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Temporal aspects of wellbeing in later life: gardening among older African Americans in Detroit

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Abstract

Gardening has well-established physical, social and emotional benefits for older adults in varied circumstances. In Detroit, Michigan (United States of America), as in many cities, policy makers, funders, researchers, community organisations and residents regard gardening as a means of transforming bodies, persons, communities, cities and broader polities. We draw on ethnographic research conducted during one gardening season with 27 older African Americans in Detroit to foreground the social dimensions of wellbeing in later life and thus develop a more robust and nuanced understanding of gardening's benefits for older adults. Based on anthropological understandings of personhood and kinship, this article expands concepts of wellbeing to include social relations across multiple scales (individual, interpersonal, community, state) and temporalities (of the activity itself, experiences of ageing, city life). Even when performed alone, gardening fosters connections with the past, as gardeners are reminded of deceased loved ones through practices and the plants themselves, and with the future, through engagement with youth and community. Elucidating intimate connections and everyday activities of older African American long-term city residents counters anti-black discourses of 'revitalisation'. An expansive concept of wellbeing has implications for understanding the generative potential of meaningful social relations in later life and the vitality contributed by older adults living in contexts of structural inequality.

Keywords: temporality; wellbeing; memory; personhood; gardening; post-industrial cities; ethnography; United States of America

Introduction: cultivating life in a revitalising city

Gardening has well-established benefits for physical, social and emotional wellbeing for older adults in varied circumstances (Milligan *et al.*, 2004; Wang and MacMillan, 2013; Nicklett *et al.*, 2016). In post-industrial cities formed by historical and ongoing processes of structural inequality such as Detroit, Michigan, United States of America (USA), gardening has been regarded as beneficial for residents,

in terms of health, economic activity, community-building and beautification of the city (Lawson, 2005; White, 2011a, 2011b; Pitt, 2014; Pothukuchi, 2015). As a practice that consists of relations across multiple scales (individual, interpersonal, community, state), the social aspects of gardening are thus especially important for understanding its role in wellbeing among older adults. In this article, we draw on ethnographic data conducted during one gardening season with over 20 older African Americans in Detroit to develop a more robust and nuanced understanding of the social dimensions of gardening in later life. Based on anthropological understandings of personhood, kinship and wellbeing, we find that the social relations that are part of gardening involve temporal scales pertaining to the activity itself, experiences of ageing and life in the city. These different forms of social relations are essential to the vitality of this practice for older adults.

Gardening fosters connections with the past, as gardeners are reminded of deceased loved ones through the practice and the plants themselves, and with the future, through relationships with youth and the community. These connections with the past and future contain familial and relational histories, as well as histories of the city. Elucidating the intimate connections and everyday activities of these older African American gardeners, who are long-term city residents, serves to counter anti-black discourses of 'revitalisation'. Thus, the wellbeing associated with gardening should be considered in terms of these different scales and temporal dimensions of social life. This study contributes to existing discussions of the benefits of gardening by developing an expansive, intersectional concept of wellbeing that has implications for understanding the generative potential of meaningful social relations in later life and the vitality contributed by older adults living in contexts of structural inequality.

In this article, we take an anthropological approach to conceptualising wellbeing. This means that we see wellbeing as a holistic phenomenon that includes multiple aspects of human experience – physical, mental, social, emotional, spiritual – that all shape and co-produce each other (Fischer, 2014; Johnston *et al.*, 2012). This concept of wellbeing integrates both subjective and objective aspects of human experience, and encompasses multiple scales of human social life (individual, community, society) (Mathews and Izquierdo, 2009: 2–6). By including subjective measures like happiness alongside objective measures of physical and mental health, this concept of wellbeing has the potential to provide analytic frameworks for both specific cases as well as cross-cultural analysis (Mathews and Izquierdo, 2009: 3). The concept of wellbeing is also underpinned by an appreciation for human experience and sociality across scales, or the fundamentally shared aspects of human life in which 'all individuals live within particular worlds of others, and all societies live in a common world at large' (Mathews and Izquierdo, 2009: 5). This understanding of wellbeing thus aims to hold together tensions between the objective and subjective nature of experience, and between universalist and particularistic understandings of human life. For analysing gardening as a practice that exceeds the level of the individual, a holistic concept of wellbeing is essential.

Implicit in any concept of wellbeing is a theoretical understanding of personhood – that is, of the analytic unit, or person, who experiences wellbeing. Our concept of the person is grounded in the anthropology of kinship, which shows how everyday practices of relatedness constitute and reshape persons through social

relations (Carsten, 2000). Persons only come into existence through relations with others, such that personhood is an inherently social phenomenon. It is also inherently processual, as these relations are always happening, meaning that personhood is reshaped and reimagined across the lifecourse through rituals and rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960; Hazan, 1987) and everyday practices (Carsten, 1995). The activities of daily life, then, are the foundation of personhood and its transformations. Indeed, the ethnographic record reveals ageing to be a process that illuminates transformations in personhood.

Everyday experiences of personhood involve evaluation within a particular cultural imaginary. People in the USA often hold ideals of autonomous independent personhood (Kaufman, 1986), which means that dependence in late life can threaten personhood (Cohen, 1998). For instance, retirement or illness transitions may foster economic or embodied dependence eroding personhood (Luborsky, 1994a, 1994b; Lamb, 2014). However, maintaining personhood is also possible for older people (Robbins-Ruszkowski, 2013, 2017); thus, normative ideals need not be totalising (Luborsky, 1994a). Moreover, research among older persons who regard themselves as independent demonstrates that this ideal is actually a fiction, maintained through social relations that are made invisible (Buch, 2018). Often, these relations consist of caring and being cared for (Borneman, 1997). In other words, although many older adults value independence as a cultural ideal, the lived realities of their lives – and indeed of all our lives – are fundamentally interdependent. Transformations in personhood are thus transformations in social relations, and part of social reproduction and regeneration (Cole and Durham, 2007; Buch, 2015).

Furthermore, transformations in personhood also have political aspects. Social relations consist not only of the particular interactions happening at a certain moment, but also contain remembered and imagined histories and worlds (Carsten, 2007). Indeed, intimate social relations are inextricably bound up with the local, national and transnational politics of which they are a part (Franklin and McKinnon, 2001; McKinnon and Cannell, 2013) and which require an intersectional mode of analysis.¹ Personhood is thus a multi-scalar phenomenon, like wellbeing. In what follows, we show how practices of gardening constitute empirical sites in which these multi-scalar aspects of personhood and wellbeing become visible.

Detroit, a post-industrial city in the upper Midwest region of the USA, is home to a majority African American population whose older members have witnessed extraordinary economic, social and political transformations. As the birthplace of the automobile industry, Detroit attracted a diverse population of migrants and African Americans from the South. Arriving largely in the post-Second World War era, they brought with them connections to that region as well as farming and food traditions that have persisted to the present day (Carmody, 2018). Interviews with our participants were full of examples of this history, including cooking and gardening practices learned alongside family members or during summers spent on farms in the South.

The historical processes that produced Detroit's intense racialised poverty and inequality are important to understanding the context and spaces in which gardening takes place today. Since its population zenith in the 1950s, Detroit has been

losing residents, affecting tax revenues, employment and services for its majority African American residents. The racial make-up of the city and its struggles with housing vacancy are the result of suburbanisation as well as segregation and discriminatory federal housing policy common to many US cities (Sugrue, 2005). Housing vacancy, which intensified in the 2000s, actually began in the 1960s (Sugrue, 2005). More recently, the 2008 foreclosure crisis wiped out gains in African American home-ownership (Treskon *et al.*, 2017) and contributed to racial wealth disparities as well as problems of vacancy and blight. Thus, the intersection of economic and racial inequality is essential to understanding the social geography of Detroit. The work of managing the problems associated with vacant and abandoned buildings has often fallen on neighbourhood and community organisations with varying degrees of access to resources. The city, private foundations and non-profit organisations imagine and promote urban gardening and agriculture as a solution and means of revitalisation, and vary in terms of whether or how they recognise or reckon with the inequality of Detroit's history.

Detroit's current urban gardening efforts are enabled by its plethora of vacant land, the remnants of processes of deindustrialisation and, more recently, demolition of homes and other buildings. Depopulation, along with political marginalisation and financial mismanagement, all contributed to Detroit's decline (Sugrue, 2005). Although popularly depicted as empty (Stovall and Hill, 2016: 119–121), the city is still the largest in Michigan, with over 673,000 residents (US Census Bureau, 2018a). However, the population is also ageing: the number of senior-headed households is expected to double over the next several decades (Treskon *et al.*, 2017: v).

The city has emerged from its 2013 bankruptcy process with population and finances stabilised, and developments largely in Detroit's downtown and 'Midtown' (formerly Cass Corridor) areas in recent years have been taken as signs of a comeback. Unfortunately, the city's poverty rate, 34.5 per cent, remains persistently high despite some gains in average income (US Census Bureau, 2018b). Media depictions often underplay the role of African American residents in positive developments in the city through racialised discourses that associate whiteness with revitalisation (Stovall and Hill, 2016). Ethnographic data on gardening among older African Americans challenge these anti-black discourses by documenting and exploring the continuity and vitality of these practices as valuable contributors to positive developments in the city.

In what follows, we first analyse current scholarly understandings of connections between gardening and wellbeing, suggesting that gardening is a particularly rich empirical domain through which to understand the social dimensions of wellbeing in later life. Next, we describe our research design, sampling strategy and methods, highlighting the contribution of anthropological and ethnographic approaches to understanding gardening and wellbeing. Then, we present ethnographic data from our study, focusing on connections to the past and future. These connections with the past and future contain familial and relational histories, as well as histories of the city. We conclude by arguing that the wellbeing associated with gardening should be considered in terms of these different scales as well as temporal dimensions of social life.

Creating wellbeing through gardening

Across multiple disciplines, research on gardening among older adults demonstrates that the practice can promote physical, psychological and spiritual wellbeing for many older adults in varied circumstances (Milligan *et al.*, 2004; Wang and MacMillan, 2013; Nicklett *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, gardening as therapy has been shown to promote a holistic form of wellbeing for older adults of diverse cultural backgrounds (Heliker *et al.*, 2001). Physical benefits include better-regulated circadian rhythms (Berman *et al.*, 2008), access to fresh fruits and vegetables (Sommerfeld *et al.*, 2010), and as a form of exercise and activity (Armstrong, 2000; Park *et al.*, 2009; Robson and Troutman-Jordan, 2015). There can be a wide range of exertion involved in gardening, from the more aerobic activities of digging, transplanting and weeding, to the fine motor skill activities of maintaining houseplants (Nicklett *et al.*, 2016). As such, gardening has been shown to be beneficial for common health problems among older adults, such as hypertension, high cholesterol, arthritis, diabetes and kidney disease (Robson and Troutman-Jordan, 2015: 293–298), and can be considered a form of healthy ageing (van den Berg *et al.*, 2010).²

Multiple forms of meaning are created through gardening. People can connect to remembered pasts, as when gardeners in urban settings remember previous life experiences in more rural contexts (Wang and Glicksman, 2013: 96) or homelands (Morgan *et al.*, 2005). These meanings tend to be specific to the person who gardens, as the ‘remembered gardens and perceived experiences of this garden project were unique in the therapeutic effects to each individual’ (Heliker *et al.*, 2001: 53; *see also* Freeman *et al.*, 2012). Since gardening is a type of exercise that people tend to enjoy doing, it is possible that they are more likely to continue the practice (as opposed to a form of exercise that is being done for the sake of exercise itself) (Scott *et al.*, 2015). However, as Scott *et al.* (2015) and Bhatti (2006) note, gardens may serve as a potent reminder of lost abilities, such that gardens can become transformed from places of joy and fulfilment to complex places that also evoke sadness and melancholy. Despite this potential for sadness, research shows that gardening provides benefits to mental health, including reduction in symptoms of depression and anxiety (Austin *et al.*, 2006) and improved cognition (Berman *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, gardening is an activity that is adaptable to a range of fitness levels and activities, meaning that as older adults experience illness or debility, they can still reap the benefits of gardening (Lee and Kim, 2008). At an existential level, some gardeners value the spiritual aspects of gardening as it provides opportunities for reflections on the nature of life itself (Heliker *et al.*, 2001: 49–50). In sum, gardening is a holistic practice that ‘may help facilitate a mind–body–spirit connection’ (Wang and MacMillan, 2013; *see also* Poulsen *et al.*, 2014). As a practice that involves multiple components of wellbeing, then, gardening is a rich practice to study from a holistic perspective as it relates to wellbeing in late life.

For many older adults who garden, the practice constitutes a way to connect with family members, both present and past (Infantino, 2004; Bhatti, 2006; but for analysis of gardening and solitude, *see* Ashton-Shaeffer and Constant, 2006). Older adults report learning how to garden from their own parents and grandparents, and enjoy passing down this knowledge to future generations (Heliker *et al.*,

2001: 49). As Heliker *et al.* note, '[o]ne older adult takes pictures of her flowers, comparing this activity to taking pictures of her grandchildren' (2001: 50). In the extant literature, however, these familial and intergenerational components are often described as one in a series of benefits, rather than taken up as a primary point of analysis. This aspect leaves space for ethnographic description and analysis to explore the quality and meanings of these connections for older adults.

In addition to providing benefits for the wellbeing of the individual, gardening has long been noted as a means of building social cohesion (Relf, 1982). Gardening can promote social engagement, thereby reducing isolation among older adults (Wang and MacMillan, 2013). In particular, community gardens (Poulsen *et al.*, 2014), gardening programmes at residential care facilities (Thomas, 1995) and programming focusing on intergenerational relations (Heliker *et al.*, 2001: 49) have been shown to be effective in fostering social relations among older adults and other members of the community. Such programmes are useful as gardening is beneficial not only for older adults, but for people across the lifecourse (Degnen, 2009; Poulsen *et al.*, 2014). When gardening is viewed from this social perspective, it can be seen as an activity with the potential to promote the wellbeing of the broader polity (Scharlach and Lehning, 2013), not only of the person who does the gardening.

The context in which gardening occurs also contributes to promoting wellbeing, as well as having methodological implications. Ethnographic research, including participant-observation, conducted in the setting in which the practice under investigation normally occurs (rather than an intervention) offers useful approaches to understanding the fuller implications of this practice. This form of research requires some trust between researchers and their participants, meaning that ethnographic methods are well-suited to the types of settings in which late-life gardening occurs. Indeed, previous findings show that 'the experience of gardening occurs within a restful, non-competitive environment and allows the development of a community of mutual caring and being cared-for' (Heliker *et al.*, 2001: 41). This finding has implications not only for methodology, but also for analysis. These relations of care between persons in community gardening contexts recall anthropologist John Borneman's (1997) understanding of kinship relations as primarily constituted via relations of care. In other words, as older adults engage in practices of gardening, they are both caring for others and being cared for, thereby forming meaningful relations that can shape personhood. Indeed, care does not flow only from person to person, but from person to plant and often back to person, as gardeners engage in repetitive acts of care to sustain the lives of plants.

Ethnographic methods are particularly well-suited to exploring the social dimensions of wellbeing that animate the practice of gardening in late life. Existing studies include both quantitative and qualitative design and methods; however, the qualitative studies tend to omit in-depth open-ended ethnographic interviews. In a systematic literature review that included qualitative studies, Wang and MacMillan (2013) did not find any studies focusing on older adults and gardening that included ethnographic methods. Thus, questions remain about what we can learn from rich ethnographic data about health and wellbeing among older adults who garden.

In sum, the inter-disciplinary literature on gardening in late life suggests that the social aspects of gardening are important for shaping the wellbeing of persons and communities. The comparative ethnographic literature on gardening suggests that plant–person relations can be intensely emotional (Degnen, 2009; Archambault, 2016) and can contain histories of previous interpersonal and political-economic relations and hopes for the future (Archambault, 2016: 249–253). Given the racialised political-economic transformations in Detroit, which have occurred during the lifetimes of the oldest generations, it seems that gardening practices among older African Americans have the potential to both contain and produce emotions and hopes that are shot through with this history. In what follows, we build on the above insights from gerontological and anthropological research to shed new light on the temporal aspects of wellbeing in gardening among older African Americans in Detroit.

Methods

As anthropologists, we aimed to identify and characterise the categories of meaningful variation in gardening practices among older African Americans. Thus, we kept the category of ‘garden’ itself open to include whatever participants understood to constitute gardening, resulting in a sample that included gardens in the front, back and side yards of private homes, plots at church and community gardens, potted plants on apartment balconies, houseplants and a heated garage full of plants. These gardens included a wide range of plants, including fruit and fruit trees, vegetables, herbs, flowers, shrubs and succulents. Allowing research participants to determine what counted as a garden for them means that our analytic category of garden better corresponds to the practices in which participants engaged, thus providing one way to avoid projecting our own assumptions on to the lives and experiences of research participants. Maintaining such categorical openness allowed us to elicit research participants’ own beliefs and perspectives, long a hallmark of anthropological research (Briggs, 1986; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015).³

We recruited participants through multiple means. The primary mode was through ‘Lunch and Learn’ events hosted by the Healthier Black Elders Center, which is part of the community engagement branch of the Michigan Center for Urban African American Aging Research.⁴ These events provide educational resources and opportunities to older African Americans in Detroit and the surrounding areas, with the goal of building ties between researchers and community members. Robbins and Seibel attended multiple Lunch and Learn events and described the study in an oral presentation, inviting attendees to participate themselves or to refer family or friends and handing out flyers with relevant information. Robbins also attended the Art of Aging Successfully conference, an annual event hosted by the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University that features educational programming, venues for older adults to display their artistic creations and opportunities to participate in research. Robbins staffed a table and answered questions from potential participants, and distributed flyers with information about enrolling in the study. Additionally, Robbins emailed the distribution list of leaders of environment-focused organisations in Detroit through the Center for Urban

Responses to Environmental Stressors research centre. This led to contact with two urban farms (names not disclosed for the sake of anonymity), where Robbins, Seibel and a group of Wayne State University students volunteered, and with consent from organisers, Robbins and Seibel also recruited participants. Finally, we recruited additional participants via snowball sampling. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Wayne State University.

Via these methods, we recruited 27 older African Americans, consisting of 21 women and six men. Most participants reside in Detroit, although some live in the broader metro area (Inkster, Westland, Commerce Township).⁵ Participants ranged in age from 51 to 89, with a mean and median age of 68. Education level ranged from some high school to master's level, with over one-third of participants reporting some education beyond high school. Although some participants were renters, many owned their homes which varied in terms of size and condition, ranging from modest one- or two-storey brick houses on streets with some vacant lots and houses, to large, sprawling houses in older neighbourhoods with less vacancy. Some had lived in their homes for decades and were among the first to integrate their neighbourhoods. They worked in different fields: health insurance, social work, education, city zoning, bartending and labour organising; one owned an ice cream franchise; some were disabled or retired. Some had less stable employment histories, and still worked several jobs to make ends meet or received federal assistance for low-income older adults (Supplemental Security Income, or SSI). That women were over-represented in our sample is not only likely due to demographic reasons but also because they were the majority of attendants at the educational events where we initially recruited. Noticing this trend, we made explicit efforts during the latter half of our recruitment to target men, who, nonetheless, still remained a smaller portion of our overall participants.

With each participant, we conducted two semi-structured open-ended interviews with gardeners, were taken on 'garden tours' by participants and, when possible, took part in participant observation of gardening practices. The first interviews occurred during the first part of the gardening season in Michigan (March to July 2017), while the second interviews occurred in the latter portion of the season (July to October 2017). The second interviews allowed us to observe the gardens at different points in the season, thus providing opportunities for participants to reflect on the passage of time and the status of the garden itself. On the 'garden tours', participants gave us a tour of their garden, providing whatever information they thought was important, interesting or valuable to know about the garden. We asked follow-up questions as appropriate to the interaction. This method created a more open-ended framework than the interviews for sharing experiences of gardening. On the whole, participants tended to be proud of their gardens and were very willing to provide tours.

For completing each interview, participants received a gift card of US \$35 for CVS, a national drugstore with many locations in Detroit. Semi-structured interviews were based on a schedule of descriptive questions around several broad topics: gardening, ageing and health, politics, social relations, life history and Detroit. We sought details about participants' gardens (*e.g.* size, what is grown, historical success of different plants) and their engagement (*e.g.* when planting occurs, how often they garden, if anyone accompanies them to the garden, if there are

barriers to gardening and how these might be overcome). Interviews also included questions to gather basic socio-demographic information as well as the history of the garden, the gardener's current and previous places of residence, the location and nature of relations with the gardener's kin, and the place of Detroit and how it has changed (or not) during the gardener's time in the city.

With consent, we audio-recorded the interviews and took handwritten notes during and afterwards that documented the above, as well as descriptions of the physical surroundings, and any points of tension or debate (Emerson *et al.*, 1995). We took photographs, also with consent, in order to complement the text-based nature of fieldnotes. We sought to make interviews conversational and allow the research participants to direct us to aspects of their experience that mattered to them. After completing fieldwork, interviews were transcribed.

We paid particular attention to the physical, social and historical nature of the gardens, such as: patterns of social interaction at gardens or through gardening; activities that foster or inhibit a sense of value and morality; implicit or explicit comments related to social change or memory; how plants or other shared points of reference may serve to build community and personhood; and comments about or evidence of health and wellbeing. We made note of how people talked about community and history, including issues of race and race relations, how they may use these discussions to buttress relations in the face of other interpersonal and community loss, and how people imagine the future as they age. These patterns of attention have resulted in the findings presented below.

‘My “Miss Sarah” plant’: maintaining connections to loved ones

In their interactions with plants, older African Americans maintain and transform relations to community, land and loved ones, including deceased kin. Their practices demonstrated how gardening connects the past with the present. Rejoice, age 69, a widow, took on the gardening and upkeep of the landscaping after her husband passed away, and her practices were connected to the transformation of this significant life change.⁶ Her husband had become interested in gardening when they first became home-owners, and Rejoice would accompany him to Eastern Market or other area nurseries to buy flowers and plants for their yard. She explained, ‘And that was just something, that was just his thing, and you know, like I said, I was just a tag-a-long. And it just wasn’t, I just wasn’t interested in that.’ Since then, her role had since shifted as visiting gardening centres and taking garden tours, in addition to care for her front and back yards, represented primary gardening activities. Rejoice said that gardening provided her with one way to cope with her husband's passing by staying active:

Just to find something that brought me pleasure. You know, the yard was always – the plants and the flowers were always something my husband enjoyed. It was not something that I liked. Uh, but uh, it just seemed like, after he passed, you're trying to – I was trying to find something to bring joy into my life. Something to keep me going. Because you know you can just sit in your home and basically just waste away. You know, because you're alone. You're lonely. And I know a lot of people who have done that.

Presently, she describes gardening as ‘my joy’, while calling herself ‘not very good at it’. Part of this new activity and responsibility was Rejoice’s desire to preserve the presence of her husband in the plants he used to cultivate. On a tour of her garden, she showed Seibel a special rose bush saying, ‘So this is my rose bush, or his rose bush.’ Over photographs that she had taken as evidence of her garden’s blooms, she indicated a recent set of tulips as ‘hers’ because she had planted them. She was concerned especially with the upkeep of the roses and worried that she was not doing a good job. After asking her if her late husband’s plants provided her with a nice memory, she replied, ‘I say, “Harold, they’re still coming up! I didn’t kill them yet!”’ (Figure 1).

On the one hand, she sought to replicate some of his preferences for landscaping. For example, he did not like having flowers planted in the ground in the front yard, a practice that she was continuing. Still, she mentioned aspirations for new things in the garden that she had seen on her outings, such as raised planters that were easier for older adults. Through her gardening, she was maintaining her home’s landscaping as a connection to her husband and a way to maintain his presence (*cf.* Hockey *et al.*, 2002; Buse and Twigg, 2016). At the same time, it was an embrace of independence in widowhood marked by new plants and activities that she would not have done when her husband was alive.

Similarly, Phyllis, age 75, traced her love for and knowledge about gardening to her grandfather. As a child in Port Huron, Michigan, Phyllis began ‘helping’ her grandfather in his garden lots next to her house when she was three years old. Lamenting that initially she was likely causing more damage than good, she continued to learn more about caring for vegetables as she grew older through the time she spent with her grandfather. As an adult living in an apartment in Detroit, she switched to houseplants rather than an outdoor garden, and described her surprise at learning that people who lived in apartment buildings did not have gardens. Gardening had always been an essential part of her life so she could not imagine that some people did not live this way. After she married and moved into a house with a yard, she once again began keeping a garden. However, she focused on growing flowers rather than vegetables, prompting her husband to say, ‘We can’t eat those!’ Like her grandfather, her husband was originally from the South, which Phyllis linked to their shared preference for vegetables over flowers.

It was not only the act of gardening that served as a connection to her late grandfather, but the actual plants themselves, for she maintained rose bushes that used to belong to her grandfather. Phyllis spoke with evident emotion in her voice as she described both the time she spent with her grandfather and the yellow rose bushes that he – and now she – cultivated. Another deceased relative, a beloved aunt, was present in Phyllis’s garden too. The stand of peonies on the other side of her driveway were her late aunt’s, and Phyllis described the peony’s red blooms as her aunt checking in on her. In a sense, then, the peonies became not only a means of connecting with deceased relatives, but the relatives themselves, at least during the season in which they bloomed. Both the roses and the peonies were plants to which Phyllis had particularly strong emotional connections, evident in her worry that landscapers might damage these plants in particular. Between our first and second conversations, she had had a new fence put in alongside the rose bushes, and although the workers knocked off a few blooms, fortunately they did not damage



Figure 1. A photograph of a blooming rose bush planted by Rejoice's late husband.

the entire plant. 'Those are irreplaceable. I mean, you know, if something happens to them, I can't fix them.' Although it would surely be possible to find other yellow rose bushes and red peonies, likely even of the same variety, they could not substitute for the plants previously cultivated by Phyllis's grandfather and aunt. For Phyllis, the gardening provided not only a metaphorical but a literal mode of relating to her deceased kin (*cf.* Degnen, 2009; Archambault, 2016).

Indeed, for several participants it was the plants themselves that served as connections to deceased loved ones. For instance, during a garden tour with Patricia, age 68, she said that she liked to grow flowers that are yellow, the favourite colour of her late husband. Another participant, Velma, age 67, pointed to a purple flower while giving a tour of her community garden: 'This right here, this is a memorial. This is Big Grams, which is what we called her. And she loved purple.' The memorial consisted of a wooden stake with the name of the beloved community member, some purple flowers and some rocks (Figure 2). 'She's out here whether she wants to be out here or not', said Velma jokingly. She described herself as 'emotional' about the flowers and seemed to fret over them because she wanted them to stay looking nice.

For Mabel, age 74, whose house, garage and yard were full of thriving plants of many types, plants had the capacity to store the social relations that produced them. She referred to one houseplant as her 'Miss Sarah plant', in honour of the friend – now deceased – who originally gave it to her. Another plant, a large Christmas cactus, began life in her house as a small clipping from her next-door neighbour, June, age 76, and also a participant in this study, who received the plant as a gift from her



Figure 2. Big Grams memorialised as purple flowers in a community garden.

husband (Figure 3). After June's husband died in 1977, her Christmas cactus also started to fail. At that point, Mabel gave June a clipping from her own flourishing plant. At the time of the study, both plants were still alive, although Mabel's cactus continued to flourish, while June's remained quite small by comparison. Through Mabel's care of this cactus, June was able to maintain a connection with her long-deceased husband.

For all these women, even when gardening seeming to be performed alone, gardening still retained a social dimension. On garden tours, they recalled memories of others, from family members to neighbours who had given plant cuttings. In many ways, they were not alone but surrounded by their loved ones and memories of them in plants that appeared, disappeared and reappeared through the cyclical gardening season.



Figure 3. Mabel's thriving Christmas cactus, given to her by June's late husband.

'They get excited when you pull up a carrot': creating connections to youth and the future

Gardening is a subset of different activities through which older adults engage with younger and older generations, pass on knowledge, and express hopes and fears about communities and the future. Gardening practices as ways of imagining community and the future are frequently evidenced in the city and non-profit programming that links urban gardening to broader 'revitalisation' efforts. Often these programmes target younger people, such as youth apprenticeship and youth leadership development programmes at a local gardening-promoting organisation,

Keep Growing Detroit. Gardening was portrayed as a way of addressing educational and health concerns and providing skills relevant to employment. Our participants shared some of these motivations for engaging youth in gardening activities. Their perspectives were informed by the changes to the city that they had witnessed over decades and observed differences between themselves and younger generations. They reminisced about living in black neighbourhoods full of community and outdoor activities like baseball, where neighbours looked out for each other's children. Gardening as an activity and topic of conversation contained within it such connections of the past, assessments of the present and visions of the future.

Despite their motivation and efforts, older gardeners struggled to engage others in gardening, as one participant and community garden founder described. Velma had founded a community garden in a local park through support from Keep Growing Detroit and set aside a portion of her garden for children. Still she had difficulty getting any younger people from the neighbourhood involved:

I've contacted the schools up here, the schools by my house, the community, and I have the toughest time. The only kids that really come up here to help is my grandkids, and they look at me and run. 'Oh, Nana, no!'

She reasoned, 'They don't have the same passion I do, I guess.' When children had come to the garden, according to Velma, they had seemed impressed. She described the children's faces as they watched the crops harvested for the first time:

But, you know, they get excited when you pull up a carrot. I mean, you should see the faces. And the peanuts, I have a beautiful picture of Mr Hendrix pulling up peanuts. The kids' mouths dropped because it's all these peanuts, you know, that came from the garden.

In terms of the value of getting children involved, she explained, 'So, and that's our goal. We're trying to teach them, you know, how to work together. And even how to count money and know what gardening is about and know how to participate with each other.' Another community garden founder, Brenda, age 62, had expressed frustration about getting more young people engaged in activities like gardening: 'We have to get these kids involved in a whole lot of stuff, but they're not', she said. She and other participants lamented that young people today spent less time outdoors and that neighbourhoods were not the same friendly and social places that they remembered from when they were young.

Gardening also fits into a pattern of seniors engaging in formal and informal care activities. In addition to grandchildren, our participants were often caring for people of the same age or older than themselves. For example, Brenda had founded a garden in her high-rise senior residence. She explained that upon harvesting the vegetables, 'I wash it, and go ahead and distribute it to the seniors. I try to get someone different each time.' After gardening in raised beds behind the building for three years, she had not been successful in involving many of the residents. Although Seibel had learned of her garden from a participant whose brother was a resident, Brenda said that residents often had no idea that there was a garden snuggled next to the back of the building. Still she clearly

loved her garden and felt that the 'seniors' were very happy and grateful to receive the vegetables. Velma, whose garden was located in a park near a senior centre, also shared vegetables with its seniors, remarking that they seemed uninterested in getting involved. These women sought to extend the benefits of gardening to those that were older or less able or engaged than themselves. The implicit message of such efforts was that the benefits of gardening should have broader reach to the surrounding community that, ideally, would be more actively involved.

These examples show how gardening creates or sustains forms of care relations across different generational and age groups. In two community gardens with formalised training and volunteer programmes, research participants engaged with a shifting cast of adult volunteers of varied ages: one woman as a trainee, one man as a former trainee turned teacher. In backyard gardens, adult children did sometimes garden themselves or help their parents with physically challenging tasks. We observed engagement across different generations, but the relationship between seniors and their grandchildren or youth generally were conceived of by our participants as bound up in ideas about the future.

Through our contact with community gardens and associations, we learned that for some older African Americans in Detroit, contemporary experiences of gardening and racial inequality in land access in Detroit reminded them of sharecropping in the South and its political-economic configurations. The state and other actors have increasingly relied upon the unremunerated labour of individuals and associations, such as neighbourhood block clubs, to maintain appearances in the city and fill the gaps left by disinvestment. Lawn care, often performed by men, is an important aspect of this latter issue, which, although present in our data, we do not address here. However, that our selection of the most compelling examples in this article are all female should not be taken to signify men were not also engaging in care relations and connecting to loved ones through their gardening activities. Ties to deceased loved ones, grandchildren, and current or former neighbours are all important to the meaning of urban gardening for our participants as they create different ways of connecting the past to future.

Conclusion: rethinking the sociality of gardening and wellbeing in later life

In all these cases, gardening serves as a vital practice that contributes to the wellbeing of older Detroiters. As Rejoice, Phyllis, Velma, Mabel and June all cared for their plants, they also cared for their deceased loved ones. Through gardening, these familial and relational histories became part of the present-day practices that shape personhood. The relations are embedded in the plants and the practices, such as exchanging cuttings and knowledge with neighbours. By making the effort to share the bounty of her garden with other seniors nearby, Velma was also caring for peers and elders. These intergenerational and within-generational relations shape the gardeners' personhood, especially as it is rooted in a network of social relations. For these older adults, gardening is inseparable from these social relations at many scales. Ethnographic approaches proved valuable in revealing such social and temporal dimensions of gardening, which would have been unlikely to emerge from explicit questions. Instead, conversational interviews and garden tours

enabled open-ended dialogue through which emerged unexpected findings about plant–people relations that were initially surprising.

As a topic, practices of gardening and their analysis provide perspective into the transformations of personhood connected to the multiple scales of its social dimensions. Memories of individual loved ones and personal and familial histories were brought into the present through cultivation practices. Significantly, these remembrances are emplaced, such that practices in contemporary Detroit recall histories of the city, its neighbourhoods, and other places where participants and their kin have lived. Contemporary gardening practices among older African Americans in Detroit demonstrate that ‘relations with and through place are not only personal – they are powerfully social’ (Degnen, 2015: 1648). Indeed, these stories and the places of gardening further connect with larger transformations in the city: from the yards of participants that were the first black home-owners in their neighbourhood, to the open lots created by demolished homes lost during the 2008 economic crisis. Including these stories is important because ‘[t]he whiteness public discourse of Detroit’s urban process excludes the majority of the city, as well as the allies and working class people who have for decades been working toward revitalization in the politics of everyday life’ (Stovall and Hill, 2016: 122). As private and government programmes use gardening as a means of transforming Detroit, attending to the activities and experiences of these older adults is important for countering anti-black discourses of ‘revitalisation’ and erasure of the past that are hallmarks of gentrification.

The signs of gardening’s social relations are not often marked in ways that are legible or apparent for newcomers or people outside those relations. The community gardens and other signs of our participants’ care for the development and education of the city’s youth were sometimes modest in appearance: a few raised beds or some rows of crops planted in a park. Backyard gardens are seen by family, friends and neighbours, while houseplants are likely seen by an even smaller set of relations. Furthermore, the regular need for cultivation that makes these practices rich can also mean that they are vulnerable to neglect. The open lots once occupied by homes and businesses but now demolished hint at both the erasure of the city’s past and personal histories, as well as the potential for future activity. Although the gardening practices of our participants were visible to immediate neighbours and community members, they remain excluded from narratives told about the city. Our findings illustrate the value of long-term residents’ skills and perspectives, countering the depiction of Detroit as a ‘blank slate’ by emphasising continuity and connection to the past. Future research that centres on gardening practices of Detroiters across the lifecourse could help to reduce the invisibility created by ahistorical approaches to urban revitalisation.⁷

In this light, wellbeing becomes a concept with the potential to illuminate and raise new questions about multiple scales of sociality in later life. For instance, intergenerational relations tended to feature interactions (or memories or aspirations thereof) between older adults and grandchildren, rather than adult children or other kin. This focus on grandchildren in particular, and children in general, raises questions about the varied ways that kin relations come to matter to older adults’ wellbeing. How might the prominence of grandchildren in older adults’ experiences and imaginaries of gardening relate to other aspects of everyday life? How are these intergenerational relations gendered, and how might they relate to

other forms of gendered sociality? In historical political-economic context, older African Americans' experiences of gardening are connected to legacies of labour migration, segregation, and displacement and erasure through so-called 'urban renewal' projects, as well as histories of foodways, farming, and family knowledge and heritage. These ambivalent pasts raise questions about how to understand wellbeing in later life among older adults with complex life histories, and suggest the value of maintaining intersectional perspectives that address the simultaneous and multiple forms of difference (Torres, 2015). How do historical complexities become evident in practices that promote wellbeing? How might different practices themselves offer different potential for wellbeing in later life?⁸ Gardening as a practice and topic of research provides an opportunity for acknowledging these complexities and histories, thus yielding further insights into how wellbeing emerges under environments and lifecourses marked by transformation.

Notes

1 An intersectional approach to later life means taking understandings of age and ageing as inseparable from other experiences and categories of personhood, such as race, ethnicity and gender (Crenshaw 1989; for a discussion of implications of intersectional approaches for gerontology, see Torres, 2015). Although beyond the scope of this article, considering how discussions of multi-scalar elements of personhood could integrate with discussions of intersectionality would be a worthwhile theoretical endeavour.

2 See Boyes (2012) for a study of how other forms of engagement with nature – outdoor activity – can be considered a form of successful ageing.

3 Potted plants in apartments or backyard gardens might not be immediately recognised as 'urban gardening'; thus, including and analysing these practices challenges an implicit public–private divide and increases the visibility of older adults in urban politics.

4 The Healthier Black Elders Center (HBEC) is part of the Community Liaison Core of the National Institutes of Health-funded Michigan Center for Urban African American Aging Research (MCUAAAR) at Wayne State University and the University of Michigan. HBEC works 'to reduce differences in the health status of elderly minorities by focusing research on health promotion, disease and disability prevention activities, thereby allowing African American seniors and their families to have better health now and in the future' (<https://mcuaaar.wayne.edu/healthier>).

5 Because the city of Detroit has multiple forms of connections to the surrounding towns that constitute the metro area, and because over the course of a lifetime people are mobile across municipal boundaries, we included people from the metro area as well as the city of Detroit itself.

6 All names are pseudonyms.

7 In particular, action-oriented research could contribute to creating visible signs of this history through materials such as plaques, art projects or documentation.

8 The idea that different gardening practices have different potential for wellbeing draws on anthropologist Webb Keane's (2014: 5–7) discussion of affordances, or the multiple kinds of engagement offered – but not determined – by any aspect of human experience. A classic example would be that 'a chair invites us to sit down' (Mead, as cited in Keane 2014: 6), but does not require us to – and that the potential for sitting is also shaped by multiple contextual aspects of the situation, such as the relative height of the chair to the person (e.g. child or adult), and expectations about social norms of any given situation. In the case of gardening among older African Americans, it is worth exploring how aspects of the phenomenon such as certain plants (e.g. flowers *versus* vegetables), types of gardens (e.g. church gardens *versus* backyard gardens) or histories of gardening (e.g. continuing a long-term passion *versus* learning a new hobby) offer varying potential for wellbeing.

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