

University at Albany, State University of New York

Scholars Archive

Anthropology

Honors College

5-2012

Transplanting Roots: Cultivating Community Amongst Brooklyn's Mexican Immigrant Populations

Rachel Luscombe

University at Albany, State University of New York

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege_anthro

Recommended Citation

Luscombe, Rachel, "Transplanting Roots: Cultivating Community Amongst Brooklyn's Mexican Immigrant Populations" (2012). *Anthropology*. 7.

https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege_anthro/7

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.

**TRANSPLANTING ROOTS: CULTIVATING COMMUNITY AMONGST
BROOKLYN'S MEXICAN IMMIGRANT POPULATIONS**

Rachel Luscombe
Honors Thesis in Anthropology
May 2012

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, the community gardening scene has steadily been making its rise in New York City. These gardens first emerged as a way of allowing New Yorkers an opportunity to reclaim their decrepit neighborhoods by recreating them into something positive for the entire community. Through physical labor and an energy dedicated to rebuilding and reinventing abandoned lots, they were able to create green havens complete with healthy foods, beautiful flowers, and a general space to escape the stresses of urban life. Since that beginning, community gardening has been rapidly growing in popularity in New York City, with city-sponsored initiatives and organizations dedicated to cultivating and enriching community gardening for the city's residents, and advocating for the availability of local, city-grown produce for the people of New York's boroughs. From its beginnings as a way of developing and improving neighborhoods to its transformations to a way of encouraging a healthy hobby and beneficial eating habits, the common threads throughout its evolution are, as its name suggests, the roles of both the gardener and the community. Without the work of a group of gardeners, and without the involvement or investment of the community, the garden would devolve, potentially turning back into the very abandoned lot it sprouted from. The vital role of people—particularly the people of the neighborhood pertaining to the garden—has led to the mainstreaming of a belief that community gardening has great potential to be a powerful tool for community development.

OBJECTIVE

This paper started as an ethnographic project aimed at understanding how urban farms and community gardens in New York City affect the development of kinship among Mexican immigrants. The goal was to learn what relationship exists between the farms and gardens and the city's growing Mexican immigrant population, specifically in terms of kinship and community development. Initially, research was to center around observing and communicating with individuals who work or volunteer at farms or gardens in Brooklyn, New York. Of the city's five boroughs, Brooklyn was chosen specifically for its centrality to New York's newest wave of urban farming and community gardening, as well as the current "food revolution" currently sweeping the country. This specificity on the borough in question as well as defining Mexican as the specific Latino ethnic group presented a change in focus from published academic literature on community gardening that predominately focuses on white, black, and Puerto Rican gardeners. Based on many of their findings, I entered the project expecting to find hands-on urban green spaces used as sites of development or formation of community and kinship-type bonds. Field observations and interviews, however, ultimately highlighted different cultural perceptions on gardening and cultural approaches to integration to one's community.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

I became interested in researching the different ways in which Mexican immigrants specifically used and related to community gardens and urban farms. I initially hypothesized that the agricultural background many Mexican migrants came from would have a direct effect on their relationship to community gardens in their new neighborhoods, and would serve as a motivating factor for them to engage and participate in gardening with their new neighbors and fellow community members, as it might be considered a recontextualization of a familiar practice. My claim became that community gardens would be large contributors to the development of

community and kinship type bonds amongst Mexican immigrants. While my original research did not ultimately include urban farms, I think they add a necessary discourse to the topic at hand, and will be discussed and referenced in subsequent sections of this paper.

I compiled a list of gardens located in Brooklyn's prominent Latino neighborhoods and formulated the following questions to ask participants in interviews during an ethnographic study:

How are you associated with this farm/garden?
Do you live in this neighborhood?
For how long have you been associated with farm/garden?
How long have you lived in New York City? And in this neighborhood?
Do you have family that lives in this neighborhood?
How did you get involved?
What were your reasons for getting involved?
How do you think this farm/garden is impacting community development?
How many people work on this farm/garden? Are most of them from this neighborhood?
What is the dynamic amongst participants?
Do you know all of the people who work on the garden/farm?

The interviews, I believed, would offer a new canon of information surrounding Mexican immigrants and the development of their communities in New York. As the interview questions covered information ranging from how long they had been living in the city to their reasons to getting involved in community gardening, to the dynamic amongst other participants, I believed their responses to interview questions and my observations at the sites, would result in insights to the role that gardens played in kinship bonds and community development, among Mexican immigrants.

As a Spanish-English bilingual, I was comfortable and prepared for, as well as anticipating these interviews and preceding and subsequent conversations being held in Spanish. Growing up in a mixed race household, my mother's side of the family Mexican-American and my father's side white, I felt familiar with many aspects of Mexican culture, a relationship that has been heightened by having lived in the Mexican state of Puebla before starting my undergraduate career. As the majority of Mexican immigrants in New York City come from Puebla, I felt that I had at least a basic level of cultural understanding with many potential participants.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNITY GARDENING IN NEW YORK CITY

The history of contemporary community gardens in New York City dates back to the early 1970s. This was a time in the city's history characterized by social unrest, corruption in the police department, the burning of the Bronx, high rates of poverty and unemployment, and general "urban disinvestment" leading to what Smith and Kurtz describe as a an "air of uncertainty" in the city's five boroughs (193, 195). While World Wars One and Two and the Great Depression had previously served as catalysts for government led initiatives for Victory Gardens (also known as war gardens, relief gardens, or liberty gardens), the garden movement of

the 1970s differed in that it was led by citizens, inspired by uncertainty and social unrest (Salvidar-Tanaka and Krasny, 399; Smith and Kurtz, 195). While the gardens' predecessors were sponsored by government initiative, the emerging gardens of the 70s were grassroots operations, built without government or legal assistance or even permission; they sprouted in communities' vacant and abandoned lots as "guerrilla operations" (Smith and Kurtz, 195). With the city in the state it was in, the demand for garden plots never exceeded the abundance of unused lots throughout New York.

By 1985, over one thousand community gardens were in existence in New York City; in 2003 it was estimated that over 14,000 New Yorkers participated in community gardening, with more than a dozen organizations dedicated to the gardening movement (Smith and Kurtz, 197; Salvidar-Tanaka and Krasny, 400). Green Guerrillas, now a 501 c3 nonprofit, claims to be the first of these organizations, responsible for New York City's first contemporary community garden (GreenGuerrillas.org). In 1973, the group dropped "green-aids," balloons filled with water and seeds, throwing them over fences into Manhattan's vacant lots (GreenGuerrillas.org; Smith and Kurtz, 197). Once these seeds had been "planted" the group petitioned the city "to open the vacant lots as gardens" (Smith and Kurtz, 173). In April of 1974 the office of Housing Preservation and Development officially started renting a lot on the corner of Houston and Bowery in Manhattan's Lower East Side to the Green Guerrillas making it the first official community garden in the city. It was named after Liz Christy, a founder of the Green Guerrillas (GreenGuerrillas.org, Liz Christy Community Garden). Today the garden, in association with Seed Freedom Seed Bombs, provides prospective urban gardeners with how-to videos, demonstrating how to make environmentally friendly, balloon-free, "green-aids" in an attempt to further spread the movement. The Green Guerrillas today "[use] a unique mix of education, organizing, and advocacy to help people cultivate community gardens, sustain grassroots groups and coalitions, engage youth, paint colorful murals, and address issues critical to the future of their gardens" (GreenGuerrillas.org).

As more and more guerilla operated community gardens started to pop up in New York, the city took action with the 1978 initiation of Operation GreenThumb, a program affiliated with the city's Department of Parks and Recreation. The program works to provide free leases for community gardens on city owned land and "acts as a liaison between gardeners and the city and helps to make community gardens viable community resources by providing horticultural expertise, resources for garden construction and maintenance, and leadership-skills training" (Salvidar-Tanaka and Krasny, 406; Smith and Kurtz, 197).

Handfuls of other community organizations have emerged dedicated to benefitting New York City's community gardens through technical assistance, consciousness building, sustainability of the food system, horticultural assistance, education, development, preservation, advocacy, enhancement, and judicial action (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 406). These organizations include, but are not limited to, New York Restoration Project (NYRP), More Gardens! Coalition, Just Food, and GrowNYC.

As the gardening movement of the 70s progressed, the culture of the movement evolved as well, with participants' motives for involvement and perceptions of why the gardens were important shifting. Smith and Kurtz argue that community gardens first emerged as a "means of creating small patches of green amid the crumbling walls that characterized the urban blight that afflicted the city at the time" (193). Since the 1970s, New York City has entered a new era and

is no longer characterized by urban blight, yet community gardens continue to thrive, addressing a new set of issues present in the city's boroughs.

CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY GARDENING AND URBAN FARMING

According to Michael Pollan, “the era of cheap and abundant food appears to be drawing to a close, [with] four main factors driving prices higher: weather, higher demand, smaller yields and crops diverted to biofuels.” But the country’s food-related problems do not end at cost increases; food systems are the second highest consumers of fossil fuels, and four of the top ten leading causes of death in America are chronic diseases directly related to physical health and diet (Pollan). In addition, thirty-seven percent of greenhouse gases are a result of the food production process; in 1940, for every ten calories of fossil fuel emitted, 23 calories of food energy were produced—today that ratio is only ten to one (Pollan). Pollan argues that in order to “make significant progress on the health care crisis, energy independence and climate change,” as well as the aforementioned issues, it is necessary to “reform the entire food system” (Pollan). American people today, according to Pollan, are more concerned with food than ever before, taking note of “its price... its safety, its provenance and its healthfulness.” He argues that the consensus amongst Americans is increasingly that the “industrial-food system is broken” and that as a result, “markets for alternative kinds of food” are on the rise. “When a nation loses the ability to sustainably feed itself,” Pollan states, “it is not only at the mercy of the global commodity market but of other governments as well.” How does all of this translate to the city-level? How are these problems combated? For many, the answer lies in community gardening and urban farming.

It is important to make a distinction between urban farms, and the different types of community gardens, as they are designed to serve different functions. I will be referring to urban farms as all those that are businesses or for-profit operations in which “gardeners” or “farmers” are actually employees, and crops and goods produced are sold to restaurants, shops, organizations, or community members. I will use Smith and Kurtz’s working definition of community gardens as “shared common green spaces where [neighbors] [can] grow food to supplement their grocery budgets and plant flowers and trees to beautify their respective locales” (195). Distinction will also be made between different categories of community garden participants: “gardeners,” will be defined as those who garden, sometimes in addition to participating in other events held at their garden; “garden members” as those who solely attend or organize events held in the garden; and “garden friends” as all those who visit the garden on occasion (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 402).

In his 1990 essay, “The Pleasures of Eating,” Wendell Berry outlines ways in which urban dwellers of the United States can make a positive change in the food industry and be informed consumers. Though the essay is now dated, the issues Berry brings up throughout the article are still just as relevant now as they were over 20 years ago at the time of publication. “Eating,” he states, “is an *agricultural* act,” (emphasis added) the last stage in the food cycle. While it is easy to view food as an “agricultural product” it is more difficult to remember (especially for urbanites) that as eaters we are not just consumers of food, but active parts of the agricultural process. That we place ourselves in a separate realm from that of agriculture has a direct effect on the types of foods we deem worthy or appropriate for consumption—an effect that Berry claims is negative, harmful, even going so far as to refer to uninformed eaters as victims of the food industry, a position that he believes even prevents us from living freely.

While the argument seems extreme and even a bit radical, he clearly lays out seven steps that would allow a consumer to reclaim “responsibility for one’s own part in the food economy.” His seven recommended steps are as follows:

- 1) “Participate in food production to the extent that you can.” This could be anything from planting a window box, a small herb garden, tomato plant to turning a front lawn into a small-scale farm operation.
- 2) “Prepare your own food.” Berry encourages consumers to take back the kitchen, cook breakfast, lunch, or dinner, and have a clear understanding of what is put into their bodies.
- 3) “Learn the origins of the food you buy, and buy the food that is produced closest to your home.” Local foods are fresher, and healthier for the consumer, the environment, and the local economy.
- 4) “Whenever possible, deal directly with a local farmer, gardener, or orchardist.” This eliminates the middleman of the food industry, and encourages the consumption of local foods.
- 5) “Learn, in self-defense, as much as you can of the economy and technology of industrial food production.” This is done in an attempt to arm consumers understand the prevalence pesticides and additives in industrially produced goods.
- 6) “Learn what is involved in the best farming and gardening.” This knowledge would allow the consumers the opportunity to improve their own food production operations of whatever scale.
- 7) “Learn as much as you can, by direct observation and experience if possible, of the life histories of the food species.” Of all seven steps, Berry places an added importance on this step as he feels people are so far removed from the realities of domestic plants and animals.

As an emerging adult in her early twenties, Annie Novak read this essay and took Berry’s suggestions to heart (Novak). On this topic she states, “I can remember exactly what I did next when I finished the article: everything, precisely as he suggested.” Those seven suggestions eventually led Chicago based Novak to Brooklyn, where she went on to become co-founder and head farmer of Eagle Street Rooftop Farm. Operating on the 6,000 square foot roof of a warehouse in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, the farm serves as a “model for the urban farming movement and utilization of green roofs,” by hosting a weekly farmer’s market, supplying produce to local restaurants, offering a Community Supported Agriculture program (CSA), and working in collaboration with a multitude of food and farming related educational programs for both youth and adults (“Eagle Street Rooftop Farm Factsheet”). While the mission of the farm is more focused around providing local produce to Brooklyn (Greenpoint in particular) and advocating for the benefits of green roofing than it is around building community amongst residents of Brooklyn, volunteer opportunities and the abundance of educational programs and workshops provides an arena for like minded individuals to bond over a mutual interest and something they feel passionately about (Novak). It is only by the spreading of the farm’s ideals through educational outreach to a wide audience that its mission, and that of Pollan and Berry can come to fruition.

“LANDSCAPE AND POWER IN VIENNA: GARDENS OF DISCOVERY”

Robert Rotenberg, in a 1995 study, analyzed Viennese landscape traditions, specifically what he referred to as “gardens of discovery”—that is, gardens aimed at returning gardening to a more natural state, void of the interventions of human will (140). Rotenberg argues that observations of the usage of public urban green space in Vienna can be used to gather insights on environmental ideologies of the respective municipality. The use of landscape, and the ideologies in question are both socially constructed phenomena. As such, the creation and subsequent way citizens of a municipality relate to the urban landscape can be demonstrative of local perceptions of the ideal role of ecology in urban life. His findings not only demonstrate the ideologies of Viennese gardeners of discovery, but also highlight great differences in ideology from America’s urban gardeners.

The ultimate goal of a garden of discovery is often for it to reach the status of a *wildgarten*, a garden that reaches a level of ecologic balance high enough that it no longer depends upon human cultivation or manipulative intervention of any kind (141). As can be expected, these gardens, when examined from a non-ecological perspective, could be viewed as unruly, ugly, or as a nuisance to the neighborhood. While some value the “creative untidiness” or the “planned disorder” others see only the weeds and equated their presence with neglect (142). One gardener and enthusiast of this creative untidiness, explained his role as gardener, and the relationship he has with it:

If people live as we do, then the garden is a recreation space. That means it must have the components, and the care of the garden must take second place. I would not work there if it didn’t bring me leisure. If I have no time or no desire, then I would do nothing. The work must be enjoyable or it’s better left alone...Nature is alive. (142).

This gardener does not carry any vision of what he wants the garden to ultimately look like. He doesn’t want control over everything that is planted in his garden and values the fact that “sometimes things grow that were not planted by people” (142). It is only after the spring has nurtured new plant life in the garden, weeds included, that he selects what he wants from what nature and the garden itself has presented him with. His statement that he, “[prefers] more weeds to fewer of them” and a motto of the Ekogarten movement, “Just let the weeds grow!” is so distant from American notions of gardening, the chore of weeding and general hatred of weeds that imagining an emergence or acceptance of gardens of discovery in the United States seems unlikely.

Examining the possibility of gardens of discovery in New York City from the lens of advocates for the abundance of local food, we are faced with a harsh contrast. If the purpose of the garden is for it to bear fruit and a harvestable crop, a high level of human intervention and manipulation of the plants is needed. Certain crops would never have been labeled domesticated if it hadn’t been for serious human agricultural intervention.

In New York City particularly, I feel that the history of community gardening lies in too sharp of a contrast with the idea of gardens of discovery. These gardens started as abandoned lots, plots of land that had been neglected, strewn with garbage, and overrun with weeds. Gardening was a way of beautifying them and enhancing the overall quality of the neighborhood, and instilling a sense of pride in the not only the community members who worked on the project but all residents of the neighborhood as well. The garden first symbolized the effort people were willing to put into the neglected city; as the plants grew, and were cared for, the neighborhood

seemed less abandoned, as there were people actively invested in the future of a plot of land, no matter how small. For the way these gardens operate then to suddenly shift to a method of planned disorder, no matter how planned it may be, I imagine the strongest impression would be that of neglect.

“RETHINKING URBAN POVERTY: A LOOK AT COMMUNITY GARDENS”

In their study, researchers Hanna and Oh set out to examine noneconomic ways of addressing poverty. The importance they placed on social capital, the sum of one’s social connections and civic engagement, and its integral role to a person’s quality of life, led them to researching community gardens. “Gardens,” they explain, “are a viable option to increase overall community well-being because of their varied functions and social benefits” (208). The researching team found that gardens contribute to the development of community social capital in five main ways:

- 1) “Growing fresh produce,” and granting access to products they might not otherwise be able to find in stores or afford to buy.
- 2) “Providing satisfying labor,” that is physical exercise with visible effects on the garden, and potentially the participants’ health.
- 3) “Value formation,” by presenting an arena in which participants can connect to nature and understand that their actions can have a direct impact on the environment.
- 4) “Neighborhood improvement,” by acting as a peaceful escape from the hectic realities of the city.
- 5) “Developing a sense of community,” through working together on the garden. The team dynamic often carries over out of the garden and results in neighborhood members addressing community wide issues. (209)

During a five-week stay in Philadelphia, several gardens were visited, most of which were located in West Philadelphia, and forty-four gardeners were interviewed while the two researchers worked with them in their gardens (212). Of these forty-four, fifty-six percent were Black, thirty-four percent White, and nine percent Asian; seventy-five percent were female; and two-thirds were over fifty years of age (212, 213). When asked a survey question inquiring about their reasons for gardening (they were allowed multiple responses, the results were as follows: twenty answered “fun,” fifteen answered “return to gardening,” eleven answered “relax,” nine answered “food,” seven answered “meet friends,” four answered “for community,” two answered “like to watch things grow,” and one answered “profit” (210). Based on the leading answer being “fun,” and the largest percentage of gardeners being of retired age, Hanna and Oh concluded that this indicated a lack of a family tradition in Philadelphia’s gardening sites, despite the fact that many participants had been actively involved in gardening when they were young (213). It should be noted, however, that many of the gardeners who came from backgrounds in gardening had relocated to Philadelphia from the south (212). This led to the team’s postulation that age could be a contributing factor to participants’ desire to garden as “there is little interest in gardening as a source of enterprise and profit” (213); among the retired, making a profit would not be a priority as it would be for working-age groups. It could also be argued that as the retired do not have hourly obligations to a job, they have more time to dedicate to gardening; for younger people working full time, free time is limited and highly valued, the employed might be less likely to spend free time in garden as there are other interests and obligations demanding their time.

All forty-four gardeners interviewed were connected to other gardens located throughout the city, even if this was not a garden where they tended a plot of land (214). Additionally, all forty-four of them “were very concerned about the well-being of their community (214). But what community are they concerned about? In this final statement, Hanna and Oh do not make it clear whether the community they are referencing is the greater West Philadelphia community, the neighborhood the respective garden is located in, or the network of all of Philadelphia’s gardens. A clear distinction between these potential references could make all the difference in understanding the weight that the gardens hold in community development; while this was not a priority in their research, or one of the questions they wanted answered, it could provide valuable information on the potential of gardening in improving and building community. It can be assumed, however, that the authors are referring to the community of gardens in Philadelphia, as this statement in the article was preceded by the statement on all gardeners holding ties in some way to other gardens in the city. This shows that while community gardens in Philadelphia do hold strong potential for harboring community development, the community they help to create is exclusive to gardeners.

CASE STUDY OF LATINO COMMUNITY GARDENING IN NEW YORK CITY

In early 2000, Laura Saldivar-Tanaka and Marianne Krasny conducted a study on the role of community gardens in Latino community development, open space, and civic agriculture, interviewing over 30 community gardeners and employees of agencies dedicated to community gardening. They chose Latino gardens specifically, as previous research on the role of community has been dominated by studies of Black and White gardeners. They felt the low socio-economic status of New York’s Latino neighborhoods would create a demand for “amenities that could be provided by gardens, such as open space and community meeting places” (400). The question they hoped their research would answer was whether or not “Latino community gardeners view the role of gardens primarily in terms of their contributions to the factors of community development, neighborhood open space, or civic agriculture” (400). Through their research, Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny found that community development—which they defined as “community members analyzing their own problems and taking action to improve economic, social, cultural, or environmental conditions, as well as feeling part of and identifying with the community as a whole” (400)—was more important than open space civic agriculture, though they argue that gardens could also be considered “participatory landscapes” combining all three factors in a way that served as a “connection between immigrants and their cultural heritage” (399).

Ninety percent of garden constituents were Puerto Rican and over ninety-five percent of the gardens Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny visited had a majority of Puerto Rican gardeners, garden members and garden friends (402). These statistics have had a compositional effect on the findings that they have labeled as being true of New York Latinos; I argue that many of their findings, while true to Puerto Rican gardens and gardeners, do not translate to the case of Mexicans in New York and the role of community gardening in community development.

The clearest example of the dominance of Puerto Ricans in Latino gardening in New York City is that of the presence of *casitas*. *Casitas* are small houses generally made of wood, with their roots in Taíno culture, the pre-Colonial culture and people of Puerto Rico that dominated the island at the time of conquest and colonization. *Casitas* served as “communal gathering places in Puerto Rico” and in New York, they are found in many community

gardens—and all twenty of the gardens visited by Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny (403). The *casitas* can fit around ten people inside, and in the gardens they are used as a spot to play games, put up photos and art, or as storage for instruments intended for use in the garden (403). Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny claim that it is the presence of a *casita* that makes “the Latino gardens recognizable and unique as against the gardens of other ethnic groups” (403). The incorporation of cultural elements such as the *casita* in gardens results in older gardeners and garden members feeling a sense of pride and connection with their heritage or country of origin, especially when given the opportunity to share it with younger members or garden friends (403). But the *casita*, as a Taíno influence, is a cultural element unique to Puerto Rico; the presence of one in a garden certainly makes it recognizably Puerto Rican, but this does not necessarily translate to being the element that makes it unique to other Latino ethnic groups, nor does its presence allow other Latino youth to connect with their ethnic background in the way it would for young Puerto Ricans. To present it as the element that makes gardens in New York City as what marks them as recognizably Latino, is to impose Puerto Rican cultural practices as being synonymous with those of all Latino groups in New York. According to the United States Census Bureau, as of 2010, Puerto Ricans, at 8.9% of the city’s population, were the largest Latino group in New York by a margin of five percent—but they make up about thirty-one percent of the Latino population, not close to ninety-percent, as might be expected based on their disproportionately high percentages of participation in community gardens. This numerical majority should not result in the term Latino becoming congruent with Puerto Rican, as it is limiting for all Latino ethnic groups. A Green Guerrillas member stated that Puerto Rican gardeners are more likely to become activists in their communities than Mexican or Central American gardeners, suggesting that this was due to their having United States citizenship and their increased familiarity with the U.S. political system (408). While this quite possibly holds some degree of truth, I would argue that when speaking of gardens, perhaps the reason for more Puerto Rican activism is that they place more cultural value in the gardens, as they are more reflexive of Puerto Rican customs and identity than that of Mexicans or Central Americans.

A staff member of Brooklyn GreenBridge, the community environmental horticulture program of Brooklyn Botanical Garden, in talking about the relationship between Latino culture, agricultural practices, celebratory activities, and the role of community gardens in all of this, mused that, “so many of the Latino people come from a farming background that gardening gives them a sense of that culture, a sense of that strength. Gardening is a way of affirmation of their culture” (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 409). If a farming background is common to “so many of the Latino people,” and it is postulated that for this reason gardening is an important and valued act for a redefining of cultural strength in New York City, why is it that Puerto Ricans constitute ninety-percent of all gardeners and garden members in a rare study done on Latino community gardens, if they make up thirty-one percent of Latinos in New York City (402)? What can be said about Mexicans, who constitute about fourteen percent of Latinos in New York City, and their disproportionately low involvement, at just two percent of gardeners and garden members in the same study (United States Census Bureau, Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 402)?

DISCUSSION OF DATA

I spent an initial day visiting and observing the gardens I had identified, hoping to conduct interviews with participants. In the neighborhoods—North Crown Heights, Bushwick, and Sunset Heights—I found the community gardens to be either closed or deserted. While I did

see many Latinos congregating with each other, engaged in conversation on the streets, outside of storefronts, in parks, I found no such activity was occurring in the gardens.

The first garden I visited, Imani Garden, located in Crown Heights, was empty when I arrived that afternoon. The garden rules, and all other postings, were posted only in English, giving the impression that Spanish speakers did not frequent the site. The garden housed a chicken coop and even participated in an egg CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), which they advertised as “like a magazine subscription but for eggs!” The flyer announced that while anyone could sign up for the CSA, it was preferred that they be from Crown Heights or Bedford-Stuyvesant. Though the garden was empty, it was located next door to a church, and around the corner from Fulton Park—both the church and the park seemed to be centers of community congregation.

McLeod Community Garden was the next that I visited, located in East New York. During the short walk from the subway stop to the garden site, I passed no fewer than five vacant lots in a three-block radius. I overheard various conversations held in Spanish and passed a handful of local businesses, many of which seemed to be owned and operated by Spanish speakers, with names like La Placita Market, or Angelito’s Auto Repair. Given the nature of the neighborhood, I was not surprised to find the garden rules posted in both Spanish and English when I arrived at the site. What did come as a surprise, and also a disappointment, was to find another deserted garden—and this time it did not seem to be located in an area of the neighborhood that was frequented by community members. A posting about garden meetings to learn about how to get involved in McLeod was attached to the fence. It listed a number of dates and times, a large percentage of which were during weekday afternoons. This came as a surprise, especially considering the working class impression I had gotten from the neighborhood. Who would have the time to attend these meetings and get involved?

I then made my way to Bushwick. Upon exiting the subway, I was struck by the number of Mexican restaurants and establishments, and surprised by the people I saw walking the streets and frequenting the local businesses. Shopkeepers and workers aside, I did not see any Mexicans or other Latinos. The majority appeared to be White emerging adults. On my way to the garden, I stumbled into a small restaurant and waited for my turn to order. The person in front of me ordered food and a large horchata, pronouncing it as if it were an English word. I ordered in Spanish, and the woman working seemed a bit grateful, and maybe surprised—as if her typical customer was not a Spanish speaker. The man ahead of me in line waited for his food in silence, occupied by his cell phone while the woman working made small talk with me, talking about the weather. It seemed that our common language gave us some sort of connection, a jumping point from which we could converse about more than what I wanted to order.

When I left the restaurant and made my way to the garden, I passed a mural on a building directly next to the garden saying “Energy up, Brooklyn! Eat well, live well, feel well.” The school down the street, PS 196, had a poster hanging from their fence letting the neighborhood know, “A garden grows in Brooklyn... at PS 196!” It seemed that the neighborhood was dedicated to community gardening and advocated all of its benefits, from health to happiness to educational value. Arriving at the site, however, I once again found myself in an empty garden, devoid of community members, Mexican immigrants or otherwise. Again, garden rules were

posted in both Spanish and English, along with a sign that proclaimed, “NYRP owns this garden for the benefit of the public and maintains it with the support of local volunteers.”

I was now interested in exploring in what sites or locations community development amongst Mexican immigrants in Brooklyn actually occurred, and in gaining perspectives and insights on perceptions of community gardening—did the Mexican immigrant community, with many of its members having agricultural roots, have any interest in participating in civic agriculture in New York City? This time, in setting out to locate a cohort to interview and interact with, I did not limit myself to approaching people in the gardens on my list; instead I spoke to people in everyday places such as grocery stores, on the sidewalks, and in parks. While my survey size was very small, only having interviewed ten people, the information and insights I gained were great—there is still further research that can be done on this topic to further dive into and understand the situation. The ten people interviewed were all immigrants from Mexico who had been in New York for time periods ranging from less than one year, to over twenty years. They ranged in age from mid twenties to mid forties. Men interviewed outnumbered women. It would be interesting to conduct research dedicated to exploring the effect different genders’ perspectives on community development might have and gather more information on different needs or expectations men and women might have for initial networking and community building immediately or soon after immigrating.

In interviewing community members from Mexico, I learned that they did not express a sense of need or urgency to meet others upon arrival in New York City, as they all had family already established in the city, or with whom they had immigrated. One man seemed taken aback by or incredulous at my questions of how he made connections and friendships in New York. (Note: I have translated all of the interview excerpts that will follow from Spanish to English.)

Question: “Upon your arrival in New York, how did you initially meet others and build relationships?”

Male participant response: “What do you mean? I was never alone; my family was already here. They were established here before I even had arrived. I didn’t need to meet people right away because I had family here. I’ve made friends at work, sure, but when we’re not working we don’t hang out, unless it’s a work related event, like a barbeque in the summer, or a holiday gathering. But when I’m not in work, I’m with my family.”

His response to the question was surprising, not so much because of what he said, but more because of the way in which he said his response—he used an extremely defensive tone when replying to the question. While he was the only participant to react in this way to the question, the theme of never being alone due to the presence of family was common in all of the interviews. I learned that when family was already established in the city, new immigrants met their friends and developed community by way of their families; when they immigrated with their families, the same sense of urgency to meet new people did not exist, as they were “never alone.”

Outside of their families, bonds were made with coworkers and other residents of their neighborhoods while doing day to day tasks—grocery shopping, walking on the sidewalks, going to the park, etc. One participant’s excited response in particular embodied this sentiment.

“Where did I meet new people? I met, and continue to meet them everywhere I go! I try to talk to people everywhere I can: when I’m shopping, when I’m washing clothes, when I’m at work. You just have to go up and start talking to them. The thing is, you just can’t be shy or else you’re never going to really feel comfortable because in order to feel comfortable, you have to know people. It’s also just more fun that way. The more people you know, the more there is to do.”

This seemed to go against one of Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny’s findings that “social gathering places are often lacking” in Latino neighborhoods (411). If they were ever lacking in Latino neighborhoods, it seems they have been compensated for by much more than community gardens; the whole neighborhood is essentially a social gathering place, with opportunity to meet others all over the neighborhood.

The woman who had been in the United States for the longest period of time, said that she felt that with the rise in technology, integration into one’s new community has started to be substantially easier compared to how it was when she first arrived, due to the prominence of cell phones, social networking websites, and café’s offering of free internet to customers. This could point to a decline in the perceived necessity of physical interaction to feel connected on a personal or even community level.

When asked about gardening explicitly, the common thread linking all of the participants’ interview responses was not as evident. Some reactions were as simple as, “No, I’m just not interested in that.” While another enthusiastic participant (who was just previously quoted) replied,

“Gardening? Sure! I’ll go wherever the people are. If everyone’s gardening I would go join. I tell you that I just like to be around the people. You can have fun whatever your doing if you’re in good company!”

Others still answered in a different manner that is congruent with Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny’s and Hanna and Oh’s studies of community gardens and gardeners in which the majority of participants in their studies were senior citizens. These participants in my study, although none of them were senior citizens by any means, were the ones who expressed the most interest in gardening and especially in growing their own food. The interesting thing about their feelings about the matter, however, is that while they all had a serious interest in gardening none of them felt comfortable or expressed any interest in gardening in New York City, especially not on land that wasn’t their own. This attitude harshly contrasts the “guerrilla” roots that the history of community gardening in New York City has. “Maybe in Long Island after I stop working,” one woman told me, “But in New York, no way!” Another man spoke about his parents who are now retired and have left New York City for a house in New Jersey that provides them with their own land to use.

“Now that they live in New Jersey, they are able to have a big garden and grow everything—tomatoes, jalapeños, cilantro, tomatillo. My parents would not have gardened like that unless the land was their own, and I am the same way. I would like to do the same one-day, but not here. This is where I work and earn money—not garden.”

This testimony was especially interesting as it indicates a contrast in Mexican and American perceptions on appropriate uses of land and of ownership of land. In Mexico, many families are dependent on agricultural practices to survive; family life is often centered on tending to the crops. It is not uncommon for students to miss school during the harvest season, or to place farm work over schoolwork—in fact, this is often the expected behavior of them from their families. The land that families work is often familial land that has been passed on from generations past, left in the care of the now adult children. That the land is so connected to the family—it has often been land held in the family for years and provides the family with food, while leftover resources and goods can be sold for profit to support the family—results in a deep sense of pride and a great deal of care placed in the tending of the land. The idea then of gardening on city owned land, or recreating an abandoned lot for one's personal use could be so incomprehensible or undesirable to people coming from such a cultural background that they would rather forgo cultivating goods to use to feed themselves or others until the land being used is land they themselves own, and thus a more respectable practice. When agriculture has always been something one *had* to support his/herself and family, it would be hard pressed for that activity to become a hobby in New York City, practiced in spare time outside of work.

ANALYSIS

Gardening in the United States, particularly in urban areas, is regarded primarily as a beneficial and healthy hobby—something done in leisurely time for one's enjoyment and personal gain. It has come to be considered an activity around which community development occurs, providing neighborhoods with designated areas where like-minded individuals can unite around a common interest, in this case gardening and access to communal green space. Members believe the benefits their participation offers them includes health and community improvement, access to fresh and local foods, stress relief, and general well being (Armstrong, 322). Why then was the Mexican population so seemingly absent from this trend in New York urban living dating back to forty years ago, that Whites, Blacks, and Puerto Ricans seemed to have embraced so whole heartedly?

It seemed that this must have something to do with different cultural perceptions on the use of free time, appreciation and enjoyment of agricultural backgrounds, and a willingness to carry over and redefine these agricultural practices from countries of origin to New York City. The presence of *casitas* in the fields where Puerto Rican men work makes for a communal atmosphere that invites the development and enrichment of community amongst workers, through conversation, joking, music, and games. A *casita* is an aspect of Puerto Rican agricultural tradition that can easily be recontextualized in New York, especially in an urban green space with community gardens being the most suitable setting. Mexican agricultural practices do not have this community based convivial aspect to them; perhaps it is for this reason that civic agriculture has not been as embraced by the Mexican community in New York. If fieldwork has always been just that—work—why would former agricultural workers choose to embrace civic agriculture as a recontextualization of these practices in a new setting?

Another possibility might have been the fact that of the list of gardens I had compiled, the majority were associated with NYRP, and as such were not “owned” by gardeners and garden members, or even by the community, but rather they were owned by NYRP “for the benefit of the public and [maintained] with the support of local volunteers.” The lack of garden autonomy

might have an impact on eagerness of involvement and the way community members related to the gardens. In Armstrong's survey of community gardens in upstate New York, she found that in communities where the gardeners were not residents of the neighborhood in which the garden was located, "local residents enjoyed the garden's beauty and recognized the close social network of the gardeners, but the presence of the garden *failed to increase local community cohesion*" (324, emphasis added).

Pollan, Berry and Novak all emphasized the importance of both challenging current food policy in the United States and of educating oneself in matters of the food industry. All three authors and food/farming activists, presented arguments that concluded with an urging for readers to get involved in the production of their own food in some way—be it by gardening or even farming in rural or urban environments. These authors represent a shift in motives for people's participation in gardening. No longer is it to challenge corruption in the city's police department or neglect of a neighborhood, but to challenges corruption in the food industry and neglect of the importance of a healthy diet. Both of these phases of the urban gardening movement—the 1970s initial emergence, and now the push from the food revolution—confront different political themes and issues. This political nature of community gardening perhaps does not hold appeal for recent immigrants to the United States as they are likely not well versed in local politics, or might feel that certain social risks go along with participating in an activity that is in some way politically charged.

Hanna and Oh's research in Philadelphia highlights the effect the lack of a profit incentive has on participation in gardening; the majority of gardener were retired, without a need for profit, and ample free-time on their side. For working age populations time restrictions affect their willingness to commit to a garden and devote the time it deserves. Add on to this the fact that it is rare to make a profit, and the number of interested candidates further diminishes. Furthermore, their research indicated that there was "no family tradition in gardening" (213).

It seems that gardening programs or initiatives to incorporate or involve Brooklyn's Mexican immigrant populations in an attempt to harbor community development are assuming that gardening will be received as a hobby or activity they would be eager to participate in during their limited free time. This is ignoring the different cultural perceptions on gardening and cultural approaches to integration to one's community. The underlying theme in the interviews I conducted was that of the importance of family in one's acclimation to life in New York City. My findings have led me to the conclusion that programs for Mexican immigrants designed to achieve community development and empowerment in Brooklyn should aim to incorporate and engage family units as opposed to individuals. Programs of this nature would better serve all involved, leading to an increase in participation, and the development of stronger, more supportive communities that by recognizing the importance of individual family units would create kinship type bonds between participating families.

CONCLUSION

Since the emergence of modern community gardening in New York City and beyond, a central point of the movement has been tied to the gardener's identity. Rotenberg found that within landscape, the ideology of the gardener was visible; often these ideologies were of such importance and so central to the gardener's identity, that s/he would take the risk of allowing their land to become a biogarten despite the opposition it might be met with from their

neighbors, in challenging standard perceptions of what makes a garden beautiful. Hanna and Oh found that being part of a garden introduced participants to an entire city of gardens, and allowed them access to connect with participants in other gardens. They became part of a social circle and network; their involvement in gardening was directly related to increases in their social capital. For Puerto Ricans in New York, their ethnic identity was combined with community gardening as these garden incorporated aspects of their culture from the island and presented specific sites in which they were recontextualized into their new city, allowing them to meet others from Puerto Rico, or non-Puerto Ricans appreciative of their culture.

The situation for Mexican immigrants, however, is different from the other cases referenced. Unlike the others, the identity of Mexican immigrants is not incorporated into gardening like it is for others. Their political or social ideologies are not represented in New York's garden's; there is little evidence for gardening granting access to a social network of like minded individuals for them, as gardening as understood in the United States is not of cultural value for Mexicans; as for specifically Latino gardens in New York, there is not a visible Mexican cultural presence like there is for Puerto Ricans. This is a situation that could quite possibly change over time as the population size of Mexicans in New York City continues to increase. For now, however, the identity of recent Mexican immigrants continues to hold its closest ties to family, especially those family members with whom they interact in daily life in New York.

WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, Donna. "A survey of community gardens in upstate New York: Implications for Health promotion and community development." *Health and Place* 6 (2000): 319-327. Print.
- Berry, Wendell. "The Pleasures of Eating." *What are People For?: Essays*. New York: North Point Press, 1990. 145-153. Print.
- GreenGuerrillas.org*. Green Guerrillas. Web. Dec. 2011.
- Hanna, Autumn K. and Pikai Oh. "Rethinking Urban Poverty: A Look at Community Gardens." *Bulletin of science, technology & society* 20 (2000): 207-216. Print.
- Jeffrey, Josie. Seed Freedom Seed Bombs. *SeedFreedom.net*, 2009. Web. March 2012.
- Liz Christy Community Garden. *LizChristyGarden.us*. Web. March 2012.
- Novak, Annie. "In Brooklyn, Lettuce, Not Steel, Scrapes the Sky." *The Atlantic*. 24 March 2010. Web. 1 Oct 2011.
- Pollan, Michael. "Farmer in Chief." *New York Times Magazine*. The New York Times, 9 Oct. 2008. Web. 26 March 2012.
- Rotenberg, Robert. "Landscape and Power in Vienna: Gardens of Discovery." *Theorizing the City: The New Urban Anthropology Reader*. Ed. Low, Setha M. New Brunswick, New

Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

Saldivar-Tanaka, Laura and Marianne E. Krasny. "Culturing community development, neighborhood open space, and civic agriculture: The case of Latino community gardens in New York City." *Agriculture and Human Values* 21 (2004): 399-412. Print.

United States Census Bureau

"Eagle Street Rooftop Farm Factsheet." *Rooftop Farms.org*. 2012. Web. 4 May 2012.