

**More than Vibrant Green Places:
exploring and situating the cultural and historical fabric of
community gardens in Vancouver, B.C.**

by

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Introduction

Having been artfully portrayed as the lungs of our City, community gardens have certainly become an increasingly integral component of Vancouver's local food assets and security. Recently, the City of Vancouver has been instrumental and had a prodigious degree of success in increasing the number of community gardens throughout the City¹. And for good reason: community gardens enhance accessibility to local food assets (Kremer and DeLiberty, 2011); add an aesthetic positive externality to neighbourhoods; improve air quality by reducing food miles and implementing green infrastructure (Viljoen, 2005); and create a space for interaction (i.e. social capital), community collaboration and increased food security (Bellows et al. 2005). However, while the benefits of community gardens have been documented extensively, recent research completed by Darlene Seto (2011) has illuminated a concerning and critical trend in the demographics engaged with Vancouver's community gardens. Specifically, Seto's research found that a disproportionately low number of visible minority, non-English language speaking, lower-income and lower-educational status individuals are represented in these garden spaces, suggesting that barriers still exist in accessing community gardens and their benefits as a source of fresh, healthy, low-cost and culturally diverse food for these residents (Seto, 2011).

By building on the Greenest City Scholars research project conducted in 2012 entitled: *Engaging Vancouver's Chinese community in achieving a one-planet ecological footprint* (Babalos, 2012), the Greenest City Scholars Program have proposed a new question for 2014 concerning the barriers preventing participation of ethno-cultural communities in local food systems and, particularly, community gardens. Specifically, this research proposal places emphasis on conceiving of an "outreach and engagement pilot" to begin addressing these issues as a means of transcending the value of community gardens as not only vibrant green places, but also as the decisive medium for improving access to local, healthy and low-cost food for ethnic-communities. Before I begin my discussion, it is first critical to point out that this research project proposed by the Greenest City Scholars Program can be understood as a response to both the work of Darlene Seto, in her masters thesis: *Diversity and Engagement in Alternative*

¹ Accounting for an increase from 3,260 community gardens in 2010 to 4,166 today (2014).

Food Practice: Community Gardens in Vancouver, B.C., as well as the City of Vancouver's Greenest City Action Plan 2020 goal: to "increase City-wide and neighbourhood food assets by a minimum of 50% over 2010 levels" by 2020. Given the momentum and significance behind this growing dialogue concerned with engaging a greater segment of the population in Vancouver with community gardens, I begin by adopting the essence of this topic, whilst proposing to take an alternative approach to the intended and suggested outcome of the Greenest City Scholars Program's question. In doing so, I will analyze the cultural and historical context of community gardens - and urban agriculture generally - in Vancouver to situate the layers of this dialogue by questioning: "what drives individuals to grow food in the City?". Through this exploration, I will suggest that there must emerge a more critical and developed approach by which to understand why a disproportionately low number of ethnic-communities are represented in community garden spaces in Vancouver.

Natalie Gibb's Parallel Food Networks

Throughout, I will adopt and build on the framework of Natalie Gibb's critical exploration into food movements in Vancouver, in suggesting that there are, in fact, parallel food networks that exist within the City (2011). To exemplify this contention, I will unpack the historical contexts of both Vancouver's mainstream local food movement and the "older" alternative food network outlined by Gibb (2011) - created by minority² and, specifically to this research, Chinese communities in the City - in an effort to understand how the political and social fabric of a city comes to define a group's interaction with space. As I will contend, ethnic minority communities in Vancouver, historically marginalized from social

² Throughout, I will be referring specifically to the Chinese community's experience in Vancouver. However, I must note that sub-groups between ethnic minorities in Vancouver, while they do have, to an extent, a shared history, they each own a different part of that history (Wang, 2011). Moreover, this distinction transcends simply differences between ethnic groups in Vancouver, but also includes even more complex layers of diversity within these groups, including inter-generational differences (e.g. the social and political context of their lives). Indeed, the Chinese community is not a homogenous group, but rather has experienced increasing complexity during the last two decades (Wang, 2011). For this reason, I must make clear that this work may not necessarily be the experience of all Chinese or ethnic groups in Vancouver, but should be acknowledged instead as a broad outline of the historical conditions of minority and Chinese communities in the City that led to parallel food networks in general. Without question, further steps and work must be put towards exploring these diversities if the City is to ever engage these communities.

and political processes, have, in response, both produced and contested space by asserting their unique cultural identities onto it. More than this, these unique, historically relevant circumstances have led, as Gibb (2011) outlined, to at least one parallel food network in Vancouver that I propose informs, in part, the disproportionately low number of ethnic-communities engaged with community gardens throughout the City. It is for this reason that I will contend: instead of seeking to increase access to community gardens for ethnic communities in Vancouver as a source of local, fresh and low-cost food, the City must first acknowledge: the influence of cultural diversity between and within these communities; the politically and culturally charged nature of community gardens; and the historically relevant circumstances that led to alternative parallel food networks in the City. It is only by doing this that the City will achieve a truly sustainable, engaged, just and secure food strategy for the region.

Parallel Food Networks: Vancouver's foodscapes through time

Through its inherent nature as an ongoing, politically contested process, neoliberalism has stemmed from complex histories³ – and thus its development in relation to urban agriculture demands exploration. In one of the most important works for defining the relationship between neoliberalism and the city within the context of urban agriculture, Nathan McClintock (2011) proposes theories on metabolism and circulation to better define how urban agriculture arose historically. McClintock shows how, from the point of circulation, the “demarcated devaluation” of North American inner city space through various neoliberal tendencies and trends, has created inexpensive land that has the potential for, and can be reclaimed from, the capitalist space economy to regain self-reliance, security and political and community organization. However, as McClintock proposes, urban food production is neither simply neoliberal nor activist, but instead, forms through the dialectic tensions between the forces of state retrenchment, economic polarization, and through the need for solutions to hunger and community

³ Neoliberalism has been argued to be the predominant free market ideology that defined the United States of America under Reagan, and that led to corporate deregulation and the dismantling of the New Deal social welfare system (Harvey, 2005). Rather than an ideology, neoliberalism can be understood as a set of processes that feature the roll back of the government, and the roll out (e.g. privatization, marketization, market-friendly reregulation) of new social and economic relationships that perpetuate capitalist accumulation.

development (McClintock, 2011; 2013) - and takes form in unique ways between cities, between the communities within these cities and within these communities. Indeed, while recent media coverage and promotion of urban agriculture has done much for its increasingly widespread adoption and awareness, critics such as Lawson have contended that this attention largely ignores the influence of the rich historical and evolutionary nature of food production in the city (2005). To begin situating this gap, I adopt the frame of Gibb's research by suggesting that Vancouver is now home to parallel local food networks (acknowledging that there may be more than two) (Gibb, 2011). First, there is a newer, rapidly growing network which includes farmers' markets and other institutions largely supported by the "local" food movement, and the City of Vancouver's Greenest City Action Plan. Second, there is an "older" network defined by roadside stores and greengrocers supplied by Chinese-Canadian farmers. As I will show, these two particular sets of food networks operate in parallel due to their distinct historical frameworks.

Providing context to Vancouver's "newer" food networks

As has been outlined by Walker, Vancouver has a robust history of agriculture that traces back to its early roots at the turn of the 20th Century - when numerous commercial farms defined the City in both urban and peri-urban regions (Walker, 2013). Indeed, there are numerous (though, I will outline only the most pertinent three) threads that inform the history of this movement, and provide context into how contemporary mainstream urban agriculture came to exist in Vancouver. First, it must be acknowledged and emphasized that the history of Vancouver's local agriculture cannot be disconnected from its current urban agriculture systems. Indeed, both provincially and nationally, Metro Vancouver has historically been defined through its extensive farming regions - a point emphasized in my interview with the chair of the Agricultural Land Commission, Richard Bullock (Agricultural Land Commission, 2014). By the turn of the 20th century, significant settler agricultural production existed throughout the region, and served the vast majority of Vancouver's fruit and vegetable demands. However, as Walker explains, by 1943, given that most of British Columbia's arable land was already being farmed, that Vancouver had a rapidly growing population and that there was a growing economic imperative to abandon diverse family farming in the region in favour of specialized commercial crop production - local agriculture and food production

levels fell. Second, Vancouver has a long tradition of gardening at home that has been sustained and seen recent growth (e.g. a 2002 survey assessed that 44% of Greater Vancouver residents grew a portion of their own food). Urban agriculture at this level (i.e. the household and local level) has, arguably, served as a subversive food production strategy, allowing individuals to operate outside of the market logic of the industrial agri-food system to different extents (McClintock, 2013). Finally, the third thread, Vancouver's modern, mainstream urban agriculture growth has an important relationship to the environmental movement. Vancouver's social fabric in the 1960s and 1970s began to shift when natural resource extraction companies (e.g. mining companies) were largely prevalent and dominant in the regional landscape (and in all of British Columbia), but were soon met with a strong oppositional subculture (Walker, 2013). The environmental movement, opposition to the Vietnam War and to nuclear proliferation, to name a few issues, began to define this group that then established strong connections to Vancouver. Moreover, as Walker argues, urban agriculture development and policy is employed as both a response to the urban environmental injustice and inequality and, more recently, a tool of the entrepreneurial city⁴ (Walker, 2012). As a result and a response of these threads outlined, support for localized food production through groups such as City Farmer (and now today, groups such as Farm Folk City Folk, Inner City Farms and Fresh Roots) and from the general public have now helped to develop an increasingly large urban agriculture network, food related initiatives (e.g. 100-Mile Diet) and, specifically, community garden networks throughout the City. These developments can be understood as an attempt to achieve various interrelated goals: resiliency, environmental sustainability, health, community economic development, cultural vibrancy and social justice (Gibb, 2011).

Having formed during the 1990s, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture systems and other institutions were made popular through the growing and vibrant food movement. As an extension of this development, the City of Vancouver now supports and oversees the majority of the current 24 community gardens in the City (Vancouver Park Board, 2013), with the greatest number being situated on institutional land, followed by City-owned land and City park land. With that being said, while the City helps to facilitate and organize the community garden network in Vancouver by leasing land and

⁴ see While et al., 2004 for a developed discussion on the entrepreneurial City, sustainability fix.

undertaking planning and zoning, none of these spaces are actually run by City officials. Instead, each garden is managed by community members or institution-run nonprofit societies. As I will show, these patterns fit closely with the City of Vancouver's current local food strategy.

Providing context to Vancouver's "older", alternative food networks

As outlined by Gibb, Chinese immigration into Canada began in as early as 1858, and by the late 1800s and early 1900s, the majority of these groups worked as either labourers in mines, railways or in service industries (2011). In British Columbia specifically, farming became another important occupation for many Chinese and minority immigrants, due in part to their exclusion - and indeed, as a consequence of anti-Chinese (and of minorities generally) racism of the time - from wage-based employment opportunities. As a result, by 1921, 90% of British Columbia's vegetables were produced and distributed by Chinese populations (Gibb, 2011).⁵ As Chinese farmers became more numerous and involved with farming in B.C., many white Canadians became threatened, and even used their presence in the region as farmers for justification of the Immigration Act in 1923 (Gibb, 2011). In response to this social and economic segregation, between 1920 and 1962, Chinese farmers and retailers began forming trade associations (e.g. The BC Lower Mainland Farmers Cooperative Association). It wasn't until the 1970s when these Chinese-Canadian farmers began commercially growing Chinese vegetables, a development that can be understood, at least in part, as a response to the emerging market (i.e. increased number of Chinese immigrant populations and an interest in "ethnic" foods in British Columbia) of the time.

Without question, Chinese-Canadian farmers are the foundation of this older, "alternative" food network - characterized by pre-existing, well-established channels for selling produce (Phan, 2011) - that we find in Vancouver today. Comprised primarily of roadside farm stores and greengrocers dating back to the 1970s, Gibb shows how these networks are in fact largely "local" or "alternative" in nature, in that

⁵ These farming systems operated by Chinese immigrants in the early 20th century were a departure from the traditional food production systems of China during the time - towards a more commercial, automated and fertilizer based process. More than this, the crops grown by these farmers were different than the traditional crops they had grown in China.

there are little to no intermediaries between consumer and producer, and food is grown seasonally and locally (Gibb, 2011). More than this, these networks connect food production to local place (e.g. through adopting environmentally sustainable farming practices specific to the climatic conditions of Vancouver). In addition, food production is also connected to local place through appealing to, and promoting, cultural proximity (e.g. labelled Chinese produce, selection of Chinese vegetables) (Gibb, 2011). However, as Phan's research suggests, wholesalers and grocers in the non-white English speaking demographic of the Chinese community are slower to become involved with the mainstream "local food" movement (Phan, 2011). More than this, defining "local" or whether having even heard of Vancouver's Greenest City Action Plan, for these individuals appears to be unclear. Through consideration, a great challenge thus exists within the culturally-sensitive and politically charged definition of "local food", in comparison to its application.

Today, the Chinese community of Vancouver has become the largest ethnic group in the City (comprising of 143,000 people of Chinese descent in 2006, or 25.4% of the total population), and Chinese farmers still operate some of the most productive vegetable farms in the province - having important implications for the economy and surrounding environment. Indeed, it is for this reason that their actions and relationship to sustainability will make a significant contribution to achieving the City of Vancouver's Greenest City Action Plan objectives (Wang, 2011).

The City of Vancouver's Goals and Vision

In 2010, Vancouver City Council adopted ten long-term goals in their Greenest City Action Plan (GCAP) 2020 - the most pertinent to urban agriculture being: to "increase City-wide and neighbourhood food assets⁶ by a minimum of 50% over 2010 levels" by 2020 (GCAP, 2011). As outlined, the City of Vancouver has further proposed to develop culturally relevant strategies that reflect the experiences of minority communities in the City, by incorporating their understandings of "sustainability" into the GCAP. In 2011, the GCAP's Local Food Action Plan set out to move towards a more "local dimension"

⁶ 'food asset' being defined quite broadly as "resources, facilities, services or spaces that strengthen the City's food system" (GCAP, 2011).

of food, whereby the City would strive to be a leader in urban food security and systems - and to do so by outlining detailed baselines, metrics and targets. More recently, Vancouver's Food Security Council's Food Strategy report focused on food production, empowering residents, increasing food access, addressing food processing and distribution infrastructure and reducing food waste (VFPC, 2013). Following this, a short term goal of the City's is to "support urban agriculture by creating 5-6 new community gardens, enabling three new urban farms, encouraging new farmers markets, adding public fruit trees, and supporting the development of a Vancouver food hub" (GCAP, 2011). And indeed, this goal is already well into becoming realized (i.e. +24% change).

Analyzing the City's goals

Certainly, community gardens⁷ are undergoing a strong resurgence across North America as a response to the growing support for a more just and sustainable food system - the benefits of which have been argued extensively for: their health benefits (Brown et al., 2000); (Bellows et al., 2005); community development (Armstrong, 2000); (MacNair, 2002); engagement and educating the public at farmers markets (Feenstra et al., 2007); asserting food security (Corrigan, 2011); social interaction (Kremer et al, 2007) (Iles, 2005); and promoting citizenship and identity (Levkoe, 2007). However, as Darlene Seto outlined of Vancouver's urban agriculture demographics, despite the increased popularity of these food systems, community gardens, to an extent, represent largely non-inclusive settings and cater to the more privileged segments of the population (Seto, 2012). Specifically, it was found that certain demographic groups were significantly underrepresented in Vancouver's community gardens in comparison to the general population. In particular, visible minority, non-English speaking, lower-income, and lower-educational status groups were found to be disproportionately underrepresented (Seto, 2012). Therefore, while community gardens indeed act as a "commons... that expand and deepen cultural and ecological

⁷ Community gardens arise when members of a community grow food on publicly or privately held land that they don't own. This is distinct from a private garden in that it is, to an extent, "public" in ownership, degree of democratic control and access. Moreover, these spaces thus become more about sustaining the social networks of community than the actual production of food - and have become, most recently, a form of ecological activism that defines this food movement (Seto, 2012).

vision and mold citizenship” (DeLind, 2002), a pressing consideration arises: whose cultural vision is being realized (Seto, 2012)?

Seto outlines some of the potential barriers that exist for ethnic communities participating in community gardens as being the social differences, language, time or human resources necessary to initiate a garden project - and suggests that these may stem from a systemic difficulty for participants without the necessary resources available to navigate formal municipal requirements. While this may certainly be the case, I wish to suggest that this lack of diversity in community gardens should also be acknowledged (and situated) as a consequence of the ways in which minority populations’ (especially Chinese communities) alternative food movements have been a response to their deeply rooted cultural and historical food production histories in Vancouver. In development of this articulation, interviews with Anonymous (2014) and, particularly the Hua Foundation (2014) suggested that issues of trust between minority groups and the City of Vancouver are crucial to address. As Bard and Kevin of the Hua Foundation explained, the City has pursued, to a greater extent, deliverable, measurable, stop-gap solutions in an attempt to promote inclusion in the local food movement, rather than alternative, “softer” methods⁸. Instead, the Hua Foundation suggested that cultivating conversation within and between food production actors in the City through looking at who is already interacting, and acknowledging the political and cultural importance, and diversity between and within these minority community’s urban agriculture networks is necessary. In fact, building a community garden may not necessarily establish a sense of community, inclusion or promote increased access to food security without an understanding of its meaning and historical situatedness. More specifically, by questioning the best methods of increasing access to community gardens in Vancouver for ethnic residents, the reality that these communities may instead prefer to socialize and grow food in more private settings goes overlooked (Hua Foundation, 2014).

⁸ The use of the term “soft” methods is meant to encapsulate a more dialogue-based strategy (e.g. Talk Food with Us) that emphasizes the development of trust and unity between urban gardeners in Vancouver (Hua Foundation, 2014) - the precise application of which, I suggest, should be determined by, and at the forefront of the City’s Food Strategy.

Suggestions/ Conclusions

Local food system initiatives and targets in Vancouver are not beginning from a blank slate. Instead, these initiatives and targets are situated within specific historical contexts and, as I have expressed, are marked by a history of anti-Chinese racism in Vancouver. It is thus important to acknowledge the ways in which this legacy is instrumental to the existence of an older, parallel set of alternative food networks produced by minority groups and, specifically to my research, Chinese populations in Vancouver. Due to this history and the sustained practice today of growing food on an individual basis, the extent to which the City of Vancouver's local food movement engages with these minority populations has crucial implications for food system sustainability and change in Vancouver. Many of Vancouver's most important local food organizations, projects, and policies have acknowledged food justice goals in consideration of the region's multicultural food traditions and food system actors. Such food justice goals were introduced in the Vancouver Food Charter as the commitment to a food system that "recognizes access to safe, sufficient, culturally appropriate and nutritious food as a basic human right for all Vancouver residents; reflects the dialogue between ... all sectors of the food system; [and] celebrates Vancouver's multicultural food traditions" (VFPC, 2013).

While Vancouver's local food trend and Chinese communities tend to be involved in distinct yet parallel alternative food networks, there is certainly common ground between each of these systems worthy of exploration. Specifically, I borrow from Gibb in suggesting that a parallel food network has the ability to represent a more resilient system, with unique opportunities for knowledge creation (Gibb, 2011). First, the coexistence of parallel food networks in Vancouver means that the local food system is composed of a greater diversity of local food institutions. As Gibb concludes, a more diverse system is a more resilient system, and thus, is better able to withstand disturbance (Gibb, 2011). Next, as there has been little interaction or collaboration between the local food movement and the alternative food production network in Vancouver, both networks run the risk of missing opportunities to learn about and propose solutions for the entire urban agriculture system of Vancouver (Gibb, 2011). Indeed, by developing partnerships through collaboration with the Chinese communities of Vancouver, the local food

movement would not only present a more resilient system, but would also help to gain a more defined vision of how food system localization and security may be achieved.

Gibb's work exemplifies how these parallel food networks have important implications for the local food movement, food security and establishing a succinct and well-developed food strategy for the region. While outreach, education and seeking to increase access to the local food movement for ethnic groups may convince some to participate in the "new" local food network in Vancouver, attempts to include minorities - specifically to my research, Chinese communities - into a predefined, culturally infused "local food" movement risk ignoring the historical processes that led to the creation, and in many cases, preference of the "older" parallel food network of these groups. A product of the historical legacy of anti-Chinese racism in Vancouver has certainly been linked to these group's investment and engagement in alternative food networks that existed before the local food movement, leading to an important cause for the disproportionately low minority presence in not only farmers' markets but, as I have indicated, community gardens in Vancouver.

If contestation and struggle for urban space is defined through everyday practices (i.e. that arise from specific historical, cultural and geographical relationships), analysis at multiple scales, both spatially and temporally, will reveal that urban agriculture is not simply radical nor neoliberal. Instead, it can be understood as an existing simultaneously neoliberal and radical counter-movement arising from dialectical tension (McClintock, 2013). As I have outlined, the response of communities to these unique tensions has resulted in movements towards local food production - unique in time, space and implementation. As a result of the structural racism and historical circumstances experienced by Vancouver's Chinese communities, in addition to the historical context of the more mainstream local food movement that I outlined, urban agriculture has come to be understood as a rallying point for radical structural critiques and the reclamation of the commons. For many, urban agriculture is about more than simply gardening, but has become a political act, a rejection of the industrial food system. Therefore, I finish by presenting the City of Vancouver's Food Policy Council's words regarding the conception of a sustainable, just food strategy, as one that: "builds upon the work already underway to improve urban

food systems, creates links between them, integrates new ideas, addresses gaps, and creates a vision for the future” (VFPC, 2013). It is only through emphasizing and putting more “soft” practices to work aimed at establishing trust with ethnic communities already engaged with growing food, learning from their pre-existing gardening practices and collaborating between these urban gardeners that the City can truly develop a sustainable, equitable, accessible, just and inclusive food system strategy.

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