

Community Gardens and Gentrification in New York City

The Uneven Politics of Facilitation, Accommodation, and Resistance

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It is dusk at Highland Park in East New York and a rally against gentrification and for affordable housing appears to be winding down.¹ The event brought together hundreds of residents, community advocates, housing activists, church members, community gardeners, and unionists to speak out against Mayor Bill de Blasio's upzoning of the neighborhood and its detrimental effects on the ability of working-class residents to live in New York City. The night is not over though, as the crowd begins to march down the street toward Arlington Village, a dilapidated and nearly vacant two-story housing complex that was purchased by a private investment firm in 2015 and is under threat of being turned into a series of gigantic buildings ranging up to fourteen stories tall. Led by the Soul Tigers, a marching band from a local elementary school, those in attendance stream down the sidewalk bellowing, "Working families under attack. What do we do? Stand up! Fight back!" Upon arriving at the building originally constructed for returning World War II veterans in 1949, the marchers erupt into a back-and-forth chant: "Whose house? Our house!"

Gentrification has dramatically reshaped the landscape of New York City over the last thirty years (Dávila 2004; Freeman 2006; Mele 2000; Smith 1996). In the Big Apple, many of the communities undergoing this process are also home to food-producing community gardens that emerged in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as a form of resistance to City Hall's efforts to displace working-class residents of color through the withdrawal of public and social services and the bulldozing of infrastructure—processes dubbed *planned shrinkage* by the City

Housing Commissioner (Eizenberg 2016; Greenberg 2008; Martinez 2010; Reynolds and Cohen 2016; Von Hassell 2002). Understanding the history of these food spaces, as a manifestation of residents' right to the city, would appear to cast them into an anti-gentrification role. Yet, urban agriculture has been claimed as a form of *green gentrification*, alongside of parks, greenways, and grocery stores, that makes these communities more desirable for affluent and upwardly mobile individuals (Anguelovski 2015; Checker 2011; Gould and Lewis 2017; McClintock 2014, 2018). This tension raises a question regarding the role of food-producing community gardens in facilitating, accommodating, or resisting gentrification. More specifically, whether and for what reasons do certain food-producing community gardens slow down or resist gentrification while others invite or work with it?

To provide answers to these questions, we compare and contrast gentrification processes as they play out through community gardens in three neighborhoods in the outer boroughs of New York City: (1) Astoria, Queens, (2) Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy), Brooklyn, and (3) East New York, Brooklyn. In Astoria, a community garden has brought together gentrifiers and long-term residents through food, but not without conflicts along race and class lines, as it has helped facilitate gentrification by making the area feel safer to affluent newcomers through resonating with middle-class cultural preferences for visual diversity, green space, and urban agriculture (see also chapters 6 and 7 in this volume). In the Central Brooklyn section of Bed-Stuy, gentrification has led to significant race and class conflicts within gardens between gentrifiers and long-term residents, as well as within the community between long-time gardeners and non-gardening gentrifiers who contest their traditional uses of these community spaces. As a result, long-term gardeners feel under attack and dispossessed by a white wave of gentrifiers who are engaging in cultural, political, and economic processes of exclusion. Unlike Astoria and Bed-Stuy, East New York has largely been removed from processes of gentrification, but akin to Bed-Stuy, the neighborhood is home to a vibrant community gardening network, one that has been empowered through the work of the food justice organization East New York Farms! (ENYF!). However, the community is now facing the prospect of significant

redevelopment through a City-led upzoning and affordable housing initiative, a project that ENYF! and a coalition of community organizations mobilized to contest based on fears of displacement (see also chapters 10 and 12 in this volume). Through comparative analysis of these gardens and neighborhoods, we trace the contested and complex relationship between food-producing community gardens and gentrification by situating the similarities and the differences across the three neighborhoods in the history of urban development politics and community activism in each neighborhood, and discuss the implications for food justice in New York City.²

Naturalized Cultural Norms and Accommodation in Astoria

Astoria is a neighborhood in the western part of Queens, a short subway ride from midtown Manhattan. Long part of the industrial waterfront and settled by waves of working-class migrants from abroad and the American South, Astoria is now undergoing gentrification. Developers are capitalizing on its proximity to Manhattan and its picturesque East River views, driving up rents and attracting investment. High-rise complexes rub shoulders with Astoria's small industrial spaces, run-down apartment buildings, subdivided family homes, and large public housing developments that are home to immigrants and working-class residents.

Amidst all of this is a half-acre community garden with more than one hundred small individual plots. The garden was started in the mid-2000s by anarchist-leaning organizers and involved a public campaign specifically for a community garden rather than a park on a plot that used to be an abandoned lot. The garden is located on land owned by the Parks Department and administered by the city-affiliated Green-Thumb organization—the same organization that administers many of the gardens in Central Brooklyn and East New York. The 200-plus gardeners reflect the diversity of the neighborhood. There are about forty languages spoken in the garden. Residents of nearby public housing, including African Americans and Puerto Ricans, have plots in the garden. Neighbors with physical and mental disabilities participate in the space. Local artists garden alongside other *bridge gentrifiers* (Zukin 1995, 111),

such as actors and writers. There are working-class and middle-class gardeners as well as gardeners who have moved to the neighborhood to live in its luxury housing.

Urban scholars have documented the battles over the aesthetics of community gardens, which parallel struggles over green public space more generally (Eizenberg 2016; Martinez 2010; Zukin 2010). When community gardens encounter the realities of gentrification, their appearance is increasingly scrutinized by newcomers. Cultural preferences of middle-class and upper-class urbanites favor orderly and lush green arrangements of plants over the types of landscape that actually constitute many community gardens: collections of recycled “junk,” bent wire fences and locks, stained plastic materials, and markedly un-green spaces where locals might gather and socialize. Often, community gardeners in these neighborhoods are quite invested in growing food, and that dedication itself, when combined with salvaged and recycled agricultural materials, clashes with the aesthetic preferences of new residents.

These tensions and conflicts have played out in the garden in Astoria in ways that do not resist gentrification but in fact accommodate and facilitate it (Aptekar 2015). This does not happen principally because the gardeners are all gentrifiers who are at odds with the surrounding community. Rather, it is driven by a visual aesthetic reproduced by the gentrifier gardeners and the ways in which this aesthetic, coupled with the visible presence of whiteness, makes the neighborhood more desirable for developers and well-off residents. Gardeners with better access to economic, cultural, and political capital, many of whom were gentrifiers, often wanted the community garden to be an orderly lush green space. This green space vision of the garden came into tension with the farm vision, which privileged food production and agricultural experimentation and was often shared by working-class and immigrant gardeners. For instance, plant support structures made from found and recycled materials could be viewed as necessary for the well-being of plants under the farm vision or as eyesores within the green space vision.

In Astoria, tensions over what the garden should look like, and even definitions of green and attractive, were pervasive. Nicos, a younger white gardener active in the local urban agriculture movement, explained:



Figure 11.1. Several garden plots in Astoria garden constructed with found and recycled materials. Photo by Sofya Aptekar.

To some people, a plot that's manicured and it is full of flowers will look wasteful, especially in a neighborhood that does not have a lot of access to fresh produce . . . Or maybe one of the Chinese gardeners who use a lot of found objects, a lot of trash. You know, those things might look repulsive and backward. And right, to another person, seeing the image of a manicured plot full of flowers is beautiful because their aesthetic, or what appeals to their aesthetic, is more the Martha Stewart or the Victorian garden ideal . . . And I don't think . . . the Chinese gardeners are not interested in image, they are not fetishizing that image . . . And I think a lot of the people that are responsible for gentrifying Astoria are not necessarily exempt from being affected by image. By fetishizing a certain appearance of something.

When disagreements over the appearance of the garden arose, they were often resolved in favor of those who emphasized a specific version of a green and orderly aesthetic. This meant, for instance, that those whose plots were considered eyesores were forced to dismantle growing structures. Sometimes the dismantling was done by other gardeners in tense confrontations.

One of the factors creating such confrontations was that the future security of the community garden was framed as dependent on

conformity to the green space vision. The better the garden looked to outsiders, the less likely the Parks Department and the local politicians would be to revoke its lease and turn it into a traditional park. As Eizenberg (2016) notes, local authorities view community gardeners as akin to park rangers who maintain the green space for free, making community gardens preferable to ordinary neighborhood parks for a cash-poor city. The less open nature of community gardens also helps manage stigmatized behavior. James, an African American gardener who grew up in the neighborhood, compared the community garden to what he called “rinky-dink” parks:

A community garden, the reason that formula works—they’ve had parks here before. It don’t work. People go in there, and then garbage is in there, and garbage is in there, and then more people in there, and then, you know, it’s not maintained and people don’t want to go in there because it’s dirty. When you start to give people sort of like temporary ownership of a plot, then they go in there and take a bit more pride. And it’s really not open to the general community, you see? So, and it doesn’t cost Parks anything. Because most people volunteer. Everything in there is maintained by the gardener.

Rather than a poorly maintained park used by public housing residents and working-class immigrants, the community garden is more exclusive and visually conforming to green space norms. As such, it makes the neighborhood more desirable for investment by gentrifiers, City officials, developers, banks, and investment firms.

The dominant aesthetic preference for the green vision did not go uncontested within the community garden. For instance, some gardeners who were more oriented toward growing food on a budget, regardless of how ugly this looked to others, enlisted the support of sympathetic and more resourced gardeners, asking them to speak up in their defense or interpret and respond to official letters. This demonstrated the nascent solidarities that this garden generated. Others spoke vociferously of their long-term roots in the neighborhood, or residence in public housing, or even invoked their rights as disabled people. Some more affluent white gardeners with liberal politics did not want to be cast as violators of rights or displacers, and these discourses could be successful in

temporarily subverting dominant hierarchies. In some ways, this community garden went a long way to accommodate difference and raise consciousness of inequities. For instance, much effort was invested in sending mailings to supplement email and Facebook to accommodate the digital divide.

Nevertheless, the gardeners pushing the green space vision were often able to get what they wanted in the community garden. Moreover, what resistance and subversion existed within the garden did not translate to neighborhood-wide resistance to gentrification. As was the case in Central Brooklyn in the next section, this was because many long-term residents had mixed feelings about gentrification, looking forward to improved services and safety, and were unevenly worried about displacement. In addition, some gardeners living in public housing felt they would be protected from displacement. Finally, few connections were made between struggles within the garden and the threat of gentrification because the normative standards of greenness and attractiveness were naturalized, treated as normal, obvious, and objective, rather than a cultural pattern with a specific class signature.

From Resistance to Displacement in Bed-Stuy

The Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy) area of central Brooklyn was especially hard hit by disinvestment and planned shrinkage in the late 1970s, an injustice that residents resisted by creating a significant number of community gardens through their collective sweat equity efforts. Bed-Stuy is a mostly Black, residential neighborhood that is a 30-minute train ride from lower Manhattan and increasingly coveted for its many pre-war brownstones on tree-lined streets (Statistical Atlas 2018). As more people are being priced out of other, more expensive neighborhoods in Manhattan and Brooklyn, Bed-Stuy has turned into a rapidly gentrifying area. According to census data, the number of white residents increased from 2.4 to 26.6 percent between 2000 and 2017; subsequently, home prices have been rising, as the median price saw a jump from \$380,780 in 2012 to \$716,387 in 2016, with median rents increasing from just around \$1,650 to \$2,300 over the same period (StreetEasy 2018).

Gentrification has had a profound impact on the practices of community gardeners and the culture of community gardens in Bed-Stuy.

Prior to gentrification, community gardens were more socially oriented (with aims such as environmental justice, youth education, cultural connection, and community-building) as opposed to the market-oriented focus of newer urban farms in the area (pounds of produce grown and revenues generated). Moreover, the day-to-day experiences of the community gardeners at the local level have become full of microaggressions that are a microcosm of the institutionalized racism of gentrification occurring at the macro level of Bed-Stuy.

Gardeners of color had a great deal of mistrust of white newcomers, much of which was connected to the history of structural exclusion and neglect from the era of planned shrinkage. One long-time community member revealed: “it was the white man who burned down your building to collect insurance money, the white man will kick you out, the white man will tear down your garden . . . because they have [done it before].” Trepidation of newcomers stemmed not just from the possibility of a loss of gardens to development, but also from the strong possibility of the loss of long-time garden leadership. Interview participants (including GreenThumb administrators) talked about how the new white residents would call GreenThumb to complain about the garden leadership (typically elder people of color). According to interview participants, newcomers complained: “the garden leaders were rude and did not keep the garden open, elder garden leaders were not utilizing the space, and hence they asked GreenThumb to change leaders.” Another community gardener, an African American woman and longtime resident of central Brooklyn, recounted the sentiments of the community members when whites entered the garden: “You’ll hear it whispered, ‘Don’t let the white people in,’ you know, that’s what they say. You find that to be true. I know one gentleman, his garden was in the Park Slope area, and he told me that’s what happened over there. They [white people] came and they took over.”

This taking over can occur through white gentrifiers occupying the garden space, but it can also occur through imposing their cultural norms on how the gardens are to be used, as occurred in Astoria. Some participants disclosed that white newcomers complained to GreenThumb regarding “noise” when gardeners had community events like block parties. Demetrice Mills, leader of the Brooklyn Queens Land Trust, shared that neighborhood block parties were like family reunions

to the African American community in Bed-Stuy, which underscores the importance of the ways in which attacks on these activities by gentrifiers was an attack on the Black community and Black cultural life. In response to gentrifiers saying they have improved Bed-Stuy, Mills said that the neighborhood was always good:

Everyone up and down the street, we looked out for each other, for each others' houses, for our children, if your child were to start running out of the gate, someone else would bring them back. Now, with a lot of the new faces, that ain't there. They walk by, and don't even say hello. They don't even look at you.

Many community gardeners also commented on the ancestral connection their communities had to working with the earth, even if white society did not recognize that connection or knowledge. Mills recounted: "all of us [founding gardeners] were from the South, so they know how to farm. We had our DNA tracked and we came from Cameroon and Sierra Leone, and we were farmers. And to this day we are farmers. So that's in our blood." Displacement from these spaces for gardeners is therefore a dispossession that disconnects them from their cultural and ethnoracial identities and roots. Additionally, instead of recognizing the importance of ancestral and cultural knowledge, the white newcomers often ignored the older gardeners' experiences, such as assuming that the longtime gardeners did not know to take certain precautions with soil testing (as supported by several interview participants). Beyond denial of the residents' agricultural knowledge and experiences, gentrifiers either did not know of or were dismissive of the political history and significance of the gardens as hard-won spaces against planned shrinkage that manifest people of color's right to the city. Karen Washington, former head of the New York City Community Gardening Coalition, said:

Urban agriculture is turning into a white hippie movement . . . they [the newer urban farmers] are coming into established gardens and co-opting the work that those gardeners had done in the past . . . these [newer urban farmers] weren't even born at that time . . . [Many of the newcomers] have no idea what the history is about.

Gentrifiers also engaged in microaggressions against long-time gardeners through presuming that white bodies will improve the community while Black bodies are what is holding it back. A longtime community member and gardener shared a story of how she was recounting the history of their garden to a group of newer members, one of whom was white. That particular garden was on a piece of property that was previously owned by an African American family who had a successful business in the community. The white newcomer was surprised and said that she thought there was a “crack house” on the lot before the garden. This participant revealed this story as an example of how the white people had a *single story* of the community (Adichie 2009), assuming the longtime community members tolerated and/or promoted violence in their communities while viewing the community through a deficit lens, which ignores the strengths and talents of the longtime community members (Tuck 2009).

According to the longtime community members, the gentrifiers used this *deficit model* as a way to justify the displacement and cooptation of longtime gardeners. A longtime resident and gardener articulated this poignantly:

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

The conflicts within the gardens between long-term residents of color and white gentrifiers are reflected in and reflective of a broader media landscape that embraces urban agriculture as a legitimate white space while criticizing or stigmatizing the community gardening of people of color (Reynolds and Cohen 2016). These class and race inequities

become apparent when examining which resources are considered acceptable to start community gardens and urban agriculture projects. For instance, Karen Washington had this critique:

Urban agriculture has shifted focus towards efforts like rooftop farms, hydroponics, aquaponics, and all those approaches take lots of lots of money [thousands of dollars in startup costs] that people of color don't have. They [the more recent urban farmers] make it seem like growing on the ground in soil is dangerous because of contaminants, but they don't realize that community gardens build raised beds and create and bring in compost.

Indeed, the *New York Post* ran a few articles defaming community gardens run by people of color during the summers of 2014, which lent credence to Washington's comments (Buiso 2014a, 2014b). The articles had photos of Black gardeners in Brooklyn, such as the Hart to Hart community garden in Bed-Stuy, growing "toxic" food that the *Post* claims was high in lead. One interview participant thought the *Post* was running this story to create the case to destroy more gardens for development by dismissing the contributions of gardeners and even defaming them. The articles did not discuss any white-run urban farms, only people of color-run community gardens. In fact, gardeners affiliated with ENYF!, discussed in the section below, wrote a public response criticizing the *Post* articles as being inaccurate and a misrepresentation of the facts (Vigil 2015). David Vigil, East New York Farms! Project Director, went on to describe the ways in which the gardeners were aware of the lead issue and were actively taking measures to remediate and improve soils through tests and the use of compost. Despite the gardeners' critique, the *Post* article reinforced a common sentiment in the media that frames white urban gardeners as hip and cool (such as from a 2010 *New York* magazine article on the subject) whereas the faces of "contaminated" and "toxic" community gardens were people of color.³ What is of additional significance here is that the article did not frame the story as an environmental or food justice issue rooted in institutional racism, but used the lead issue as a way to criticize and delegitimize the community-building practices of people of color and their use of and right to this space.

Overall, interview participants repeatedly talked about how gentrification destroyed the strong community bonds that existed in their neighborhoods where community members used to care for each other, relations that the community gardens previously helped to nurture. Instead, they believe that gentrification has made the culture of neighborhoods more individualistic and transient while further marginalizing Black cultural traditions through the urban agriculture practices of gentrifiers as well as the cultural practices of non-gardening gentrifiers.

The Community Gardens of East New York: Against Displacement, For Food Justice

East New York is located in northeast Brooklyn, just south of the rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods of Bed-Stuy and Bushwick. It is a working-class community of color and has a long history of disinvestment tied to redlining, blockbusting, urban renewal, planned shrinkage, and the *war on drugs* (Thabit 2005). It is also home to a vibrant community gardening movement that encompasses more than sixty community gardens and the food justice organization East New York Farms! (ENYF!) (Daftary-Steel and Gervais 2014). The gardens of East New York are similar to those in Bed-Stuy, both emerged through the grassroots sweat equity efforts of residents to convert vacant land and trash-filled lots into functional social spaces. During the 1970s through the 1990s, the community was hit hard by City Hall's strategy of planned shrinkage, which bulldozed blocks and blocks of housing into rubble and enforced austerity on the education, transportation, and public safety institutions in the community (Thabit 2005). Rather than return to the Caribbean or the American South, as City officials desired, residents dug in their heels and worked to improve the community.

There were several reasons that resident activism took the form of community gardens. First, due to a history of disinvestment, East New York has very few parks, public squares, and public gathering places in general. City Hall suggests 2.5 acres of open space per 1,000 residents, but East New York's ratio is only 0.614 acres, less than 25 percent of this recommendation (Savitch-Lew 2015). In such an environment, community gardens became de facto community parks and public spaces. Second, many gardeners grew up on farms or in farming cultures—in

the American South, Western Africa, Southern Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean—and wanted to maintain these traditions in New York City. For instance, while many gardeners grew primarily for themselves, neighbors, and coworkers, and sold to residents at the ENYF! farmers' markets, quite a few gardeners were interested in commercial growing at a much larger scale for the community. One of these gardeners is Andre, a Guyanese immigrant:

I grew up on a farm the baby of twelve. My dad was a farmer but the town was built around bauxite mining so there was not much farming out there. Yet there was big money at the mine, high wages, engineers, people with education. My dad had acres, acres and acres of pumpkins and corn . . . We all worked the farm. I sell at the table [the gardeners' share table at the ENYF! farmers market], squash, cucumber, you know . . . but I want more land so I can sell and make some money. There's so much land around I want to talk to them [ENYF!] about growing more, commercially.

Another reason for the flourishing of resistance through community gardens is that many East New York residents were unhappy with the quality of produce, and the food in general, that was available in the local grocery stores. Referring to such produce as “second-hand foods,” residents turned to growing food in their community gardens to contest the low-quality foods offered by the conventional food system in East New York. Beverly, a longtime gardener from Barbados, speaks to why growing food became so important:

East New York is one of the lower income sections of New York State with high rates of diabetes, obesity, and high blood pressure, and all those have to do with food. That was one of the reasons for getting involved, helping the community to enhance their health. Look at how many fast food places are in walking distance, McDonalds, Checkers, Burger King, White Castle. Even go to the supermarkets like the Western Beef over there (points down the road) and you see what people put in their shopping carts. They have got six boxes of noodles and eight boxes of doughnuts and you have a bunch of fast food macaroni and cheese, which I love and all that, but there is not an onion, an apple, a garlic or anything in that shopping cart and you will see it ring up and there is nothing there but starch.

Residents' sweat equity initiatives have subsequently been scaled up and strengthened by the food justice organization ENYF! that emerged out of an asset-based participatory planning project (Daftary-Steel and Gervais 2014; Sbicca and Myers 2017). The organization uses food as a conduit to build community-based power through running a social justice-oriented youth program, maintaining several urban farms, networking with more than thirty food-producing gardens, operating two seasonal farmers' markets, and providing workshops, technical expertise, labor, and land to residents to grow and sell food. Notably, the organization is housed within the United Community Centers (UCC), a social justice- and racial justice-oriented community center with roots in the area dating back to the 1950s. ENYF!'s location within UCC has been central to its cultivation of a food justice politics and its attempts to use food to build stronger community bonds (Sbicca and Myers 2017). Former ENYF! Project Director, Sarita Daftary-Steel, underscores how this shapes ENYF!'s youth program:

We believe it's important for youth to understand that urban agriculture in East New York rose out of a painful history of racial discrimination, disinvestment, and urban decline. With this historical background they can better understand the significance of gardens as a source of pride, and the systemic forces that created segregated, impoverished neighborhoods like East New York. (Daftary-Steel 2015)

East New York, unlike Astoria and Bed-Stuy, has not generally been subject to gentrification or redevelopment pressures and the community is still predominantly working class and people of color, with only 3 percent of the population identifying as white—the vast majority of whom are long-term residents (Myers' calculations, ACS 2012–2016). Consequently, East New Yorkers have been left alone to cultivate a vibrant and strong community gardening network that celebrates people of color, grows food by and for the community, and combats inequitable food access in their community. Nevertheless, this all began to change in 2014, with the unexpected announcement that Mayor de Blasio's affordable housing initiative would include the upzoning of a two-hundred-block section around the Broadway Junction transit hub at the convergence of East New York, Bushwick, and Bed-Stuy. After the announcement,



Figure 11.2. Numerous garden plots growing tomatoes, corn, hot peppers, collards, and callaloo in the Hands and Heart Garden. Photo by Justin Sean Myers.

housing prices increased dramatically, rental prices began to look Bushwick-esque, and real estate speculation became an increasing problem (Center for NYC Neighborhoods 2016; Savitch-Lew 2016, 2017).

Because ENYF! sees their food work as rooted in community economic development, social justice principles, and countering institutional racism, they have become involved in opposing the upzoning through their parent organization, UCC. UCC is a core member of the Coalition for Community Advancement (CCA), an umbrella organization of community groups in East New York that has collaborated with a panoply of community- and borough-based organizations throughout the city to mobilize residents to ensure that any upzoning benefits current residents, not just future ones.⁴ Roy Frias, who is a member of the coalition, as well as a former youth intern and current Youth Program Director at ENYF!, underscored that the coalition “came together as a pure reaction to the rezoning. We want to make sure that with this change, there’s an investment in the community” (Devlin 2017).

The CCA and its partner organizations mobilized against the upzoning through rallies and marches, community visioning sessions and workshops, attending City-led meetings and workshops, and meeting with borough-wide stakeholders and community organizers (including

those who had gone through the Williamsburg rezoning under Mayor Bloomberg). The CCA also threatened acts of civil disobedience, pushed local City Council members to vote against the plan, and put forth their own community-based plan for redevelopment. These actions built on alliances formed through previous battles in the community against Walmart and stop-and-frisk policing and for better funding of child care, public education, public transit, and affordable housing. The coalition-building of CCA, and the knowledge and connections built up by these organizations over decades of existence, was vital to residents' ability to continually put pressure on local politicians, city agencies, and the mayor while demanding an investment in long-term residents, not just gentrifiers. This entailed advocating for broader and deeper affordability when it came to housing and moving beyond a housing-only plan to include the creation of good paying jobs as well as significant reinvestment in community resources to address the decades and decades of disinvestment by municipal and private actors.

East New York was officially rezoned in 2016, but the organizing of community members, including community gardeners, resulted in a number of victories: more than \$250 million in funding for new and improved infrastructure, the creation of a community center, a city-run employment center, a public institution of higher education, a fund for distressed working-class homeowners, and deeper affordability targets for new construction. The CCA continues to fight for more units of and deeper levels of affordable housing for residents, the creation of robust anti-displacement policies, and the passage of policies to ensure that new commercial spaces will indeed create good jobs for residents.

Community Gardens and the Politics of Gentrification

While the story of gentrification is often told in a universalizing way, local factors shape how gentrification unfolds in urban neighborhoods. In the case of the community gardens analyzed in this chapter, there are significant similarities and differences that profoundly influence gardeners' relationship to gentrification processes.

Two important factors at play are whether gardens were formed prior to, during, or after gentrification, as well as the reasons for creating the gardens. In Bed-Stuy and East New York, community gardens emerged

in response to planned shrinkage and long before gentrification came to these areas. The result is that gardens are rooted in longer histories of community self-determination that resist the racialized and classed politics of the neoliberal city. This was not the case in Astoria, where the garden emerged during gentrification and is instead rooted in an anarchist politics of reclaiming land for the community. Additionally, the severity of planned shrinkage in Bed-Stuy and East New York led to vibrant community gardening movements with little to no competing claims to this land, whereas in Astoria, the garden under study is one of a small number of gardens in an area with little vacant land, and its existence was pitted against the desires of some long-term public housing residents for a park.

These neighborhood and land-use factors also played a large role in whether the gardens in existence embrace or oppose gentrification. In Astoria, the community in the most advanced stage of gentrification, the race and class composition of gardeners has been central to institutionalizing a green space vision that not only devalues and stigmatizes the food-producing practices of working-class, immigrant gardeners, and gardeners of color, but effectively depoliticizes the garden as a space that is connected to broader social struggles. In fact, in Astoria, the cultural, political, and economic capital of gentrifying gardeners increasingly makes the garden not merely a white-dominated space in a community of color but a space that is setting the groundwork for the remaking of the community around white norms and values. This was not the case in Bed-Stuy, where race and class tensions between gentrifiers and long-time residents of color were occurring inside and outside of the gardens, and where gentrifiers symbolically and materially devalued and sought to dispossess gardeners of their right to land and the community. In Bed-Stuy, gardeners of color resisted this attack by gentrifiers on their community practices, their ethnoracial ties to the land, and their sweat equity projects through a variety of practices of resistance. This resistance, however, was largely confined to the micro- or interpersonal level and did not scale up to a broader movement against gentrification during the time of study. A key variable here is that unlike in East New York, City Hall was not as clearly involved in gentrifying Bed-Stuy through a single yet massive upzoning process. It is potentially harder to mobilize people to contest gentrification if it is being done by a variety of smaller

real estate companies and developers, as it can make the process feel diffused and disparate and create a situation where it is unclear who residents should mobilize against and how. But if a centralized actor like City Hall is leading the way through zoning changes and if residents have a history of challenging City Hall, then mobilizing against this actor may be less daunting and more effective.

The gentrification experiences of gardeners in Astoria and Bed-Stuy are also quite different from those in East New York due to the geographic distance of East New York from Manhattan and Western Brooklyn, as well as the persistent “unsafe” image attached to this neighborhood compared to the other two, both of which reduced gentrification pressures.⁵ Another important factor is that East New York gardeners are particularly well connected to the food justice organization ENYF! and through it UCC and their strong connections to community-based organizations across New York City, which offers the capacity to mobilize and advocate on behalf of gardeners’ interests. What emerges from the story in East New York is that for community gardening to be able to slow down or halt gentrification requires it to embrace the values of social justice and equity while grounding itself in the community. This entails community gardens not being stand-alone entities only caring about green spaces or food production, but rather, entities firmly rooted in broader social networks and community organizing spaces and institutions. ENYF! and UCC by themselves would have been able to secure very little from the city and its top-down up-zoning process, but with the preexisting networks that UCC has built up over its fifty-plus year history, it was less of an uphill battle to challenge City Hall. The connections and networks that push gardeners beyond food politics is all the more critical because, without such connections and mobilization, gentrification has the potential to turn the gardens for which residents of color fought so long and hard into mere cultural amenities for gentrifiers.

NOTES

- 1 This event, including the quotes below, is drawn from Whitford (2015).
- 2 Data for this chapter were generated through three separate ethnographic studies conducted between 2011 and 2015. Aptekar’s research was part of a larger project investigating contested uses of public space in Astoria. Lal’s focused on urban agriculture movements in Bed-Stuy, while Myers’s focused on food justice activism

in East New York. As participant observers, we played a variety of roles, including being plot-sharing gardeners and volunteers with various organizations.

- 3 “What an Urban Farmer Looks Like” showed seven urban farmers and gardeners in the city and only one was a person of color, although all the urban farms in the article were located in predominantly communities of color (Stein 2010).
- 4 The CCA consists of Arts East New York, Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, Local Development Corporation of East New York, Highland Park Community Development Corporation, Muhammad Mosque 7c, North Brooklyn YMCA, Sabaoth Group, St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, United Community Centers, COFAITH Church, as well as local houses of worship, residents, and business owners. The CCA has partnered with New York Communities for Change (NYCC), Community Voices Heard (CVH), The Greater East New York Coalition, and The Real Affordability for All (RAFA) coalition, among others.
- 5 See Thabit (2005) for voyeuristic metaphors describing East New York as “the end of civilization.”

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