"I am not by any stretch a gardener, just curious": Feminist Gentrifier Memoirs and an Ethics of Urban Gardening

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Abstract

Even though the texts that this article refers to as "feminist gentrifier memoirs" are not exclusively examples of garden writing, their feminist writers' gardening practices feature prominently to explore their conflicted position in a gentrifying neighborhood and the networks of care that form out of neighborly interactions over the garden. These texts employ modes and affordances of garden writing, feminist memoir, urban memoir, and gentrification fiction. Drawing on urban studies, literary studies, and environmental humanities, the article turns to Anne Elizabeth Moore's *Gentrifier* (2021) and Vikki Warner's *Tenemental* (2018) as engagements with the complex emotions caused by their writers' white privilege, homeownership, and complicity in processes of displacement and real estate speculation. Which ethical consequences do these feminist writers draw from their benefiting from and contribution to the gentrification of their cities? And how does their gardening allow them to develop a feminist ethics of urban gardening in this specific context? The article further considers the ways these writers are influenced by the activism of community gardening and how their gardening relates to sustainability measures of cities, including urban farms and gardens (summarized under the keywords green or environmental gentrification).

Keywords: Urban gardening, environmental gentrification, memoir, feminism, gentrifier.

Resumen

Aunque los textos a los que este artículo se refiere como "memorias feministas de gentrificadoras" no son ejemplos exclusivos de escritura sobre jardines, las prácticas de jardinería de sus escritoras feministas ocupan un lugar destacado para explorar su posición conflictiva en un barrio gentrificado y las redes de cuidado que se forman a partir de las interacciones vecinales en torno al jardín. Basándose en los estudios urbanos de las ciencias sociales y las humanidades, los estudios literarios y las humanidades ambientales, el artículo se centra en *Gentrifier* (2021) de Anne Elizabeth Moore y *Tenemental* (2018) de Vikki Warner como tomas de posición respecto de las complejas emociones causadas por el privilegio blanco de sus escritoras, la propiedad de la vivienda y la complicidad en los procesos de desplazamiento y especulación inmobiliaria. Estos textos emplean modos y posibilidades de la escritura de jardines, las memorias feministas, las memorias urbanas y la ficción de la gentrificación. El artículo considera además las formas en que están influenciados por el activismo de la jardinería comunitaria y se benefician de las medidas de sostenibilidad de las ciudades, incluyendo las granjas y jardines urbanos (resumidos bajo las palabras clave gentrificación verde o ambiental).

Palabras clave: Jardinería urbana, gentrificación medioambiental, memorias, feminismo, gentrificadora.

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This contribution looks at two US-American examples of feminist life writing that position gardening within larger narratives of urban change: Anne Elizabeth Moore's *Gentrifier* (2021) and Vikki Warner's *Tenemental: Adventures of A Reluctant Landlady*

(2018). These autobiographical texts by feminist writers and activists critically explore a rather neglected yet fundamental position invested with economic privilege and complicity: the gentrifier. And yet these gentrifier writers are also gardeners, and write about their gardens as a site of encounter with their neighbors. They are aware of clichéd metaphoric relations between gardening and writing, and hence, attempt to reconcile the pleasures of a privately-owned garden with cultural contexts of environmental justice and green gentrification. Warner and Moore unexpectedly find themselves in possession of real estate and struggle with the ethical, financial, and organizational difficulties that this ownership (and, in Warner's case, the renting out of living space to others) entails.

Since sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term in 1964, academia and activism have struggled to define "gentrification." It commonly refers to multifaceted, systematic urban processes of neoliberal capitalist privatization, globalization, and the destruction of a city's affordable housing stock. At the heart of the phenomenon is thus a class conflict, that is racialized because communities of color are disproportionately affected. Recently, scholarship has been trying to find ways to explore how gentrification simultaneously describes "the interaction between the social institutions around us and the choices we make" (Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill 14). The feminist gentrifier memoirs discussed in this article share this interest with such critical scholarship.

Gentrifier is Eisner Award-winning culture critic and graphic artist Anne Elizabeth Moore's tenth book, following *Sweet Little Cunt: The Graphic Work of Julie Doucet* (2019) and *Body Horror: Capitalism, Fear, Misogyny, Jokes* (2017). In 2016, Moore was awarded a permanent writing residency in the form of a renovated "free" house in Detroit through the now-defunct nonprofit *Write a House*.[1] The goal of this writer's program was to "fundamentally shift the narrative about Detroit by bestowing gifts upon the exact folks who craft narratives for a living" (Moore 13/4), not unlike the Detroit mayor's office which had hired an official storyteller as part of the city government in the same year (Borosch). Moore moved to Detroit's Bengali Muslim neighborhood Banglatown, and to a large extent the memoir is about the community she finds with her neighbors.

Pushcart Prize-nominated writer Vikki Warner's debut book *Tenemental* follows the decade or so since Warner, in her mid-twenties, impulsively decided to take out a mortgage to buy a crumbling three-story house in the Federal Hill neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island. Like Moore's memoir, the narrative amounts to a kind of Bildungsroman with the house as a touchstone for Warner coming to terms with being a homeowner, landlady, and unwilling participant in systems of wealth accumulation and real estate speculation. She explains that "it is my home, not my profession" (213). Again and again, her gender identity and age result in cismale contractors, realtors, or tenants not taking Warner seriously, and the different strategies she develops to manage challenging situations by herself.

Both memoirs are critical of the practices with which these women inhabit and improve their new homes, including gardening. They seek to avoid cultural narratives of

[1] Moore was the third writer to be awarded, following poet Casey Rocheteau and journalist Liana Aghajanian, both of whom still live in their houses in Detroit. The nonprofit was financially unable to award a house to the fourth winner, local poet Nandi Comer, and has since dissolved the program (Derringer).

home renovation as a transformative process of generating real estate value, well known from reality television shows like *Fixer Upper* (HGTV, 2013-2018) or *Flip or Flop* (HGTV, 2013-2022). Robert Goldman argues such shows celebrate "home renovation and flipping as gentrification opportunities–as a symbolic revitalization of spaces that allows ordinary people to make money, build financial security, and optimize their living conditions" (9).[2] Both writers are well aware that their unexpected homeownership plays into the US-American fantasy of property ownership as a means of social mobility. At the same time, their books interrogate the need for (economic) stability as single women without job security and struggling with chronic health issues.

Further, these texts can be called feminist gentrifier memoirs because they come to terms with the writer's impact on a changing, often postindustrial urban neighborhood and their diverging from their neighbors in terms of class status, race, and education. Against this background, the garden emerges as a particular site of place-making. In and through the garden, the feminist writers connect with their immigrant neighbors across language barriers and cultural differences. These feminist gardeners may on the surface show commonalities with the white, urban, middle-class, millennial "hipster farmer" that, as Katje Armentrout argues, appropriates "characteristics of traditional family farmers and commodif[ies] their lifestyle" (86). And yet, as their critical engagements with the label of gentrifier demonstrate, the writers of such gentrifier memoirs are well aware of their privileged gardening practices.

This article will focus on Moore's and Warner's respective memoirs precisely because their books are not traditional examples of garden literature but, instead, feminist reflections on complicity, privilege, and the complex affects of life in a gentrifying city—a context in which gardening becomes a vehicle for understanding and expressing emotions beyond mere proclamations of guilt. An example of a feminist garden memoir is Susan Brownmiller's *My City Highrise Garden* (2017) about the writer's terrace garden in a rent-stabilized apartment in New York City. Brownmiller recapitulates how fortunate she is to have a "private oasis in a competitive city" (6), even though the "hostile, unnatural environment" (4) twenty flights above street level brings with it gardening challenges such as extreme wind and temperatures. Throughout this article, Brownmiller's more traditional garden memoir, albeit written by a prominent feminist, serves as a point of comparison with Moore and Warner's texts.

This article aims to explore the role of gardening in these feminist memoirs of gentrification, and in the following two sections, to relate them to the conventions of garden writing as well as to social science scholarship on green gentrification. While the first section is interested in the question of what a feminist gardener is, the second section explores this persona's relationship to larger, structural issues of gentrification by asking what the feminist gentrifier/gardener can contribute to current discussions about urban change. The ambiguous subject position of gentrifier is thus connected with the much

[2] Warner articulates a similar criticism, demonstrating her awareness of this discourse: "We did have that pretty bad crisis about a decade ago, and that kind of felt like a rock-bottom moment, but here we are again, so soon. Americans are so enamored of housing as a way to get rich and look rich, though, that we cannot stay away" (222).

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more socioculturally attractive position of the gardener, and, through the perspective of the feminist writer and activist, this uneasy combination is interrogated in its complexity. These types of texts are indebted to various literary traditions and genres, such as urban memoirs, feminist life writing,[3] and autobiographical garden writing. Next, I will briefly summarize these three different literary traditions and the feminist gentrifier memoir's indebtedness to them.

1) Katzenberg and Freitag describe how autobiographical writing set in cities or urban regions positions an individual urban dweller's experience as relating to the city as a whole as an "urban memoirist script": "city memoirists' self-narration may be understood as always both predefined by preexisting urban societal models and intervening in them. They are generated in a process of being inscribed, writing one's self, and redefining one's self via one's city" (n.p.). Katzenberg and Freitag draw on Danielewicz's argument for the simultaneously "referential (the author is a real person) and relational (the author's relationships to others are central)" characteristics of memoir (6) to capture the tension between the individual writer and larger city populations.

2) Western feminist movements have a unique relationship to memoirs, as evident in the memorable slogan the personal is political, the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s, or movement autobiographies by celebrity feminists such as Susan Brownmiller (*In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*, 1999), Betty Friedan (*Life So Far: A Memoir*, 2000), or Andrea Dworkin (*Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant*, 2002). Kaye Mitchell employs the term "feminist writings from life" to account for such writing that shares an anxiety about the relation of the self to the collective experience of the movement (208). Mitchell urges us to ask if such texts "reduce political, structural, and public issues to personal struggles, or whether they use personal struggle as a lens for confronting and combatting those structural injustices with which feminism has always concerned itself?" (209). Further, Kyla Schuller demonstrates that despite the historical diversity of feminist movements in the US, it is a particular kind of feminism that has been dominant: "white feminism attracts people of all sexes, races, sexualities, and class backgrounds, though straight, white, middle-class women have been its primary architects" (3). And since its beginnings, white feminism has been intricately connected to private property ownership: "White feminism began in the 1840s with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others' fight for white women to possess the rights and privileges afforded to white men, including the right to own property and to hold careers" (221). Moore and Warner are well aware of their racial privilege. The question of how to be a feminist and a white woman, and yet not profit from the affordances of white feminism, lies at the heart of the feminist gentrifier memoir.

3) Within a US-American literary context from the 19th century to the present, Jennifer Wren Atkinson distinguishes gardening literature, "anything from instructional guides, seed catalogs, and reference books to glossy coffee-table publications," from garden writing, a genre that employs "a relatively stylized or 'literary' mode where the

[3] The article employs the term feminism in a broader sense, yet, the concerns and approaches of academic and activist ecofeminists also apply. However, both authors use the term feminist rather than ecofeminist and do not engage with the history of ecofeminism.

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writer's personal reflections and voice" are crucial (3). In addition, Robert S. Emmett further expresses the necessity to look at "the literature of gardening—not as an isolated analysis of genre but within the political and environmental contexts in which gardens and garden literature were created" (2). Both literary scholars highlight the special status of autobiographical writing within the literary mode and literary history of garden writing, especially that by women of color such as Alice Walker or Jamaica Kincaid.

Against this literary and cultural background, Moore and Warner's autobiographical writing develops a kind of gentrifier memoir subgenre and thus responds to urban scholars and activists' call to establish responsibility and awareness of how oneself contributes to processes of gentrification. As urban sociologists John Schlichtman, Jason Patch, and Marc Lamont Hill argue in their auto-ethnographical study *Gentrifier* (2017): "we believe that the most difficult work in understanding gentrification is not putting ourselves in the place of the 'victims' but honestly putting ourselves in our own place" (Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill 5). The garden then becomes a particular site within which to explore these interactions between the individual and the larger systems within which they exist. This turn to the garden is nothing new because the garden has long been used as a representation of or lens through which to understand societal issues and politics.

Garden Politics, Feminist Gardeners, and their Neighbors

In *My Highrise Garden*, Brownmiller recalls the events of September 11, 2001, and then sarcastically apologizes: "Sorry to have gone on about 9/11 in a garden book, but I could not suppress what I witnessed that day from my penthouse aerie near the Hudson River" (31). The apology is insincere because the writer is well aware that a garden book set on a NYC terrace would have to include some acknowledgment of this tragic moment in the city's history. And yet, Brownmiller's comment is not out of place either. After all, gardening has long been understood as an "apolitical and disengaged" activity (Atkinson 217)—despite the best efforts of radical progressive gardeners (see McKay). However, the political resistance of radical gardeners against the destruction of their community gardens and the selling of the land to real-estate developers continues to serve as a powerful model for anti-gentrification activism. Further, the work of postcolonial garden writers or garden writers of color offers a similar exploration of the politics of gardening as enmeshed in larger systems of exploitation and injustice. For instance, Antonia Purk argues that Jamaica Kincaid "implicates herself in processes of globalization that are grounded in the very colonizing practices she criticizes, but in doing so, she also exhibits an awareness for her participation in such relationships" (359). While the Antiguan-American writer, who grew up with the legacies of colonialism and racism, is differently positioned than the white woman coming to terms with her privileged homeownership, their writing about the garden still has to navigate the tensions of complicity, criticism, and pleasure caused by their horticultural practice.

In what follows, I want to tease out the affordances and limitations of the subject position from which Moore and Warner write simultaneously as gardeners, gentrifiers,

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writers, and feminists. I am interested in how the feminist memoir imagines the feminist gardener as a storyteller position from which to depict the difficult position of complicity in gentrification and the conflicting emotions related to the status as gentrifier.

Emmett finds that "autobiographical garden writing is a form well-suited to reproducing the interpenetration of selfhood and property" (84), precisely because installing a garden, taking care of it, or paying someone to do so validates ownership (15-16). However, Moore and Warner's gardening appears less to establish home ownership than to become involved with others. Their gardens are unstable spaces that allow for the encounter with neighbors. Interestingly, neither Moore nor Warner falls back on a trope of garden writing, the tour of the garden (or terrace in Brownmiller's case). This trope gives readers the lay of the land, with the narrative voice taking on the persona of a guide and proud owner showing off their possessions. Rather than such a tour, the gentrifier memoir offers only glimpses and vignettes of the garden, refusing to establish the garden as a fixed space and highlighting its fluctuation and porousness in this textual form, as well as deemphasizing the women's ownership.

Both writers begin gardening when they come into possession of their house without prior knowledge of, or experience with gardening. Curiously, neither woman recalls childhood memories or family traditions connected to gardening. After all, the nostalgic return to the gardening practices of parents or grandparents, or planting of plants remembered from childhood gardens, is yet another staple of garden writing.[4] Directly after moving into her new home, Moore plants bean seeds, without commenting on how these seeds came into her possession. "I am not by any stretch a gardener, just curious, so before I open a single box, I carefully drop the beans into the dirt in my front yard at evenly spaced intervals and, with a paper cup, water them in. Ten days later, tiny bean plants poke through the dirt" (27). This passage is striking because planting as a means of settling into a new home is such an established practice: "throughout American history, immigrants have carried seeds to new homes both to preserve material links to places left behind and establish a sense of belonging in new homes" (Atkinson 174). Recalling Henry David Thoreau's bean fields in *Walden* (1854), Moore's gardening is an experiment, and she appears surprised at its success. Like Thoreau facing the scrutiny of other farmers for not sticking to seasonal schedules and experimenting with farming procedures, Moore's choice to plant vegetables in her front yard puzzles other gardeners. Neighbors "side-eyed me then and asked why I didn't want pretty flowers in front of my new, pretty house" (51). Nevertheless, the same neighbors decide to share her enthusiasm, enjoy the beans she gifts them, and bring her Lima bean seeds from Bangladesh to plant next to her Kentucky beans–all of which becomes an apt metaphor for intercultural exchange and shared living.

Whereas for Moore moving into her new home begins with planting, Warner's garden suddenly occurs to her as an afterthought after months spent renovating the

[4] For example, Brownmiller grows a birch tree because her father had birch trees (13), her honeysuckle reminds her of the street she grew up on in Brooklyn (121), and her peonies bring back "a crucial passage during my preteen years" (85).

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house. "I remembered with dread and excitement that I was also responsible for resurrecting a scrubby, trash-plastered dirt lot that I hoped someone might someday call a backyard" (93). Warner accepts the challenge and already pictures herself "in a chaise lounge under a thick canopy of glossy leaves, the scent of geraniums infusing the Tom Collins in my hand" (95). While this initial vision is one of leisure and relaxation, Warner –like Moore– comes to enjoy the physicality of gardening itself. "I'd had no inkling of how hard I would fall for the seemingly repetitive and menial tasks required of the job" (97).

Both Moore and Warner struggle with chronic physical conditions. While Warner does not comment on how gardening affects her health, Moore–who has written about her autoimmune disease in *Body Horror* (2017)–does so. She realizes that repeated digging in the soil relieves her joint pain and that a diet of vegetables grown in her garden improves her health significantly:

> I begin eating what I grow, first as seasoning, then side dishes, soon entire meals, and eventually I can go for whole seasons without shopping at grocery stores. My body adapts. Certain damaging medications, I find, I can take less of, with no noticeable increase in pain. My blood pressures steadies, then drops. For entire months, it is almost as if I am not sick at all, a new person in a new body. (121/122)

Here, Detroit-based Moore follows (but does not acknowledge) a well-established practice of black female Detroiters growing their own food to improve their health in an urban environment referred to as a "food desert" without access to fresh produce. Monica M. White demonstrates that African American women take up farming to "work toward food security and to obtain more control of the food system that affects their daily lives" (18). Interestingly, Moore's writing also draws parallels between her digestive system and that of her garden, the compost. These descriptions link the writer's body with that of her garden in ways that exceed the sensual and aesthetic pleasures so often proclaimed in the physical exertion of gardening or eating one's produce. Rather, for Moore, keeping her garden healthy becomes a means to keeping her body healthy.

Overall, gardening is a rich source of political metaphors, images, and meanings (including, as Tim Cresswell demonstrates, metaphors surrounding weeds, health, disease, and bodily processes). These garden images have become so commonplace in political discourse that some worry about their becoming "dead metaphors, as figures of speech that reinforce the status quo–in other words, the danger of cultivation as ideology" (Emmett 80). Moore runs up against this issue when she contemplates how to write about the difficulty of getting rid of the mulberry bushes in her backyard:

> most of the metaphors available to describe similarly frustrating endeavors are literal descriptions of removing stumps – digging deep, growing like a weed, pulling something out by the root, feeling stumped. Because the practice I am engaged in daily is so widely understood to be filled with frustration that descriptions of it act as metaphors for other, less taxing undertakings, I do not write about it. (68/69)

Moore's hesitancy to express her gardening in worn-out, clichéd images reveals the challenge but also the appeal of gardening for the political writer. Famously, George Orwell was shamed by angry readers for his essays on the seemingly trivial pleasures of keeping a rose garden (Atkinson 217, Solnit 92). However, Rebecca Solnit, another feminist critic, takes Orwell's love of gardening as a starting point to investigate how the

activity of political writing may actually spark the desire for gardening. Solnit finds that gardening "offers the opposite of the disembodied uncertainties of writing. It's vivid to all the senses, it's a space of bodily labor, of getting dirty in the best and most literal way, an opportunity to see immediate and unarguable effect" (44). This immediacy of gardening appeals to writers Moore and Warner as well because it counters more abstract notions of white privilege and complicity in gentrification with moments of direct exchange with neighbors.

Both memoirs describe neighborly interactions over gardening as instances of improvised care, that are not always communicable across cultures and language barriers. For Warner and her Italian American neighbors, and Moore and her Bengali neighbors, working in the garden offers a context for encounter and a topic of conversation.

In one passage, after returning home, Moore finds several carpets lain on her soil by the older woman next door–to suppress the growth of weeds. This act of neighborly care is unasked for and cannot be explained because "the only English word she ever speaks is my nickname, Annie, and she says it now from her porch while flashing me a thumbs-up" (34). The humor derives from Moore's neighbor teaching the younger woman her gardening knowledge in disregard of US-American notions of private property and propriety. By contrast, Moore too causes surprise when she shares her gardening practices in the form of cow manure as fertilizer: "I ask my neighbors if they want any poop, and I am treated with disdain, as if I am a disgusting person. After the Year of the Many Baromasi Pumpkins, however, everyone wants some poop" (47).

Warner and her older, traditional Italian American neighbors, Angelo and Fiorella, follow a shared seasonal routine simultaneously enacted in both gardens. Hence Warner uses the collective pronoun "we" to describe their spring-time work: "we break off hardened stalks from the perennials scattered throughout our beds […] We patch our hoses and scatter our compost" (27). Like Moore, Warner and her neighbors share advice on gardening and produce:

> I gave him jars of the jam that I made every year from his grapes. And he handed me fat glowing tomatoes over the fence and pushed basil seedlings on me whether I had room in the garden or not. I passed them baskets of strawberries, and they tossed me escarole and arugula. (100)

Unlike the humorous trespassing of Moore's neighbors who enter her backyard without asking,[5] Warner's backyard is fenced in and her encounters take place over their fence. This creates a shared secret community: "No one passing by would have known we were here, side by side, tucked behind our defeated, old houses, on green and flowering concrete plots" (100). Like Moore, Warner and her neighbors communicate across a language barrier. She begins to understand Angelo's mumbled Italian phrases within the context of their gardening; "soon enough I was able to respond with something more apropos than a nervous laugh or a blank nod" (99).

[5] Moore describes how male neighbors wander into her backyard to watch her work as a form of entertainment. When she confronts the men, her neighbor explains, "we have just never seen a white woman work so hard" (43), again emphasizing her exceptional position in the majority Bengali neighborhood.

Brownmiller also highlights moments of neighborly exchange over gardening. Most memorably, she recalls a neighbor who had died from AIDS through a small memorial: "my first daylily [...] is housed in a magnificent brown-glazed urn that a neighbor in the building gave me when he knew he was dying of AIDS. His name was Rodgers" (80-1). Brownmiller faces a dilemma – not resolved in the book – when the lily does poorly and she wonders whether to replace the special plant growing in this meaningful container. Warner finds out about Angelo's death when she gardens alone without her activities being mirrored in the adjacent garden. To mourn, Warner decides (just like Brownmiller does with Rodger's urn) to create a garden remembrance: "I dedicate my garden that summer to his memory. I decide that every time I get tired of pulling weeds or stringing up trellises, I'll keep going a little longer, with him in mind" (219). This memorial gardening, or mourning through gardening, allows Warner and Brownmiller to move from considering death to appreciating life in ways resembling gardening cycles through different seasons.

From such descriptions of neighborly investments and care, the question arises whether these memoirs also, at times, fetishize the racialized neighbors. While the dominant perspective is that of the white US-American narrator, the humor over cross-cultural encounters is not necessarily only placed on the immigrant neighbors ignorant of US-American conventions of neighborly exchange but also on the neighborhood newcomer unaware of local history. Atkinson finds that gardening enables immigrant gardeners "to resist assimilation by preserving elements of their cultural heritage and identity, while simultaneously helping these immigrants establish a meaningful sense of belonging in unfamiliar new places" (172). Through Moore and Warner encountering their neighbor's garden practices and sharing their own experiences, a shared sense of neighborly belonging is established in their demographically divergent neighborhoods. It also enables the white feminist writer to work through conflicting emotions related to their status as gentrifiers, as the next section will explore further.

Again, the garden's particular spatial character is connected to but separate from the houses that the women now own, and that bring with them both ethical and concrete practical challenges. While their gardens also create issues, these are less morally fraught and treated more humorously. Further, in the garden, the women appear to cut themselves more slack when asking others for help and possessing inadequate knowledge or skills. For Warner, "being a woman and a feminist, and inhabiting the somewhat unusual role of landlady, I imagine that I always need to be capable and get things done without anyone's assistance" (141). Eventually, she learns to ask for help in the garden more willingly than for support with her responsibilities as the owner of a house.

Robert Emmett wonders:

> What is it about gardens that challenges assumptions of private selves and private spaces and renders ethical questions more coherent and their political stakes more glaring? Perhaps it is their liminal character, the way even private gardens always border on public space, crossing the two categories. (83)

Indeed, especially for Moore, whose neighbors walk into her garden, and to a lesser extent for Warner's fenced-in backyard garden, garden practices blur the binary of public and

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private spaces. These shifts follow the tradition of urban community gardens as pushing against notions of private property ownership and commodified urban space, leading gardeners to question such notions altogether (see Emmett 143, Haefs).

As Moore and Warner envision it, the feminist gardener embraces her own shortcomings and failures. She is critical of property ownership and aware of her privileged gardening practices. Because of this, her open garden is the site of surprising and sometimes unwelcome encounters with her neighbors. This hesitancy toward privileged real-estate and garden ownership also surfaces in these writers' avoidance of tropes of garden writing. Finally, as a transition to the next section, we need to ask what these practices of communal exchange in the garden mean within the context of gentrification. How do the individual garden politics of these writers relate to the larger societal contexts from which they are writing? Specifically, how are gentrification and activist resistance against it (such as by radical gardeners and community garden collectives) depicted in these texts?

Green Gentrification and the Conflicting Affects of Urban Gardening

Unlike garden writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, for whom gardening often took place in rural or suburban environments and was an escape from the city, contemporary writers are well aware of urban gardening as a means of reshaping urban spaces and challenging binaries of rural and urban (Atkinson 158). Such binaries may also affect perceptions of some cities as culturally and economically more important than others, the distinction between major and minor, or "secondary" cities (Finch, Ameel, and Salmela). Moore, for instance, is asked by a bank teller if living in Detroit after Chicago is like living on a farm: "She means this as a metaphor, as if I have moved from the big city to some quiet rural habitat" (51).

Moore utilizes this question to plunge into a list of gardening activities she has been up to—which the teller did not have in mind. Asking the reader to join in on it, her joke operates on said binary between rural and urban (or primary and secondary cities), as well as the ambiguous position of the urban gardener. However, this list does not reference urban farming practices in Detroit, particularly by women of color. While the reader learns that Moore volunteers at a majority African American urban farm, the memoir excludes any mention of concrete farming experiences, communal gardening, or knowledge exchanges from this farm. This is striking since these black female farmers employ gardening as "a strategy of resistance against capitalism, corporatism of the food system, and agribusiness" (White 24) in ways that are very compatible with anti-gentrification activism. Even if Moore had not been actively involved in such a collective, the omission of these African American urban gardening and farming practices would have been glaring. Specifically due to their relevance for the city of Detroit and Detroiters, these gardening practices are examples of the kind of community-building envisioned by feminist movements.

Following this example, two conceptions are relevant to understanding the connections between gentrification and urban gardening: gardening as an improvement

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of a neighborhood, and thus, as enhancing a dynamic of green gentrification; and gardening as creating possibilities for community encounters and activist collectives against gentrification.

The terms "green gentrification" or "environmental gentrification" refer to urban sustainability efforts that appear to benefit a city population as a whole but, at a closer look, raise property values and accelerate the displacement of vulnerable demographics. "Low-income residents, homeless residents, tenants in informal housing, and people of color have found themselves excluded from the benefits of these new environmental amenities" (Pearsall 329). Green gentrification may include mobility (expanding bike infrastructure and public transportation, reducing car use), removal of pollution, brownfield redevelopment, and creation of green spaces. Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill point to the contradictions surrounding such urban changes: "farmers markets and urban farming, for instance, are seen as answers to food deserts for many progressives … until they bring in those middle-class folks also looking for good food" (24-5). Wolch, Byrne, and Newell refer to this unintentional effect of gentrification that results from efforts to implement the principles of sustainability in city environments as "the urban green paradox" (235). The paradoxical discourse surrounding green gentrification is prone to become even more relevant as global warming accelerates and cities worldwide respond to the challenges of changing climates through sustainability campaigns.

However, stemming from the critical anti-gentrification activism of community gardens, gardening is explicitly often also understood as a method to achieve environmental justice (see Haefs). Sharon Zukin demonstrates the changes to the positively connotated "authenticity" of urban gardens shifting

> from being a grassroots social movement challenging the state to an embodiment of ethnic identity, then an expression of secular cultural identity in tune with gentrifier's values, and finally a form of urban food production consistent with the tastes of middle-class locavores and strategies for sustainable development. (197)

Hamilton and Curran analyze sustainable planning efforts that attempt redevelopment without displacement. Central to such actions are strategic activist coalitions that involve newcomers to a neighborhood alongside residents to ensure that the interests of longtime residents are the priority of urban change. Such "gentrifier-enhanced environmental activism" (Hamilton and Curran 1558) could develop out of the improvised neighborly gardening networks that Moore and Warner describe—even though neither author is involved in activist coalitions in their neighborhood.

The death of her neighbor and fellow gardener, Angelo, gives Warner an occasion to think about the many ways their neighborhood has changed in Angelo's lifetime, including changes to the housing market. However, her considerations extend beyond merely wondering what Angelo would think about these transformations to positioning Angelo's death as a kind of signpost for them: "Angelo was my anchor to the old neighborhood; I understood it in some measure only because I could look at him, hear him speak. With his death, I had some kind of internal proof that the old institutions of this place were ending" (227). This description makes Warner sound like a "curator-gentrifier" mourning the loss of 'authentic' local life in her neighborhood (see

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Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill 163-171). Nevertheless, Angelo is not displaced from the neighborhood by rising rents but dies of old age in his home. Angelo's departure is thus fundamentally different from that of other neighbors who are priced out and who do not receive such a sentimental remembrance.

Increasingly, Moore comes to question the nonprofit organization that awarded her the house and their story that this house had been abandoned for years. Finally, she finds out about the foreclosure of her house based on inflated property assessments, a process that Detroit has been notorious for, which led to the previous owner being displaced by what she feels are "illegal and certainly unethical methods" (233). Her memoir depicts her attempts to find the previous owner and understand her complicity in their displacement. Strikingly, Moore comments on her stylistic choices in an interview:

> I could have written this like a ghost story, wherein I would let the presence of the former owner linger but remain ephemeral [… instead] I presented it as a mystery, an investigation. Because the former owner of my house is still alive. Reparations are still possible. The housing crisis, too, is solvable. (Lindsay)

Within what is sometimes called gentrification fiction, ghosts frequently haunt white gentrifier characters (see Peacock).[6] By contrast, Moore's response is more concerned with her bodily reaction than any supernatural presence. While reading the legal files, Moore feels "disembodiment kicks in then, the tethered distancing. It is not physical pain that unmoors me, but something more like psychic distress at the ease with which I participated in a fundamentally violent process" that is gentrification (219). This sense of disembodiment and distance describes a directly opposite experience from Moore's physically grounded gardening, her direct encounters with the garden and her neighbors.

Her realization ultimately leads to Moore leaving her neighborhood rather than – like Warner – staying and continuing to feel complicit. When Moore prepares to sell her house, she wonders whether to price it so her neighbors can afford it or that the money she invested is returned: "this is when I must decide if I will deliberately participate in the gentrification of Banglatown or write off several years of my life as a financial disaster filled with a lot of dark days. This is not an easy decision" (241). Moore decides to sell her house to a Bengali couple below market value. However, she has written her successful memoir based on "these dark days." In an interview, Moore expresses that the title of the book, *Gentrifier*, is an initial joke, a reduction of complexity undertaken by those "who never spent time in Detroit, have no idea what it was about or didn't understand my neighborhood at all and just automatically assumed that like, a white girl moving to Detroit is a deliberate process of gentrification" (Spencer). However, from this joke Moore proceeds to question larger structural issues: "we can kind of see the ways that gentrification, or neighborhood disinvestment, or just being a bad neighbor – all of the

[6] Warner, too, employs the theme of haunting as a "heavy and eternal psychic toll" on real estate and raises the possibility of reparations: "Imagine each of these stately houses claimed by black families, rather than being passed around by white people to other white people for a million dollars a pop. Could be the sole cure for the haunting" (265). And yet, Warner bought a house and continues the chain of real-estate concentration in white hands.

things that go into our notion of gentrification–then we can kind of see the way that gentrification is a system that works outside of individual control" (Spencer).

Like Moore, Warner articulates feelings of guilt at having bought her way into the neighborhood, just like the potential investors she sees checking out real estate on her street. "I have to make sense of my own possible contribution to the change, […] I somehow helped to boost the financial outlook of the block, the street, the neighborhood" (18). For Warner, her willingness to stay and unwillingness to participate in real-estate speculation may recompense her privilege: "I have only hoped to atone by sticking around, neither selling nor buying again" (224). She also confesses her shame at not having realized how socioeconomically different her status is from that of her neighbors: "My privilege contributed to making me an owner here and not a renter. That I ever glossed over that fact isn't an easy admission" (225). Both writers express how ethical decisions and (self-) realizations about privilege in the gentrifying city are not "easy." Their memoirs are driven by various conflicting emotions that coalesce around homeownership in the US and the question of how it can be compatible with feminism. These affects range from guilt and shame over acquiring a house and possibly having displaced its previous inhabitants, to resignation at needing a stable home due to their health struggles, relief at ending a precarious lifestyle, anxiety surrounding the financial obligation of keeping the house intact,[7] and finally hope to be part of a community of neighbors (and Warner's renters).

In addition, both memoirs offer a quirky, comic self-narration of their gardening. As gardeners, Moore and Warner express humility and amusement at their failures, pride and astonishment at their achievements, and gratitude to their neighbors and friends for support. Again and again, they demonstrate their capacity for self-criticism and self-parody. After the winter, Warner's "arborvitaes had died horrible, crispy deaths" (96). Her word choice resonates with that of Moore who speaks of "two young juneberry saplings" being "murdered" (108). Whereas guilt factors into these moments, so too does humor. Warner continues "I went out to the yard to do the landscaper's walk of shame – digging up the root balls of the very dead trees" (96). Their failures at gardening do not diminish the pleasures these women find in gardening as physical activity and place-making practice.

When Moore visits a garden center with a friend "who wants to support my new life endeavor" by gifting her gardening appliances, she refuses an upscale nozzle for her garden hose: "He believes he has selected a state-of-the-art tool that I will use every day. But what I see is a shiny, overly elaborate gewgaw that my neighbors will see me using" (142). Not wanting to showcase her seeming economic privilege, Moore feels shame despite her gratitude for her friend's much-needed gifts. Her description renders these complex emotions humorous by highlighting the absurdity of their different perspectives on something as small as a nozzle.

[7] Moore and Warner's houses are not as renovated as they had hoped, with expensive structural repairs creating financial challenges.

As Emmet shows, within Western modernist garden writing, a "comical and lighthearted approach" can be found in the works of Katherine White, Vita Sackville-West, or Karel Čapek. He argues: "such writing depended on not taking oneself (or one's gardening) too seriously. Such humor assumed a context of comfortable domesticity, along with a class of readers surrounded by (or longing for) material comfort" (58). The feminist writers' humor stylistically is informed by these previous modes of garden writing. Whereas their self-criticism and awareness of their complicity in processes of gentrification appear as a source of concern to be treated seriously in the rest of their writing, when it comes to passages set in the garden, these writers are much more at ease with their social status.

Moore's memoir uses a staple of garden writing, the "comedy of surplus" or the unexpected gift of the garden turned curse due to its multiplicity. The gift is a plentiful harvest of pumpkins after a neighbor's pumpkin decomposed in her yard: "pumpkin plants grow from every crevice, vining up every fence, stick, gat, and other plant that they can find" (42). As Atkinson demonstrates, gardening practices may offer alternatives to the "zero-sum arrangements" of capitalism "because in the garden plot, where market values do not trump all other values and considerations, the grower's dilemma commonly revolves around schemes to *distribute* some outrageous surplus" (10). After giving away as many pumpkins as she can, Moore assembles the neighborhood kids to carve the remaining pumpkins into Halloween decorations, a holiday custom the children are unfamiliar with "partially because their families are from Bangladesh and partially because the holiday [due to arson and vandalism] has been largely criminalized in Detroit […] The children are delighted. Finally, Halloween! Their mothers are angry at me for wasting food" (42/43). It is striking that the Halloween decorations created by Moore and the children anger some of her neighbors as wasteful, as turning valuable food into seemingly worthless decorations, whereas the humor in this scene lies in the abundance generated by Moore's garden. The passage demonstrates how within the context of the urban garden value and waste are subjective.

What does it mean that these critical feminist writers who are so open about things going wrong in current gentrifying cities, at the same time, exhibit such a capacity for humor when it comes to their gardens? Moore expresses "a tiny bit of guilt" at having to "kill" certain plants or weeds to grow others. When she comments on this process of selection, it is hard not to read this gardening activity as simultaneously referring to her ongoing reflection on her presence in a gentrifying city: "it is part of learning to trust your instincts as a grower and set boundaries for yourself as a human. But sometimes the guilt stacks up, and I catch myself thinking, God, all I'm really doing is condemning stuff to death that doesn't please me" (185). This may seem a crass commentary on how through gentrification certain tastes and needs are privileged (those of affluent citizens) and entire neighborhoods are remade to accommodate these new inhabitants. However, the parallel between gardening and gentrification only sometimes holds in these gentrifier memoirs, because at other times gardening appears to reconcile feelings of guilt and shame that the writers feel regarding their homeownership.

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This second section has explored the feminist gardener-gentrifier's relationship to the city, its transformations (green gentrification), and urban community activism. Despite being indebted to political traditions of radical gardening, these memoirs exclude any mention of anti-gentrification organizing. While Moore and Warner's memoirs seek ethical engagements with their own privilege, the feminist ethic of gardening in the gentrifying city that these texts begin to articulate is an individualized, improvised practice. Their desire for such an ethic is highlighted in the complex emotions the feminist gardener feels as a privileged newcomer to her neighborhood. And yet, perhaps this feminist ethic manifests more clearly as a writing practice of critical analysis and self-inspection than as a political activist practice to build anti-gentrification coalitions.

Conclusion

Due to its seemingly apolitical nature, gardening within privately owned spaces may serve as an example of green gentrification and a leisurely practice of home improvement, furthering the value of real estate. This essay was interested in how feminist writer-gardeners remain committed to feminist visions of equality and the fight against racism, sexism, and classism, while at the same time benefiting from a phenomenon like gentrification. Through gardening, the antagonistic position of gentrifier might be reframed, emerging from the texts of Moore and Warner as a subject position necessary for understanding their privilege as well as the social interactions within a changing neighborhood. While we should appreciate the work that Moore and Warner do as writers, including their self-critical reflections (at times using the tool of humor), there are limitations to this work.

The improvised moments of connectedness and informal networks of neighborly care, enabled through the exchange of gardening knowledge, harvested produce, or cow manure never serve as more than an unrealized potential for anti-gentrification activism. Neither memoir describes more concrete coalition-building practices comparable to those of radical community gardeners. A return to the uneasy relationship between the individual and the collective (that is a driving dynamic of both feminist memoirs and urban autobiographical writing) reveals that these feminist gentrifier memoirs at times fail to "use personal struggle as a lens for confronting and combatting those structural injustices," and rather "reduce political, structural, and public issues to personal struggles" (see Mitchell 209). While their gardening practices with immigrant neighbors open the white feminist gentrifiers' eyes to their involuntary involvement in gentrification processes, they also at times relieve feelings of guilt over privileged homeownership.

At its core, the feminist gentrifier memoir is a paradoxical text. The memoirs demonstrate how understanding oneself as a gentrifier is a necessary first step for combatting gentrification. Taking up the subject position as gentrifier can never be a dead-end to conversations but causes further difficult questions surrounding privilege and political action. Finally, despite the problematic absence of concrete political action, through their memoirs, these feminist gentrifier-gardeners may inspire further conversations and even activism in their readers—whether these readers understand

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themselves as urban gardeners (yet) or not. These writers, each in their locally specific contexts, seek to develop a feminist ethic of neighborly gardening. And yet, this ethic looks much more like an individualized practice than a more concrete step towards taking an activist stance against the dilemmas of green gentrification.

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