to the word “scientific” in order to address the popular delineation between pure science and its socio-culture counterpart (Terrell 2000). This dichotomy between “science” and “culture” furthers this dependency on larger institutions as centers for knowledge while erasing and reducing traditional and local approaches. This reliance on the elite can be further manipulated in commodity driven economies that promote a sense of market based “greenwashing” . As a whole, such influences have promoted the idea of “greener cities” that serve as mega centers of knowledge, sustainability, and technological advancement (Isenhour 2011).

These ideologies of sustainability, such as the ones mentioned previously, come to cultivate the garden and the political geography of urban green spaces. Throughout my spatial observations I have come across these principles at work, as it influences how the garden is managed and cultivated. For example, practices such as Integrated Pest Management and Hydroponics have been incorporated within the Santa Ana garden as a modes of being economically sustainable (Moreno 2015). Such practices work towards achieving a greater human benefit concealed under the labels of multispecies interconnections. This common theme occurs throughout history, bringing forth the topic of human exceptionalism and its establishment of scientific practice as a means of turning non-humans and nature entirely into “subjects” rather than “equals (Tsing 2012).

Besides the economic intersection that occurs within urban gardens, I wish to touch on political control enforced by city laws and policies. Although urban gardens are promoted as a form of “Urban Oasis” (Poulsen 2014), I argue that it is not a separate or autonomous space but

rather intertwined with the political geography of the greater city it resides in. An example of urban politics funneling into the garden is enhanced through the current debate and “war on invasive species”, which have been linked to the instilled norms surrounding urban sustainability. Non-human beings are subjected to eradication under terms such as “nuisances” or “economic threats” in relation to urban advancement. Such terminologies come to cultivate the micro geographical relationships in the garden, stemming from the microorganisms living in the moist soil to the squirrels scurrying by (Orion 2015). Since municipalities have been aspiring to achieve the title of the “global city”, it has enforced neoliberalist ideals and Westernized notions of economic prosperity, which come to dictate the health and wellbeing of ecosystems (Roy 2005). Through invasive species politics, there is a creation of an “us” vs “them, as undesirables are symbols of dysfunction and chaos, not fitting into the aesthetic frameworks of the master-planned cities. Extreme options such as genetically editing species in order to have less “invasive” qualities are becoming a new techno-scientific option, masked under the name of environmental consciousness, giving ultimate aesthetic authoritarian power to urban planners and developers (Campbell, 2015). This brings forth the question, which bodies instill such encroaching qualities and to whom are these qualities invasive?

The Politics of Space, Place, and Community Making

The economic and political complexity embedded into the landscape creates spaces where community and identity making is dependent on strategic urban design. Through the management of urban spaces, both non-humans and humans come to form identities and normative roles. In the case of the community garden under observation, imaginary and legal borders come to shape and influence how the garden is managed and who the garden is produced

for. Politics of the border come to shape the livelihood of species in this green space. My interview with a community gardener in Santa Ana depicted how active one's relationship can be with neighborhood and city borders,

“This side is known as the ritzy side of town and so here we have all the townhomes and like actual houses. But they are not the demographics that we want to empower you know? Our demographic is the Central Santa Ana part of the city and so we kind of live in a catch twenty-two as far as our physical space.”

These urban structural divisions are important in the construction of spaces such as the garden. What are seen as lifeless and neutral objects are in fact material agents, capable of influencing human and non human actions and responses (Rotenberg 2015). These agential structures, both the garden and its borders, all bring to life a relational understanding of the land. This reciprocal relationship promotes ideas surrounding who can flourish and who are nuisances. Such notions stem from municipal boundaries, where the economic and political intersectionalities funnel through the rest of the urban cracks. It is primarily from these borders and boundaries that both human and non humans are subjected to disparities in wellbeing. This brings to question the roles of local citizenship and the “right to the city” (Abbas 2016).

Such is the case of the South Central Farmers fighting for land in South Los Angeles. It is evident that agriculture, land, and production is dominated by policies of land ownership that is further connected to socio-cultural and traditional modes of living in connection to the land (Hamilton 2008). Ron Finley, an urban gardener, also explains the connection between institutionalized inequalities and politics of power that govern agricultural practices. Through privatization of land, and, in a sense, privatization of livelihood, Ron Finley believes that there is

a connection between community wellness and the composition of the soil. Similar to the South Central Farmers, Finley believes that providing local food for communities further shape culture and identity creation (Vallot 2015). This goes to show agricultural spaces, both small and large, represent and embody this intersectionality that go to shape ideologies surrounding community making and sustainable living that come to manufacture the garden. Such manifestations create an essence of contradiction, placing otherwise complementary ideologies at odds with one another, splitting the circadian rhythm away from the humming sounds of insects and into systematic distress.

The Garden as a Contradictory Space:



Land provides both spaces of activism, collaboration, and community identity creation, allowing members to gather and speak against institutionalized injustices while planning for shared future visions (Hiite 2017). It is in the city that these communities congregate, holding the city's promises of prosperity and freedom accountable, with shared hopes of obtaining citizenship, equality, and opportunity (Holston and Appadurai 2012). Although cities instill such

hopefulness, it is also a space of political and economic dependency often troping the right to grow, live, and expand. It is also a place where contradictory relationships spring forth causing an unequal balance in the equalities and freedoms that had been originally promised. Looking towards relationships, the garden space creates “moral companionships” which describe the interconnectedness gardeners have with unwanted pests and the lengths taken to eradicate them while meanwhile working to enhance the existence of other garden beings (Maurer 2018).

Identities of non-humans often become determined by the human and there is less emphasis on companionship with the land. In the garden weeds become carriers of stigma and nuisance, rather than a community member of the ecosystem while bees and hummingbirds become labeled as “beneficial for the garden”. In this sense, it is beneficial for the humans profiting off their labor, providing plentiful harvest and cross pollination. Although one may argue these interactions may serve to benefit the beings too, the creation of the urban and implementation of design has denied these species full livelihood, as their homelands have been destroyed by boulders and the shrill sounds of power tools.

The term “community garden” often implies open and accessible space for all beings. However, I had noticed the “kept away” quality of urban gardens, having to drive past four neighborhoods and behind a large church parking lot in order to reach my destination. Once there, I had noticed the large bordering walls separating the land from the rest of the neighborhood. Such seclusionary aesthetics resembled larger scale borders of conflict, spread throughout cities and neighborhoods of divided cities such as Belfast (Bollens 2012). These methods of seclusion are often produced in order to keep desired communities in while keeping informalities out (Low 2017). Such structures form a “green fortress” not only physically

keeping unwanted bodies out, but also forming symbolic hostility that has been recycled on the basis of race, class, and species.

Parallelism of Racism, Speciesism, and Classism



Speciesism is defined as the categorization of species in a hierarchical manner, enforced by a human centric mode of knowledge. Further, this anthropocentrism has created the foundation of human and non-human relationships on the basis of a subject-object stratification, as opposed to an interconnected one. In the garden, speciesism creates a hierarchy of non humans based on their utility to humans (Noske 1997). Plants and animals are removed under the term “invasive” and “nuisance” in order to structurally reinforce a human centric approach when managing local agricultural spaces. However, the term nuisance is not only used for plants but can apply to humans of varying socio-economic classes. In the case of New Delhi, India, a nuisance law had been interpreted and translated onto the bodies of the homeless, branding them as a disturbance to others and an environmental threat. The term nuisance has been used throughout many modes of propaganda towards any form of “aesthetic impropriety” (Ghertner 2012). Political and economic factors often determine which bodies get branded “informal” and

“unfit” for the desired urban landscape. One can note a stark similarity between how invasive species are looked upon as socio-economic and environmental threats, and how the homeless are seen as the very same threat. The connection between classism and speciesism is one that has been controlled by positions of power who will recycle inequalities from one body to the next effortlessly.

Such inequalities are structurally embedded and stand strong behind environmental racism. This method of racism is directly tied to animal and plant bodies with parallels of images throughout historical acts of violence. Both human and animal bodies have been used for intensive hog farming labor, with the livelihoods of both being interdependent and at odds with each other simultaneously. The mistreatment of confined feeding operations have specifically exposed people of color to toxic neighborhoods and living conditions (Jenkins 2015). Found in the CAFOs are animal bodies being harshly treated, harkening back to the dark days of slavery and massacres of indigenous beings. These operations work under conditions where both the humans and the beings have no political voice and autonomy to speak against injustice.

In the small patch of land deep within the busy city streets, all three categories of “-isms” converge and collide. Border politics and identity creation come to play in the garden embedding race into space. A garden member that I had interviewed expressed,

“Dependency is a big issue, even I think most of the things we do is because we are dependent on something. Not in a good way, I mean there is another side to it like being dependent because you have to work and make money. Having to be

there because you have to be, I mean we see this politics, sometimes we have to do things in a certain way because you have to rather than you chose to.”

The tensions of class and race under such economic and political inequalities come to cultivate the garden and the political ecologies found within it. It is vital to incorporate a multispecies ethnographic approach in order to “study the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds” (Helmreich). It is important to take into consideration the attachment of livelihoods and interdependencies that create an ecosystem rather than an ego-system comprised of human achievements and anthropocentric views. Mindful observations about the agentive qualities of both humans and non humans are not only important for studying contact zones and ecotones, but for understanding larger structures that influence relationships that can flourish or perish in what seem to be tiny cracks in the larger urban terrain.

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