

FOLLOWING THE PLANT:
THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF A HMONG COMMUNITY GARDEN

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ABSTRACT

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Community gardens are one of the many kinds of urban agricultural green spaces that exist in the cities and suburbs across the United States. Current research credits them with producing a wide array of human and environmental. Especially touted are increased access to fresh produce and a reduction in food insecurity. This same research however, has tended to oversimplify the community garden, focusing for advocacy's sake solely on key social and environmental benefits. While it can be generally agreed upon that community gardens do produce social and ecological benefits, there is little research that focuses on the complex cultural, class, gender, ethnic, and generational intersections that affect the articulation and experience of these benefits.

Situating the Henderson Community Garden in Eureka California, a predominantly Hmong garden, within the existing literature on community gardens, I will explore the unique ways in which this garden is constituted through these complex cultural, ethnic, gendered and class intersections. Without much differentiation or attention to these intersecting complexities, the universalizing "community garden" heading can invisibilize key symbolic differences, including the degree to which some

gardens can institutionalize themselves; the plural articulations of benefits from aesthetic to cultural, and finally the varied extent to which some become conduits through which communities navigate toward more just and culturally appropriate urban food sheds.

Using a feminist political ecology framework, with an explicitly intersectional feminist analysis, this research project seeks to explore the multiple, and often competing ways in which the community garden space is understood. In addition to being a rich ecological and cultural space, the Henderson Community Garden is also a uniquely gendered space. While political ecology helps draw attention to the interconnectivity between the discursive, material, and ecological, using a feminist political ecology framework helps highlight the intersectional gendered nature of the garden. The purpose and value of this research project is to force a rethinking of these gardens spaces as plural, complex, and tension-filled cultural spaces that fall under the otherwise universalizing “community garden” heading. This rethinking is an essential component to illuminating not only the plurality of practices engaged in, ways of knowing and tending the land therein, but also for illuminating how access to natural resources through the community garden are always socially, culturally and politically mediated.

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INTRODUCTION

In Defense of Space

Speaking in defense of their small community garden space, the Hmong¹ women went one by one to the microphone in the City Hall chambers of the small town of Eureka, California.² They spoke in broken English as candidly as they could of poverty and the importance of growing food to sustain themselves, their families and their community, urging the city to spare their garden from plans to convert the space into a more capital intensive development. Garden advocates and Food for People³ staff spoke after the Hmong gardeners, touching on the topics of food security and the need to protect the few green spaces remaining within the urban core. Had the women gardeners been able to articulate themselves in Hmong, they would have been able to share more nuanced details about the importance of the garden space as they see it and experience it on a daily basis.

¹ The term “Hmong” refers to an Asian ethnic group who are labeled “Miao” in China and “Meo” in Thailand (Yang 2001, 165). Paoze Thao and Chimeng Yang claim that the term Hmong has misrepresented the existence of two culturally and linguistically distinct groups consisting of the Mong (*Mong Leng*) and Hmong (*Hmong der*) (2004). Although they are from the same ethnic group, neither is a subgroup of the other, rather each possesses their “own linguistic justification, authentic and indigenous self-identification” (Ibid., 9). For this reason several scholars use corrective terms to represent the two distinct groups. These include Mong/Hmong, Hmong/Mong, Mhong, Mong, M/hong or (H)mong (Thao and Yang 2001, Lemoine 2008). In my research I use Hmong when referring to both groups because this is the term most conventionally used, however my use of the term should not be interpreted as supporting a position in a debate between the Hmong and Mong communities. In my opinion, this is a debate that merits more attention.

² Eureka is the largest city in Humboldt County, one of the northernmost counties in California, roughly 100 miles south of the Oregon border and 270 miles north of San Francisco. Located adjacent to Humboldt Bay, the city has approximately 26,097 residents.

³ Food for People (FFP) is the designated official food bank site for Humboldt County. They coordinate distribution of food countywide throughout a number of different programs. FFP are part of the larger national Food Bank effort. At the time of this project FFP also managed the Henderson Community Garden.

They would have described a space in which whole families gather to work side by side at different tasks related to tending plants for a whole array of purposes including, but not limited to food production. They would have described a space that is particularly important to the women who are responsible for cultivating and tending to a wide range of plants that are inaccessible to them elsewhere. These plants, they might have added had they been asked, do not just provide sustenance to the families, but nourish their spiritual and cultural existences. In-depth socially and culturally contextual accounts of the garden space were, however, not heard the night the City Council reviewed the proposal to develop the land. Community members are given three closely timed minutes at the podium to make a case for things of importance to them. Without Hmong interpreters to help with the language barrier, families struggled with English to get their point across in a very limited amount of time. Forced to speak in a foreign tongue, the Hmong accounts of the garden provided only a glimpse of the unique importance the space has for them and their families.

On August 19th 2008, the Eureka City Council had placed the proposal to develop the parcel of land on which the Henderson Community Garden sits as an agenda item for review. This was, according to the city, part of a much needed city-wide effort to identify properties held by the municipality that could be sold for development in an effort to raise revenue to fill the city's growing debt. Identified by city staff through its parcel number as city-owned surplus property, this approximately one acre parcel of land was chosen for review because it was deemed a "prime" piece of property for commercial uses. Branded by its parcel number, the garden site was repeatedly referred to as both

“vacant” and in “non-use.” However, this same parcel of land has been a community garden since at least the 1970s and almost exclusively a Hmong garden since the 1980s. On the night of the City Council meeting, only three or four families came to defend the garden space although at that time more than 15 families tended garden plots there. Language and cultural barriers and an intimidating and long, drawn out City Council process hardly encouraged civic participation from anyone. During the Council session, even the agenda item was moved to be reviewed close to the end of the council session, to accommodate another unrelated issue that according to Council Member votes, required more time and discussion and therefore warranted being placed ahead. The fact that Hmong family members came to the City Council meeting early in the evening unprepared to sit through an entire council meeting with their whole families in tow was irrelevant to the city.

Despite the intricacies of city politics and the fact that hungry, tired children were running up and down the city halls, while husbands stood by, the families and community supporters that came bore witness to the women proudly standing at the microphone to passionately defend their garden space. According FFP, this had not been the first time the city had hoped to sell the property they acquired as a donation. Before the parcel became a community garden, local businessman Bill Pierson, then owner of Pierson’s Building Center, owned it privately. While in the process of selling the then vacant parcel for the development of an affordable housing unit, the surrounding neighborhood rose to vehemently oppose this proposal, and Bill Pierson instead bequeathed it to the city to be zoned public open space, something the area residents much preferred. Although it

was explicitly deeded to the city for use as public land and accordingly zoned public open space, history is quickly forgotten as Council seats change hands over time and elected officials are the first to facilitate or block the changing of zoning codes to suit their vision of the city space.

Although only anecdotal evidence exists, when the garden space came up for review again in 2008, rumor had it that an associate of one particular councilmember had their eye on “developing” the parcel. Despite the parcel having been bequeathed for public use, the plot on which the garden sits repeatedly makes its way onto the Council agenda as an item for review as the city repeatedly conceptualizes the land as underutilized. Although they are also recurrently reminded of the unique way in which the garden is currently made useful to the community, this particular social, cultural and gendered use garners less support than the potential economic value of the site and is itself not consistent with their limited definition of rightful uses for urban land. There is no municipal language to describe or value the social relations that occur within the garden space. According to the city, although they begrudgingly acknowledge that the land is in use, that use of the space is also consistent with their view of the parcel as being vacant.⁴ The parcel is simultaneously in use and described as vacant because that particular use of the land is of so little value to the city.

⁴ This is similar to what happens with “illegal” housing encampments. Although these encampments make use of city space as living quarters, that particular kind of use of city space is not condoned. By labeling that use of the land “illegal,” it can simultaneously be in “use” even while being described as vacant, easily facilitating the removal of encampments for more socially acceptable commercial developments.

The City Council's ability to label the space vacant stems from the systemic privilege enjoyed by Council members. Systemic privilege means they not only have elevated institutional access, but also the "cultural authority" and "agenda setting power" to define a situation and be taken seriously (Johnson 2001, 33). Allan Johnson describes agenda setting power as "having the ability to set agendas that reflect one's own self-interest" and cultural authority as "being in a position to make judgments about who gets heard versus who it's okay to ignore" (Ibid.). The systemic privileges enjoyed by the Council members therefore rely on the systemic and systematic oppression of social groups constructed and represented as 'other.' For example, by invisibilizing the garden members' productive use of the garden space, Council members exclude and devalue those productive uses and threaten to dispossess garden members of the space that provides positive contributions for their community. In the process of assessing their surplus properties, the municipal golf course never comes up for review and yet it, like the garden are identically zoned. As members of privileged social groups, Council members are able to define what is "good," "worthy," "productive," and therefore worth safeguarding, and what is ultimately dispensable (Ibid.).

Despite the city's repeated identification of the garden as "vacant" and "prime" for development, an alternate reality beyond this privileged description exists. The lived reality of the Henderson Community Garden as the Hmong garden members describe it, stands in stark contrast to both the City Council's view and those held by some of the neighbors adjacent to the garden. This particular parcel singled out by city staff as vacant and prime for development continues to house the Henderson Community Garden,

Eureka's only and longest standing community garden. Today the garden space continues to be a place where the Hmong reaffirm and maintain their agrarian cultural traditions, passing down cultivation techniques and a taste for their unique foods to their children, sustaining cultural continuity and creating important generational ties.

The garden can currently accommodate as many as 24 plots, the number of plots can oscillate as some request to have familial plots combined.⁵ The plots are roughly 600 to 700 square feet in size, allowing participants to grow large quantities of food, herbs, and medicinal plants⁶ for their families, for trade, informal sale and cultural practices year round. Through this research, I have had the great honor of hearing some of the more nuanced and contextually rich accounts about the garden as described by the garden members who experience it daily. For the past two years I have been conducting research on the Henderson Community Garden space, talking with the families that tend plots there about the rich meaning the garden has for them and what can be done to sustain the space according to their unique vision. The stories that garden members shared were not only more nuanced and detailed than what they could share during their limited time at the City Council meeting, their accounts have also been emerging as counter narratives to the view of the garden held by the non-profit agencies that manage it, the city that invisibilizes it, and the adjacent neighbors that judge it negatively. The complexities and

⁵ While conducting my research the garden could only accommodate 15-18 family plots.

⁶ The separation of plants into food, herbal, and medicinal categories is a little misleading, as the distinction made between them is not so sharp. According to several garden members, plants can possess multiple purposes depending on the part of the plant used, or the method in which it is prepared. Some plants are simultaneously used as food for sustenance, for flavor and as medicinal remedies.

tensions the Henderson Community Garden experiences also shed some light on the limitations of much of the prevailing literature on community gardens.

As I spent time in the garden, I began to think about the importance of understanding the garden as both a site of cultural production and moreover, a site culturally, socially and politically produced by diverse peoples. The particular meaning and implication of this community garden as a space produced by multiple and diverse people is not fully acknowledged by the wider community, nor is it fully acknowledged in the prevailing literature on community gardens. I began to realize that – in being a space produced by multiple people within a context of unequal relations of power often leads to some interpretations and practices within the garden space being silenced, or worse subjected to “corrective measures.” I began to wonder what implications do contested aspirations over the space have for garden members? In what ways do varied interpretations of the garden result in conflicts and misunderstandings? How do these conflicts play out on uneven ground? Does the urban political environment create processes that benefit some at the expense of others? How might these processes be cloaked and normalized? How is the garden space produced under different political economic conditions, unequal urban environments wherein multiple ideas of property, the environment and identity are differently constituted? And finally what positive results could come of a deeper understanding of the space? Might elevating an alternate understanding of the garden help transform the urban landscape into one that is more socially and politically just?

In this thesis I consider the on-the-ground, lived realities of the garden members as the most important starting point of analysis. In order to better comprehend the relationships between the garden and the community in which it is located, I focused my efforts on the place-specific elements of that space, attempting to move beyond the broad generalizations of physical and social benefits outlined by much of the literature, fanning my analysis outward to demonstrate how the situation of conflict surrounding the Henderson Community Garden, is in fact part of a larger urban sociopolitical process. In order to problematize the oversimplified way in which community gardens are studied and understood, I explore political ecology and adopt a feminist political ecology framework with an explicitly intersectional feminist analysis to help illuminate the intricate complexities and tensions the Henderson Community Garden embodies and the multiple and diverse ways the garden space is culturally, socially, and politically produced.

By conducting an in depth exploratory study of the Henderson Community Garden, in partnership, collaboration, and in solidarity with the garden members, I hope to elaborate on the importance of acknowledging some of the complex cultural, class, gender and generational dimensions of community gardens. When acknowledged, these intersecting dimensions not only enrich the prevailing focus, but also serve to highlight a plurality of ways that community gardens fit into, impact, and are impacted by the communities in which they are located. Taking into full consideration these intersecting dimensions also serves to highlight the inequities some garden spaces face. Garden spaces made useful by members of social groups who experience systemic oppression

based on their race, gender, sex, age, generation, class and refugee status routinely struggle to defend, legitimize and justify their practices. Whereas other social groups, especially social groups with structural advantages and other privileges, do not have to legitimize themselves or their practices. Their use of city space is advantaged, privileged and taken for granted as a norm. Systemic oppressions felt by some social groups and the systemic privileges enjoyed by others are both institutional and ideological, meaning they operate by and through social institutions that rely on the discriminatory dominance of certain taken for granted norms, values and beliefs (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2007). These taken for granted norms, values, and beliefs dominate for example, ideas around what city space should look like, how it should be organized and what practices within city space are valued.

Overlooking and invisibilizing the unique, highly technical knowledge and insights that the Hmong garden members possess, and the knowledge passed down inter-generationally from a long spiritual agrarian tradition, is not accidental. Rather, structural oppression and the associated delegitimization of their voices, knowledge and analysis is a result of the institutional operation of interlocking systems and ideologies of power, privilege and oppression. By focusing on the garden members' on-the-ground lived realities, these ideological and structural injustices can be exposed. Rendering the injustices visible will hopefully weaken their influence on the garden space, which is beset by contestation and a fragile balance between existence and annihilation. To analyze the complexity of the garden without getting to know the space, the people, and the conflicts they encounter, is to ignore the garden members' unique experiences and

understandings and reinforces the pattern of silence and systemic marginality that already exists.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Gardens Redefined

Much of the existing literature on community gardens associates them with a plethora of benefits. For example, community gardens are depicted as an effective urban agricultural strategy for tackling hunger, food insecurities and urban decay (Brown and Jameton 2000, Lawson 2005, Wakefield *et al.* 2007, Foster 2006, Williamson 2002). While many of the benefits supposedly derived from community gardens are anecdotal, some scholars make concerted efforts to quantify the benefits in a more scientific fashion, whether they are direct health benefits to humans through exposure to green space or indirect benefits accrued to property values adjacent to gardens (Voicu and Been 2008, Grogenewegen *et al.* 2006). Some researchers also suggest gardens aid in the maintenance of cultural traditions by providing spaces in which to cultivate plants that have deep cultural significance, allowing garden members to sustain culturally appropriate diets (Peña 2006, Mares and Peña 2010, Sheehan n.d., Bays 1994, Bays 1998).

Despite these many benefits however, community gardens can encounter significant challenges. Only a few researchers call our attention to some of the social tensions community gardens can be fraught with (Schmelzkopf 1995, Peña 2006, Mares

and Peña 2010). For example, Karen Schmelzkopf points out that community gardens can become “politically contested spaces” when tensions in the community mount over competing interests to develop the space for other purposes (1995, 364). Internal conflicts can also occur along racial and class lines amongst other intersecting axes of difference (Ibid., 376). In his discussion of the South Central Farm in Los Angeles California, Devon G. Peña suggests that tensions emerge over the seeming incompatibility of communal agricultural traditions being practiced in an otherwise capital-intensive urban environment (2006, 3).⁷ Agricultural traditions practiced for physical, cultural and spiritual sustenance can stand in stark contradiction to more common or dominant capital intensive uses of city space. Prior to being leveled by bulldozers, the fourteen acre South Central Farm was being cultivated by 360 families, both U.S. born Chicana/os and indigenous peoples from Mexico and Central America (Mares and Peña 2010, 244). Teresa Mares and Peña describe the South Central Farmers as being at the

center of a widening conflict over an urban commons that arose from the political economic context of contested urban land use politics. The over-valuation of urban spaces for commercial/industrial uses is the deeper cause of this conflict (Ibid., 247).

The agricultural traditions practiced within these garden spaces can also clash with narrow conceptions around what a community garden is “supposed” to look like.

⁷ The South Central Farm in Los Angeles, California faced similar issues of forced relocation to make room for a more capital-intensive purpose. Almost at the exact same time, a parallel controversy was also occurring in a not so distant Southeast Fresno California community, where the City Council there made plans to relocate a garden that was also tended predominantly by members of the Hmong community to make room for a police substation.

The Henderson Community Garden, much like the South Central Farm, can therefore be analyzed as a structurally and systemically marginalized community's demand to define and reshape city space for themselves in a manner of value to them, outside of both the capitalist mode of production and the homogenizing notion of what a community garden should look like. The unique values, visions and benefits garden members possess and derive from the space however, repeatedly receive less support, or even recognition by those who see in the garden a failure to conform to the norms of community gardens, and receive less support from municipalities who claim the space is underutilized and who in many cases can claim ultimate ownership of the parcel of land on which a garden sits.

Most research on community gardens has a tendency to overlook, downplay or oversimplify these social tensions, instead advocating for garden spaces by highlighting the generalized benefits they produce for both humans and the environment. Community gardens are subsequently homogenized through this focus on the assumed universal benefits. Even the "community garden" heading, a title given to multiple types of garden spaces, reveals little about their complexity and heterogeneity. The tendency to universalize community garden benefits ignores the multiplicity and diversity of these spaces, including the diverse levels of support and access to resources that ultimately enable, or disable, garden members from being able to legitimize their use of city space for wide ranging purposes. The degree to which some of these garden spaces become conduits through which communities navigate toward more sustainable, just and culturally appropriate urban foodsheds also varies widely. Reasons for engaging in urban agriculture and cultivating certain plants within the community garden setting are not

immediately articulated in terms of food production and decreasing food insecurity, but can also include more nuanced articulations that span medicinal, cultural and spiritual reasons (Peña 2006, Mares and Peña 2010, Sheehan n.d., Corlett, Dean and Grivetti 2003, Bays 1994, Bays 1998).

Besides exhibiting a plurality of urban agricultural practices and purposes, garden spaces can be important cultural sites. As spaces of identity making, and knowledge production, each site is potentially influenced by importantly complex and intersecting axes of difference including, race, culture, class, ethnic, and generational categories amongst others that produce even more key symbolic differences. The dominant framing within the conventional literature around community gardens loses these nuances of difference, masking both diversity and social conflict. The generalized focus on environmental and social benefits presented by much of the literature on community gardens homogenizes potentially diverse spaces, failing to acknowledge their multiplicity, the diverse ways in which they manifest within a given place, and the conflicts and tensions that can mount around their presence. This homogenizing framework does not allow for an adequate engagement with the politics of difference, specifically for garden spaces like the Henderson Community Garden that do not conform to the norms the existing literature presents.

From Political Ecology to Feminist Political Ecology

Political ecology can be described as both a framework and a methodology for interrogating socio-environmental tensions and conflicts that revolve around access to

resources and threats to livelihoods (Peet and Watts 2004, Robbins 2006, Neumann 2005, Paulson and Gezon 2005). Although political ecology has traditionally been employed to investigate resource and livelihood related conflicts in Third World rural societies, with an emphasis on interrogating societal-environmental tensions there, it is nonetheless a framework that fits the urban setting well. The tensions that revolve around the Henderson Community Garden have many similarities with Third World, rural, socio-environmental tensions. Third World political ecology chronicles cases that deal with ecological damage and degradation, dwindling and scarce resources, livelihood struggles and community displacement.

In the urban core, community gardens are scarce resources, with garden members battling for legitimacy, for a right to define and shape city space through the lived practice of gardening there. Many garden members are also tied to livelihood struggles wherein communities⁸ battle to sustain culturally significant land-use practices that enable them to survive and thrive. The land use practices engaged in gardens like the Henderson Community Garden and the South Central Farm result in ecological islands rich in biodiversity. Displacement from these garden spaces often means the land is prized for more capital-intensive developments that would result in ecological damage

⁸ The topic of community is an important and reoccurring one within political ecology debates. The practice of invoking “community” in terms of a unified whole however, needs to be problematized, because communities are in actuality more complex. Intersecting categories of difference inflect how members experience community differently, what parts of community life they value and articulate as important (Peet and Watts 2004: 24). Sharon Bays makes a similar observation, cautioning us to be cognizant about the discourse on culture, often made as though culture were also unified, and equally experienced by members of a cultural community (1998). Cultural identities are better understood as plural, fluid and contested and should more explicitly be identified as “shaped by the specific experience of gender, class and generation as well as ethnicity” (Ibid., 42).

and diminished biodiversity. Much like in the Third World rural setting, garden members face and fight displacement, privatization, enclosure and ecological damage.

Urban political ecology has taken a back seat to the rural setting in part because of an entrenched belief that draws a line between the city and the “natural” world. Often conceptualized as a human made environment, the city *is* nonetheless an environment, a biophysical as well as a social environment. Indeed, even ecologists are beginning to understand that urbanized areas are complex and interdependent ecosystems (Svendensen & Campbell 2008, Alberti et al., 2003). Unless much credence is placed on the limiting city-nature dichotomy, the political ecology framework functions nicely to interrogate tensions that mount over resource conflicts that occur in urban core. Cities are after all, as Paul Robbins points out, political ecologies (2006, 216). They are produced social *and* ecological spaces that should be examined with the same principles with which any political and ecological space is examined, regardless of its rural or urban location. As an analytic framework used to explain “human-environment” interactions, political ecology can therefore be applied to the urban core as well as to more rural areas (Neumann 2005, 6).

Steve Hincliffe suggests that cities are not simply places where nature ceases to be, rather there is an inseparable connection between the urban and the natural (1999, 138-9). Rather than resorting to the either-or, nature-city binary, Hincliff suggests there are a variety of city-nature mixes. Urban agricultural endeavors are a prime example of these urban-nature mixes (Ibid., 168). Cultivation within city limits explodes the boundaries of the city-nature dichotomy, challenging the meaning of the urban landscape

as devoid of nature and nature as having to be untouched by human interaction.

Cultivation techniques, and traditional agroecological cultivation in particular, constitute a kind of people powered nature, where urban agroecological practices can be said to increase the biodiversity of city life. A big difference between interrogating the city-as-ecosystem and political ecology is the incorporation of an explicit engagement with unequal power dynamics as a major contributor to the shaping of the urban environment. While ecologists such as Erika Svendsen and Lindsay Campbell focus on the way in which the urbanization process “affects the heterogeneity of the landscape,” less time is spent focusing on the heterogeneity of the urbanization process itself and the way in which unequal relations of power can result in unjust ecological landscapes (2008, 3).

The core principle of political ecology has been to show how ecological problems and environmental degradation are essentially “social and political” in nature, requiring an analysis that delves into the complex relationship between the social, political *and* ecological (Neumann 2005, 5). Political ecology therefore focuses attention on an always shifting dialectical relationship between the physical and social, between nature and society (Neumann 2005, Robbins 2006, Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003, Peet and Watts 2004). The spheres that constitute the physical and social, nature and society are not distinct and separate spheres, but rather interconnected. Political and social forces, filled with tension and conflict and constantly in motion, propel this dialectical relationship. Rather than focusing solely on the ecology of the community garden, the political ecology framework insists that the ecology of the garden does not stand outside of the socio-political, material, and discursive worlds in which it is situated. All of these forces

interact to produce the unique tensions the garden experiences and it is on these forces combined, that awareness is needed.

The ecological, material and discursive intersect in a multiplicity of ways, and most of these intersections coalesce in culturally, socially and politically mediated and context specific ways. The importance of pointing out the mediated nature of this intersecting mode of analysis is to always keep present the fact that the confluences never occur on neutral ground. Power differentials overlay whose understanding of the space is legitimized and whose claim overrides the other existing claims to the same space. For the Hmong community, the ecological, material and discursive coalesce differently than they do for the city or the surrounding neighborhood, for example. Political ecology draws attention to unpacking the power-imbued nature of these intersecting categories. This entails challenging objectivity, making power differentials evident, and exposing the historical and cultural production behind how these converge, with particular attention toward interrogating whose symbolic meaning of the space is legitimized and whose is silenced in the process (Neumann 2005, Swyngedouw & Heynen 2003).

Social-environmental tensions that emerge from the interstices between the material, discursive and ecological are decidedly political, producing unequal environments. Political ecology is about exposing the normative work within and between these spaces, and searching for the political-economic processes that drive them (Neumann 2005, 155). An understanding of the changing ecology of the garden space is enriched for example, by the inclusion of a material analysis that includes a focus on the influence of the political economy, the state, market forces, laws, policies, etc. and a

discursive analysis that focuses on the diverse cultural and social politics of symbolic meaning (Ibid., 9). According to Erik Swyngedouw and Nikolas C. Heynen for example, a political ecological analysis is explicitly attentive to the way in which “economic, political, social and ecological” factors are inextricably linked together in processes that shape environments from rural to urban (2003, 898). As an integrated and relational approach, the political ecology framework therefore provides a useful road map for dissecting the “power-laden socioecological” processes of the urban political environment, helping to denaturalize the way in which these can produce inequitable environments (Ibid., 898).

Political ecology also offers a fruitful lens for transcending the limitations of most of the prevailing literature on community gardens. Tending to subsume otherwise diverse and plural garden spaces under a universalizing heading, much of the prevailing literature on community gardens not only fails to differentiate between gardens and the varied significance gardens have to members, but also fails to account for why some are disproportionately targeted for more commercial developments, and what implications this has for the members who use the garden space. In failing to delve into the social and political environment in which a garden is situated, the ways in which these spaces are appropriated and developed for other purposes are too easily naturalized and normalized as inevitable outcomes of a neutral urbanization process. Urban environmental change processes are never neutral however, as these processes are “spatially differentiated and highly uneven” so that the social consequences of change are felt most keenly by

marginalized groups who have to cope with, and or resist the attempted changes proposed for their spaces (Ibid., 910).

As a theory of knowledge, critique, and methodology, political ecology also stresses the relevance of historically contextualizing these spaces and places of conflict (Peet and Watts 2004, 7). Advocating that researchers move beyond an analysis of the particular situation at hand entails interrogating the way in which history is not just a thing of the past, but also, a relevant piece of the puzzle shaping the present context. Fanning outward also entails building an analysis that links the micro-level community conflict to macro-level global conflicts, drawing lines of interconnection between them. This is part of what Roderick Neumann (2005, 6) refers to as a “multiscaler” approach and Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003, 912) call the “territorial scaler” approach, as both incorporate relevant temporal and spatial analysis that fan outwards from a given situation. This approach was a response by political ecologists to the practice of analyzing ecological damage, resource depletion, and environmental changes, and relating these only to the most proximal causes. This outdated approach not only failed to incorporate the relevance of history in shaping the present, but also failed to look at the bigger picture, of which history is only a part. Most political ecology frameworks therefore, fan their analyses outward from a given place, recognizing the influence of patterns of historical continuity and recognizing the influence of an increasingly globalized world (Neumann 2005, 42).⁹

⁹ There is an inherent danger however, in fanning an analysis outward in a linear fashion in search of causation. Paul Robbins cautions for example, that fanning out in a linear fashion can inadvertently create an oversimplified causal “chain of command” that moves ever upward to

Fanning an analysis outward entails paying attention to the broader processes of which the particular situation being analyzed is just an embedded piece of a larger puzzle. Although this research, for example, began with the exploration of the tensions that emerged from the potential loss of the Henderson Community Garden space, the issue, as is the case with many conflicts surrounding environmental changes, became more broadly defined and proved to be deeply embedded within a broader set of issues (Thomas-Slater, Wangari and Rocheleau 1996, 300). Single issues quickly fade into the background to reveal a complex set of interconnected issues, issues related to the gendered, classed, ethnic and cultural impact of municipal policies and the right of a structurally marginalized community to stake a claim in alternately defining city life. Indeed, the multiple and interconnected issues revolving around the Henderson Community Garden are about a community's struggle to alternately shape the contours of city space outside of the capitalist paradigm of production by redefining their civic engagement through the act of gardening.

As a framework for analyzing the Henderson Community Garden, political ecology on its own, however, is insufficient for exploring the mounting tensions around the garden space. When I began working in the Henderson Community Garden and with the garden members, it became apparent early on that the garden space was predominantly a women-centered space. As I spent time there, I noticed that it was mostly Hmong women who tended the garden year-round, leading me to begin thinking

blame a monolithic "global capitalism" (2006, 210-211). Fanning outwards does not need to be conceived in this unidirectional manner. It can be conceptualized in a more complex way, as an "anatomy of networks" that is attentive to patterns of exploitation *and* resistance (Ibid., 212).

of the space as a cultural, political, ecologically *gendered* space. Barbara Thomas-Slater, Esther Wangari and Dianne Rocheleau draw our attention to the importance within political ecology to account for “gendered space” (1996, 292). Because the Henderson Community Garden is a highly gendered space, an intersectional gendered analysis should figure prominently when interrogating its political ecological surroundings.

Across communities, spaces are socially and culturally gendered in a multitude of ways. For example, kitchen spaces are often associated as being gendered women’s spaces. The Henderson Community Garden is a similar example of a gendered space, a place not exclusively of women’s work, but nonetheless a place where women primarily have “rights of control and access” to the resources within the space, providing them with sources of power in their community (Ibid., 293). A deeper understanding of the Henderson Community Garden should account for the gendered nature of the space, the gendered benefits accrued to members, and the resulting gendered impacts of development. Development and privatization policies may not explicitly target gender, but by targeting a gendered space for development, they run the risk of further entrenching the social isolation and subordination of a portion of the community comprised of the women who rely on the space for familial and community survival (Ibid., 301).

Making gender, as it intersects with other categories of difference such as race, class, age, refugee status, central to this research is part of a larger effort to reorient attention to the silencing potential that power differentials can have on the multiple ways the garden is produced, understood and experienced. The city and community wide

interpretations of the Henderson Community Garden are not only more audible, they also enjoy more legitimacy than the garden members' interpretations of the same space that they use daily, often finding themselves on the defensive about their particular practices and use of the space. Power differentials overlay whose understanding of the space is legitimized and whose claim overrides the other existing claims to the same space.

Interrogating power differentials can therefore help illuminate strategic silences that are often based largely on a lack of in depth context about who, and how, and for what purposes the space is alternately being put to use. There is for example, both a silence in the literature on community gardens for failing to draw attention to the complexity of their diversity and the tensions this can engender, and a silence in the urbanization processes for naturalizing and normalizing change, which more accurately results in an inattention to the effect of change on structurally marginalized groups. Using a feminist political ecology framework, one that foregrounds an intersectional feminist analysis, this research project will explore some of the multiple and diverse ways the Henderson Community Garden is culturally, socially and politically produced and what implications this has for garden members.

A feminist political ecology can introduce an explicitly intersectional lens to the political ecology of the Henderson Community Garden, and better acknowledge the garden not only as a unique women-centered space, but also the potential gendered, raced, classed impacts of its development. The added intersectional perspective to political ecology calls for an analysis of the complex and intersecting ways “gender interacts with class, race, culture” amongst other axes of difference to shape the way we

interpret the “environment” around us (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter and Wangari 1996, 5). As I spent time at the Henderson Community Garden, for example, it was not uncommon to see mothers and grandmothers tending the land with their children and grandchildren. I found that older and middle-aged women spent the most amount of time tending and cultivating the space, and older and middle-aged women reporting knowing more about certain medicinal plants, adding a generational component to intersect with the gender analysis. It was also only women who spoke in defense of the garden at the City Council meeting, all citing the same “economic” reason for defending the garden, adding a class component to intersect with both gender, generation, race, refugee status amongst others.

While gender, as an axis of difference, provides a starting point of analysis, gender never stands in isolation but rather, should always be examined as intersected by these other categories of difference. The intersection of these categories informs, and is informed by, institutional policies and practices creating interlocking systems of power, privilege and oppression. The political ecology framework invites us to interrogate these complex relations of power that produce inequitable environments, while feminist political ecology urges that researches look at the interconnected relationship of gender and many-if not most- environmental change issues. Dianne Rocheleau, Barbara Thomas-Slayter and Esther Wangari point out for example, that feminist political ecologists have been drawing attention to the fact that across diverse communities, women are often uniquely situated with rights and responsibilities to “procure and manage resources for the household and community,” and that many of these resources

come directly from the environment (1996, 10). Women across communities are therefore articulating a deep interdependence with the environment that provides for them, for their families and their whole community. This is precisely the situation occurring at the Henderson Community Garden, where the multiple responsibilities of the Hmong women who tend the land there are uniquely tied to the very existence of the garden space itself.

In order to succinctly unravel the “power geometries” that produce inequitable environments, those that benefit and those that are disadvantaged by them should be examined along these axes of difference (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003, 911). For example, one can either assume that city policies are neutral, and only happen to disadvantage the garden space and its members because they occupy city owned property, or alternately, one can examine more deeply the embedded property regimes that structurally privileged and powerful social groups have more access to and that do not allow for alternate uses of city space. In the case of the Henderson Community Garden, the portion of the community that actively carve out that small space for the sustenance of their livelihoods and the continuity of their cultural practices are the women of the Hmong community, and therefore a deeper examination should look at gender as one of the axes of difference that disadvantages their unique use of city space.

The city’s imperative to raise revenue is articulated as a ‘right’ to develop the parcel on which the community garden is located because it is city owned surplus property; the parcel belongs to the municipality. The city government saw no controversy in making this claim to the space, couching their right to appropriate the

space in completely neutral terms supported by municipal and private property laws. This is one of the ways in which the members of the City Council exercise their systemic privilege. They have access to institutions of power that allow them to accrue benefits, to shape and define city space in ways that advantage themselves at the expense of, and through the appropriation of the space for purposes that align with their goals and vision regardless of the people who use it currently.

A feminist political ecology helps acknowledge the myriad of ways in which these spaces of environmental change and conflict are symbolically, politically and culturally experienced and understood. The garden *is* a political ecological space, and moreover a *gendered* political ecological space. The Hmong garden members articulate their right to the space in completely different terms than the city does, and the struggle between them and the wider community to define the best use of the space does not occur on neutral ground. Michael Watts and Richard Peet point out that communities create attachment to places by territorializing a history that legitimizes their claims to those places (2004, 24). In the case of the Henderson Community Garden, the Hmong community have “*re-territorialized*”¹⁰ their history and traditions to a new space, making claims to it that are not afforded the same protections as the city, who can claim ultimate ownership under current property regimes (Peña 2006, 7).

In their opening chapter, Diane Rocheleau *et al.* point out for example, three themes they deem vital to the analysis of socio-environmental conflicts such as those

¹⁰ In his discussion of the South Central Farm, Peña points out that the “reproduction of original and hybrid” forms of agrarian practices that take place in the garden represent a “*transnationalization of a sense of place*” (2006, 6). In other words, for migrant and refugee communities, history and traditions are more aptly “re-territorialized” to new places (Ibid., 7).

experienced within and around the Henderson Community Garden (1996, 4-5). These include, “*gendered knowledge, gendered environmental rights and responsibilities,*” and “*gendered environmental politics and grassroots activism [emphasis in original]*” (Ibid.).¹¹ These three critical themes to feminist political ecology are essentially born out of an intentional foregrounding of the gendered dynamic of many social-environmental spaces and the tensions experienced around those spaces. The Henderson Community Garden is a gendered space, where women often direct both their children’s and their husband’s activities. Although whole families spend time helping in the family plots, the year-round tending of the plants is the domain and responsibility of the women.¹² The garden is a place of women’s work and empowerment, where they gain, hold, and share knowledge about plants and plant properties, knowledge that is passed down to them, and derived from their years of agrarian responsibilities. The Hmong women’s *gendered* knowledge comes from their customary *gendered* rights and responsibilities to resources within the garden space, both of which can result in a *gendered* response or a gendered grassroots activism to the threats made that encroach on their space.

These dimensions of the garden confirm that gender is an important starting point for exploring the Henderson Community Garden. However, this realization must also

¹¹ Both Rocheleau *et al.*, (1996) and Robbins (2004) stress the importance of not essentializing, or rooting in biology, gendered differences in knowledge, responsibilities and values. Rather they and others importantly note, that differences along gendered lines have more to do with social and cultural constructions and not with inherent biological differences between men and women.

¹² It was mostly during seasonal changes that whole families could be seen working together in the garden space, clearing it up and preparing the plots. I was told through several interviews that men were often tasked with the heavier duties of prepping the family garden plots. These prepping duties occurred year round but corresponded most to seasonal changes.

include an explicitly intersectional analysis that recognizes the multiplicity and intersectionality of identities. Age, marital status, class and other categories intersect with gender to equally influence customary rights, access to resources, levels of knowledge and responsibilities. Gender intersected by these other categories of difference, mark how the space is used, understood, valued, and defended by garden participants. More than just plants are cultivated in the garden space, cultural identities, knowledge, rights, responsibilities and activism are all tended to in the garden space, making it an important site of community empowerment and survival.

In addition to the need to acknowledge the intersectional gendered dimension of socio-environmental conflicts, Thomas-Slater *et al.* point out a need to explicitly show how the environment and survival are linked (1996, 289). The Henderson Community Garden is a space in which these links are explicit, as garden participants link “livelihoods and the conditions necessary to meet basic subsistence needs,” to their survival, and the survival of the garden space itself (Ibid.). Policies and decisions made over the garden space that do not consider these links can inadvertently and disproportionately affect the women who are responsible for, and dependent upon the physical, spiritual and emotional resources the space provides.

The practices the Hmong women engage in within the garden, not only as women but as particularly raced, classed, ethnic, refugee women, not only actively create spaces for familial and community survival, but also reshape civic life through the act of gardening in the urban core. The city staff and council only see the community garden’s added value in very narrow terms. The primary value attributed to the space, according

to the city, adheres from its potential as a capital investment. The only other added values articulated by the city staff and council members conform to the limited lexicon of most of the prevailing literature on gardens, namely that these garden spaces can sometimes increase adjacent property values and have the potential to increase access to healthy foods for participants. Neither of these added values to the space incorporate the perspectives of the women who have for the past twenty years, transformed that space into a place of empowerment and community survival.

METHODS

Epistemology: The Politics of Social Location

The conflict over the garden space was not the only thing that drew me to conduct research there. My personal passion for gardening, my activist passion for food justice, and my experience as a migrant to this country drew me to look deeper into the struggle over the garden as one that encompassed many other struggles; struggles over multiple and simultaneous meanings of identity, culture, gender, and establishing legitimacy for oneself as part of a marginalized ethnic group. As a woman of Mexican descent, a transmigrant¹³ who traverses social and political borders in varying ways, I have always

¹³ A brief introductory distinction between the words *transmigrant*, *transmigration*, and *immigrant* reveals that, while immigration is implicit of a permanent move from one country to another “evoking images of permanent rupture,” on the other hand “transnationalism” more accurately describes “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al. 1997, 3).

been interested in the complexities of identity and plural positionalities as they pertain to multi-generational and multi-ethnic migrant experiences, and the ways bodies laden with symbolic meaning travel across borders.

Not having been raised in the United States nor in Mexico (my country of origin), and having arrived to the United States from Mexico via Vienna, Austria, has enabled me to witness and experience what zigzagging across multiple borders, negotiating multiple cultures, and speaking in multiple tongues can be like. One of my goals in this project is to allow the perspectives I have gained from these places of *origins* to inform my research and writing. I do not mean to imply that I have a privileged vantage point from which to write, nor the entitlement to write “*the definitive piece*” on the Hmong people, nor do I presume to have a special license with which to *speak for* the Hmong people (hooks 1989, 46). Instead, by positioning myself and highlighting my own social location, I aim to disclose where the research is coming from, how I arrived to it, why it is my passion, and why it is a work in progress, not an end in and of itself. Additionally, by positioning myself, I am disclosing the ways in which the “subjective me” arrived at the starting gate (and continues through this process), replete with theory, experience, and passion, not objectively devoid of it.

For these reasons, my research focuses on my role as researcher and the role of the research; my ongoing role in the garden; negotiating my relationship with participants

Transmigration or transnationalism is a more inclusive term indicating an often non-linear movement and a continual crossing of borders. A crossing of borders which is not necessarily limited to the movement of bodies, but also includes the transfer of money, gifts and letters that reaffirm ties to the native land. It is also a crossing which is not limited to the crossing of national borders alone, but include “geographic, cultural, and political borders” (Ibid., 7).

and the managing agency; my role with the larger Hmong community; individual and group narratives and counter narratives; and finally, the potential role of this research as a tool for more clearly realizing an alternative vision of an urban landscape. Positioning myself and making evident my social location is about divesting myself of the cloak of objectivity, moving instead toward honest disclosure at all times in the hope that doing so will help me create a genuinely, self-reflexive research project, “attentive to the complexity of power relations” (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004, 13). I recognize that as a researcher and a person, who I am, my background and positionality in general, and my position in the garden, not only shape my research, but also shape the way in which garden members interact with me, and furthermore, shape the results and interpretations of my findings, not to mention the findings themselves.

The process of revealing who I am and what I bring to the table as part of my ongoing practice of self-reflexive analysis has helped me throughout this research project. The concept of reflexivity according to Paul Atkins and Martyn Hammersley “acknowledges that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer” (2007, 15). While more traditional, positivist research methods may go to greater lengths disclosing *how* their research was conducted, less attention is put into answering *why* or by *whom*, and therefore, *what* consequences may exist for the research. My own research project has undoubtedly been a journey of self-discovery and constant self-reflection. In spending this time describing myself and my process, I am also explaining what drew me to Hmong experiences in the garden and consciously drawing attention to my

understanding that who I am, what theories I draw from, will certainly influence the outcomes of my research. Indeed, "...neither one's theories nor one's methodological tools are benign; they are connected to power and play crucial roles in the (re)production of knowledge" (Urban 2008, 6). These crucial questions *how, why, by whom*, and for what *purpose* are important if one is to avoid engaging in cultural appropriation and reinforcing systems and ideologies of power, privilege and oppression.

By identifying my positionality as both a privileged feminist scholar and a Mexican-American transmigrant, I am also putting forward what systemic privileges and disadvantages I experience and bring to the table. As a privileged scholar for example, I have access to institutions of power that can give me the cultural authority with which to legitimize my theories. As part of a structurally marginalized group I have also personally experienced being theorized on, and know the importance and value of knowledge otherwise deemed marginal for lacking that same access to institutions of power that I now enjoy. I therefore navigate with as much care as I can, the multiplicity of my identity, the simultaneity of advantage and disadvantage, and the contradiction inherent in that. The multiplicity of one's identity and the simultaneous operation of "systems of power, privilege, and oppression" (which include institutionalized racism, sexism, heterosexism, genderism, classism, ageism, and ableism), form one's "social location"(Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, 2007, 71). Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey refer to social location as:

a way of expressing the core of a person's existence in the social and political world. It places us in particular relationships to others, to the dominant culture of the United States, and to the rest of the world. It determines the kinds of power and privilege

we have access to and can exercise, as well as situations in which we have less power and privilege...social location is where all the aspects of one's identity meet (Ibid., 71).

One's complex and contradictory social location, informed by the simultaneous operation of interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression, are intimately connected to what Kirk and Okazawa-Rey refer to as the "matrix of oppression and resistance." Much like the phrase "systems of power, privilege and oppression," both draw attention to the existence, intricacies, and interrelatedness of various forms of oppression and privilege, as well as the multifarious (historical and contemporary) ways communities resist inequality and violence (Ibid., 5). Given the operation of this matrix on all four levels of analysis (micro/individual; meso/community; macro/national and institutional; and global/international), our identities overlap and people can be simultaneously advantaged in some ways and disadvantaged in others on systemic and systematic bases (Ibid.). Given my own social location, for example, as both advantaged and disadvantaged, colonizer and colonized, I am a woman of color and I am white, I navigate multiplicity and contradiction on a daily basis. As Evelyn Alsultany so aptly puts, it "[m]y identity fractures as I experience differing dislocations in multiple contexts" (2007, 212).

For this reason amongst others, the act of colonizing is not something I take lightly, nor something I wish to make excuses for. This is precisely why I pay a substantial amount of attention to the importance of incorporating self-reflexive analysis into my research process by, for instance, exposing and examining my own social location, and the implications of my social location for this research project. As a privileged scholar conducting research with a structurally marginalized minority

community, not engaging in this important practice could allow my research to become another conduit for cultural appropriation, attempting to strip a people of their culture for my own academic gain, or “taking possession of specific aspects of someone else’s culture in unethical, oppressive ways,” which is a form of cultural genocide (Kadi 1996, 117). Cautious not to fall prey to this, I have chosen to embark on what Joanna Kadi calls “ethical cultural connections,” forged out of a

respect for the community involved, a desire to learn and take action [in solidarity], an openness to being challenged and criticized, a willingness to think critically about personal behavior, and a commitment to actively fighting racism (Ibid., 123)

Being part of a migrant community and a woman myself who has, and still does, battle living with multiple identities that are contested and contradictory, ongoing self-reflexive analysis enables me to catch myself (and work to keep myself from), comparing our experiences, drawing on similarities where sometimes the differences between us are just as important and/or are what really need highlighting. I have caught myself on several occasions wanting to project or compare my experiences, especially with the younger first generation Hmong, about how we straddle these multiple locations. There is a grave danger in universalizing our experiences. These tempting comparisons pose the danger of stressing similarities and homogenizing them at the expense of key differences among our respective experiences. It is more important that I be attentive to the differences and diversity between us. I therefore actively work to deconstruct the homogenized, universalizing, socially constructed categories that envelop us as a result of the ideologies upholding systems of inequality. Despite the fact that I have always felt a

sense of commonality with other transborder ethnic communities,¹⁴ I am well aware that more often than not, I share little more than a loose trajectory across borders, and at times not even that, as the multiple lines that cross class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and age to name a few complicate even the most similar of experiences.

My commitment to constant self-reflexive analysis comes from my feminist commitments. I approach everything in life, including my research, as a feminist. Feminist research epistemologies and mixed qualitative methodologies are critically attentive not just to the end result of the research project, but instead, take the time to critically and self-reflexively examine every stage of the research process (Brodsky 2003, 7-8). However, not all feminist epistemologies are created equal, and this recognition comes, in part, from a visceral understanding that gender does not stand alone. How one experiences being a woman is always mitigated by other axes of difference that can never be isolated from one another. A feminism rooted only in gender analysis is fragmented from the reality of the multiple ways in which gender is intersected by race, class, sexuality, age among other categories. I find the reference to the “matrix of domination,” particularly useful in conceptualizing (like the term “matrix of oppression and resistance”), the structural “...interconnections among race, class and gender” (among others), and importantly, their operation as interlocking systems of oppression,

¹⁴ Basch et al. importantly urge researchers to “continually critique our position as observers” because we are consumers, and contributors to hegemonic concepts. Part of having a self-reflexive analysis therefore involves repeatedly questioning our roles as contributors to systems of domination and resistance (1997, 16-17). The question isn’t whether we participate in these systems of domination, it is about how we choose to participate in them (Johnson, 2007: 29). Moreover, it is in self-reflexive analysis that one uses the tools central to one’s analytical framework to critically examine one’s own actions, intentions, methods, assumptions and so forth.

“embedded in the structure of society,” which “affect all aspects of human life...[including] individual consciousness, group interaction, and group access to institutional power and privileges” (Anderson and Hill Collins 2007, xi, xiii, 5).

Taken together, interlocking systems of inequality and the ideologies that support them create a matrix that benefits some at the expense of others. Therefore, what results is not simply a matrix of oppression, but a matrix of *power, privilege* and *oppression*. Importantly, this matrix is institutionalized. To explain, privileged social groups enjoy systemic advantages at the expense of others whether they want them or are even aware of them, precisely because the systems and ideologies of inequality that comprise the matrix of power, privilege, and oppression are deeply ingrained within every U.S. social institution (the educational system, mainstream media, state, and family for instance), despite their representation as neutral (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2007, 5). However, as Margaret Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins explain, dominant U.S. social institutions are not sites of oppression and repression only, they are also sites of support and resistance (2007, 267-8).

This kind of feminist framework, one attentive to the structural relationships between systems of power, privilege and oppression, is often referred to as “intersectionality.” Although the term may be relatively new, the core arguments, visions of a more just world, and forms of activism associated with intersectionality have an incredibly long, rich, and diverse history (See Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2010, Urban 2008). This is despite the systematic invisibilization, wanton co-optation, and/or simplistic lip-service given to the scholar-activists dedicated to developing this

framework by privileged members of the mainstream (a.k.a. hegemonic) women's movement in the United States, both within and outside academia (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2010).

Intersectional feminist analysis and activism “[i]n its most basic terms...take as its starting point the recognition that racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ableism, heterosexism, and genderism, alongside colonization, neo-liberal globalization, and militarism, operate as interlocking and mutually reinforcing [ideologies and] systems of power, privilege, and oppression” (Urban 2008, 5). Another key component of intersectional feminism is an understanding of “...identity as fluid, multiple, evolving and intersectional, meaning identity is also comprised of the intersections of race, class, gender-identity, sex, sexual orientation, age, ability and others. Thus, people can be systemically privileged in some respects and oppressed in others “*simultaneously*.”¹⁵ Intersectional feminist perspectives can therefore play a pivotal role in unmasking the systemic ways in which garden members are marginalized. This framework has also helped me understand not only the complexity of the garden space, but also that the identities of the Hmong garden members – far from singular, homogenous, or static – are multiple, complex, fluid, dynamic, and mitigated through various axes of difference.

I am also especially inspired by Chandra T. Mohanty's insistence on the importance of an antiracist feminism, invested in “decolonization, anticapitalist critique, and solidarity” (2003, 3). An antiracist feminism is not only as attentive to the ways in

¹⁵ Jessica Urban “Some Core Concepts and Definitions Associated with Intersectional Feminism,” *Lecture Notes for WS 106, Introduction to Women's Studies*, Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA, 2010.

which gender is interwoven with other categories of difference, but is also cognizant of the fact that interlocking systems of inequality “fuel social and political institutions of rule” (Ibid., 3). Antiracist feminism therefore insists on a transformative investment in decolonization and anticapitalist critique, because colonization and capitalism are fueled and supported by these interlocking systems of inequality. Antiracist, intersectional feminisms take us to toward the next step, transformative social action and change.

By threatening to appropriate the space that garden members have turned into a place of cultural and agricultural production, the city is engaging in a practice mired in a legacy of colonization. To colonize, according to Daisy Hernández and Burshra Rehman “is to strip a people of their culture, language, land, family structure, who they are as a person and as a people” (2002, xxii). This is precisely what would happen if the garden were to have been “developed” in the interests of privileged social groups in the area. Drawing on Allan Johnson, the structural privilege enjoyed by some social groups enables not only greater institutional access, but also the “luxury of obliviousness” with which to ignore the crucial importance of the garden; the “cultural authority” to define it “worthlessness” (and be taken seriously); and the “agenda setting power” to do with the land what they please, regardless of the impacts on the community (2001, 33).

Yet, it is important to note that while the city could have stripped the land from the Hmong community, their language, culture, and family structure cannot be completely taken from them. Resilient communities find ways to recompose

themselves.¹⁶ Anne Brodsky defines resilience as the “seemingly unlikely positive outcomes that can arise from situations that are associated with elevated negative results” (2003, 6). These positive outcomes can include communities recovering from specific acts of marginalization, such as the dispossession of the land they have tended, or communities organizing to resist marginalization in a myriad of ways. An interrogation of the capitalist paradigm that seeks profit at the expense of diverse communities, for example, through dispossessing them of resources that alternatively enrich them outside of the capitalist logic of production, is essential to envisioning a decolonized urban environment.

The existing matrix of oppression and privilege also requires a matrix of resistance that is attentive to the pitfalls of single-issue activism. Fighting against the appropriation of the garden alone would constitute a single-issue battle. However, the issue of the garden space is better understood as embedded in a larger system of unjust land use practices and discriminative politics mired in a legacy of capitalism and

¹⁶ Nick Dryer-Witford emphasizes the power and capacity of people to recompose in the face of capital restructurings (2004). According to this argument, the proposal to commercially develop over the Henderson Community Garden or the South Central Farm can be read as a response by capital to decompose this space, because amongst other reasons, the space provided a means for active subjects to dispense with wage labor. Witford points out that capital needs labor, but labor, or rather active subjects, can “dispense with wage relation,” and labor is “potentially *autonomous* [emphasis in original]” (Ibid., 7). As the “cohesion of the working class grows, capital must respond by offensive restructurings, deploying economic, technological and state power to ‘decompose’ its opponent’s organization” (Ibid., 8). Taking over the garden would have decomposed the space, but not annihilated the desire by garden members to recompose the space elsewhere. The South Central Farm for example, was decomposed, but also recomposed itself in a new location while members continue to battle for legitimacy for their prior location (Peña 2006, Mares and Peña 2010).

colonialism that depend on these interlocking systems of inequality. Battling to sustain the garden, while important, should also include a holistic vision of social and political transformation from the bottom up. Moreover, working in solidarity is a necessary path towards this transformation and the dismantling of these systems. Mohanty defines “solidarity” in terms of

mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together (Mohanty, 2003, 7).

This approach to solidarity is reminiscent of a quote most often attributed to Australian Aboriginal activist Lila Watson in response to mission workers: “If you have come here to help me then you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then lets work together” (Morales 1998, 17). Working in solidarity with the Hmong community is about our liberation being bound together, but is also simultaneously about working together across vast stretches of difference between us, not only to save the garden, but to create a more just urban environment for all.

I was warned by Katie Harbaugh,¹⁷ the prior garden manager, that my position as an ‘outsider’ to the Hmong community would prove to be a barrier in creating trust, let alone building enough trust to work in solidarity with garden members. However, I also understood the complexities of the insider-outsider relationship to not be so cut and dry.

¹⁷ I gave every interview participant the option of choosing a pseudonym, but nobody felt they needed their privacy protected. Therefore, all of the names throughout my research are the actual names of participants.

Even within our own communities we might not hold an absolute insider status as the binary oversimplifies complex, diverse communities wherein “both insider and outsider status hold specific meaning and consequences” (Islam 2000, 42). But there are no pure positions that we can draw commonalities from. For example, as women, multiple communities can exist within singularly defined communities, with categories sometimes overlapping enough to make us simultaneous insider-outsiders within and between communities. While I had been told that women predominantly used the garden space, I understood that my status as a woman would only be marginally beneficial in creating relationships of trust.

Our common gender is only one possible axis of difference through which we are seen and through which we see and evaluate the people around us. How we see and interpret the world is always mediated through the *multiple* and *overlapping* lenses of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age etc. (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 21). In shaping our identities, just as in shaping our advantages and disadvantages, gender as a category of analysis, does not stand on its own, it is always intersected by these other multiple categories. Thus, an individual possesses multiple positions within any community. In previous work with the Latina/o community for example, especially with Latina women, I have found that being a woman is often evaluated through my familial position. My marital status and plans for motherhood are often interrogated as a means

for evaluating me as a true insider, as an insider-insider or only a partial insider, an insider-outsider, and/or as worthy or unworthy of trust.¹⁸

Regardless of my level of involvement in the garden however, I am neither fully an insider nor fully an outsider. I have to constantly navigate the complexities of the insider-outsider dynamic within the garden and beyond. This is consistent however, with the intersectional feminist recognition that there is no “pure position” from which one may act. I also believe firmly that despite the diverse array of complications that every community experiences with the politics of “insider-outsider status,” a more definitive piece of research on Hmong gardens and agrarian practices must come from members of the Hmong community. Drawing from Mai Neng Moua’s *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, Jeannie Chiu points out the importance of self-expression, “to write our stories in our own voices and to create our own images of ourselves,” cautioning that if the Hmong do

¹⁸ I am keenly aware of the ease, not to mention the frequency, with which Latinas in the U.S. are contradictorily represented as sexually voracious “Others,” or tradition-bound, submissive, and de-sexualized “Others.” It is extremely important to expose and challenge these dualisms (such as modern/traditional; civilized/backward) that remain foundational to Western philosophy. Dualisms must be understood as hierarchically valued, interlocking sets of opposites, where the first term constructed as superior, and the second as “Other” (i.e. inferior, threatening, sub-human, and fundamentally unlike “us”) (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2010, 539-40). Dualisms form the basis of hierarchical systems of thought (Ibid.) and serve as one strategy by which systems of inequality are maintained and “justified” (Ibid., 96-7). Dualisms also erase the complexity, dynamism, material realities, and diversity within and among “Othered” groups in an attempt to strip “Others” of their humanity and dignity. It is therefore crucial that I highlight the broad, diverse range of positions that exist within and among Latina/o communities on innumerable topics of concern, including marriage, sexuality, and family, and emphatically note that the experiences I am about to share *cannot* be generalized to the entire population of Latinas in my age group. Having said this, when asked about my marital status I can now respond that I am married, which has proven beneficial in some circumstances for establishing some trust with Latina women my age who might find co-habitation or being single a bit suspect. When asked about my plans to have children, my usual response is “not yet,” followed by “*algún día, con el favor de Dios,*” the literal translation being “some day, if it is in God’s favor.” This response takes childbearing out of my hands and puts it into the hands of God. An unyielding “no” could be highly suspect for woman in my age group who may define themselves as holding more traditional religious and/or community values.

not write their own stories they will have to accept those that are written for them (2004, 43-4).

Part of the challenge is focusing on culture as “alive and adapting,” not static nor vanishing, but rather, “exerting active agency” (Ibid., 44). Kou Yang provides a list of Hmong stories that reflect this kind of self-telling autoethnography by the Hmong community (2001, 170-3). These examples, of “courage, adaptation, and survival” are the lived evidence of what Yang refers to as a “trans-centennial change” experienced by the Hmong community (Ibid., 173). There is a powerful and empowering potential of the emic autoethnography, for bringing in the “cultural informant’s own voice, rewriting and reclaiming authority” away from the etic perspective of the anthropologist and ethnographer (Chiu 2004: 44). Balancing a tightrope between the emic and etic,¹⁹ I have tried here to center the stories of Hmong gardeners as the most important starting point of analysis because it is their lived experiences that make and shape the garden.

This recognition is deeply influenced by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s “theory in the flesh” (1981). A theory in the flesh is one that takes shape out of the “physical realities of our lives...uses flesh and blood experiences...to bridge the contradictions...by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words” (Ibid., 23). A theory in the flesh is about actively producing ones own histories, stories and identities out of ones own lived experiences. Kirk and Okazawa-Rey point out that “as with individual identity, naming ourselves collectively is an important act of

¹⁹ The terms emic and etic are used by ethnographers, anthropologists to distinguish between accounts that come from within the culture or social group be studied, referred to as emic, and those accounts that are derived from observers who are outside the culture or social group, referred to as etic. The lines between the emic and etic are not as cut and dry as often implied.

empowerment” (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2007, 67). Creating cultural, ethnic, gendered identities can therefore be both a form of resistance and a form of oppression, depending on who is narrating those identities, stories, and histories and for what purpose. A theory in the flesh has multiple implications for my research in the Henderson Community Garden, as it draws attention to those theories derived from my own lived experiences that I bring to the research, while insisting that the focus be on the stories, theories, and lived experiences of the Hmong garden members themselves, who shape the garden daily and who best can share its importance in their own words.

Although this research has not been undertaken or written by a member of the Hmong community, what I hope to make clear to the reader is my unwavering dedication to positioning the Hmong community at the center of this project. It is not my intention, nor do I attempt to act as a representative of, or speak for, the Hmong community. Instead, I hope their voices, analyses, and their narratives of struggle, resistance, and resilience *are* the central focus. This written narrative about the garden is only an introduction, for one must, as Chiu urges, “move to other texts to see the variety that emerges when the subjects of study speak for themselves” (2004, 49). All texts are a language of meaning, value, and purpose regardless of the shape the text takes.

Language,

whether in the form of words or images, ritual, story, music, dance, or song, provides not only an avenue for communication but also a way of framing reality – of making sense out of particular experiences, giving legitimacy...It is through the exercise of language(s)...the retaining, reframing, and reclaiming of reality, that a sense of self and collective identity emerge (DeLind and Bingen 2008, 143-4).

I contend that the work performed primarily by Hmong women in the garden represents a kind of text; their work in the garden tells a story, like the story cloths, the songs and ceremonies of the Hmong, and other texts like them, these are their lived stories in physical form.²⁰ Clarissa Kimber notes how “narratives of cultural identity can be read in the garden,” even changes in the garden, like changes in the story cloth tradition reflect a part of history that narrates to the present moment (Kimber 2004, 272). These are all important and valuable texts and reservoirs of meaning reflecting life histories that “can be examined to produce a readable narrative (Ibid., 276).

Feminist Methodologies: Shifting the Center by Centering Women

Shifting the center is not only an academic exercise or a commitment tied only to this research project. I contend it is a practice and belief to be carried out in everyday life. “‘Shifting the center’ means putting the voices, stories, theories, and perspectives of those systemically excluded from mainstream scholarship, media, and policy at the center of our thinking and work” (Anderson and Hill Collins in Urban 2008, 199). It is, in other words, about listening, honoring, and centering the perspectives of “those at the bottom of social hierarchies” (Warren 2000, 33). Research lacking a commitment to shifting the

²⁰ Story clothes are “representational narrative tapestries” that link “insiders and outsiders” and can be “read intertextually with oral narratives,” serving amongst other things as a means for the Hmong community to represent themselves (Chiu 2004, 51-2). Dia Cha describes the story cloth tradition in detail, the way the “stitches in the Hmong story cloth make pictures of life” that tell history, bridging both past and present (1996). Story clothes can juxtapose the past and present in close proximity, in a manner that connects them within a “larger historical context...relating the past and present in a crisis of spatial displacement” (Chiu 2004, 53-4).

center, runs the very real risk of rendering the experiences of structurally marginalized social groups invisible. This silencing practice itself constitutes both a form of oppression and a strategy by which interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression are maintained. Centering women and making women central to my research project comes from my recognition of the garden as a uniquely women-centered space, and from my own commitment to forms of feminism dedicated to “praxis,” the inseparability of theory and action, or rather, “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it (hooks 1994, 14). I am especially committed to those forms that highlight the importance of shifting the center by approaching a research topic from the perspective of women whose unique social locations are comprised not simply of sex and gender, but also specific racial, refugee, class, age, generational, and other interlocking identities.

Starting with their diverse, lived experiences, I intended to learn about the garden space from the unique perspectives of the women who tend it and who incorporate aspects of the garden into their everyday lives as grandmothers, mothers, sisters, aunts, cousins and wives. The Henderson Community Garden is a uniquely gendered space. Although men have a role, Hmong women are the primary care-takers of the garden space and therefore, the ones with a closer connection to and a deeper knowledge of the plants, plant properties, and needs associated with the space. To be clear, I am not suggesting Hmong women have a closer relationship with the garden space simply because they are women, although some feminists do advance the position that women are closer to the natural world. For example, although ecofeminist theory is by no means

monolithic (in fact, it encapsulates a range of theoretical/activist positions), the “women as biologically closer to nature” argument is a fairly popular one. As one interviewee explains to Stuart Miller, “as bearers of children, women have an innate [read biological] emotional bond to the Earth” (1997, 3). The “biologically closer” strand of ecofeminism is roundly criticized and rejected on innumerable grounds, especially by those committed to intersectional and materialist approaches to ecofeminism, such as Warren (2000, 1997), Sturgeon (1997), and Mies and Shiva (1993).

Biologically determinist arguments are often made to support the claim that women, because of their biological capacity to birth offspring, are also naturally and biologically inclined to be nurturers and caretakers. Biological determinism therefore posits that, “a groups biological or genetic makeup shapes its social, political, and economic destiny” (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey 2010, 54). Instead I argue that women are not inherently or biologically closer to nature, but rather the daily, material realities of women’s lives and work enables the development of particular, context-specific, and therefore varied forms of knowledge, relationships, connections, and forms of (inter)dependence with the natural environment. At the Henderson Community Garden, the women spend the most time there, tending, cultivating, and harvesting the fruits of their labor. These include not only the tangible products from the garden, but also the tending and cultivating of cultural identities and gendered forms of knowledge associated with the garden. As Elizabeth Sheehan notes from her study of Hmong gardens in the Carolina’s,

Women maintain garden culture, they serve as cultural conservators who labor daily in the gardens and kitchens. Women introduce their children to plants that define the Hmong palate and pharmacoepia. As they process garden-grown herbs and foods, Hmong women convert the physical environment into a meaning-laden society. Beliefs about prosperity, health and generational continuity from food are translated by women through their working of a garden...Their work enacts cultural definition (Sheehan n.d.).

Biological determinism is not the reason why Hmong women are the primary caretakers of the garden. Rather, their positions as primary caretakers of this space (a result, in part, of context-specific gendered divisions of labor and social constructions of “women’s work”), and the *particular work they perform*, lay at the heart of their unique knowledge of and relationships to the garden space. This also helps explain why they are most likely to rise in its defense when it is threatened. Therefore, as Gwyn Kirk explains, one important reason why women find themselves organizing, defending, and resisting the destruction of ecologically rich spaces globally, and I argue the Hmong garden space locally, is their “close material connection” to those spaces (1997, 346).

Again, I argue that women are not inherently biologically closer to nature, nor intrinsically or biologically determined to become care-takers; their *social position* helps place them closer to nature, just as it positions them to become care-takers. The Hmong women are connected to the garden space through their gendered responsibilities for raising children, cooking and caring for family members, etc. Moreover, since women are the “primary users” of the garden space, it is their close, lived material connection to the garden environment that leads to the growth of their particular forms of indigenous technical knowledge (Warren 2000, 5). Close personal interactions with the social,

political, and environmental world under investigation can, in other words, elevate a community's understanding, knowing and awareness of them. Furthermore, one's social location, as mentioned earlier, determines the kinds of power and privilege one has and the kinds of advantages and disadvantages one faces (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2010, 100). And the social locations that one occupies are not static or singular but are, fluid, multiple, interlocking, and often contradictory.

By starting with the lives of women and interrogating the social locations they occupy, I am also centering the everyday practices engaged in within these spaces as specific research topics worthy of study. Similar to Mohanty, this is an analytic strategy that draws "attention to what is unseen, undertheorized, and left out in the production of knowledge" (Mohanty 2003, 230). Arturo Escobar eloquently notes that the search for the "new-and-interesting" has always saturated research efforts at the expense of looking in depth at everyday practices, especially, I would add, those engaged in by women (1992, 33). By including the everyday practices of people's lives, especially the everyday practices of the Hmong women in the garden (women structurally marginalized by virtue of their sex, gender, as well as their race, refugee status, and others), the spaces they occupy, and the overlooked and undervalued practices they engage in within those spaces can be reevaluated and recognized as precious reservoirs of knowledge and insight. Given the operation of interlocking systems of inequality and the devaluation of women's work as "unproductive," given the dominant definition of work within the western capitalist development paradigm, making women (and their full, complex, social

locations) central to this research is therefore part of a larger effort to reveal and reorient attention to silences on multiple levels (Mies and Shiva 1993).

There is not only silence in the literature on community gardens regarding the complexity and diversity of gardens, but also the potential for further silencing by traditional research methods²¹ that might overlook (and have a history of overlooking) the unique knowledge and insights that women can possess, knowledge passed down inter-generationally from a long spiritual agrarian tradition. I do not claim that all science based on positivist regimes automatically result in self-serving, insular findings. However, academia has over-valued the hard, andro-centric sciences, often at the expense of other legitimate forms of knowledge production. Positivism is a philosophy of science that claims “authentic knowledge” can only be arrived at through strict adherence to an objective scientific method (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2010, 53). The scientific method, according to Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, is founded on this “presumption of **objectivity** [emphasis in original];” producing un-biased and value free results based on the researchers social, emotional and political detachment from the research (Ibid.).

This expected detachment is both unfounded and impossible because “[r]ather than being neutral, all knowledge is value-laden and biased and reflects and serves the interests of the culture that produced it” (Ibid.). The problem, in other words, is not that research is necessarily tainted by biases, political agendas and values. The problem lies

²¹ The reference to scientific research methods as “traditional” is a bit misleading. This reference makes the methods used, appear as though they precede or pre-date other research methods. However, I think it is safe to say that research is as ancient as people. People have been conducting research in one form or another for millennia. Currently, however, scientific research methods take center stage as they proclaim to be *the* mode of inquiry that produces valid results.

in the fact that these traits are always present, yet often hidden under a false guise of objectivity that masks possibly dangerous biases, agendas and values. Kirk and Okazawa-Rey point to eugenics “science” as one example (Ibid.) whose “theories,” referred to as “academic racism” by Southern Poverty Law Center, continue to flourish and garner academic and popular support (2002a, 2002b, 2006). Rooted in positivism, traditional research methods assume to be grounded in objectivity, whose *truths* can be applied across broad spectrums and whose *facts* are universal in character and scope. Although I acknowledge that science spans a spectrum of adherence to objectivity, and is not as homogenous as sometimes depicted, I nonetheless reject an agenda that seeks universal generalizations through positivistic research methods.

As it stands now, there is a hierarchy of knowledge production that situates “expert” inquiry emerging from the objective sciences on top while systematically silencing the voices of everyday people who are most often situated on the margins of scientific debates. This creates a closed loop, a technocratic social system, controlled by certain scientists and technical experts with the systemic privilege that enables the institutional access, cultural authority, and agenda setting power to identify and determine “real knowledge” to be taken seriously, versus the “illegitimate knowledge” to be ignored. Part of this practice within more traditional research methods comes from what Arjun Appadurai has termed the “ubiquitous, taken-for-granted, and axiomatic quality of research” itself (2001, 10).

In order to be considered a quality piece, research projects can become mired within the confines of a strict cult of objectivity, the use of prescribed sound and tried

methods resulting not in the *search* for knowledge, but in *re-search*, a literal reiteration in other words, of the old and already said (Ibid., 12). My goal in this research project is not to *impose* this type of re-search onto people, but to engage in a genuine search *with* them as equally valuable, legitimate, collaborative knowledge producers. This has required thinking outside the box in search of the new and ‘not yet said,’ in the least likely and most common of places, within the devalued gendered spaces (spaces simultaneously impacted by race, refugee status, class, age, and, and generation) of the garden members’ homes and in the garden space itself.

Knowledge production from and within these marginalized spaces has typically been undervalued. Foregrounding systemically marginalized knowledges is not about repositioning them on top, but rather, re-centering and recognizing these as important and as essential to the process of finding diverse, meaningful solutions to the myriad environmental and social problems that engulf us all. What is needed, I argue, is a re-privileging, re-connection, and re-centering of voices from those margins; voices who hold particular forms of indigenous technical knowledge emanating from their daily lives, work, material realities, and unique social locations. By centering their knowledge, alternate perspectives can be recognized and developed to challenge and critique the limited and taken for granted truths that we are otherwise often limited to.

Traditional research methods have been especially damaging to the lives of women, partially because women’s gendered knowledge has been undervalued and women have been largely excluded from dominant modes of knowledge production, and

moreover, research has often been done *to them*, not with them.²² Sharlene Hesse-Biber,

Patricia Leavy and Michelle L. Yasir note that,

Conceptualizing women as a starting point for research not only validates their knowledge and includes them in a process from which they have long been excluded, but also attempts to upend the power relations that are reproduced in traditional, positivistic, scientific research (2004, 14).

The overvaluation by traditional research methods of one form of objectively produced knowledge above all others has come at the expense of innumerable other forms of knowledge production that are experiential, subjective, goal oriented, driven by ethics, and differently attained. A dangerous silencing occurs through the overvaluation of knowledge produced by traditional positivist research methods, and the devaluation of knowledge subjectively produced and branded anecdotal because it is unconventionally attained (Appadurai 2001, 14). It is this knowledge subjugated at the margins that I have chosen to focus my attention on in my research project.

I am dedicated to working collaboratively with the Hmong women in the garden, to conduct research together, engage in knowledge production by less traditional means to arrive at alternate truth claims. There are alternate truths that can be arrived at if attention is paid to the marginalized perspectives of the Hmong women in the garden. I believe that they possess a level of knowing that is invisibilized unless one takes the time to listen to and honor their worldview. The unique and multiple positions that the garden members hold as refugee Hmong women, as women of color, or as first

²² This in no way is meant to imply that women are passively acted upon. Women have agency and they are social subjects who present myriad forms of resistance to research impositions that aim to define them.

generation Hmong-American women born in the United States, may afford them perspectives that one may otherwise be ignorant to. By listening more closely to the narratives told by the garden members themselves, my hope and goal is to become more aware of the intellectual blind spots that invisibilize their way of knowing. By recognizing and starting from their social locations and the peripheral spaces they occupy, I intend to shift the center and thereby center their unique perspectives, theories, experiences, knowledge, and legitimate forms of knowledge production within this research project.

Research Approach:

Toward a Collaborative, Praxis-Oriented Participatory Effort

My initial approach to this research was to become a garden participant, spend time in the garden, and hopefully build relationships with the other garden members. By joining the garden, I engaged in some participant observation, spending time in the garden not so much to observe garden members but rather, to build relationships by tending my own garden plot that I volunteered to help manage for the Plant-a-Row for the Hungry program²³ through FFP. At the time I became a member of the Henderson Community Garden, FFP no longer managed it. Management had been transferred to the

²³ The Plant-a-Row for the Hungry initiative was spurred on by an increase in the number of people during food distribution days. It is a call for farmers and gardeners to literally plant a row of food that can be donated to FFP, who help harvest and distribute. The idea behind the initiative is innovative however, the name Plant-a-Row for the *Hungry*, is a mild improvement over labeling people 'Needy.'

Natural Resources Division of the Redwood Community Action Agency (NRS-RCAA).²⁴ Management to the NRS division of RCAA occurred shortly after the last battle with the City Council over their proposed development plans for the parcel of land on which the garden currently sits. The reasons provided for transferring management focused on the difficulty and time-consuming nature of managing the space and the belief that the tasks involved often fell out of the purview of FFP work.

My initial step of joining the garden to tend a plot was made easy by the fact that the new garden manager, the gatekeeper to the space with whom I would have to negotiate my entry and access, is also my husband Chris Lohofener. I hoped being in the garden would enable me to develop relationships and initiate conversations with garden members. I had never guessed however, how difficult it would be to make connections with the Hmong community. Chris was only one gatekeeper and my relationship to him and to the prior managing agency carried baggage that influenced the way in which garden members interacted with me. I was routinely positioned as a garden manager, and I had to negotiate that dynamic through honest disclosure about my relationship to the current manager and my hope to research their space and better understand it from their perspective in the hopes of working in solidarity with them in advocating for their right to the garden space.

²⁴ Natural Resources Division of The Redwood Community Action agency is part of the national network of Community Action Agencies (CAA's). A policy idea of the John F. Kennedy administration, CAA's were established in 1964 under the Economic Opportunity Act as part of then President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty legislation.

Initially this resulted in quizzical looks and confusion about my intent. Language barriers, age and cultural differences, amongst others also resulted in complications to building relationships. Who I am, I realized, carried baggage and meanings that I could not discard or ignore. I could neither observe the space in the hope of seeing genuine interactions, unhindered by my presence, nor could I ever be a participant of the garden in the same sense that the other women are. We are, in the words of Hammersley and Atkinson, neither “flies on the wall” nor “full participants” (2007, 17). Even though I was inside the garden tending a plot, I remained an outsider to the community whose space I shared; this is the important difference between having access to a space and having access to the “social relations that take place there” (Ibid., 44).

I began my project with a strong desire to utilize a collaborative participatory research approach involving the gardeners and the managing agency. Participatory research methods are attractive because they can enable one to build the trust relationships crucial to engaging in horizontal knowledge production and coalition work aimed at analyzing, envisioning alternatives to, and challenging injustices, with the potential for bringing about positive changes desired by those directly impacted. While more traditional research approaches emphasize the importance of distance, objectivity, neutrality, and especially as Appadurai notes, the “subtraction of the idea of moral voice or vision,” participatory research approaches can reintegrate political action as part of the research endeavor (2001, 13). Political action seemed vital in approaching the garden site, as it was not only being disparaged by some of its neighbors who lacked an

understanding of the myriad levels of importance it held for the Hmong community, but it was also being threatened by the city, which held the power to demolish the space.

Several scholars in the field call for this kind of reorientation of research.

Orlando Fals-Borda for example, calls on researchers to engage in more praxis oriented research engagements by challenging approaches that monopolize knowledge and challenging the academic “prophylactic definitions of commitment,” which disrupts the very notion that “good research” must be neutral and lack a political agenda (2001, 29). Scholars like Fals-Borda importantly call on researchers to redefine their commitments in order to work toward true social transformations (Ibid.). Redefining our commitments can entail first and foremost acknowledging that all research is tied to social and political commitments, and asking ourselves which commitments do we honor, and which ones do we challenge. Redefining our commitments as researches can entail for example, asking ourselves as researchers if our ultimate goal is to gain on a personal level academically or financially, or if our commitments are to the communities we work with, to changing inequitable social structures that we may even inadvertently benefit from.

Working *on behalf* of the Hmong community through the non-profit agencies that manage the garden would be one way of approaching my research project. However, I firmly believe that building the trust necessary for working in solidarity *with* the Hmong gardeners, collaborating *with* them, exposing our commitments and building knowledge *with* them, while shifting the center and therefore foregrounding the voices, perspectives, theories, and needs of the Hmong gardeners at the same time holds far more promise. A “collaborative convergence” holds the promise of creating more horizontal relationships

between researcher and researched, something I strive for in all my work; with the Hmong families with whom stark power differentials have been glaringly obvious, and with other communities as well (Fals-Borda 2001, 30). In this research I work to bring multiple types of knowledge together in a “mutually beneficial, problem-oriented dialogue,” in which knowledge often defined as “academic,” works in “dialectical tension” with the “popular” knowledge the garden members possess (Fisher 2005, 179). I did so while simultaneously rejecting the dualism between “academic” versus “popular” knowledge, and by adhering to my commitment to honoring multiple forms of knowledge and knowledge production, including the indigenous technical knowledge, developed, cultivated and adapted by the Hmong garden members.

I have had to balance the desire to produce a reputable research project with my personal belief in honoring the priorities of those with whom I collaborate, working to create spaces of horizontal knowledge production, and realizing the time it takes to foster relationships that lead to ethical cultural connections, coalition, and solidarity; doing so has not been easy. Not having known how difficult this work would be, I have only begun to lay the foundations of what this collaborative convergence might look like, and much work remains. Both Frank Fisher and Fals-Borda caution against the co-option and emptiness of uninformed and/or disingenuous participatory action approaches wherein “participatory” is simply a word used to garnish the research, and notably, help maintain existing power structures (Fisher 2005, Fals-Borda 2001). Without an informed and genuine commitment to such approaches paired with ongoing self-reflexive analysis on the part of the researcher, words like “participatory” (as well as “solidarity,” “coalition,”

and others), can sit like empty “buzz words,” stripped of their original focus on empowerment and transformation (Stirrat 1996, 67). It bears repeating that this dynamic can reinforce, however unintentionally, the very systems of inequality a researcher may seek to end: “We can never be too sure, or too arrogant, to think that good intentions will [automatically] lead to good things” (Morris 2002, 140).

Participatory action research is a process, and given the time restraints I have had to work with, this research project reflects only the beginning stages of that process. While this initial portion of the research has been completed, my work with the Hmong community continues to move through the difficult stages that lead toward more horizontally planned, participatory approaches. I have now been working with the members of the Henderson Community Garden for the past 2 years, helping them raise awareness about the importance of the garden space to the wider community and helping them define and organize around sustaining the garden according to their own image of how the space can be improved and sustained.

My Relation to the Garden

My interest in researching community gardens, and particularly the Henderson Community Garden, was partially accidental. I was previously involved with the Henderson Community Garden in 2006 through my work as the coordinator of a small community grants initiative. The manager of the garden at that time, an AmeriCorps

VISTA²⁵ member through Food for People (FFP), had approached me with an idea for improving the garden space. After the initial process of explaining to him that this grant program was about empowerment and inclusivity, and that the gardeners would have to be involved in the process of allocating the funds, he assured me that they would. An application was submitted shortly after, which supposedly reflected what the gardeners wanted to see improved. Years later, in 2008 I was drawn back into the garden when the parcel of land upon which the garden sits was placed on the City Council agenda for review. At that time FFP was looking for non-profit community partners to help them advocate for the preservation of the garden space. As a past supporter of the garden, my agency was asked to join them in solidarity to defend the garden from being commercially developed by the city; a development that did not take the needs or perspectives of the Hmong gardeners into account. As I was drawn into politics of the garden, my interest in researching it was awakened as I also became aware of the micro- and macro-politics of that space. My interest quickly became personal, political and academic in nature.

The new manager of the garden, another AmeriCorps VISTA member named Katie Harbaugh, invited me to re-tour the garden under her management. She began to tell me about the managerial tensions she had experienced with the garden members, the surrounding neighbors and the struggles with the city that garden members and supporters repeatedly encountered. She also explained that shortly after the prior

²⁵ AmeriCorps VISTA is a national service program of volunteers that was started by president John F. Kennedy. VISTA members serve for one year at a non-profit, government agency or school on efforts that fight illiteracy, poverty and improve health.

manager's grant application was submitted in 2006 requesting funds for garden improvement, the arbors and benches purchased to "improve" the garden were promptly "vandalized." It was her impression that the gardeners themselves, who had not been quite as involved in the grant application process as I had been told, destroyed the new property. She pointed out how the wooden remnants were incorporated into the family plots as structures for the plants to grow on. This story made me wonder to what extent the prior manager had involved the gardeners in the application process at all, or if the well intentioned AmeriCorps VISTA member applied for what *he* thought would improve the garden space best. Perhaps the garden members responded by promptly dismantling the "improvements" in an act of resistance, in their own way making useful the improvements that had been imposed on their space.

As our conversation continued, I also began to wonder how the garden members were involved in the management and shaping of the garden space in general. I wondered why the city was repeatedly drawn back into trying to develop the parcel of land upon which the garden sits, as I was told this had not been the first time. As I looked around the garden, listening to Katie divulge her rich history with it, I also noticed that only women were tending the plots. I began to wonder too, if this garden space was predominantly the domain of women. Only women spoke to defend it at the City Council meeting, even though men were present; were the women defending a space they are primarily responsible for, a space uniquely theirs? As I looked around, plants foreign to me grew within the plots and were trellised along massive structures in unimaginable quantities. Entire garden plots were dedicated to sugar snap peas, leafy greens, and many

plants I could not identify, which prompted me to wonder if produce was sold or shared amongst families. I wondered if some of these plants were used medicinally and/or spiritually, and if the women were the keepers of that knowledge. As the flow of questions continued to surface and grow, I realized the space had inextricably drawn me in.

The Henderson Community Garden, at times tucked away and forgotten, periodically re-emerged into a hot spotlight wherein multiple actors fought amongst each other as they tried to lay their claims over this little piece of property, a scarce resource in the urban environment. I knew then that my research would be conducted in this garden space amongst women, where I longed to hear their perspectives, their stories, their insights and their unique claim to this space. Although Katie was always forthright, honest and insightful about her experience as a garden manager, it was the stories and experiences of the Hmong women themselves that I longed to hear. I wanted to hear from them in their words why this garden space was so important to them. What roles did it play in their lives besides providing them access to food? Was this indeed a women's domain and if so, what role if any did men play in it? And these questions represent only the tip of the iceberg...

Research Methods

What ensued from my initial inquiries has been a “messy multimethodological” endeavor, employing a variety of qualitative methods (Fisher 2005, 177). I came into the garden knowing only that I wanted to better understand the space from the perspective of

the Hmong women who occupied the space so prominently. Entering the garden with a fixed set of methods would have been presumptuous because all variables worth further inquiry were not immediately apparent to me. John Creswell stresses the utility in engaging in this mixed method approach, noting that the open-endedness allows for exploration (2003, 22). A mix of qualitative approaches, moreover, provides researchers the tools to be innovative and when combined with advocacy and participatory goals, can move research towards outlining tangible goals (Ibid., 23). In essence, this is a combining of praxis and methodology in a dialectical dance, wherein praxis informs methodology and methodology in turn informs praxis.

The methods outlined below followed the experiences I had in the garden. Those that emerged as most useful included a variety of qualitative methods, including a case study and narrative research. The case study provides an in depth exploration of the Henderson Community Garden, in combination with some comparative work within the community garden literature and between similar community gardens in Fresno and Los Angeles. My goal was not to speak for the Hmong community, homogenize and universalize their expressions, romanticize, exoticize or represent as “other,”²⁶ nor appropriate aspects of their culture solely for my own academic gain. My research effort foregrounds the firsthand experiences of garden members’, centering their analysis, so as not to fall victim to this re-presentational practice. By listening and using their own voices throughout my research, I hoped to avoid the portrayal of women as victims,

²⁶ Kirk and Okazawa-Rey note that the practice of “othering” people is about making them “invisible, misunderstood, misrepresented and often feared” (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2007, 67). In addition, “it justifies its exploitation, its exclusion from whatever benefits the society may offer, and violence and, in extreme cases, genocide committed against it” (Ibid.).

instead focusing on them as active participants in the shaping of the urban landscape. Within the act of listening to the experiences of the women who are the subjects, not the objects of the research moreover, “we can learn from the true experts, those who are already successfully working to overcome and change their lives and their environment” (Brodsky 2003, 7)

The narrative research comes into view through my analysis of a series of listening sessions that I conducted with the garden members, the managing agency and the neighbors. Listening sessions are much like semi-structured interviews, a key difference being that these sessions pay closer attention to what participants are saying, allow them more freely to direct the conversation and to themselves ask questions. I tried to conceptualize interviews more along the lines of Bruce L. Berg’s notion of dramaturgical interviewing, where the interview can be seen as a “stream of symbolic interaction” between people who improvise on a stage together (2004, 76).

While I initially tried to connect with families as they gardened, occasionally sharing pleasantries and small talk, the language barrier proved too difficult to surmount on my own. After about a month or two of small talk in the garden, I solicited the help of an interpreter to begin engaging in more in-depth listening sessions. Mike Lee,²⁷ a young Hmong-American man who over the years had volunteered his time providing informal interpretation services, offered to help during listening sessions with the

²⁷ Although I did not know it at the time, over the years our paths had crossed, as the VISTA program and my small grants program often converged on joint efforts. I am eternally grateful to Mike for his help and dedication to this research, without his help none of this would have been possible.

Hmong families. Mike Lee had previously been solicited to help interpret at the Henderson Garden when he himself was enrolled in the AmeriCorps VISTA program. Mike Lee and I conducted 10 listening sessions out of the 15 families that were participating in the garden. I also conducted listening sessions with the prior garden managers and the only two neighbors willing to talk to us.

The listening sessions allowed me to take the time to hear and center the analysis and the perspectives of the Hmong garden members as they in their own tongue question, critique and engage with the perspectives provided by the city government, the surrounding neighbors and the managing agency. The listening sessions also provided a means for the gardeners to critique the overall conventional understanding of community gardens and the effects these limited understandings have had on their culture and livelihood. Conducting listening sessions with a wide array of people has been important in both teasing out the different perspectives held on the garden space, while allowing me to be attentive to the garden members often overlooked perspectives. As Paulo Freire eloquently argues,

the silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. In this context research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world (1982, 30-31).

This practice has also shown me the important distinction between the strategic use of silence by garden members as a means to safe-guard their unique knowledge, or as a strategy of resistance, and the silencing effect that can occur when structurally

privileged groups purposefully overlook the meaning and value the garden has for the community that uses it.

Conducting listening sessions with a wide array of people involved in and around the garden has therefore been vitally important. The best results from interviewing, no doubt, come from “casting our interview nets wide,” because if only one group of people are interviewed, then only part of the narrative piece will come forward (Ritchie 2003, 24). By comparing narratives I was able to discern some discrepancies in understandings, and imbalances in power, between multiple people competing to define the best use of the garden space. Most importantly, the narrative study helped to foreground the otherwise unheard and invaluable sentiments of garden members who battle for legitimacy with the city of Eureka, the neighbors and the non-profits that oversee and manage their space. These narrative comparisons not only helped me compare the plurality of different worldviews and multiple understandings of the single garden space as it is viewed and defined by various people, but also helped me center the perspective of the garden members. Centering their analysis in this research project, and looking particularly at their everyday actions within the context of the garden, is a reorientation of research towards the reevaluation and elevation of the everyday.

On-going Role in the Garden

Prior to the City Council meeting, during which the proposal to develop the property on which the garden sat was reviewed, FFP had started to communicate a need to transfer the garden to another agency, as managing it had become too burdensome for them, and

had started to stretch the boundaries of the agency's scope of work. After the Eureka City Council agreed not to develop the property for other purposes, the NRS division of RCAA entered into talks with the city and FFP, resulting in the successful transfer of management on a trial basis to the NRS division, and the re-signing of a one-year lease with the city in December 2008.

Under the new management with the NRS division, the Henderson Community Garden has convened several garden meetings to discuss the future of the garden as the garden members envision it. I have attended every one of these meetings, providing support when asked, but mostly listening to the visions and needs expressed by the Hmong gardeners. Although NRS staff are working towards creating more horizontal relationships with the garden members, the hierarchy of management remains in the background.²⁸ With unequal power dynamics always present, working toward creating more horizontal relationships takes a constant self-reflexive analysis, a willingness and even requirement that I question my motivations at all times, constant vigilance and self-criticism are required to build the trust relationships that are an essential first step to co-crafting genuine collaborations.

Helping to create a comfortable space for garden members to feel open enough to share their vision for the future of the garden on their own terms, without judgment, took some time. With some renewed funding from the small grants program that I manage

²⁸ At the time of these meetings garden members were asked if they would like to restructure how the garden is managed. Garden members agreed that they did not want the burden of managing the garden on their own, they did however, say that they appreciated being listened to, and appreciated the increased two-way communication coming from the new managers. Several mentioned how important this open communication is to them.

and with the involvement, guidance, and input from the garden members themselves the garden space has now expanded to include nine new plots, going from 15 to 24 since May of 2009. The one thing that really helped to create more horizontal relationships with the Hmong garden members was rolling up our sleeves and getting dirty, helping side-by-side to construct the new plots. During the construction phase, NRS staff and garden members' toiled together, removing bedrock from an old road that ran through the middle of the garden, moving heaps of soil and manure and putting up fencing. Doing *with*, as opposed to doing *for*, created a level of trust and camaraderie between the managing agency and the garden members that I had not evidenced in the garden in the years since I have been acquainted with the space.

My current employment as the coordinator of the small grassroots grants program has provided me with many other opportunities to collaborate with the Hmong community on different levels besides just within the garden. The grassroots grant has helped fund the Hmong New Year celebration for three years in a row, providing me with the opportunity to meet with and interact with area Hmong leaders. A group of Hmong high school students²⁹ at Eureka High School have been struggling to institute a Hmong language class. This same group of young women has also applied for funds through the

²⁹ This same group of young women were instrumental in the return of the Hmong New Year celebration after it was discontinued. After a brief hiatus, they took it upon themselves to organize and bring back the New Year festivities. As the celebration was reinstated by community elders as a yearly occurrence, the same young women reported being ostracized when they tried to organize in its support. Generation and gender interface in this dynamic interaction, as in the garden.

grassroots grants initiative, allowing me to interact with yet another community struggle, this one geared around retaining and sustaining their mother tongue. The group of young students, mostly juniors and seniors, have met with resistance both from the school and from within their own community. As young women, they have had to play a delicate balancing act, as they are criticized within their own community for supposedly stepping out of the traditional bounds for their gender and their age. This echoes what Sharon A. Bays found in working with the Hmong, namely that identity formation varies along gender and generational lines and can be deeply “contested within the ethnic community and between Hmong and the surrounding society” (1994, 4). Young women and girls are simultaneously resisting “cultural expectations” while also “struggling to preserve their traditions” or incorporate their traditions into hybrid forms of “*Hmonghood*” (Ibid., 18).

The Hmong census data indicate linguistic isolation along generational lines with older Hmong-Americans reporting that they do not speak English well, and the oldest generations reporting not being able to speak English at all (Pfeifer and Lee 2003, 8). Although no indicators are provided by the census report about linguistic proficiency in the Hmong language, some of the high school students reported that the same pattern is true in reverse, with the younger generations reporting less Hmong linguistic ability and the older Hmong reporting increased proficiency in Hmong. The result could be that both the younger and older generations are becoming linguistically isolated from each other. If the younger generations are not learning the tongue of their elders and vice versa, then the Hmong community itself can become bifurcated and isolated from within.

Garden meetings and listening sessions have provided us with another related community goal to work on in solidarity. During garden meetings, and also during listening sessions with garden participants, the importance of raising chicken has been a frequently raised topic. In exchange for some labor, a group of Hmong families had for some time been raising chicken on some private land. This chicken raising operation, however, was put on hold after receiving a cease-and-desist letter for violating zoning laws and because chicken coups were deemed “unsightly”.³⁰ With the nearing Hmong New Year, the topic of finding a new place to raise chickens has taken on a level of elevated importance. There has been growing interest in the community to find ways of sustaining the raising of chickens, finding a place that is not so vulnerable to the whims of individual property owners or the judgmental complaints of neighbors.

Susie Cha, the daughter of a former garden member, commented that although younger generations might not be learning the agrarian practices of their elders, everybody knows about the importance of chickens and particularly about the “chicken cure.” After a baby is born a mother eats nothing but chicken for a period of time. Former garden member Neng Xiong also mentioned that chickens play an important role in the Hmong New Year and where shamans are concerned.³¹ Documenting the importance of chickens in death ceremonies, Chiu also points out that chickens are sacrificed at funerals to “guide the soul of the deceased to the afterworld (2004, 51).

³⁰ The chicken coups were located near a freeway over pass, where California’s Redwood Highway 101 passes over Northbank road into the town of McKinleyville. This was an incredibly visible location open to public curiosity and scrutiny.

³¹ I did not ask for particulars in relation to the purpose of chickens in ceremonial practices. I did not want to pry about sacred practices to a community.

Much like cultivating in the garden space, the ability of the Hmong community to raise their own chickens has cultural, spiritual and community implications beyond securing food.

What I have found in each of these on-going community struggles is that each issue being tackled is a small part of a larger puzzle; each is a part of an embedded piece of a larger conversation about a diversity of rights and entitlements. Some of these rights, according to David Harvey, are considered to be “derivative rights such as freedoms of speech and expression, of education and economic security,” and I would add freedom of cultural practice, a right not only to food security but food sovereignty wherein food practices are importantly embedded in cultural practices (2006, 57). These derivative rights need to be made primary while the “primary rights of private property and the profit rate” need to be made derivative (Ibid.).

Every moment spent sharing across cultural divides, whether during listening sessions, time spent in the garden, attending group meetings in participant’s homes, eating together and struggling to communicate across language differences, amongst others, has given me a chance to witness a resiliency, a joy, and a hope for the future. Although I attribute, in part, my current employment for providing me with these opportunities, it is more accurately the behind the scenes work in solidarity that keeps me bound to the multiple community struggles that have emerged with threads of connectivity between them. Through all these Hmong led efforts, identity formation figures prominently, and as bell hooks has pointed out, marginality provides a space, a place and a world of “community and collectivity,” wherein “the formation of an

oppositional worldview” can take root (1989, 76). An oppositional worldview is not a guaranteed view that comes with marginality, however marginality does position people to have access to a view of the world from multiple complex locations.

SETTING

History and Background

“She [Neng Vang] is better at farming than I. When I go to protect the county in the army, she stayed behind”- Nhia Neng

The history of the Hmong people in the United States has deep global and political contexts that are relevant to their experiences within the Henderson Community Garden space. Were it not for our involvement in the Vietnam War, they might not have the presence in the United States that they do today. The Hmong people started coming to the United States after the Vietnam War as political refugees, resulting from their involvement with the US military in the Secret War.³² During the Vietnam War, they fought for 15 years and thousands of Hmong soldiers and families were killed.³³

³² Under the Geneva Accord of 1962, Laos was guaranteed neutrality during the Vietnam War. However, both North Vietnam and the United States breached the accord, engaging in what has been known as the “Secret War” (Thao and Yang 2004). During this covert operation, the United States recruited the Hmong to fight for them by hampering North Vietnamese supply lines in Laos (Chiu 2004, 46).

³³ Several scholars point out that the Hmong people did not exclusively support the French and United States during the Indochina Wars, rather some fought alongside the North Vietnamese soldiers and some in support of the French and Americans (Lee 1998, Lee 2007, Cha 1996).

According to some scholars, there was a promise³⁴ of relocation to the United States in return for help in fighting the war. This promise however, was not kept in a timely manner. As many as 150,000 Hmong people were forced to flee persecution into Thailand (Buley-Meissner 2002, 327). Gaps in U.S. history omit the full details of the war, including the

destruction of Laos by the United States and China, the deliberate sacrifice of Hmong lives in our battle against communism, the empty promise of our protection, and the overwhelming obstacles overcome by Hmong survivors in their struggle to reach America (Ibid.).

This is precisely why uncovering alternate narratives and telling history from multiple perspectives is so important; it provides the potential to “redress past injustices and to correct false representations” or lack of representations altogether (Lee 2007, 19). It opens opportunity for the Hmong who dare to tell their history a chance to represent themselves.

Kou Yang points out that prior to their arrival to the United States, the “Hmong have previously been an undocumented people,” many having left persecution in China to settle in Southeast Asia (2009, 1). An ethnic minority living in diaspora, the majority of the Hmong people continue to reside in Southeast Asia- China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma. Others, displaced by war, reside in the U.S., France, Australia,

³⁴ Not every scholar agrees that there was a promise of relocation. In a personal correspondence Kou Yang mentioned that no such promise was ever confirmed (Kou Yang, Personal Correspondence. Professor Ethnic and Gender Studies, California State University, Stanislaus November 19, 2010).

Canada, Argentina and Germany (Lee 2006, 2).³⁵ Gary Yia Lee therefore characterizes the Hmong diaspora as a “transnationally alienated minority group” (2006, 2). Because the borders crossed by the Hmong communities residing in the U.S. are more than just national ones, the term “transborder migration” better indicates the ways in which the transnational becomes a subset of the transborder experience (Stephen 2007, 23).

Although they may have resided within the Chinese, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and Burma territories before arriving to the United States, as ethnic minorities residing within these territories, many crossed more than national boundaries. These other borders and boundaries overlap with the national and they include cultural, ethnic, class, race and religious borders, amongst others. As ethnic minorities in these territories, the story of Hmong migration is therefore complicated. They are migrant refugees who have crossed multiple borders of meaning and consequence. The importance placed on theorizing Hmong origins and history, according to Gary Yia Lee, stems from “a need to lend continuity and credence” in addition to defining the self instead of being defined by those in whose territory one resides (2007, 18).

Lacking historical or written records, debates abound about the origins and history of the Hmong people as a collective ethnic group (Thao and Yang 2004, Yang 2001, Yang 2009, Lemoine 2008, Lee 2007, Lee 2006). Yang points out that many versions of Hmong history have circulated since the “transition from a pre-literate to literate society”

³⁵ Some scholars claim that the Hmong number over 10 million world-wide (Lee 2006, 2). Others however point out that this figure includes all people under the name, “Miao” in China, which has at least four major groups: Ah Hmao, Hmong, Hmu and Qho Xiong (Kou Yang, Personal Correspondence. Professor Ethnic and Gender Studies, California State University, Stanislaus November 19, 2010). The world-wide number of the Hmong sub-group is therefore closer to 4-5 million (Lemoine 2005, 7).

(Yang 2009, 3). Despite the lack of written data however, the oral tradition of the Hmong has been the “unwritten charter of their common culture,” providing a testament to their collective memory (Lemoine 2008, 14). Just because their history is unwritten does not mean that it is unconfirmed, illegitimate or does not exist. Writing history is not just about inscribing a legible past, it is also about informing the present and future. History, as Lee notes, serves many purposes, the purpose depending on who the teller of the story is, and what their position is in relation to the story being told (2007, 18).

Telling history, or historiography, is therefore a powerful act of narrative ownership, it goes hand in hand with the search for one’s origins and a search for identity. Lee documents the practical uses of history by the Hmong people as a “collective paradigm to affect social change” based on the need to “redress past injustices and to correct false representations” (Ibid., 19). The crafting and “telling of identity narratives” can therefore be seen as a profound “political activity” of defining the self (Julian 2004-05, 19). Much like reclaiming history, reclaiming “Hmongness,” involves a connection with the past as well as a “reinvention” of tradition to serve the present (Ibid., 13). The response to who the Hmong are for example, depends on who is being asked, “who is narrating the identity, who is reading the identity, and who is performing it” (Ibid., 19). Like history and culture, Roberta Julian points out identities are not fixed and static but “dialogic, highly contextual and inherently political” (Ibid.).

It has been thirty-five years since the end of the U.S. Secret War in Laos, which resulted in the arrival of many Hmong from Laos to the United States (Yang 2001, 165). Thao and Cheng estimated that over 80,000 Hmong refugees arrived in the United States

after the end of the war (2004, 1). Scholars such as Bob Sutcliffe note that most of the situations that are said to foment the migratory movements of people result both “directly and indirectly from the foreign policies” of the very same countries to which people go, and which in many cases ironically then try to exclude them (2004, 277). Following this theory, U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam and Laos, specifically the training of Hmong tribesmen by the Central Intelligence Agency to support the war effort in Laos during the Secret War, can be said to be the direct line drawn between host and receiving country. Similarly, of the factors that contribute to an individual’s decision to leave their country of origin, is the long-standing colonial relationship between host and receiving country (Chomsky 2007, 123). In the case of the Hmong people, the militarized relationship between host and receiving country stands out most prominently as that which links the two. Migratory movements are indeed better understood as intrinsically part of larger world systems, embedded within the context of complex systems of globalized power and militarization.

Accounts that explain the creation of a bridge between our countries through structural theories alone are also only partial however, as they render migrant agency in playing an active role in building that bridge invisible. The story of Hmong refugee migration and resettlement to the United States is not only enmeshed in global politics and military conflict. Their history and their present lives are also tied to centuries of adapting to change and resisting marginalization. The struggle for the garden space should not be stripped of any of this important historical matter but rather, it should be

analyzed in the context of these complex systems of globalized power, militarization, historical continuity *and* community resiliency.

Even in the small city of Eureka, the mark of U.S. geopolitical processes can be seen. City spaces can be conceptualized as places where multiple distinct histories come together, hybridize and begin to co-evolve. The presence of the Hmong community is a testament to the collision of our histories, part and parcel of both larger geopolitical forces and a community and individual will to survive and thrive in diaspora. In their introduction to *Unsettling Cities*, John Allen, Doreen Massey and Michael Pryke draw attention to the open and permeable nature of cities that are shaped both by processes within their bounded locals and processes beyond them (Allen et al., 1999). In other words, the shaping of the city of Eureka is a product of both external global influences and conflicts, and internal processes and conflicts. It can even be said that the contours of the urban landscape provide a biography that narrates the intersection of these internal-external influences.

Macro-geopolitical processes do not just act upon people, people shape and act on them in decisive ways. It was not just the U.S. war of aggression that brought the Hmong to the United States for example, but perhaps also a conscious and strategic decision that was part of a long practice of resisting oppression and marginalization. The presence of a Hmong community in the United States, according to Lisa Long, is rooted not only in the U.S. militarized conflict, but even more deeply rooted in an “ancient four-thousand-year-old history of conflict and flight through the highlands of modern China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand-and now to the United States” (2008, 1). The Hmong communities adapted,

and hybrid agrarian practices within the garden can be similarly analyzed as a continuation of this long practice of resiliency, resistance and adapting and re-territorializing their deep-seated customs to yet another new place.

Movement also punctuates the Hmong trajectory within the United States. Most Hmong families spoke of arriving to the United States and later re-relocating to be closer to family or clan members that had preceded them, some moving in search of opportunities, work, education or arable land. After initially being dispersed throughout America, the peak year of resettlement being in 1980, many engaged in a second wave of movement to California in what is known as a “secondary migration” pattern (Yang 2001, 166). Although California currently boasts the largest Hmong population in the country, the same data indicate a slower rate of increase in the Western United States than in other regions (Pfeifer and Lee 2003, 5).³⁶ Several accounts in the *Times-Standard*, a local newspaper, recount how the California North Coast region was chosen as a destination by the Hmong community because the mountainous terrain and temperate weather reminded them of home.³⁷

When they began to settle around the California North Coast, reports began circulating about bigoted and racist retaliations against them. The *Times-Standard* listed as common, accounts of people “throwing eggs or harassing the Hmong,” one family

³⁶ Pfeifer and Lee also report from the 2000 census that 186,310 persons of Hmong origin were counted in all of the United States (2003, 4).

³⁷ Howard Davidson, “Sowing the Seeds of Freedom: Cooperative Garden Helps Refugees Feed their Families,” *Times-Standard*, August 26, 1986.
Charles Winkler “Coping in a New Land: Hmong Refugees Settle along North Coast,” *Times-Standard*, March 26, 1989.

even reported their “backyard garden destroyed.”³⁸ In some ways, not much has changed since their arrival in the 1980’s. The Henderson Community Garden is routinely vandalized on an almost yearly basis. Although the reasons for the vandalism remain unknown, they could be linked to the same bigoted sentiments that spurred the early acts of violence.

Deborah Giraud, Farm Advisor in Humboldt County with the University of California Cooperative Extension,³⁹ claims that over 1,000 Hmong community members moved to Eureka as part of the secondary migration pattern (Giraud 1995, 166). As Farm Advisor, Giraud began a shared backyard garden program with local residents to help accommodate the desire for garden spaces being expressed by the new refugees. Much like my findings two decades later, the high demand for gardens articulated by the Hmong families continues to be because these spaces offer

more to a Hmong family than the growing of food. A garden serves as a refuge from the stress of the changes in their lives...where they can meet and speak together in their own language...there are no pressures to understand, to translate, to feel judged...a garden offers a social outlet, as well as a place to use daily skills from their homeland (Ibid.,168).

Residents in Eureka were asked to consider sharing their underused backyards with a Hmong family, in the hopes of “creating gardens in a cross-cultural partnership” program (Ibid., 166). Giraud was able to facilitate a handful of these garden partnerships, one of which is still in existence to this day. However, unable to accommodate the high demand

³⁸ Kie Relyea, “Hmong Endure Cultural Contrasts in America: Children of Refugees get Caught in Generation Gap.” *Times-Standard*, March 22, 1992.

³⁹ The University of California Cooperative Extension is a division of the Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) statewide network of University of California specialists in agriculture.

for a place to garden, Giraud also sought to help place Hmong families in area community gardens. The Henderson Community Garden was a perfect match. Shortly after the Hmong community became acquainted with the garden space, more members began to request plots there and the garden quickly transitioned into a predominantly Hmong garden. The Henderson Community Garden had not always been exclusively a Hmong garden. Although only anecdotal evidence exists, I was told that at one point in time families of Latina/o decent had predominantly used the garden. Currently, all plots are gardened by Hmong families with only intermittent and short-lived use by other non-Hmong garden members.

The non-profit agency, Food for People (FFP), who then managed the community garden space asked Giraud, who had just begun teaching the Master Gardener⁴⁰ class in 1988, to use her students from the class to help manage the garden space. Throughout the past 27 years since then, FFP has continued to play a major role in managing and sustaining the Henderson Community Garden. Under FFP, managerial tasks related to the garden space have included the collecting of fees from garden participants, securing the necessary grant funds and donations of money to sustain and make improvements on the space, and mitigating issues as they arise between the gardeners, the neighbors, and the city. For several years in a row, AmeriCorps VISTA members have been brought in to help with these managerial tasks for the garden. They have been instrumental in

⁴⁰ Started in 1980, the University of California (UC) Master Gardener program, a program through UC Cooperative Extension, certifies master gardeners who in exchange for their training volunteer their research-based information, knowledge and time to a variety of community horticulture programs. These include issue-based programs in water and urban trees, as well as community gardens, school based gardening and many other programs. More than 45 California counties have UC Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Programs.

playing a delicate balancing act between multiple people and agencies, and the program itself has been invaluable in making the management and sustainability of the space even possible. FFP, an under-resourced non-profit, could not have managed the garden without the AmeriCorps VISTA program.

Management of the garden under the FFP non-profit goes back to the 1980s. Giraud is the earliest garden manager I could locate.⁴¹ According to Giraud, before the AmeriCorps VISTA program took such a prominent role in making the management of the garden space possible, the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA)⁴² program staff were used to help manage the space. According to Giraud, they were “government paid” staff people brought in to help keep the garden “neat and orderly.” The bringing in of CETA program members to keep the garden “neat and orderly” set the framework for the way in which the future AmeriCorps VISTA members interfaced with the garden space.

Importance of the Henderson Community Garden

The Henderson Community Garden is amongst other things an important source of food and a means to save money for Hmong community members. At the City Council meeting, the women testified that they needed the garden both to grow food and for economic reasons. Some garden members live in homes with yards, doubling their

⁴¹ Deborah Giraud also joined the FFP board and remained a board member for 14 years.

⁴² The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) was enacted by Congress in 1973 in an effort to consolidate fragmented and disjointed federal job training programs. These programs, fragmented or otherwise, were designed to supposedly help the “unemployed underemployed, and disadvantaged” by providing them with marketable skills.

growing space. Many however, live in nearby apartments and housing projects with no available yard. During more intimate conversations, garden members confirmed the economic necessity of growing their own food, but they did not stop there. True Vang for example, stated, “We like to grow our own food, but we also have to, out of need,”⁴³ and because she reported not making much money, if the garden were not available to them, “things would become very hard.” Chuck Her’s sentiment was similar, noting, “there is a great need for the garden for food, because of money issues.”

However according to Chuck Her, money was not the only driving force behind the garden: “At the garden there was always surplus and we shared, not sold it. I like thank you better than money, the garden fee is low, only for the water bill. I don’t need the money, better to share it with the community who need it.” Neng Vang also confirmed that the garden space offered reduced costs and a place to grow things unavailable to her elsewhere: “We don’t need to buy vegetables when we garden, we grow all year round, we save \$100-\$200 a month! We can’t buy in store what we grow, and with some it’s very expensive and does not taste as good as when you growing, is dead already!” Long Vang also mentioned that the garden is culturally important to them, and listed medicinal plants that they grow, including plants whose original seed stock came directly from Thailand, noting, “if it [the garden] goes, the plants we brought with us go too.”

⁴³ I have purposefully not corrected the grammar of the conversations within quotation marks, these are verbatim quotes from the garden members who participated and were able to speak some English. I believe that a lot can be lost in translation and even minor grammatical changes can change the intent of what was shared. Where no quotation marks are present, Mike Lee was directly interpreting Hmong into English for me.

The garden space provides an important way for the Hmong community to stay connected to their common history, to reconnect to their food sources, maintain traditional methods, and adapt new hybrid cultivation methods suited to the California North Coast environment.⁴⁴ The struggle to sustain the garden should not be misinterpreted as an effort to protect from extinction the “pre-modern” culture of the Hmong people (Chiu 2004, 63). The garden is better understood as a space of creative place-making, wherein “continuation, change, rebirth, and hybridization of Hmong American culture” occurs on a daily basis (Ibid.). The lived realities of the Henderson Community Garden and the narrative stories shared by garden members chronicle their resiliency, resistance and adaptation strategies. The garden space also provides the wider community, including the non-profit community, a chance to work in solidarity with the Hmong community not only in sustaining the garden space but also in linking their issue to the wider conflicts around legitimizing one’s cultural practices, one’s rights to derivative entitlements, food sovereignty and a right to shape city space.

It is hard to encapsulate a single aspect about the garden that is of most importance for the Hmong families that cultivate food, herbs and other plants there. The garden participants all have spoken of the space allotted in economic terms: it increased their access to fresh foods at a reduced cost and allowed them to save money. All participants also talked about the cultural importance of being able to grow things unavailable to them elsewhere, including medicinal and spiritual plants. Several also

⁴⁴ The California North Coast, also referred to as the Redwood Coast, generally includes the coastal environments of Marin, Sonoma, Mendocino, Humboldt, and Del Norte counties.

mentioned a great joy derived from being in the garden, with some articulating this through a belief in the health benefits accrued by working and tending the land, and others articulating it in terms of a sense of being in an important place that reminded them of home.

AGROECOLOGY

Behind the tall gates that almost obscure the garden entirely, emerges an otherwise ordinary city lot made rich in biodiversity⁴⁵ by the agroecological cultivation techniques practiced by Hmong garden members. The cultivation techniques used in the garden explode the boundaries of the city-nature binary, challenging the meaning of urban as devoid of nature and nature as having to be untouched by human interaction. The traditional agroecological cultivation techniques in particular constitute a kind of people powered nature, where urban agricultural practices can be said to be increasing the biodiversity of city life. Traditional agroecological farming systems can be described as complex farming systems that help in promoting and sustaining biodiversity (Altieri, 2002). Stephen R. Gliessman describes sustainable agroecosystems as those that maintain their natural resource base; rely on a minimum of external and artificial inputs; internally manage and regulate pests and diseases; and replenish the resource base from the disturbances caused by cultivation and harvest (2010a).

⁴⁵ Biodiversity can be defined as a characteristic of a given area, and “refers to the variety within and among living organisms, assemblages of living organisms, biotic communities, and biotic processes, whether naturally occurring or modified by humans” (DeLong 1996, 745).

The ecological implications of the urbanization process on this culturally and ecologically rich space are rarely given much thought by urban developers. The results of a commercial development replacing the garden space would not only negatively impact the level of biodiversity in the urban core, but would also negatively impact gendered cultural practices, nutrition and the dietary diversity of garden participants and their families. In an otherwise dense urban environment, thoughtless development over the garden space would mean a loss not only in general plant biodiversity, but would also mean the likely disappearance of some plant species that are only grown there. In this hidden garden space, cultural practices and biodiversity go hand in hand, one is not incidental to the other, but rather the agrarian practices of the Hmong garden members directly result in the biological and cultural enrichment of the urban environment.

The diasporic plants that have been transferred to the garden from their original homes in the tropics of Southeast Asia, are considered off-site cultivars that did not originate or evolve here. In their original landscape, many of the plants found in the Henderson Community Garden were certainly native cultivars. Transplanted to a new region, by ecological definition they have by virtue of travel ceased to be native. Plants however, can also become naturalized over time as they evolve with their soils and the many soil organisms they live with. At the Henderson Community Garden, the plants are becoming naturalized by adapting, enriching, and co-evolving with the new environment – plants, soil, and place begin a process of co-evolution – they evolve together aided by the agrarian practices of the garden members that tend to them.

The continuous cultivation that occurs in single family plots means that nutrients are constantly being extracted from the soil. Every garden member described in some detail the inputs added to the soil to put back what the plants take out, these include direct composting, adding grass clippings, if they had access to a lawn, and chicken manure, if they had access to chickens. Long and Yer Vang described taking the dying plants and plant leaves and working them into the soil. Old grass clippings are, “put under the soil” and “some chicken manure from home is also put into the soil.” For those who can afford it, purchasing bags of cow manure is also an option. When asked about inputs, Chuck Her mentioned he used just, “grass and cow manure,” the grass coming directly from the garden and the cow manure is purchased. Nhia Neng similarly mentioned that in their garden, “we use dead leaves, grass and cow shit,” to which everyone in the room laughed. “Neng and I use compost, we buy the compost in the truck by the yard, this is a new practice we learned here,” and Neng Vang added, “left over crab and fish is also very good.”

In addition, traditional agroecosystems are described as those that, amongst other variables, rely minimally on the use of purchased inputs; activities within agroecosystems are beneficial for the immediate and surrounding environment; are adapted, or in this case adapting to local conditions; maximize yield while sustaining productive capacity; rely on and conserve local genetic diversity, or in this case a transborder genetic diversity; and rely on and conserve indigenous knowledge and culture (Gliessman 2010b). Despite using some purchased inputs, the practices of the Hmong garden members fit these descriptions well, perhaps with the caveat that they are *adapting* to local conditions as

opposed to *adapted* to local conditions.⁴⁶ The principles of agroecological systems can be adapted to new agroecosystems, and this is precisely what is happening at the Henderson Community Garden. Hmong garden members have brought with them their diasporic indigenous technical agroecological knowledge base that they are adapting and re-territorializing to a new environment.

True Vang, for example, described how she adapted her farming practices from Thailand to the Henderson Community Garden: “There, terrain was different, there were more hills, here it is flat land, it’s easier in some ways here. Except here we can’t grow as well year round, and work schedules interfere with farming.” True Vang and her family reported not needing to use fertilizer in Thailand because “we moved the farm,” but here, they adapted by practicing crop rotation, since they have to use the same plot every year. When asked about inputs into the garden plot she has now, True shared that she uses only straw, they do not use chemicals. The straw helps to fertilize the soil and helps with self sowing plants, True believes that chemicals in fertilizers are harmful to the body and are taken in when eating foods treated with them.

Faced with new and unfamiliar pest and weed varieties, some garden members have resorted to purchasing minimal amounts of synthetic inputs. Some garden members apply snail pellets around the plants, but according to most garden members, synthetic products are never put directly on the plants. Many garden members responded that they used minimal external inputs, if any at all. Long and Yer Vang for example, mentioned

⁴⁶ No matter where agroecological traditions originated, I believe they are always *adapting*, as opposed to *adapted*, which almost connotes a state of stasis. Agroecological traditions are far from static; they constantly adapt and evolve to changes in the environment.

that additives like chemical fertilizers were not used because these “do not make the plants taste good.” Similarly, when asked about pest control, Yer Vang mentioned that not much is needed, as the bugs do not do that much damage. For snails, some garden members use salt around the perimeter of the plants, which acts as a deterrent. Long and Yer Vang reported not liking to use the store bought snail pellets as the plants absorb these, the snail pellets according to Yer Vang, “go into the soil and plant and then you eat them.” Neng Vang reported, “In Laos we don’t have for pest control, so we try to kill by hand. Here we put some around the plant, but not on the plant.” Although some purchased or synthetic inputs are incorporated, the practices of the Hmong garden members can be characterized as “low resource” agriculture based almost entirely on local resources and using only a minimal amount of external inputs (Altieri 2009, 3).

The Hmong garden members employ traditional methods to sustain the genetic diversity in the garden space such as “multiple cropping systems or polycultures” (Altieri 1983, 403). Polyculture is a traditional agricultural strategy of using multiple crops in a variety of ways to achieve benefits for both the land and the farmer (Ibid.). Intercropping, crop rotation, and companion planting are all polycultural practices common amongst the Henderson Community Garden members. Flowers are grown by most garden members, interspersed throughout the plots along with edibles, culinary herbs and medicinal plants, even small red-leafed banana stalks are grown by several garden members, tucked between rows or up against walls where they are sheltered from the ocean wind. When asked if the bananas were for eating, Youa Yang responded that they were there to make the plot beautiful and because she enjoyed growing them. Sha

Cha had even learned to grow the dahlia, a variety of flower popular to North Coast gardens. By planting a variety of plants and crop species together, yields are higher and agricultural risks are reduced (Altieri 1983, Altieri et al. 1987, Altieri 2002).

This use of indigenous technical knowledge acquired over years of farming practices is used to select plant varieties, to determine how and when to harvest, save seeds and regenerate soil health in a manner that promotes biodiversity. According to Miguel Altieri, this is a product not of “primitive” ignorance but of “ecological rationales (Altieri 1983, 402). These techniques being used are “knowledge-intensive,” as opposed to “input-intensive” (Altieri 2002, 3). Hmong garden members also described saving seeds and allowing leafy greens to self-sow. These practices are especially important to the Hmong families because the seed varieties they use are not as readily available in the area. According to some of the adjacent neighbors by contrast, it appeared as though plants were not harvested and garden plots were not tended. The practice of seed saving and allowing plants to self-sow, meant that many plants would in the process, become yellow or brown in color, or would even “rot to the ground” as one neighbor described it.

Some neighbors who peer into the garden from their properties described the space as unsightly, accusing garden members of not taking pride in their plots. In reality, these practices are not the result of negligence as some neighbors have reported, but rather, age-old regenerative practices that allow garden members to save transnational seed stocks and allow nutrients from the dying plants back into the soil through the direct composting of dead materials. These practices are very much the result of pride, the application of indigenous technical knowledge, and a deep interdependence with the

physical environment and what it provides for them.⁴⁷ According to Sheehan, the agrarian practices of the Hmong

serve to conserve natural resources because in doing so human life is conserved. Soil and water resources benefit directly through frugal Hmong gardening practices while the use of hand technologies prevents soil erosion...their choice of horticultural system replicates the biological characteristics and dynamics of a natural ecosystem...cultural values and their resistance to domination result in the replication of a horticulture that is ecologically as well as socially beneficial (Sheehan, n.d.).

Sustaining the garden not only conserves the rich genetic resources garden members bring in, but also provides the space that helps to promote their highly technical, ever adapting and hybrid cultural practices being re-territorialized to a new place.

Anthony Bebbington points out that through years of experimentation, farmers “build up” a body of indigenous agricultural knowledge (IAK) (1991, 14). IAK is defined as the

agricultural knowledge that peasant farmers have at any one time. It is constituted both by the empirical contents of the knowledge and by the principles that underlie its production, organization and meaning (Ibid., 15).

Neither the city, nor the neighbors adjacent to the garden have come to appreciate or acknowledge the level of intricate knowledge and experience the garden members have applied to the garden space over the years of their tenure there. This failure to acknowledge the rich knowledge base of the Hmong gardeners is part of a long legacy of

⁴⁷ My intent is not to romanticize Hmong agricultural practices, but rather to point out the detrimental effects that result from the failure to take seriously the many benefits that are a direct outcome of the urban agroecological practices of the Hmong garden members. Both romanticizing and exoticizing cultural practices, although they seem positive, are nonetheless based on one-dimensional stereotypes that homogenize and invisibilize the complex, diverse, and dynamic nature of communities, thereby functioning to maintain systems of inequality (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2007, 66).

colonialism for delegitimizing, “ignoring and sometimes maligning indigenous knowledge,” depicting it as “primitive, simple and static” (Warren 1992, 3).

IAK however, is neither static, primitive nor simple, and Bebbington illustrates nicely how it can be part of a broader analysis that includes not only its role in food production, but also cultural identity production and the production of political strategies (Ibid., 14). Retaining and “recuperating” IAK and practices is linked to “strengthening political participation, self determination to maintain local autonomy, and even for territorial control” (Ibid., 20). Farming in the midst of the city constitutes a political reshaping of urban space, a carving out of alternate civic participation through the act of farming. The activities of the garden members are critically linked to ethnic and gendered identities and demands structural changes on several levels such as the “restructuring of land holding, marketing, and political systems” that otherwise make little room for these alternative practices (Ibid.).

The land use practices in this garden space are both ancient and new. They are ancient re-territorialized and adapting hybrid practices of cultivating traditional garden food crops in a new place. Altieri notes that the goal of the traditional cropping schemes are not for the

short-term maximization of yield, but rather stabilization of yield with the most efficient utilization of energy and of non-renewable resources, and a minimal degree of ecosystem degradation. This is the strategy of the small tropical farmer who has managed to survive under conditions of low-quality marginal soils, low capital and no access to institutional support (Altieri, 1983: 404).

This is also the strategy of many urban community farmers, like the garden members at the Henderson Community Garden, who stabilize their yields through knowledge intensive practices, enhance the biodiversity of the urban ecosystem, are routinely relegated to marginal soils, lack access to capital and are offered little institutional support. The garden space can be analyzed as a veritable microcosm of the “adaptive capacity and resilient capabilities exhibited by small farmers” everywhere being threatened with development in other places around the world (Altieri 2009, 6). Fanning outwards from the microcosm of the garden space, the efforts of the Hmong garden members at the Henderson Community Garden link to other local and global efforts to maintain traditional cultivation techniques and achieve food sovereignty.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Space of Gendered Responsibilities, Knowledge and Activism

Gendered Knowledge

“The men tried to get us [the women] to grow food on this land, but this land is no good. Men don’t grow, they don’t understand. They think they know, but they don’t!” -Neng Vang Lee

Neng Vang Lee is reflecting on an incident in which the men of the community located a piece of property they deemed suitable for the women to build a new garden on. The

uniquely gendered⁴⁸ agrarian knowledge the women possess led them to reject that space for a whole host of reasons. They knew the space to be “no good.” The men on the other hand, lacking the women’s level of knowledge, saw only a vacant plot with the potential to become a new garden. In order to understand the Henderson Community Garden more holistically, one needs to examine how knowledge production is gendered, and specifically, how *gendered forms of knowledge* emerge, and are produced from women’s specific gendered responsibility in the garden space. According to Katie Harbaugh, it appeared as though the women at the Henderson Community Garden are “in charge” when in the garden space. At the mandatory clean-ups and garden meetings, she claimed that the women “gave instructions to the husbands” on what needed to be done. Once, when Katie was mowing the communal area, she witnessed a Hmong woman instruct her husband to go and assist her in the heavy mowing task.⁴⁹

During a listening session with Nhia Neng and Neng Vang Lee, Nhia Neng explained that the, “women know how to grow and weeding and knowing how to protect the plants to get good produce, men do the hay and digging, when it comes to design, taste and what vegetables to grow then it’s the women,” to which Neng Vang added, “because women run the kitchen, is women’s job and they know how.” What both Nhia Neng and Neng Vang were alluding to is that knowledge becomes gendered with the responsibilities attributed to women. Time spent and experience gained in the garden

⁴⁸ Gender is always only a starting point of analysis within a larger intersectional analysis and never, in my opinion, stands in isolation from other categories that equally inform and are informed by it.

⁴⁹ Perhaps the task of mowing did not fit Katie’s gender assignment compelling help from one of the Hmong men.

leads to the development of a gendered division in knowledge. It is a knowledge grounded in the work they perform and in their daily, lived, material realities more generally, which emanate in part from accepted gendered divisions of labor within the community. It is not a knowledge that is biologically essential or inherent to women, but a knowledge learned and passed down from generation to generation, from one woman to another. This transfer of knowledge occurs in spaces that are gendered for women. These spaces are not essentially, nor inherently women's spaces either, they are as Thomas-Slater *et al.* point out, "socially constructed" as "appropriate and suitable" domains for women (1996, 292).

When asked where and when she learned to cultivate plants, Neng Xiong mentioned that she came from Laos and Thailand and "I didn't need to learn, we always knew how." The question of when she learned was almost arbitrary and strange to her, like asking someone when they learned to walk. Neng Vang responded similarly, looking at me quizzical as if the question made no sense to her. "I learned since I know how. I learned from my mother, and grandmother and great-grandmother," she remarked. What the women are attesting to is the fact that young girls, as soon as they are able, begin to help tend the plants that provide sustenance for the family. Learning to tend the land that feeds the family starts at a very young age, but knowledge about certain plant properties, however, especially medicinal plants, is imparted along other lines of difference, such as age, marital status, motherhood, etc. Varied levels of knowledge are imparted along these lines of difference as new stages in life come with new responsibilities. Gendered responsibilities within the garden space relate to productive

and reproductive roles along gendered intersectional lines, both of which have spatial and generational dimensions.

Gendered Responsibilities

“The children help with the heavier work in the yard, because they are younger and stronger. I help in the beginning too with the heavy stuff, but everyday no, she [Neng Xiong] tends the garden every day.”-Chuck Her

A deeper exploration of *gendered responsibilities* can help illuminate key differences between what women and men do in that space, and what influence this has on the differing values of, management of, and knowledge attained within the garden. Women are predominantly responsible for the garden space, it is after all, as Maria Elisa Christie so aptly describes it, “an extension of the kitchen,” a continuation of one gendered space into another, both featuring women prominently as primary care takers of food, all the way from cultivation to consumption (2004, 378). The women of the Henderson Community Garden are not merely responsible for cultivating plants, but also responsible for raising their children. The garden space provides a place in which these two activities can occur seamlessly. When asked what purpose the garden fences around the individual family plots provided, some garden members mentioned that these helped them keep their children close and out of other family plots.

The value of the garden is imparted on children at a young age, making the space a place of cultural continuity as children spend time at play in their mother’s garden. Gendered responsibilities and gendered knowledge are, moreover, intricately intertwined.

The responsibilities attributed to women within the garden lead to the cultivation of uniquely gendered knowledge systems. As Neng Vang alludes to above, women know how to cultivate edibles because they are responsible for the kitchen. Other garden members similarly support this hypothesis. Sha Cha, a former member of the Henderson Community Garden who now focuses solely on her kitchen garden,⁵⁰ reported being the primary decision maker in the garden. When she was at the Henderson Community Garden, her husband would help with the heavier tasks, and this gendered division continued in the home garden she predominantly tends to now. Another gardener, True Vang, responded while her husband was present that “he does all planting and makes decisions and the children help out.” When he left the room, she whispered to us “but I dictate,” to which she chuckled. Later in the interview, when I tried to engage her still silent husband for input on the garden, True responded for him, reiterating more publicly “it is what I say.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ In her study of Mexican house-lot gardens, Christie describes the absence of a clear boundary between the kitchen and the house-lot garden, coining the term “kitchenspace” to more accurately describe the combined “indoor and outdoor spaces where food is prepared” (2004, 370). I made a similar observance with the Hmong kitchen gardens. All families grew what they could close to their house, some in pots on the pavement by their apartments, and more fortunate families with houses tended full gardens in addition to the plot held at the Henderson Community Garden. Plants grown in the kitchen garden are predominantly used in the kitchen, making it an extension of the kitchen space. The Henderson Community Garden fit the kitchen garden description well.

⁵¹ True Vang’s situation was unique from other garden members. Due to a back injury her husband and children would spend more time in the garden than she. This is perhaps indicative that gendered spaces are more amorphous, they are not exclusively women’s spaces. Despite this observation, both True Vang’s comment about dictating her husband’s activities, and Neng Vang Lee’s aforementioned exclamation that men only think they know about cultivation, but really do not, point to a continued uniquely gendered knowledge that only they as women claim, possess, develop and pass on to other women.

The garden is not only a predominantly women-centered space, wherein her gendered knowledge about cultivation, seed saving, medicinal and spiritual plant properties are tied to their role as food provider for the family, but are also tied to their age, to their marital status and to their status as mother (Neumann 2005, 110). In their study of Hmong gardens in Sacramento, Jan L. Corlett, Ellen A. Dean, and Louis E. Grivetti also note the generational influence on what is grown in Hmong gardens, observing that the “gifted elders” pass their extensive knowledge on to other women, especially when it comes to the use of traditional herbal medicine (2003, 366). Elder women in the garden grew a greater variety of plants, attributable to their increased knowledge *and* responsibility for the medicinal plants grown. In tallying the variety of plants grown by Hmong women by age, they noted that elder women grew an average of 32 plants, while younger women cultivated an average of 26 (Ibid., 369). This shows that gender provides a great starting point of analysis, but does not stand alone, and is insufficient by itself to account for the way in which the garden provides a repository of knowledge and experience along other axes of difference. In her kitchen garden, Sha Cha reported growing a wide variety of medicinal plants, for aches and pains, bladder infections, herbs for cooking, and a kind of ginger plant with multiple purposes, working well in soups as broth and as an antiinflammatory remedy. When Susie Cha broke her finger, she went to her mother for a compress out of the leaf of the plant, and this she said, “helped with the bruising and inflammation.”

When asking Susie Cha why she had not yet learned about the medicinal plants properties, her mother Sha Cha was quick to point out, “she [Susie Cha] is not ready, she

is too young.” This is indicative of the transition of knowledge not only being gendered but also generational. Nhia Neng even mentioned a leafy green that women only liked “when you get older, maybe 35 and older,” and that “most women feel they need some vegetables, when they want some fresh, women need vegetables!” Both these comments are indicative that even tastes and needs can be defined in uniquely gendered and generational terms. Susie Cha expressed an interest in learning about plant cultivation, but also mentioned that growing your own food is a lot of work and hard to juggle with paid work. Susie’s mother Sha Cha does not work in the “formal economy” – she is not “employed” – but she does work hard at maintaining her garden, her chickens and her medicinal and herbal plants that help sustain the family. However, this work routinely performed by women is devalued, it is not considered “real work” because it is not waged labor for the capitalist market.

Although the Hmong women spend countless hours in the garden, enriching the soil, cultivating a countless number of plants, harvesting tons of food, imparting cultural and technical knowledge to their children, none of this counts as “productive work” because it goes unremunerated (Waring 1988). Marilyn Waring for example, outlines how the “international economic system constructs reality in a way that excludes the great bulk of women’s work” (Waring 1988, 25). Those things that are attributed as lacking a monetary value are discounted and devalued. Although the capitalist economic system does not attribute a value to the productive or reproductive work that women perform both within the garden and beyond, this does not mean that these activities intrinsically lack value. Outside of the boundaries of commercial production and lacking

a monetary value, the work women perform in the garden is socially and politically constructed to lack value, it has been *devalued*.

The bulk of women's work goes through this process of being stripped of value, rendered invisible by a capitalist economic system that gains to benefit from its devaluation. As Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham note, women are socially situated to be the primary responsible care-takers for the young, the old the sick, performing most of the "world's socially necessary labor" without pay (1997, 2). The processes through which the devaluation of this work has occurred have been so normalized and ingrained so as to go unnoticed. The power of the economic system rests on how it has been naturalized to reflect the "conventional social virtue" of those who construct it, effectively stripping it of the cultural work that it performs and the social processes that put it in place (Waring 1988, 29).

For the younger generations who feel the pressure of wage labor, Susie pointed out that maintaining a garden becomes less of a viable reality, as "it [tending a garden] becomes more like work" and waged work interferes with the ability to garden. True Vang similarly commented that work is constricting to gardening. The amount that can be grown is restricted by the amount they have to work for wages. Capitalism – and wage labor specifically – impedes the regeneration of this cultural practice. When gardening practices are sustained by older and younger generations alike, they challenge capitalism, not only by working less to take the time to tend to their garden, but also by locking in the potential capital value the land otherwise holds for the city or other property owner.

Gendered Activism

“The city tries to take the garden away because they don’t understand how important it is to us, they need to know. If the garden were not here for us, things would become very hard. Even if the city and other people did know how important the garden is to us, the Hmong are so few, why should the city continue to give us this land?” -True Vang

Acknowledging the gendered nature of these spaces is an important starting point when investigating the kinds of threats made to the space, because the outcomes can consequently be gendered as well. If the garden were understood as a women-centered space, a gendered domain where knowledge is transferred and social networks sustained, then it could also be recognized that the women would most keenly feel the consequences of its “commercial” over-development⁵² by the city. Hmong women’s *gendered activism* in response to this threat derives from their struggle to maintain the garden they are predominantly responsible for, because it is a source of cultural, spiritual and physical nourishment for both their families and their own personal identity. True Vang’s statement encapsulates a big part of the problem as she sees it, “the city does not understand how important the garden is to us,” the city enjoys the luxury of obliviousness. The parcel of land on which the garden sits, is only legible to the city in terms of property and ownership, they fail to see the cultural texture of the land, the re-territorialized richness of the space, especially as it pertains to the women. As Long and Yer Vang point out,

⁵² I added “commercial” over-development to emphasize that the land is in actuality already developed, just not in the way the city sees fit, or in the way the city defines “development.”

If it [the garden] goes, the plants we brought with us [from Thailand] go too. The plants make this place home. It [the garden] is a little bit of home, it is lifestyle we are used to. Not growing food would be boring.

Despite the presence of whole families, the only family members who spoke to defend the garden at the City Council meeting were the women. This is because the women had the most to lose from the city's proposed commercial development of the property that houses the garden. It is also during garden meetings that the women predominantly speak and provide input, contest accusations made by neighbors, or challenge garden managers. Sharon A. Bays, who similarly worked in a Hmong garden for her dissertation, noted that women spent the most time in the garden space, sharing it with family members but taking on leadership roles in the management of their plots, both within the family unit and when garden issues arose (1994, 16). The women take the time to defend the garden because it is a repository of their unique knowledge and a space that they are primarily responsible for. The Hmong women are the ones culturally and socially positioned to be responsible for this unique garden space and therefore, are the ones most likely to defend it as well.

The women of the Henderson Community Garden are involved in a localized, place-based, "collective struggle" to address threats being made to the garden space. Their efforts to keep their garden links them to women all over the globe involved in similar struggles that "address problems of resources, the environment, and economic survival" (Thomas-Slater *et al.* 1996, 294). As one begins to recognize how women are situated as responsible for the care of the living landscape that nourishes their families on multiple levels, the struggle the Hmong garden members experience ceases to be just

place-based, they possess threads of commonality, linking them globally with struggles in many other places over the living landscape.

Contested Social Spaces:
Negotiating Relations with Non-profits, Neighbors and the City

“We [Hmong] need the garden because we follow the plant.” -Chuck Her

When Katie Harbaugh started her position as a garden manager for the Henderson Community Garden through the FFP agency, she described a “garden in chaos.” Well before the last incident in which the city threatened to develop the property upon which the garden sits, Katie and FFP were faced with mounting tensions between the garden and the surrounding neighborhood. Complaints were coming in from the neighborhood that the garden was in disarray, unattractive, and attracting “criminal elements.” Katie went on to recount that when she started her position, “the garden was an eye sore” and “I needed it to be an example.” The imperative to make the garden an example was perhaps fueled by the need to make the space fit into the accepted community garden parameters in order to make it more palatable to the complaining neighbors and perhaps to help fend off threats from the city.

To mitigate the issue of a garden in chaos, grants were often sought that could be used to “improve”⁵³ the appearance of the garden space. Katie described building a

⁵³ These narratives of improvement have an uncanny link to the discourse of development. Arturo Escobar describes development practice as an apparatus or mechanism “that links forms of knowledge about the Third World with the deployment of forms of power and intervention” (1992, 23). Defining the Third World for example, as underdeveloped invites strategies and

communal herb garden with grant funding, only to find that the kinds of herbs used by Hmong families were not as readily available. Herbs like rosemary, oregano and thyme were purchased to fill the communal herb garden. Pressured by grant deadlines Katie stated that they: “had to put something there, it couldn’t just sit empty and these were the herbs available.” However, most garden members did not grow these herbs in their plots and none of the garden members use the communal herb garden, which was in all likelihood constructed without their input and without their use of it in mind. Had the garden members been asked for input, they would have known, as Neng Xiong, one of the garden members explained, that Hmong families like to have their culinary herbs handy. She described how most families grow these “everyday” herbs at their homes, in containers or in the ground wherever they could find a place – “if you see pots outside with cilantro and onion [green onions], you know this is Hmong family.” They would also have known that rosemary, oregano and thyme are not herbs commonly used. If the purpose of the herb garden and arbors and benches prior to Katie’s tenure, were constructed to “improve” the garden, it begs the question for whom these improvements really served a purpose for.

The tensions that mounted with the surrounding community were often articulated around the proper “look” and purpose the community garden was expected to have.

These sentiments could in part have stemmed from the neighbors’ lack of familiarity with

interventions of improvement. The metaphors articulated in development discourse often connote mobility, moving forward from a backward state, from the primitive to the modern, from an uncivilized state to a more civilized state. For a more in depth discussion of development discourse see also (Crush 1995, Escobar 1991, Escobar 1988, Escobar 2002, Esteva 2005, Mosse 2005).

the plants grown and the cultivation methods being used by the Hmong gardeners. One resident in particular, shortly after moving into the neighborhood and adjacent to the garden, described that the garden was not only a “mess,” but that it also did not fit her expectation of what living next to a garden should be like. “Anybody that garden connects to has problems. Gardens are supposed to be beautiful and good neighbors, if they would just take a little pride in it, it could look a lot better.”⁵⁴ This same neighbor claimed to notice some plots were not even harvested, and she claimed to see from her house that “plants just rot to the ground.” Even neighbors who generally had positive things to say about the garden would end by claiming that the garden was in need of some “beautifying.” Another neighbor suggested the garden manager or garden members themselves

Plant flowers to change people’s minds, doctor the garden up with that stuff. Make them [the neighbors] happy by showing something beautiful. I travel a lot, and Sacramento has state of the art community gardens, everything is in line! This garden could be more like that.

None of these statements however, coincide with the descriptions provided by many of the garden members of the same space. In contrast, garden members spoke of the beauty of the garden, the joy of spending time there and the significance of the plants that make the space a little place like home. Complaints about the garden and its members were not always so benign, they could also be disparaging towards garden members. Many of these sentiments come from privileging assumptions about what urban agriculture is supposed to look like, and in privileging a dominant paradigm, the

⁵⁴ Although I was given full permission by all the interview participants to use their real names, I nonetheless decided in some places not to include all names.

current practices within the garden are simultaneously constructed as “inappropriate,” “uncivilized,” and “backward.” One neighbor in particular recounted in an apparent warning about the garden members, “be careful, they are like a bunch of wild Indians,” rhetorically asking in addition to that, “why don’t they learn English?” That same neighbor claimed when peering into the garden from her property, that she had trouble discerning when the garden members were men or women. These complaints took on bigoted, racial and sexist overtures, as some neighbors struggled to appreciate, or let alone understand a space more accurately mislabeled a community garden.

Trying to fit the Henderson Community Garden within their established criteria of what a garden should look like was a recipe for disappointment and often resulted in levels of resistance by the garden members. The dismantling of the garden arbors and benches are examples of some of the ways in which the garden members have resisted the imposed reshaping of their garden space. Another example of resistance has been the act of selectively speaking English. Prior garden managers and neighbors have both indicated a sense that the Hmong gardeners sometimes “understand more English than they tell you.” Katie indicated that the level of English comprehension is revealed gradually, as trust is developed. In his foundational work on resistance, James C. Scott points out that what has been missing from the traditional perspectives on resistance, due in large part on a skewed “shared understanding of relevance,” are “*everyday* [emphasis in original] forms of resistance” (1985: xvi).

Everyday forms of resistance tend to occur below the radar screen, often left unrecognized for being ordinary and mundane and therefore evading the proverbial

optics of resistance. The dismissal of these forms of resistance, Scott goes on, “fundamentally misconstrues the basis of economic and political struggle conducted by subordinate classes in repressive settings (Ibid., 289-92). In other words, the dismissal invariably defines and draws lines around what is and what is not political action and subject-hood. Selectively sharing the extent of one’s English proficiency fits well into this everyday form of resistance category as described by Scott. It is a form of resistance that can be deployed to defuse a hostile situation.

These acts of resistance created tensions with the neighbors, the city and the FFP managing agency, who found themselves in the position of having to carefully balance the tensions to safeguard the garden. The most difficult and taxing managerial task communicated to me by the prior FFP garden managers had been the liaison role they had to play between the garden members, the city staff, the surrounding neighbors, and even their own agency. Besides the city repeatedly threatening to sell the space from under them, at one point a neighbor even threatened to sue FFP for the supposed disorderly conduct of the Hmong garden members.

Garden managers had a balancing act to play between the outside push to improve the garden space to make it better fit the community garden standard, and the Hmong garden members’ internal interpretations and values around the proper use of the space. Katie frequently described the difficulty in trying to convey, “even the simplest of concepts such as property.” On many occasions, when issues around the property would arise, Katie described attempted to explain the relationship between ownership and management. It was, according to Katie, “beyond my ability to convey that the city owns

the garden, and FFP only manages it.” It was her impression that garden members had their own notions of property, notions tied not to individual ownership, but rather tied to the continuous use of a plot over the years by multiple family members. Mai Soua Vang and Susie Cha, who occasionally provided interpretive help during garden meetings, conveyed that property was not even in the Hmong vocabulary.

Despite the garden being managed by the FFP agency, garden members controlled access to family plots and even transferred them with some autonomy. Many of the same Hmong families and extended family members who garden at the Henderson Community Garden today, have been tending plots there since the mid 1980s. An accurate number has been hard to ascertain, however, since many informally passed plots on to extended family members, often without informing FFP staff, who would find out well after the new members had already established themselves. To accommodate new gardeners, FFP began to create a plot waiting list. Area residents would occasionally inquire about the availability of plots and FFP staff would place them on the waiting list. According to the managers, plots would very rarely become available, and rarely would members of the Hmong community inquire about their availability. In the spring of 2008, Katie described what happened when a plot was finally left vacant by the only non-Hmong gardener who left the plot fallow only a short period of time. Before being able to offer it to a person on the waiting list, Katie found the garden plot already “tilled and occupied.”

Finding a new Hmong gardener there, Katie described her as a, “Hmong grandmother in from Michigan who used the plot without permission.” When asked how she came to occupy the space, or how she entered a privately locked garden, Mee Lee

responded that she heard about the garden, and the plot, from a relative who also tended one there. Katie relayed her frustration during the interview, trying to convey the concept of property and proper process and, “that this is not how you obtain a plot, there is a waiting list with people who get priority.” Although she had the authority to do so, Katie did not evict Mee Lee. At this point in her tenure as garden manager, Katie had come to accept that the Hmong community had their own processes for informal transfer of plots, and unique understanding of space and property that did not coincide with the notions of that space held by her agency, the city or the wider community.

DISCUSSION

New Paths for Understanding Community Gardens

Privileged social groups have the institutional access and the cultural authority to determine and define what knowledge is valid, who is worthy of listening to, and simultaneously, whose knowledge is invalid and who is not worthy of being heard. Hmong garden members weave counter narratives by questioning, critiquing and engaging with the limited perspectives provided by the city government, the judgment passed by neighbors, and the rules dictated by the managing agency. Counter narratives provide bottom-up critiques that contest the effects these limited understandings have had on the culture, resources, and livelihood needs of the garden members. Michel Foucault discusses these counter narratives in terms of subjugated knowledges that are present but

disguised and hidden between the lines of dominant discourses. Considered “*low-ranking*” on a “*hierarchy of knowledge*,” they are left “*unqualified*” or delegitimized within the dominant mainstream discourses (Foucault 1980, 82).

At the City Council meeting, garden members were each given only three minutes to summarize and defend the importance of the garden space. Their knowledge and insights took a back seat to the ensuing discussion between council members around the need to develop the space to raise revenue. It was not only during the City Council meetings that their unique knowledge was disregarded as unimportant. During FFP’s mandatory garden meetings, more time was spent on going over rules of conduct than asking garden members to share their insights and expertise. These are some examples of the systemic way in which power, privilege and oppression function in tandem to silence the Hmong garden members. The uniquely situated knowledge they possess was treated as low-ranking and deauthorized. These deauthorized knowledges, however, can be thought of as emerging and from the margins, resisting the high-ranking knowledges that seek to delegitimize them or downplay their importance.

The whirlwind of multiple narratives about the meaning and value of the Henderson Community Garden resulted in it being a highly contested social space. Some of the conflicts between the garden members and the city, the agencies managing the garden, and the neighbors, result from differing perceptions, interpretations, meanings and valuations of the same space by multiple actors. These divergent and even clashing understandings of the same space are partially the result of multiple “patterns of symbolic discourse” that diverse people and organizations simultaneously impose on a single space

(Jamison 1985, 473). Tensions revolving around discordant meanings and the values and definitions of rightful uses of urban space however, fall along unequal relations of power.

The city, the neighbors and the managing agency have access to institutions of power that legitimize their interpretations. For the garden members, the space represents, as Long and Yer Vang point out, “a bit little of home,” an important link that, according to Peña, “connects the migrant to her origin community” (2006, 6). By contrast, the neighbors who peer into the garden from their properties provide accounts of the space as “untended” and “neglected” space. They lack an appreciation of the space in part because the agricultural methods being used to cultivate and tend the garden are foreign to their sensibilities. Failing to see the meticulous order of the space, neighbors frequently provided accounts of “perceived Hmong disorderliness” (Bays 1994, 16). To the FFP non-profit agency, the garden space was most often described as a complicated managerial balancing act that required placating the city and the neighbors by bringing a “garden in chaos” to “order.” Finally, for the city, the garden is most often narrowly defined as a piece of property, reducible to its potential sale value.

Using Foucault, Peña points out that spaces possessing multiple and contradictory meanings such as the Henderson Community Garden are “heterotopias” (2006, 3). These spaces are “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1967, 5). The garden space, for example, transcends the false binary between the public and private spheres. As an extension of gendered kitchen spaces, community gardens, according to Schmelzkopf, are simultaneously part of the “public domain,” even while the activities that take place there

are often associated with the private sphere (1995, 379). They appear in other words, as both a part of the private domain of the household, even while they are located in the public domain of the city. The garden also disrupts the long-standing notion that there is a clear separation between the city and nature. The way in which the garden space has been put to use by garden members conflicts, and is incompatible, with the way in which the city would like to put the space to use.

Edward Soja makes an interesting case for the “spatiality” of (in)justice,⁵⁵ linking geography to the way in which justice and injustices are created through space (Soja 2010). The reference to the socio-spatial helps illuminate the co-constructedness of “socialized lived space.” How spaces are shaped and constructed, socially, politically, and culturally, creates physical “biographies and geo-histories” that are inscribed on the landscape (Ibid., 18). Soja points out that an inordinate amount of attention has been placed on social processes in shaping (in)justices, with little to no attention on the importance and influence of space, the ways in which “spatial processes, spatial consciousness, and spatial development” also shape (in)justices (Ibid., 2). Changing the shape of the urban landscape, for example, has tangible effects on peoples’ lived realities. The biographies and geo-histories of the Hmong families who have shaped the garden are being dismissed as irrelevant. Challenging the city’s desire to reconfigure the garden space as a piece of investment property is about asserting the right to claim and shape that piece of the urban landscape.

⁵⁵ Combining justice and injustice into one word helps to demonstrate how (in)justices are two sides of the same coin. Both justice and injustice, according to Soja, are conditions that are shaped and influenced by geography and socio-historical processes (Soja, 2010: 5).

Through gardening, the Hmong families have transformed, reconfigured, and redefined the way city land can be used, but their use and transformation of the space continues to go unvalued by both the city and neighbors. One reason for this continued devaluation is that the garden's communal nature contradicts the private and individual-oriented foundation of property ownership. Garden members share in garden responsibilities between family plots, and in doing so, create an intricate web of mutual aid. Houa Cheng described helping in her aunt's plot before getting one of her own. Even after obtaining her own plot, however, Houa continues to help her elder aunt. Ties of obligation, mutual aid, and reciprocity, bind them to each other. These collective and collaborative agricultural practices in the garden space are, in essence, also "incompatible" with the "commodity form" that needs to develop, grow and expand for profit (Peña 2006, 3).

David Harvey suggests that the politics of capitalism are shaped by an insatiable search for "profitable terrains" that can be shaped and molded to suit the needs of capital (2008, 24). This search not only shapes the politics of capitalism, as Harvey suggests, but also shapes, or attempts to shape the city itself. The garden however, locks in the capital potential, of the land disrupting the process of capital accumulation and putting it in direct confrontation with the city's desire to raise revenue. Ngai Pindell notes, that in attempting to develop these spaces for capital accumulation and displacing garden members from the social act of living through the garden space, both "[p]rivate capital and speculative capital" are excluding members from "access to city spaces" and narrowly defining the kind of "participation in city life" worth safe guarding (2006, 3).

The urban laws and policies that support these “discriminatory geographies,” privilege a specific spatial inscription on the landscape that benefits an elite few (Soja 2010, 48).

For this reason, spatial justice involves defending the erosion of public spaces, such as the garden against “commodification, privatization, and state interference” (Ibid., 45). The ascendance of private ownership can be shown to play a pivotal role in the creation of spaces of injustice. However even pushing against privatization in defense of public space can and should include room for alternative uses. The Henderson Community Garden enjoys few protections as a public space, namely because the practices engaged within that space are deemed by many as unsuitable. Without an explicit acceptance of difference, public spaces can be highly controlled and surveilled, as behavior within them is judged as appropriate or inappropriate (Massey 2005). This regulation can include overt surveillance and exclusion from access, as practices engaged in the public domain are labeled legitimate or illegitimate.

Public space should therefore be thought of as a resource whose access is differentially distributed across diverse publics. Using the work of Nancy Fraser, Linda McDowell notes that people do not possess equal access to public spaces. She argues that public spaces are “multiple and differentiated,” and that some groups have a taken for granted privileged access while others are systemically excluded (1999, 113). However, the “subaltern counter-publics” are those public spaces in which structurally marginalized groups create space for the articulation of their needs. These are the “oppositional spaces

where the powerless⁵⁶ challenge conventional uses of space” (Ibid.). The Henderson Community Garden is a great example of this oppositional space, where garden members have created a space that articulates their own needs.

As a practice shared between people, urban agriculture can be envisioned as a form of civic engagement. Civic engagement can be defined as emerging from collective biographies, “lived experiences, shifting relationships, and common cause” (DeLind and Bingen, 2008, 129). The differential distribution of access to public space however, renders civic engagement more difficult for structurally marginalized groups and communities without legitimate access to public space. According to Laura DeLind and Jim Bingen, civic action requires two things, “personal agency and the public domain” (2008, 144). In other words people need the space through which they can act and enact the totality of their cultural and spiritual personhood, in places that are safe, familiar, and nurturing (Ibid.). The garden members have created that domain in the garden space, shaping the space to supports their unique brand of civic engagement. One is not incidental to the other rather, civic engagement requires a public domain. However, conflicts in the urban environment tend to ensue in part because there are an inadequate number of spaces to accommodate or support the diversity of lived experiences and civic styles. The garden space is a scarce resource in the urban core.

The tensions around the garden reflect the Hmong families’ efforts to claim a piece of that scarce resource for themselves, and with it to establish a right to the city

⁵⁶ I would not have chosen to use the word ‘powerless’ to describe a group people. No one in my opinion is completely powerless, people can be structurally marginalized power, however, can be summoned out of the most unlikely and oppressive of experiences.

through the inscription of their own adapted, hybrid biographies and geo-histories onto the urban landscape. These efforts illustrate a community's attempts to take the "opportunity and power to make meaningful determinations on the contours of urban space" (Pindell 2006, 3). Through the act of gardening in the urban core, the garden members are reshaping city space and struggling to define their kind of participation as legitimate and valuable. Soja's call for spatial justice, is a call for a right to the city. It is a rights-based approach to spatial (in)justice that challenges the continued inscription of inequitable geographies. Spatial justice therefore calls for the realization of diverse forms of individual and group empowerment, participation, self-realization and self-determination outside of the logic of capital accumulation (2010).

For the Hmong garden members, establishing a right to the city would also mean replacing the individualized conception of property in favor of a more collective view. Advancing a collective view of property would first and foremost entail an admission that property is a concept, a socially and politically constructed idea that is constituted through laws and policies within dominant U.S. social institutions. Arguing for a collective view on property is challenging because private property is so naturalized in this country. The idea that private property rights are absolute and inviolate, and possessed by property owners is enshrined as part of an assumed collective American identity. However, contrary to this perception, private property is in actuality an evolving, fluid and ever-changing "social institution" (Freyfogle 2003, 7; 28).

Since it is a social institution that people may shape to suit their needs, the hope is that people will also re-shape it to serve a more plural set of needs and identities. There

is no inherent reason or logic that links property to the sole purview of individual property owners. However, Eric T. Freyfogle points out that historically in the United States, foundational ideas about property privileged the “self-centered, individualistic” notions surrounding private-property (Ibid., 62). As American life became separated into the neat binary categories of private and public spheres, property was privatized, making private its very public consequences (Ibid., 80). As a private category, it came to be viewed as an “entitlement that people held in their private lives,” and it acquired an abstract existence as a “natural right in full form,” masking the fact that only certain privileged social groups were entitled to it (Ibid., 81). Naturalizing private property rights was a way to hide the way in which such rights privileged some and disadvantaged others. Little has changed.

Labeling the garden space “vacant surplus property,” for example, seemed to invite appropriation by the city, as it implies a particular set of suitable uses related to development and privatization. According to Vandana Shiva, this logic of privatized property “remains the same as 500 years ago” (1997, 2). The “assumption of empty lands, terra nullius” or the constructing, labeling, and defining of the land as empty, unused, and unproductive, for example, has and still does serve a purpose; it invisibilizes the way the land is currently and productively being put to use and it justifies the takeover of the land so that improvements in productivity (that benefit certain social groups) can take place (Ibid., 4). In much the same way in which modernity depends on and defines itself in opposition to some non-modern other, the idea of converting the

garden space for more productive uses depends on strategically labeling it vacant, and thereby invisibilizing how it has productively been put to use.

Interrogating the demonization of swidden agriculture Michael Dove et al. for example chronicle not only how swidden agriculture is deprecated based on its “illegibility,” but also, how that “alienness” is in fact a politically motivated social construction (2007, 134). The concept of modernity is pitted as a remedy to the non-modern. Modernity, moreover, counts on the traditions of the non-modern to define itself as superior (Ibid., 131). The socially constructed “otherness” of swidden agricultural practices is about rendering invisible the real driving force for dispossessing people of the means to engage in the practice in order to justify its replacement. In much the same way, by constructing as “other, “alien,” and “illegible” the urban agroecological practices engaged in the garden, the city easily justifies its replacement with a more capitalist intensive endeavor. In doing so, the city also renders invisible the very politically motivated intent of constructing “alien” and “other” the practices of garden members, in order to justify the garden’s replacement.

Sadly, the burdens of this conversion often fall on those most marginalized, repeatedly requiring violence to “build the new urban world on the wreckage of the old” (Harvey 2008, 33). Harvey calls this violence, “accumulation by dispossession,” whereby people around the world driven by the continual search to “colonize space for the affluent,” are dispossessed of spaces of deep significance (Ibid., 39). Accumulation by dispossession includes the process of normalizing and naturalizing the

commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations (as in Mexico and India in recent times); conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources)...(Harvey, 2006, 43).

The enclosures related to accumulation by dispossession and the taken-for-granted norm of privatized property can however, be resisted through the telling of “stories, allegories, and metaphors” that illuminate alternative property arrangements (Rose 1994, 6). These stories can expand the discussions outward even farther to critique larger systems of power in which property can be located as an embedded piece of a larger puzzle. The small garden exists as a tenuously reclaimed commons in a sea of private property, providing a plethora of such stories.

While most private property goes unnoticed by the wider community, the tiny garden is subject to constant scrutiny, especially by a city government desperate to raise revenue. The small piece of marginal land on which the garden sits holds little meaning for the city until it is looked at strategically as possessing value or producing value for others not currently using it. One city council member hoped to gain from it politically, one private developer hoped to gain from it economically and had these benefits been realized, the garden members would have lost out. This sort of spatial injustice is directly related to the privileging of taken-for-granted individualized property rights.

Carol M. Rose succinctly questions the taken-for-granted nature of individualized property regimes, and draws our attention to the socially produced difference between

“property-as-thing” and “property-as-relationship” (1994, 5). Although city governments tend to see and treat property-as-a-thing, all property regimes, are in essence, produced out of relationships and formed around common social beliefs and understandings. Property regimes can legitimize or de-legitimize how space is used. For example, when asked about the frequency with which the city raised the topic of the Henderson Community Garden during City Council meetings, the current FFP executive director Ann Holcomb described that the property had repeatedly come up for review.

Despite there being no “imminent plans,” Ann was also told by the city that they had “the right to do whatever they needed, including selling the property to raise revenue.” Ann recognized that the city is “looking more at the financial bottom line than the community benefit or the spirit in which the land was donated.”⁵⁷ The city articulates their claim to the land upon which the garden sits as an “imminent right,” a right to city space based and protected under private ownership laws. That individualized claim to the space supercedes, and receives more legitimacy, than the alternate claims the garden members make to the same space. Nicholas Blomley observes that the idea of individualized property fails to acknowledge the alternate ways in which property can sometimes collectively be put to use (2004, 615).

City governments do not have a means of evaluating the social and cultural uses of city space. The normalization of private or individually owned property makes it difficult to conceptualize different property arrangements. Inserting a socio-culturally

⁵⁷ Anne Holcomb, Personal correspondence, Executive Director, Food For People Inc., February 2, 2010.

defined view of property could help municipalities account for the social meanings city spaces have. A socio-cultural depiction stands in stark contrast to the way in which the garden, for example, is currently and repeatedly characterized as a parcel number, through its zoning, as if it were “atomized space,” separate from the community that daily shapes it (Foster 2006, 538). The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 is an example of a policy that attempts to take the social context and cultural relevance of areas into consideration when assessing the effects of a planned federal action. NEPA requires that assessments be made of the possible impacts on the environment of proposed significant federal actions, and that when identified, impacts be mitigated, including impacts on “historic, cultural, social, and economic resources” (Ibid., 548-9). However, NEPA’s scope is relatively limited, as Sheila Foster points out, starting with a narrow conception of the “environment” and a judgment call on impacts deemed “significant” (Ibid., 549-50).

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) of 1970 was similarly instituted to provide environmental protections from proposed developments. Under CEQA’s jurisdiction, proposed developments with potentially significant environmental impacts must follow the CEQA protocol. With both NEPA and CEQA, a narrow conception of the environment, a focus on federal or state actions, and limited judgments on what is deemed significant, can limit the protections these laws offer for important cultural resources such as the Henderson Community Garden. Despite the limited efficacy of legislation such as NEPA and CEQA, these kinds of laws open up the possibility of setting a “precedent of spatial responsibility” and imagining the

development of spatial awareness (Soja 2010, 50). Public policies could be developed to help mitigate what Soja calls the “negative spillover effect” on the surrounding community of spatially reorienting municipal practices (Ibid., 50).

DeLind and Bingen conceive of “cultural property” that “embodies a community’s values and orientations within a specific place, and thereby allows for coherence through ‘reference points’ or stories and artifacts that are shared and transmitted to successive generations” (2008, 131). When diverse communities find ways to “transform space into place,” the altered urban spaces reflect “autotopographical” landscapes where alternate styles and types of engagement are made visual through lived realities or “place-making” (Peña 2006, 4). These are more personal, socially contextualized and communal understanding of property, ones that importantly takes into consideration the deep meaning a space can acquire through the activities that shape it into place. Property in other words, acquires meaning not just through an impersonal sale value, but rather, the parcel of land that houses a garden is “made meaningful by the actions of people during the course of their everyday lives” (Kimber 2004, 263).

Place *becomes* “embodied experience...[s]tories, memory, and meaning are embedded in the landscape,” making it significant and consequential outside the logic of individual property ownership (DeLind and Bingen 2008, 136). In this same vein, Clarissa T. Kimber likens garden spaces to stages that provide for participants the space to act upon, where “plants are markers of a comfortable cultural history” (Kimber 2004, 269). The garden members have transformed a privately owned piece of property into a

stage, a collective space of cultural continuity and regeneration, a space of consequence, opportunity, empowerment, emancipation as well as a space of physical and cultural resistance, survival and celebration. Public spaces within the city can be places where diverse peoples scramble for room on the metaphorical stage, seeking to make places that “support their own needs, identities and relational worlds” and this can lead to “contested uses and aspirations, where the contest might result in turf wars” (McDowell 1999, 21).

All geographies have consequences, and these consequential geographies can either “provide advantage and opportunity, stimulate, emancipate, entertain, enchant, enable” just as they can “constrain opportunity, oppress, imprison, subjugate, disempower, close off possibilities” (Soja 2010, 104). According to Linda McDowell, city spaces are therefore both liberating and constraining, they can provide spaces for people to participate in, and shape city life in myriad ways, just as they can restrict, exclude and discriminate against difference (1999, 132). For this reason, city spaces reflect (in)justice, they mirror advantages and disadvantages in a structural sort of way (Soja 2010, 20). For a structurally marginalized social group, living in diaspora, grappling to make place out of space in the urban environment, the garden provides a new urban commons, a space of “alternative networks of support and livelihood,” a space that reflects Hmong empowerment (Allen et al. 1999, 5). Because the land on which the garden sits is ultimately owned by the city, however, the garden is also a space that reflects injustice. When the garden is in the middle of a heated turf war, between the community that uses it and the community that hopes to appropriate the

resource for other uses, the space reflects and renders especially visible the unequal power relations between social groups. These spaces are therefore both spaces of control and liberation, where the intersections and “complexities of power, culture, and economy become clear” (Baker 2004, 306).

Because unjust geographies are produced and reproduced, they can also be challenged and reshaped. If geographies have consequences, Soja points out, we can reshape them through social action to have positive consequences (2010). In order to understand how unjust geographies are produced and reproduced and maybe how more just geographies can be imagined, Soja calls for a “*multiscalar view of the city*”[emphasis in original] (2010, 32). Just as political ecologists and feminist political ecologists call for multiscalar approaches, applying this view to an analysis of the city means zooming in and out from the local and regional to the global, and seeking linkages between them. The struggle for the Henderson Community Garden is a micro-regional example of a community struggle to sustain their commons against enclosure, and their struggle is not isolated from other struggles and social movements across the globe that similarly push against displacement, enclosure and privatization.

In this manner, the scales of spatial justice, from regional to global, have linkages that connect them. However, it is not the case that the only thing linking these movements and struggles is merely what is being done to them by top-down, regional, and global capital. As political subjects, people have the agency to act through and act upon their circumstances. What equally links these movements therefore, are the bottom-up strategies of resistance, and importantly, as feminist political ecologists point out, that

in many of these instances women are often at the front lines of these struggles. The proposed appropriation of the Henderson Community Garden space would have undermined the close material connection the Hmong women have to the space. Like the many other women's grassroots organizing efforts against ecological destruction around the globe, the women of the Henderson Community Garden are defending their space against appropriation, enclosure and ecological destruction. The Henderson Community Garden is therefore a microcosm example of other struggles around the globe, resisting the appropriation of ecologically rich, vastly productive spaces, primarily in the care and charge of women. To threaten the garden space is to threaten the women, their livelihood, well-being and status as women (Warren 2000, 6).

The garden members' battle for the garden space draws its strength as Harvey notes, from the "nitty-gritty of daily life and struggle" and yet in doing so, as in other social movements, the key to change will be to "extract itself from the local and the particular to understand [and link itself to] the macro-politics of what neo-liberal accumulation by dispossession was and is all about" (Harvey, 2006, 63). Linking the struggle over the small piece of marginal land to the macro-global is important, not only because around the globe oppression is linked to exploitation, but also because resistance in one locale will gain strength from becoming aware of similar struggles and strategies of resistance in other areas. There is immense value in revealing the pervasive nature of these types of efforts to create "social and spatial justice."

CONCLUSION

Community gardens such as the Henderson Community Garden can be understood from numerous angles. They can be examined as rich ecological spaces, they can be evaluated for the social benefits they procure for members and the surrounding community, they can even be assessed as real estate to be developed for revenue generating purposes. These individual understandings, however, neglect the significance of community gardens as complex socio-spatial *and* political spaces. The confluence of the ever-shifting convergences among the dominant material, discursive and ecological discourses about community gardens produces unequal urban environments that undermine the Hmong garden members' claims to the garden space by privileging dominant interpretations over those of the Hmong gardeners.

As a rich cultural and ecological space, the Henderson Community Garden offers a vantage point from which to engage in a bottom-up critique of the otherwise taken-for-granted and imposed upon management schemes, municipal policies and narrowly defined conceptions of property that do not acknowledge the garden members' years of transformative land use practices or their own understandings and gendered value of the property. The competing understandings of the community garden circulate within arenas of unequal power relations that follow axes of racial, class, age, and gendered social differences. The diverse understandings about the meaning of the urban space the garden sits upon have created numerous misunderstandings and conflicts within this field of unequal power relations. Systemically privileged social groups, who have access to

institutions of power and legitimacy to define the space and the rightful uses for it, include city staff, garden managers, and neighbors adjacent to the garden. At multiple points in the history of the garden, these groups have tried to impose their paradigms onto the garden space and have been met with varying levels of resistance and complicity from garden members who struggle to define the space for themselves.

This research has attempted to identify the plurality of different understandings of a single garden space, as it is viewed and defined by various people. Furthermore, it has sought to reveal the particular normative work that dominant discourses about the garden perform, including the understandings of the garden that they filter out or delegitimize. It is necessary to move beyond a comparative analysis of multiple understandings of the garden to develop an analysis that also examines the power relations within which those understandings circulate. This allows identification of the perspectives and values that may be undermined or marginalized when universal formulations about community gardens are espoused as true and superimposed on a place and space like the Henderson Community Garden. Universally defining otherwise diverse, and varied community gardens may disadvantage a garden and its members. Molding the Henderson Community Garden, its members, and their practices to fit the existing community garden lexicon silences their rich practices, ecological contributions and unique reshaping of city space. Additionally, the urban political ecology of the city tends to hide the cultural and gendered consequences of urban change processes. Municipal policies, such as plans to commercially develop the garden space, that on the surface appear to be gender, race, and

class neutral, actually produce consequences that disadvantage groups of people in a gendered, raced, and classed manner.

The city views the garden space as underutilized and vacant, and calls for its appropriation and development in the name of raising much needed revenue for the public good. Developers sought to turn the garden into a more productive use, specifically a more productive space for capital accumulation. However, for garden members, the garden is already extremely productive. As a tenuously reclaimed commons, the garden faces an up-hill battle, one that entails simultaneously challenging capital investors and idealized notions of rightful use of public space. Sustaining the garden in the face of private property and capital accumulation interests is hard, so too is the challenge of sustaining the space for alternate public uses, for supporting alternative forms of civic engagement that currently do not conform to dominant norms of proper use of public space.

Despite these hurdles, there are at least three legal issues that could help the garden members organize in the defense of their space. Firstly, given the initial bequest of the land by the Pierson family, which contained specific restrictions on how the land was to be used, it should not be so easy for the city to suggest overriding such intent. The deed to the land stands as a public record available to support the garden members' arguments for protecting the garden space. Secondly, the 20 years of gardening can be seen as the basis for claiming a prescriptive, customary use right – a form of property right that supports the gardeners members claim to the garden space. Although the city might be able to claim ultimate ownership of the parcel on which the garden sits, there

could and should be legal standing for claiming a prescriptive property right based on the over 20 years of *on-going productive use* of the garden. Lastly are zoning issues. For the city to appropriate the land for a more commercial development, they would have to rezone the parcel – a rezoning should have to go through a long process including public scrutiny and should meet the goals of Eureka’s general plan. However, a special use permit could be used to avoid rezoning – a strategy that unfortunately has been used in other, analogous situations. These three factors support gardeners’ claims to the garden space and should be explored further.

The actual gardening practices and the benefits derived thereof provide an opening through which the homogenized notion of “public interest” and notions about the proper use of public space can be challenged. The on-the-ground, lived experiences of the Henderson Community Garden members provide a means to see how the garden ecology is tied to identity, gender, knowledge production, community activism and power. Narrowly defined property laws and municipal codes tied to a capitalist development paradigm marginalize a community’s right to define urban space in a culturally appropriate fashion. These laws and codes normalize the unequal distribution of resources and other inequities.

Real race and gender-based differences, amongst others, are neutralized and rendered invisible by municipal governments’ use of race – and gender neutral – criteria for appropriating the space on which they garden. Through the omission of the social, political and historical contexts that made this space a “little place like home,” policy makers in effect are practicing a collective ‘racial’ and ‘gendered’ ignorance when

picking places to develop. Denaturalizing these processes is an important component of the political ecology of the garden. Denaturalizing the idea of property and challenging the homogenizing community garden paradigm reveals the ways in which competing versions of the proper use of the garden space collide with each other. Thus, the garden space provides a rich opportunity to study both the gendered consequences of the urbanization process and gendered strategies of adaption and resistance to these changes. Tucked behind tall garden gates, another world emerges wherein whole families can be seen tending to various aspects of their family plots. The predominantly Hmong garden has become a place where the Hmong diaspora reaffirm and maintain their agrarian cultural traditions, passing down cultivation techniques and a taste for their unique foods to their children, creating important generational ties.

The struggle for the Henderson Community Garden is tied to an emergent social movement that is both place based and global in scope. Spanning temporal and spatial dimensions, it can be tied to other struggles connected to maintaining and adapting culture to a new place, and it can be tied to other social movements nationally and globally that struggle against capital accumulation and dispossession of land and the right to sustain their livelihoods. The garden members are engaged in a multifaceted struggle for legitimacy, a struggle that includes garden members seeking to materially define their garden space outside of the capitalist paradigm of production, and to define the space as intricately linked to their livelihood and cultural identity. This unique urban garden space is a place where the Hmong diaspora are able to continue and adapt their agrarian

traditions to the Californian North Coast environment, re-territorializing a unique sense of place.

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APPENDIX A

Verbal Instructions

To be read by Interpreter

Elena L'Annunziata is conducting research on the Henderson Community garden. Elena recognizes that this garden space is of great value to you and your community. Her goal is to learn from you, hear your stories, in your own words about why the garden has such great value to the Hmong community. She hopes to use the conversations she has with you and other garden members to write about the garden and to explore with you how to secure the garden space for years to come.

Elena would like to spend between 30 minutes to an hour with you to explore some ideas and ask you some questions. The questions are just there to start the conversation. You can direct the conversation and you can ask her questions. You are the expert and she is willing to follow your lead!

Any information that you share might be published in the written report, if you wish for your real name to remain private, you can ask her to use a pseudonym, (a name that is not somebody's correct name and is used in the written report to maintain your privacy). If there is information that you would like to share with Elena, but not have included in the written report, please do not hesitate to let her know. Elena would additionally like to take pictures of the garden space and would like permission from you to use these pictures in her report.

By signing this form you give informed consent (permission) for her to use the information and the pictures as I have explained. Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary (up to you), there is no payment for taking part, and you may decline or may change your mind at any time.

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY
 CONSENT TO ACT AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Elena L'Annunziata is conducting research on community garden spaces with a focus on the Henderson Community garden. The research project aims to explore how to secure these garden spaces and how to make their importance understandable in your terms to the wider community.

Because this project hopes to help the garden members advocate for the maintenance of the space Elena would like to explore some key themes. The researcher will then translate these into a written document that will be of access to you and to the community.

Any information that is collected as part of this study might be published in the written report, if you wish for your real name to remain private, the researcher will ask you and will use a pseudonym (a name that is not somebody's correct name, a name used by the researcher in written publications to maintain participants privacy). If there is information that you would like to share with Elena, but not have included in the report, please do not hesitate to let her know. Elena would additionally like to take pictures of the garden space and would like permission from you to use these pictures in her report.

By signing this form you give informed consent for the information obtained, and pictures taken, to be used for the above described research report.

I understand that Elena will answer any questions I may have concerning the investigation or the procedures at any time. I also understand that my participation in any study is entirely voluntary and unpaid and that I may decline to enter this study or may withdraw from it at any time without jeopardy.

 Printed Name and Signature

Date

 Mailing Address (include City, State and Zip) and Phone Number

APPENDIX C

Conversation Guide

1. How long have you been a member of the Henderson Community garden?
2. Who taught you to grow food
3. How long have you been growing food?
 - a. Did your parents garden? Did you watch your parents garden?
 - b. Have you grown food elsewhere? Where did your parents grow food?
 - c. How was growing food there different than growing here?
 - i. Did you/they have more time?
4. Are you growing things that cannot be purchased in the stores?
5. Where did the seeds come from originally?
6. Where else do you grow food?
 - a. Do you have a garden at home?
 - b. What do you grow there?
7. What are the different reasons you grow plants?
 - a. Do you grow things that are not for eating?
 - i. Medicine plants that cure,
 - ii. Plants used for festivals/decorations?
8. Do you grow just for home eating?
 - a. Do you sell it/share it?
 - b. Do you grow certain items for special festivals?
 - i. What do you grow for what festivals?
9. What do you do to improve the soil?
10. What do you use for pest control?
 - a. How long have you been doing this practice?
 - b. What do you think this does to the plants/soil?
11. Who spends the most time in your garden? Why?
 - i. What tasks do you do?
 - ii. What tasks does your husband do?
 - iii. What do your children help with?

12. Are the younger generation to grow food and garden?
 - a. Is it important that they learn these skills?
 - b. Are they not as interested in learning the skills?
 - c. Why/why not?

13. Are there people in the community with special knowledge about plants?
People who know how to treat sickness with plants? (if no go to #13).
 - a. Do you have to travel to see them?
 - b. How do you repay their favors?

14. Can you share with us why the garden is so important to the Hmong community?

Advocacy questions:

1. How was the relationship between the garden members and the Food for People agency?
 - a. Were there sometimes tensions?
 - b. Were there tensions with the neighbors?
 - c. How could it have been better?
 - d. Did they manage the garden fairly?

2. If you could improve the garden space what would you do?
 - a. Are there things you would like them not to do?

3. What is your relationship to the other garden members like?
 - a. Do you get along?
 - b. Why or why not?

4. Do you like the way the garden is set up?
 - a. Are the plots set up in a way that is appropriate for you to grow what you need?
 - b. Why are the plots fenced?