

# Disparity Despite Diversity: Social Injustice in New York City's Urban Agriculture System

Kristin Reynolds

*Environmental Studies/Tishman Environment and Design Center, The New School, New York, NY, USA; reynoldk@newschool.edu*

**Abstract:** Many studies have documented the benefits of urban agriculture, including increased food access, job creation, educational opportunities, and green space. A focus on its social benefits has fed an association of urban agriculture with social justice, yet there is a distinction between alleviating symptoms of injustice (such as disparate access to food or environmental amenities) and disrupting structures that underlie them. Despite its positive impacts, urban agriculture systems may reinforce inequities that practitioners and supporters aim to address. This paper reports findings from a 2-year study of urban agriculture in New York City, which found race- and class-based disparities among practitioners citywide. Using the lens of critical race theory, it argues that a failure to examine urban agriculture's role in either supporting or dismantling unjust structures may perpetuate an inequitable system. The paper concludes with recommendations for urban agriculture supporters and scholars to help advance social justice at structural levels.

**Keywords:** action research, alternative food movements, critical race theory, social justice, racial justice, urban agriculture

## Introduction

As the autumn harvest season began in 2010, a *New York Magazine* article highlighted some of the City's up-and-coming urban farmers, hailing them as the "new class of growers" (see Stein 2010). Included in the article and its accompanying photographs were the leaders of what the author deemed some of New York City's "most notable" urban farms and gardens. As any popular media source might, this article broadened awareness about urban agriculture among readers who were not involved with the movement through the type of storytelling that only personal narrative can provide. And, since urban agriculture has often been considered an oxymoron given the association of food production with rural environments, this was an opportunity to help bolster the legitimacy of the growing movement.

However, despite, or perhaps because of the reach of this popular magazine, the article angered many in New York City's urban agriculture system (including some of the farmers that it featured) because six of the seven farmers profiled were white. Through the power of beautifully gritty photographs that professed to depict "What an Urban Farmer Looks Like", this article did more than raise awareness about growing tomatoes or keeping chickens in New York City. By failing to acknowledge the racial and ethnic diversity of New York's farmers and gardeners, it also suggested that urban agriculture in the city was a mostly white phenomenon, despite findings that the majority of gardeners in the city's nearly 1000 community

gardens self-identify as African-American and/or Latino/a (Eizenberg 2008, 2012; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004). By inaccurately situating leadership of New York's thriving urban agriculture system among a mostly white group of "young, idealistic, and educated" entrepreneurs,<sup>1</sup> the magazine piece effectively reinforced white dominance of the movement. Media coverage is, after all, a cultural and political resource that can contribute to the maintenance of power among dominant groups (Entman 2007; Ryan et al 2001).

Within the context of alternative food and community food movements, the representation of whites as the face of urban agriculture is not wholly surprising. Critiques of these movements have documented the dominance of white people and white culture in alternative food activities and community groups (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Mares and Peña 2011; Slocum 2006, 2010). Studies have also uncovered ways in which alternative food discourses have dismissed racism as an underlying cause of inequities, and found that, in some cases, organizational structures of organizations have reified white dominance at the same time that groups have sought to realize more sustainable and community-centered food systems (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Morales 2011; Slocum 2006, 2007, 2010). Although it is not surprising that a mainstream magazine article would fall into a common trapping of representing whites as the predominant group, the framing in this piece was nonetheless disheartening to many within the urban agriculture movement who seek to dismantle racial and intersectional forms of oppression through their work.

As urban agriculture continues to grow and diversify, and as scholars and activists engage more deeply with questions of social justice in the food system, it is increasingly important to understand ways that race- and class-based disparities and white dominance resurface within these movements and to recognize their structural roots. This paper begins to examine these issues, based on a subset of findings from a broader study of urban agriculture in New York City conducted between 2010 and 2012, which documented farming and gardening throughout the city through interviews with 31 individuals (New York City farmers and gardeners; representatives from non-profit supporting organizations, private foundations, and municipal government agencies), along with document review and participant observation. The paper finds that race- and class-based disparities that exist in broader social systems are being replicated in New York's urban agriculture system, despite the existence of a diversity of practitioners and increasing public interest in both urban agriculture and social justice. Using critical race and intersectionality theories, the paper argues that these patterns are structural and can therefore perpetuate systemic inequities even when individual level disparities do not appear to follow race or class lines.

The paper adds to existing literature by arguing that failure to critically examine urban agriculture's role in either supporting or dismantling much broader social and political oppression may perpetuate an inequitable system that is legitimated through progressive narratives about the positive impact that urban farming and gardening can have on issues such as food access, education, job creation, and public health. The paper offers recommendations for urban agriculture practitioners, supporters, and scholars, and concludes with interviewee reflections about using urban agriculture to advance social justice at structural levels.

## ***Urban Agriculture and Social Justice?***

Interest in urban agriculture has increased tremendously over the past 15 years. Community groups have expanded existing farming and gardening programs, individuals and households have increasingly sought opportunities to grow produce and small livestock in the city, and new forms of commercial production have cropped up on rooftops and ground-level greenhouses. Meanwhile, non-profit organizations and funders have provided support for urban agriculture, and city governments have implemented policies and programs particularly to expand food production (Cohen and Reynolds 2014). From self-provisioning to broad public interest, urban agriculture has become a social movement on a national scale.

Along with the growing movement, a body of literature examining urban agriculture throughout the United States has also developed. Many studies have documented benefits including increased access to fresh, affordable, and culturally appropriate food in low-income communities; maintenance of green spaces in areas dominated by the built environment; cultivation of women's empowerment; job training for youth and adults; and community economic development (see Cohen et al 2012; Draper and Freedman 2010; Eizenberg 2008; Feenstra et al 1999; Kaufman and Bailkey 2000; Reynolds 2011). Descriptive works have highlighted diversity in the movement, noting that urban gardeners and farmers in the US represent racial, ethnic, and cultural groups from around the world, suggesting that urban agriculture facilitates social inclusion and provides opportunities for recent immigrants to maintain elements of their cultural heritage (Hynes 1996; von Hassell 2002). Several studies have also identified barriers to the success of urban agriculture (eg zoning regulations; lack of funding and technical assistance; a perception that farming is not a legitimate use of urban space), and have offered recommendations to overcome these challenges (see Hodgson et al 2011; Kaufman and Bailkey 2000; Pothukuchi and Kaufman 1999).

As urban agriculture scholarship has expanded, city gardening and farming have been characterized as forms of political expression, as well as social and environmental activism (Certomà 2011; Eizenberg 2012; Milbourne 2012; White 2011a, 2011b). Scholars have also explored the role of urban agriculture in facilitating changes in the ways that city residents interact with the urban environment in contemporary, post-capitalist contexts (McClintock 2010). While more critical in their approach to the social politics of urban space, these analyses have joined the substantial body of literature that positions urban farms and gardens as serving mainly positive or liberatory functions.<sup>2</sup> In highlighting the social benefits of city farming and gardening, these studies, have fed an association of urban agriculture with social justice, particularly insofar as it addresses issues of community food security, public health, and environmental justice.

Most recently, research has begun to document racial disparities and tensions within urban agriculture systems. Studies have identified predominance of white gardeners in communities of color (Meenar and Hoover 2012); race- and class-based disparities among urban agriculture practitioners (Cohen et al 2012); the potential for technical assistance programs to disproportionately serve practitioners in predominantly white, upper income communities (Reynolds 2010); and the intersections between urban agriculture and processes of neoliberalization (McClintock 2014). Still, relative to the extensive documentation of its benefits,

there remains a paucity of scholarship examining the possibility for urban agriculture to ignore or reinforce unjust patterns, and how scholars might help understand and work to dismantle these.

To be clear, urban agriculture *can help* work toward more socially just systems: it *can* increase access to fresh, affordable food and green spaces in low-income neighborhoods. It *can* provide venues to cultivate leadership and job skills among youth and adults who may not have ready access to other such opportunities; and it *can* contribute to community economic development through job creation and micro-enterprise development. And, many of these impacts touch the lives of low-income women and people of color. Given the persistence of racialized and feminized poverty, environmental racism, and public health disparities throughout the United States, these common outcomes are among some of the most fundamental ways in which urban agriculture improves people's everyday lives, and are indeed *part* of realizing a more just food system.

Yet, as alternative food scholars and activists have increasingly pointed out, there is a distinction between alleviating symptoms of injustice (such as disparate food access or exclusion from movement leadership) and disrupting social and political structures that underlie them (Ahmadi 2009; Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Allen et al 2003; Herrera cited in Slocum 2006; Mares and Peña 2011; Redmond 2013). And, while there has been a tendency in the alternative food movement to conflate one aspect of alternative initiatives with multiple others (eg local scale with food security or community development), there is nothing inherently "just" about any geographic location or mode of production (Born and Purcell 2006). Even the most well intentioned initiatives may exist within, and reinforce unjust systems, and without attention to the oppressive structures that lead to social inequities, urban agriculture may perpetuate or even reinforce the injustices that practitioners and supporters aim to address. Thus, while urban farms and gardens are important for many reasons, and should therefore remain as permanent elements in cities, just how deeply they make changes in social and political structures of the food systems, and by what means practitioners may do so, merits deeper questioning.

### ***Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality Frames***

If the dominant urban agriculture narrative has lacked critique of the social and political structures in which farms and gardens are embedded, this has been due in part to the need to build support for an activity whose legitimacy has often been questioned (eg *Is agriculture an appropriate use of city land? Is urban food production really agriculture?*). At a most basic level, then, framing urban farming and gardening in terms of what it adds to city environments and communities (eg the material, cultural, and sociopolitical benefits) has been understandable. However, in order for urban agriculture to advance social justice at multiple scales, it is also important to address ways that social patterns can be re-enacted within the movement, and then reinscribed in broader social and political structures.

As noted above, critical food scholars have increasingly pointed to white dominance in alternative food initiatives, calling for more inclusive approaches and more diverse

participation in the movement (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Morales 2011; Slocum 2006, 2007, 2010). Another strand of critical food scholarship has focused on whether alternative food initiatives such as farmers markets, farm-to-school, urban agriculture reinforce the processes of neoliberalization (Alkon and Mares 2012; Allen and Guthman 2006). While importantly questioning the constitution of alternative food groups and the scale at which initiatives may bring about change, identifying white dominance or the embeddedness of “alternative” initiatives within the existing system does not in itself elucidate the structural roots of these imbalances, leaving us to solve a systemic problem with superficial approaches.

Recently, critical food scholars have begun to examine the food system through the lens of critical race theory (CRT) (see Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Harper 2011; Hoover 2013; Slocum 2010). CRT is a broad framework that considers racism as an organizing social paradigm (Omi and Winant 1994) that advances the interests of a dominant racial group (eg whites) and presents little material incentive to its beneficiaries (eg white people) to dismantle it (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Omi and Winant 1994). Developed in the mid-1970s by lawyers, legal scholars, and activists who realized that progress that had been made during the Civil Rights Era had either stalled or was being rolled back, CRT helps us understand that race is socially constructed and that dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times. The CRT framework and movement have expanded into numerous other disciplines and settings and are explicitly “activist” in approach in that they seek not only to understand social situations, but to improve them (Delgado and Stefancic 2012; see also Omi and Winant 1994).

CRT is important in understanding racial dynamics, as it focuses on the structures that reinforce racial disparity, not simply on individual interactions or acts. The US-based organization Race Forward identifies four levels of racism. *Internalized* racism is that which exists within individuals—their private beliefs and biases—which may manifest as feelings of inferiority among people of color or of entitlement among white people. *Interpersonal* racism is that which occurs between people acting on their internal beliefs. Examples include racial discrimination or racial violence. *Institutionalized* racism is the effect of institutional policies and practices (such as school district policies that result in the concentration of children of color in overcrowded schools) that routinely produce inequitable outcomes for individuals, privileging white people and placing people of color at a disadvantage. *Structural* racism is “racial bias among institutions and across society” that perpetuate disadvantage among people of color. Examples of structural racism include media portrayals of people of color as criminals, which pervade dominant public consciousness and scale up to discriminatory treatment grounded in an association of all people of color as potential perpetrators (Apollon et al 2014; see also Bonilla-Silva 1997; Conley 1999; Omi and Winant 1994). Within these frameworks, *white privilege* is understood as whites’ historical and contemporary advantages in access to quality education, jobs and livable wages, homeownership, and multi-generational wealth (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Keleher and Sen 2012; McIntosh 1990; Omi and Winant 1994; Taylor 2009; The Aspen Institute 2013).

Within the CRT framework, racism and white privilege function in concert, and at multiple scales, to maintain racial inequity. For instance, understandings of racism

as simply interpersonal bias or animosity towards members of a specific racial(ized) group may keep us from seeing the institutionalized or systemic patterns that perpetuate racial oppression and white privilege. This can also foster the idea that representation and diversity are marks of racially equitable (and even “post-racial”) societies. Viewed through the lens of critical race theory, the reinscription of racial disparities and white privilege within alternative food movements becomes less surprising, and can even be expected without conscious effort to dismantle oppression at numerous levels, from the personal to the structural.

Of course, questions of social justice extend beyond race, and an analysis of disparity or inequity would be partial without also considering the intertwining of social locations and the ways in which they shape lived experiences. The concept of intersectionality recognizes that individuals have overlapping identities and loyalties, including race, class, gender, spiritual beliefs, and country of origin (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Delgado and Stefancic 2012), and that these “shape structural, political, and representational aspects” of the social world (Crenshaw 1991). Insofar as an urban agriculture system consists of people with diverse identities, understanding these interactions is key in examining inequities, privilege, and the way that these might help or hinder the success of individual initiatives, as well as the integrity of the system as a whole.

CRT and intersectionality theory, then, are important in productively examining the role of urban agriculture in creating socially just systems because they help shift the analytical focus from inclusion and diversity to a focus on overcoming racial and intersectional oppression. These frameworks also help elucidate the roots of oppression in multiple political, social, and economic systems, and the fact that racial, class, and gender inequities, as well as white privilege, can be perpetuated, even if individual initiatives to improve a system are successful. With regard to urban agriculture, CRT and intersectionality analyses help us see that although food production and green spaces may alleviate some of the food and environmental system *effects* of social and economic disparities, the simple presence of a farm or garden does not do away with structural oppression. In New York City, this analysis is particularly salient, given high rates of racialized income inequality and residential segregation, along with high real estate values and concomitant competition for urban space (see Ackerman 2011; Bergad 2014; Cohen et al 2012; Conley 1999).

## Data Sources

This paper reports a subset of findings from *Five Borough Farm*, a project of the New York City non-profit Design Trust for Public Space. The goals of the project were to document the state of urban agriculture in the city’s five boroughs (Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten Island, and Queens); to create metrics and evaluation tools to enable the city’s farmers and gardeners to track their activities and impacts; and to identify policy measures to strengthen urban agriculture citywide. The research team consisted of seven researchers and design professionals, and one urban farmer who worked collaboratively between 2010 and 2012 to conduct research, develop policy and evaluation strategies, and depict New York City’s urban agriculture system through text, photography, and information graphics.<sup>3</sup>

The project was initiated by a small group of stakeholders and commenced with a larger stakeholder workshop held in 2010 that brought together 75 farmers and gardeners, staff members from non-profit organizations, funders, and researchers to discuss their respective goals, priorities, needs, and challenges related to urban agriculture. Findings from this workshop were distributed to all participants in February 2011 and informed the subsequent research activities, which included:

- a review of literature evaluating the impacts of common urban agriculture activities;
- a review of websites, reports, and other relevant documents from non-profit organizations supporting urban agriculture in New York City;
- participant observation New York City food advocacy, policymaking, and planning processes; and
- structured 1–2 hour interviews of 31 key informants with unique knowledge of aspects of urban agriculture in New York City, as described below.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select key informants from four stakeholder groups in New York City: urban gardening and farming practitioners with diverse operations throughout the city's five boroughs ( $n=16$ ); representatives of non-governmental organizations that provide support or advocacy for urban agriculture ( $n=5$ ); representatives of foundations that had recently funded urban agriculture programs ( $n=4$ ); and municipal and state-wide government officials directly involved in urban agriculture activities in New York City ( $n=6$ ).

Criteria used to select practitioners were diversity of location/borough, leadership demographics, and type of operation, the latter of which was based on a typology developed by the project team and included: community gardens; community farms (those operated by community based organizations that sold/distributed food in the community); commercial farms; and institutional farms (eg prisons; larger non-profits). The research focused on food-producing urban agriculture activities in publicly accessible spaces. Therefore educational gardens, demonstration gardens/farms, and private backyards were excluded from the study. Names of individuals, organizations, and agencies are omitted here for confidentiality.

Interviews explored characteristics of urban agriculture in New York City, as well as policy and evaluation needs as observed from key informants' respective positions (ie practitioner, funder, support organization representative, or government agency staff). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for consistent and divergent themes. Preliminary findings were shared formally with two working groups (one on policy, one on metrics) consisting of five to six practitioners, non-profit organization representatives, and government agency staff that gave feedback on the policy and metrics recommendations, respectively. Design Trust staff also met informally with a number of city agency officials to obtain further input on the feasibility of the policy recommendations. This feedback was incorporated into the final report (see Cohen et al 2012). Findings related to race and class disparities are included in this paper.

## Urban Agriculture in New York City

Urban agriculture in New York City has had a longstanding and at times politically contentious history. As in many US cities, urban gardening and livestock husbandry provided important sources of food for poor New York City residents during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though this was not without contest. Larger livestock (hogs, dairy cattle) were eventually outlawed out of concern for public health (Blecha 2007). World War and Depression-era gardens were also used both to address urban hunger and to divert food from the conventional agricultural sector to US and allied military efforts abroad, and were promoted by a number of government programs (Hayden-Smith 2009; Hynes 1996; Lawson 2005).

Urban agriculture waned during the 1950s and 1960s throughout the country, but it resurfaced during the economic crisis of the late 1960s and 1970s as a venue for community development, as well as social and environmental organizing. During this time period, grassroots organizing and community activism became intertwined with urban agriculture in several US cities (Lawson 2005). In New York City, many African American and Latino gardeners organized the cleaning and planting of lots abandoned by unscrupulous landlords who had resorted to arson as a way to avoid renovation costs of derelict properties and collect insurance payments (New York City Community Garden Coalition). Organizations such as Green Guerillas, also founded in the 1970s, helped facilitate neighborhood revitalization and empowerment through community gardening (Lawson 2005).

Following the lead of Green Guerillas and other community-based organizations, then-New York City Mayor Koch's administration created "Operation Green Thumb" (now called GreenThumb) in 1978 to provide technical support to community gardeners and to assist in their management of city-owned garden sites. GreenThumb is funded by federal Community Development Block grants slated for programs in low-income communities. This period also saw the growth of the New York City Housing Authority's Garden and Greening program, and the creation of an urban agriculture program within Cornell University Cooperative Extension that targeted technical assistance toward low-income families.

Despite measures supporting urban agriculture, its status in New York's landscape has also been contested. Notably, in 1999, then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's administration attempted to capture the increasing value of the real estate occupied by many gardens, and to use the city-owned properties to construct needed affordable housing by auctioning them off for development. This set off a fierce battle between gardeners and the Mayor, which involved legal challenges, protests, and the eventual intervention of the state Attorney General.<sup>4</sup> It also saw the coalescence of the New York Community Garden Coalition, which has taken a leadership role in fighting for the preservation of community gardens on public land. Though most of the gardens in question in 1999 were purchased by the non-profits Trust for Public Land and New York Restoration Project, and thus preserved from development, community garden preservation and permanency has remained a contentious issue between gardeners and New York City government agencies (see Cohen et al 2012; Moynihan 2013).

Today, New York City has more than 1000 community gardens (some 80% of which produce food), nearly 300 school gardens, about two dozen community



operated farms, a handful of commercial farms, and dozens of neighborhood composting projects (Ackerman 2011; Cohen et al 2012). This extensive network of community gardens and urban farms reflects the city's diversity, as well as historical and shifting neighborhood demographics. For instance, studies have found that African Americans and Latino/as (with representation from a number of regions in Central and South America) represent the majority of community gardeners in the city, and that urban agriculture sites, particularly community gardens, are concentrated in low-income communities and communities of color (Ackerman 2011; Eizenberg 2008, 2012; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, although there has been no empirical documentation of the changing demographics of urban agriculture in New York City, observers have noted a recent uptick in the proportion of young white urban agriculture practitioners compared with previous decades (see Tortorello 2012). This change has coincided with gentrification of historically low-income neighborhoods including parts of Brooklyn (see Curran and Hamilton 2012; Pearsall 2012) where many new urban agriculture projects have developed.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond gardeners and farmers, the urban agriculture system in New York City consists of a host of individuals, institutions, and components that make the system function. This includes numerous not-for-profit groups that provide technical assistance and networking opportunities (eg, Just Food; The New York Botanical Garden's "Bronx Green-Up" program; Black Urban Growers); government programs and private foundations that have provided competitive funding for urban agriculture; city agencies overseeing aspects of urban agriculture (land, water); and policy makers who have expressed support through various white papers and policy statements (Cohen et al 2012). Whether it is through farming, gardening, or supportive measures, these groups collectively make up a diverse urban agriculture network in this ever-reinventive city. However, this system is not always equitable, as the data in the following sections demonstrate.

## Findings

### *Overlapping Goals*

Urban agriculture has been described as a multifunctional activity, through which practitioners accomplish a number of goals that may also intersect with goals of other urban stakeholders (Hodgson et al 2011). Indeed, farmers and gardeners in this study described a wide variety of goals for their operations, which were grouped into five overarching themes (financial, environmental, health, social/educational, and community development). Within these broad themes, practitioners had several social goals in common: over half of the practitioners mentioned improving food access/community food security and over one-third mentioned youth development as one of their main goals. Several practitioners identified goals related to community, and women's and youth empowerment, as well as social and human rights. Practitioners sought to accomplish these goals through activities ranging from community education about social oppression and food justice<sup>7</sup> to the creation of collaborative women-led, non-hierarchical organizational structures. (A more comprehensive list of goals and activities can be found in Cohen et al 2012.) One African American practitioner in a historically African American neighborhood described her operation's youth program:

The kids learn to grow food on the farm. They learn about livestock because we have two chicken coops. They learn about composting ... They learn about cooking demos ... so they can be peer educators ... I educate them about food justice and the structural inequities of the system that cause the disparities that we are experiencing. It's really clear to them. They get it more than some adults do. ... I take them to community board meetings where I speak about my work so they can learn how to speak about what they are doing and not have the phenomenon of others speaking for you.

Many of the practitioner goals overlapped with priorities of the funders, government officials, and non-profit organizations in this study. For instance, government staff explained that urban agriculture could help address their respective agencies' priorities in terms of addressing public health (eg through increasing access to fresh, healthy foods), fostering community development, and supporting job creation in low-income communities. Funders, specifically, noted that urban agriculture could address some of their foundations' respective social and environmental goals, including increasing community food security, preserving open space, advancing environmental justice or food justice, and supporting community empowerment. Support organizations included in this study provided various forms of technical assistance to urban farmers and gardeners, and interviewees explained that urban agriculture could be used to support work toward their organizations' broader goals related to environmental education and increasing food grown and marketed in the city.

Practitioners had also observed, and in some cases tracked, a range of economic, environmental, public health, community development, and educational impacts resulting from their operations, including job creation; increased food production and food access; increased community awareness about and consumption of healthy foods; children's education about food and the environment; and leadership development among youth participants. However, despite the positive social impacts that farmers and gardeners had observed in their surrounding communities as a result of their initiatives, practitioners and supporters alike had observed disparities *within* the urban agriculture system, as described next.

## **Disparities**

Throughout this study, farmers and gardeners related their experiences with obtaining financial support, accessing city-owned land, and securing services from city agencies. While some groups were offered city land for urban agriculture activities, or were able to create opportunities for rooftop farming, others encountered barriers obtaining permission from city agencies to grow food or hold farmers' markets on city property, or getting support to address safety concerns on city-owned land. Whereas some groups were able to leverage hundreds of thousands of dollars to support infrastructure, programming, and staff, others supported their operations' basic needs (eg fencing, water, community outreach) through a reliance on volunteer labor and community fundraisers. These experiences often differed with the organizations' leadership demographics, demonstrating race-based disparities that appeared, in some cases, to stem from structural racism.

## Funding

Farmers' and gardeners' experiences obtaining financial resources varied widely, both in terms of magnitude of funding received and the strategies they used to raise funds. Generally, groups with white leaders (including operations located in low-income communities and communities of color but led by whites) reported raising larger amounts of funding to support their operations and paid staff than did groups led by people of color. In terms of fundraising strategies, one African American practitioner in a predominantly Latino and African American neighborhood explained that the farm managed its expenses through community fundraisers:

We were in bad need of a generator [and the] generator we needed cost \$550, [so] we had a small party. [We raised] \$250 and put the rest out of our pockets ... Grants are good, when you can get 'em, but I think it helps more when you can help yourselves, so you do what you can, that's what we do. [We'll have] a fish fry. That's the way we raise money for the garden.

Another African American practitioner noted that his operation, located in a low-income community, was "bare bones" and that more funds were needed to sustain the basic farming activities. A third African American practitioner, in another low-income and historically African American community stated that "paying people [is hard], especially when I don't get paid; [When] I'm sitting in front of grant applications for two days and there's no pay involved."

In contrast, interviewees from the white-led operations in this study had generally obtained higher levels of funding for their operations. A few of these reported hundreds of thousands of dollars in capital expenditures and operating budgets, which, according to interviewees, had been obtained through a combination of grants, individual donations or investments, fees-for-service, and community fundraisers. During the time of this study, a highly publicized rooftop garden at a school with a primarily white student body in Greenwich Village (Manhattan) was also significantly funded through a combination of public and private donations totaling more than \$1 million (Decker 2012). Having observed such disparities, one African American community gardener cautioned against the urban agriculture movement becoming "the haves and the have-nots", adding:

sometimes I sit and I hear people talk about how much money they bring in ... \$200,000, \$300,000, \$400,000 ... I don't see how you can stand up and say that you're bringing a lot of money [without explaining whether] you're sharing that money with other gardens. Or are you just keeping it for your own project?

To be clear, many of the operations in this study obtained financial support through a combination of community-based fundraisers and grants, yet interviewee comments suggested a notable contrast between the amount of money raised by white-led groups versus those led by people of color. While this paper reports interviewees' individual experiences (not an analysis of citywide funding allocations), considering these observations through the lens of critical race theory can help contextualize them in terms of broader societal patterns. For instance, racialized income inequality and wealth disparity have been well documented in New York and nationally (eg Bergad 2014; Conley 1999; Massey and Denton 1993),

and CRT helps us understand these patterns in terms of structural racism and white privilege: whites often have greater access to cultural and educational means of attaining and accumulating wealth, leading to the perpetuation of racialized wealth and poverty within whole communities.

Applying this analysis to the observations above helps us understand that there may be structural causes of funding disparities between urban agriculture organizations led by people of color and those led by white people that are more complex than organizations simply obtaining (or not obtaining) competitive grant funding based on the merits of their projects. Factors producing funding disparities may also include differences in cultural capital held by organizational leaders, and the level of economic resources available to surrounding community residents who may provide individual donations or participate in community-based fundraisers to support farm or garden activities. A CRT analysis suggests that these resources are often more available to whites.

### ***Support from Government Agencies and Elected Officials***

In contrast to funding disparities, interviews with urban agriculture practitioners did not reveal *stark* racial patterns in terms of support from government agencies, yet critical race and intersectionality theories again help us consider the findings in a different light. Several practitioners—including people of color and white people—expressed frustration with city agencies and processes in terms of getting permission to use city land for food production and marketing activities. As one practitioner, whose operation was run primarily by women of color in a low-income neighborhood, explained:

[W]e have no electricity and that sort of limits what we can do sometimes, or maybe just inspires more creativity about how we do things. [For] water, we use the fire hydrant and that works, but it would be a lot more convenient if there was water directly on site ... I guess land is tricky because [the terms of our] lease [are] still in question. So we're on the land, [the City knows] we're there, we use it, but we don't necessarily have the support that would go along with a more formal arrangement.

A white practitioner reported having been fined for violating city building code regulations by placing a chicken coop on a rooftop, and an African American practitioner described relationships with government agencies as “absorbing instead of supporting”.

In other cases, both African American and white practitioners described actions of supportive individuals within city or statewide agencies or within local community boards. For example, one African American practitioner related experiences with the district manager in the farm's community district:

[I]n order to get our space in the park we had to do our homework. We have a very good relationship with ... our district manager. And so when we said that we wanted to do a farmer's market and we wanted to go on parkland, we had to get Parks' permission. So she set up a meeting with the Parks Department. So it was [our garden], the Parks Department, and [the district manager] to throw out this idea of having a farmer's market. They said “heck, yes.” And then our Councilperson, who happens to be her son, gave us \$7500. Now he gives us \$3750 every year for our market.

Another African American practitioner described productive collaborations between his farm and the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets that, according to this interviewee, resulted in the farm obtaining permits to operate a community farmers market on city owned land. A white practitioner stated: “We’ve had amazing relationships with the city. We operate solely and exclusively on city owned land ... [The city] approached us ... It’s been amazingly positive.”

The variability of government agency support for urban agriculture operations in this study appeared to be tied more to practitioners’ individual abilities to cultivate relationships with supportive government officials than to individuals’ racial identities. Yet again, critical race and intersectionality theories are useful analytical frames to help us understand these dynamics, as they remind us that individuals’ connections with influential groups often develop through the type of cultural capital that is part and parcel of white privilege. Although this study did not include an exhaustive analysis of government agency or officials’ support for all urban agriculture projects in New York City, a CRT framing helps us understand that individual examples do not necessarily reflect a structural whole. It also reminds us that structural racism can play out in many policy-making processes (Massey and Denton 1993; Omi and Winant 1994), including policy advocacy made more effective through the cultivation of working relationships with influential government officials. As one white practitioner observed, referring to a number of rooftop farms that had been supported by government agencies and officials, “I mean let’s be honest, there are people who can afford to put their gardens on the roof, they have the money. They have *relationships*” (emphasis added).

### ***White Privilege in New York City’s Urban Agriculture System***

Urban agriculture practitioners in this study were mainly asked to recount experiences at their respective operations. However, several interviewees also offered observations about the system overall, characterizing urban agriculture in New York as two communities: one with significantly more financial resources, stronger relationships with influential groups, and/or a white leadership that has created or been able to take advantage of opportunities to expand their operations; the other with less access to financial and cultural capital, and led primarily by people of color. One African American practitioner commented:

I’m afraid right now that the way [urban agriculture is] looking is white-led. White-led. And ... people of color are being pushed to the side ... I want to make sure that [this] movement is sustainable [so] it is has to be equal, because right now I’m starting to see a trend whereby the people with the most power, the most voices, are getting the money and the people who can’t speak as well are [not].

And a white practitioner observed:

There are two very unique and distinct aspects of this urban farm movement that’s going on ... One is very middle class and white, and one is not. One is of color and very low income. And they are ... very separate. Unless they are brought together, I don’t know that the success of either is going to continue. The needs [of both groups] are completely different.

Other interviewees observed that race- and class-based divisions in wider society were being replicated within the urban agriculture system in New York, and underscored the need to address these at root levels. One African American funder noted that:

Community gardens can be a place of exclusion. We've all probably had the experience of passing by a lovely looking garden that's locked, and perhaps there's a phone number on a sign, but you don't necessarily feel like you're meant to call it. And I think, like everything else in our society, most processes and practices mirror larger social problems; It may look like an oasis but [it's] still going to be fraught with class, and race, and cultural, and ethnic—just the various ... divisions that exist in society more broadly. [These] don't just disappear, I mean they have to be very intentionally addressed or they will be replicated just like they are everywhere else.

These interviewee observations underscore the analyses of race- and class-based disparities above. Understanding these divisions in the urban agriculture system as symptoms of structural racism and white privilege helps contextualize these patterns in broader society. If, as suggested by the interviewee comments here, white-led urban agriculture groups' greater access to key resources (eg funding; agency support) puts them at an advantage over those led by people of color, this is a textbook example of white privilege. And, as the funder cited above suggested, race, class, and other disparities linked to individuals' identities can be replicated in any system. As observed by the interviewees, these patterns compromise the integrity of the urban agriculture system as a whole.

## Discussion

At the same time that the social benefits of urban agriculture are receiving more media attention and more support from government agencies, funders, non-profit organizations, disparities remain, according to the findings in this study. This gives pause to the idea that urban agriculture *per se* creates more socially just systems. Practitioner goals and the ways in which the other key informants in this study perceived urban agriculture as meeting some of their programmatic goals and agency mandates were in line with the commonly cited benefits of urban agriculture, including increased food access, education, job creation, community development, and aspects of public health. Practitioners further discussed the positive impacts of their operations, but they recounted divergent experiences at individual levels. Several interviewees (practitioners, supporting organization representatives, and funders; African American and white interviewees) had observed race- and class-based disparities and white privilege within the system.

As discussed above, these findings may be counter-intuitive within the dominant urban agriculture narrative, which has very much centered on the multiple benefits of farming, without much discussion of the potential for urban agriculture to obscure or reinforce structural inequities. Viewed through the lenses of CRT and intersectionality theory, however, these observations seem almost banal. If racism is an organizing social paradigm, and if race is linked to class, then any system within this paradigm can be expected to replicate race- and class-based disparities.

From media representation of urban agriculture as a predominantly white activity to whites' greater access to various resources, the findings suggest that the urban agriculture system in New York City is no exception to these patterns.

This analysis then presents a more fundamental question: *Can an urban agriculture system in which some social groups have more power and privilege than others really be seen as advancing social justice, as long as fresh produce is more equally accessible and the farmers and gardeners are racially and ethnically diverse?* Further, how should practitioners and supporters of an activity that has itself been marginalized (insofar as urban agriculture has been considered an illegitimate use of urban space) balance the need to recognize all of its social, ecological, community, and public health benefits, on one hand, with critical reflection about the potentially unjust social patterns that it, like any other activity, can reproduce?<sup>8</sup> Which level of change should practitioners and supporters aim to address in their efforts to advance social justice through urban agriculture?

There is no singular answer to these questions, of course. There *is* a difference between seeking alternatives and seeking systemic change. Yet, dichotomous thinking—whether it is about the best way to improve food access in a community or how to dismantle structural racism—is overly simplistic. Diversity does not automatically create racial justice; members of dominant groups can support work to dismantle oppression; and activists often work simultaneously on making changes at multiple scales (Wekerle 2004).

Although urban agriculture is not a panacea, it can be used by diverse stakeholders to advance social justice at structural levels. For urban agriculture practitioners, this may mean doing what some of the groups highlighted in this paper have begun to do: educating those in their communities about structural oppression, modeling non-hierarchical forms of leadership, or engaging in informal and formal policy advocacy (Reynolds and Cohen, forthcoming). Nationally, some urban agriculture groups have also begun offering anti-oppression training and suggestions for whites interested in working in communities of color (Crouch 2012; People's Grocery 2014).

Beyond practitioners, other stakeholders might also work for social justice through urban agriculture, and address some of the challenges described in this paper. Specifically, policy makers might support practitioners' work by developing guidelines for public participation in policy making processes, including systems for ensuring fair representation of a city's population in such processes, and taking seriously the suggestions made by historically underrepresented groups (eg people of color; low-income individuals) (Cohen and Reynolds 2014). They may also adopt an explicitly anti-racist stance in developing policy. Seattle and Portland have led the way with anti-racism initiatives, and these could be adapted for use in other cities (City of Seattle 2013; Governing for Racial Equality Network 2014). Funders and supporting organizations could develop protocols that prioritize funding for organizations led by people of color and help these groups build capacity in organizational management, grant writing, and networking (Cohen et al 2012). In the Northeast, a Community Food Funders collaborative has begun exploring ways to support urban agriculture groups focused on social justice and led by people of color (Community Food Funders 2014), and this may provide a model for other foundations invested in this level of food systems change.

As for researchers and scholars, we might support work for social justice through urban agriculture by partnering with practitioners to answer questions identified by the community, assisting with evaluation required by grantors, and helping to document the leadership of women and people of color in the movement. We might use our analytical skills and “birds-eye” view to elucidate ways in which urban agriculture may replicate oppressive patterns, and help develop collective understandings of the ways in which farming and gardening activities may, or may not, support socially just *structures*. We may also “help see openings and provide [spaces] of freedom and possibility” for social justice (Gibson-Graham 2008) in which urban agriculture can play a part. Urban farms and gardens are not always obvious places for addressing structural oppression, so demonstrating ways in which some practitioners are using urban agriculture to these ends is one powerful role that scholars may play in changing the dominant narrative.

As one step in this direction, two members of the Five Borough Farm research team (including the author of this paper) are conducting research to more thoroughly explore both disparities among farms and gardens in New York City, and the ways in which practitioners and supporters—specifically people of color and women—are using urban agriculture to advance social justice and dismantle oppression (Reynolds and Cohen, forthcoming). We are also asking questions about how researchers might use their skills to support this work, and intend for this to inform future critical/action research projects to these ends.

## Hopeful Conclusions

While this paper has focused on some disheartening aspects of urban agriculture in New York City, several interviewees in this study were confident that urban agriculture could be a mechanism for political and social change. To do this, they explained, power structures would need to be shifted. A white funder stated:

[W]hen we [talk about] the movement for equality, economic justice, and peace, our theory of change is that the people most directly affected by injustice and oppression need to be in the driver seat ... our analysis is the power structure's the way it is because people who are directly affected don't have [enough] control over the forces and conditions in their community; that they are the furthest from the halls of power when ... big policy decisions are made, and lastly that they have the biggest interest in seeing deeper, systematic, more fundamental change created and then sustained.

An African American practitioner put it simply: “[urban agriculture] can empower people to have political power, and economic power. And that is part of the mission of [our farm]. That’s part of what we do.” Beginning to change the dominant narrative of urban agriculture may be a part of shifting power structures in the food system, and this includes recognizing innovation where it exists: among those who are working to change structural oppression at the same time that they address day-to-day community needs. A hope held by many supporters is that urban agriculture can help produce something more than food, and help realize nothing short of justice for all. But in order for this to occur, some very critical and challenging realities need to be acknowledged, and addressed.



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> One cannot help but note the irony here: these words recall Nina Simone's 1970 "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black"—Simone's tribute to author Lorraine Hansberry and an anthem of the Civil Rights Era.

<sup>2</sup> Though, see Pudup's (2008) analysis of community gardens' roles in creating "citizen subjects".

<sup>3</sup> There is not a hard line distinguishing urban farmers from gardeners and the terms are used interchangeably in this article. Gardeners typically grow vegetables and other plants for themselves or to share with others. Farmers typically grow edible and ornamental crops for sale or sharing as well as for self-consumption. Most farmers and gardeners are engaged in horticulture, though some also raise small livestock.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the 1999 community garden standoff see Elder (2005).

<sup>5</sup> The concentration of community gardens in low-income neighborhoods can be partially attributed to the fact that the city's GreenThumb program is funded by Community Development Block grants, requiring it to work in low-income areas, as noted in-text above.

<sup>6</sup> For reference, Census data show that in 2012 African Americans represented 25.5% of the City's total population of 8.3 million residents, while Latinos represented 28.6%, and whites represented 44% (US Census Bureau State and County Quick Facts: New York City Community Garden Coalition 2012).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of food justice considers social and economic inequities that give rise to issues such as community food insecurity, wage gaps in the food industry, labor rights in the farm and service sectors, and other food system disparities. Food justice differs from the concept of community food security in its attention to underlying causes of food systems inequities—such as structural racism and class-based disparities—beyond the specific impacts of these (such as disparate access to food) (see Ahmadi 2009; Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Levkoe 2006; Mares and Peña 2011; People's Grocery 2009; Redmond 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Delind (2003) has posed similar questions about community-supported agriculture.

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