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Paul Fleischman's *Seedfolks*: Community Gardening and Urban Regeneration

Because of the hegemonic status of the suburban lifestyle in the U.S., the dominant image of American garden is a private lawn surrounding a single-family home. Yet, in recent decades, increasing numbers of Americans have engaged in community gardening projects, raising fruit and vegetables rather than mowing grass. Interest in community gardening as a grassroots initiative to countervail urban disinvestment and abandonment goes back to 1970s New York. In a city verging on bankruptcy, amidst blight and decay, environmental activists mobilized the Lower East Side residents in an effort to reclaim rundown neighborhood lots via gardening. Only when they had cleared the vacant lots that doubled as dumping grounds, did the city show interest in the land that over the years had come into city ownership for tax delinquency. Similar voluntary initiatives took root in many low-income communities of color that had been passed over by capital and deprived of public services. These infrapolitical activities involving the squatting of vacant lots[1] and cultivating vegetables and flowers were initially contested by the city but then supervised by Operation Green Thumb, a city organization established to administer the issue of temporary leases which cost a symbolic $1 per year. Thus, what began as a grassroots revitalization of deteriorating neighborhoods, over the years was incorporated into the policy agenda of many American cities.

Today urban gardening is so widespread and familiar that few would question its nutritional, educational, cultural, and therapeutic benefits. The gardens offer entrepreneurial and practical skills training, as well as sustainability. The building of local economies today usually goes hand in hand with a food justice agenda that focuses on ameliorating social and economic inequalities in the underserved neighborhoods. Be it Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles, or Cleveland, American municipalities make it their priority to offer access to fresh, healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food to their diverse body of residents. But parallel with concerns for social justice, community gardening is extolled by experts,

1 See Sandrine Baudry's "Reclaiming Urban Space as Resistance: The Infrapolitics of Gardening."

not-for-profit organizations, community activists, and federal grant applicants for its capacity to enhance social capital at the neighborhood level, and, in the process, prompt a comprehensive regeneration of "islands of deprivation, encircled by oceans of prosperity" (Davidson, "Is Gentrification All Bad?").

One of the ways in which the idea of urban gardening has spread across the country is through didactic literature for children and young adults.[2] Such literature performs important affective work; while it spins utopian visions rather than documenting real-life projects, it also gives us an insight into the social and affective potential of community gardens. Paul Fleischman's 1997 short novel for young adults, *Seedfolks*, seems to be a literary response to the promise of urban regeneration brought on by the community gardening movement. Among other children's books published in the 1990s that deal with urban farming are *City Green* (1994) by DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan and *The Gardener* by Sarah Stewart (1997). Their protagonists are young resolute girls who beautify their drab urban neighborhoods with flowers, herbs, and vegetables. *City Green* is similar to *Seedfolks* in that it is set contemporaneously and makes a community garden a source of neighborhood transformation. Residents of different age and ethnicity unite and cooperate to transform a vacant lot into a garden that is not only aesthetically pleasing but also breeds joy, kindness, and happiness, even managing to seduce an old cantankerous man who initially stayed apart from the project.

The affective aspect of community gardening is also highlighted in Stewart's *The Gardener*. Set in the Depression Era, the story has a family focus, but carries a similar message of personal growth and enrichment as mediated by the beauty of nature. To make her uncle happy, the young female protagonist focuses all her energy on beautifying a drab city bakery; she achieves her goal by transforming a trash-filled rooftop into a lush flower garden. More recently, Jacqueline Briggs Martin's non-fiction picture book *Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table* (2013) has joined the list of books on urban farming, this time with a male protagonist as the hero. Once a basketball star, Will Allen is known today for his engagement in sustainable urban farming, combining food justice activism with community building. What links Martin's informative story with the earlier fictional accounts of urban farming is that all of them reach out to children and young adults with an educational and socially transformative agenda in mind. Whereas *City Green* transitions smoothly from the imaginary world of the narrative to real-life recommendations on how to start a community garden, *The Gardener* and *Seedfolks*

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2 I would like to thank Professor Daniel Hade of the University of Pennsylvania, a Children's Literature scholar who, when visiting Poland as a Fulbright Scholar in 2013, responded to my ideas, supported my line of inquiry, and prompted me to deepen my analysis with more daring questions.

conceal their political agenda behind a veil of nostalgia for the past and utopian idealism respectively.

At the very moment when children's books began to propagate the idea of urban farming, 114 out of more than 700 New York community gardens were threatened with bulldozing as part of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani neoliberal policies of stimulating growth (Knigge 63).[3] It is no coincidence, then, that sites like community gardens find their way into children's literature of the period. Yet *Seedfolks* does not merely illustrate the mechanics of community building as investigated by sociologists, urbanists or political theorists. Nor is the community garden only a convenient literary backdrop against which a sense of community is cultivated. The garden is inherent to place-based identity formation in the urban context. Informed by intellectual and public debates on the politics of multiculturalism and its ramifications for liberalism, the novel is constitutive of a public that draws on communitarian idealism to re-define the American nation.

Seedfolks is set in a 1990s working-class immigrant neighborhood in Cleveland, whose history is typical of the urban growth of the industrial era. As we learn from Ana, a Rumanian old-timer and an avid observer of neighborhood life over several decades, in the early twentieth century, the area experienced an influx of European immigrants: Slovaks, Italians, Rumanians, and Poles. When in the 1930s African Americans migrated from the Southern states, the neighborhood reproduced the racial divisions of the Jim Crow South, with Gibb Street as the dividing line between the white and black communities. At the peak of the industrial era, Cleveland's steel mills and factories absorbed immigrant workers, yet as those industries closed or relocated South or overseas, the whites fled making room for new waves of immigrants, this time from Central and South America and Asia. But the newcomers in Ana's account do not put down roots as their predecessors did in the bygone era of prosperity and economic stability. They are a transient people from Mexico, Haiti, Guatemala, Vietnam, and India who treat the place "like a cheap hotel—[where] you stay until you've got enough money to leave" (6).

The grim fate of the Cleveland neighborhood is in many ways typical of that suffered by many Northeastern industrial towns and cities since the 1970s. Deeply affected by economic restructuring and the loss of industrial jobs, disinvestment and decline, those ethnically diverse neighborhoods have turned into sites of destitution marked by unemployment, alcohol-addiction, illicit drug economy, overcrowding, and crime.

It is against the backdrop of these demographic and economic shifts that *Seedfolks*' thirteen narrators, differing in age, race, ethnicity, and social background,

3 Giuliani announced his plans to do so in 1997.

engage in a community gardening project. Yet the dire physical environment or structural limitations to upward mobility do not seem to be the narrators' major concern. Those considerations are inserted into the individual stories in an attenuated manner, and are often alluded to by old residents who have a memory of the neighborhood's patterns of ethnic succession and disinvestment. Random yet meaningful references to the immigrant neighborhood's past and its gradual decline over the years make it a case of what in sociological parlance is defined as "social disorganization": a combined effect of residential mobility, cultural diversity as well as economic deprivation. In urban areas where social disorganization prevails, low levels of social control (formal or informal), anomic and conflictual attitudes, and weak social integration have been identified (Putnam 307–308).

The narrative focus of this short novel for young adults lies somewhere else. While the narrators acknowledge the subsistence, aesthetic, sentimental as well as therapeutic functions of the abandoned, trashy, and rat-infested lot turned into a verdant public space, the community garden has wider social implications. The blurb on the back cover of *Seedfolks* informs us that it is a story of a "garden that transforms a neighborhood," yet the transformative agency, although limited to a specific place, lies in the determination of volunteers of diverse ethnic backgrounds, with different life experiences and histories. This neighborhood project emerges in spite of, as much as against, the grueling reality of cultural estrangement, social fragmentation, as well as economic disadvantage. Giving an account of the first year of the Gibb Street community garden, *Seedfolks*' multiple narratives delineate a progression from individual anonymity and alienation, through interest generated by informal contact, to a fledgling sense of place-based identity. The Gibb Street community garden serves as a paragon of successful community-level regeneration and is symptomatic of the neoliberal governance whereby the burden and responsibility for a thorough neighborhood transformation[4] is located in the structures of the civil society rather than the welfare state (Paddison 194). An intermediate ground between the family and the distant institutions of the city, the garden fosters cross-generational and cross-cultural dialogue. More, it becomes a stepping stone towards spontaneous, grassroots-level community building.

4 According to scholars at the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech, "urban regeneration has many parallels to US urban policy in the fields of economic/community development and neighborhood revitalization. Similar to the three pillars of sustainability, this definition of urban regeneration establishes a holistic policy and planning framework with a strong emphasis on placed-based approaches that links the physical transformation of the built environment with the social transformation of local residents" ("Urban Regeneration").

This paper offers a reading of *Seedfolks* that is informed by discussions of communitarianism that scholars, public intellectuals, and grassroots activists took up in the 1990s to address what they thought was ailing the American society, namely, social atomization, competition, the weakening of institutions of the civil society, and loss of traditional "community." However, not all were supportive of communitarianism; opponents of a return to the community saw it as a force destructive to individual freedoms, promoting parochialism, and perpetuating fear of cultural others. Born of a desire for stability and security, communitarianism, they claimed, was conducive to social homogenization and spatial exclusiveness, and could lead to social disunity on a larger political scale. As will be argued in this paper, *Seedfolks* attempts to find a middle ground between the two intellectual/ideological positions by subsuming the politics of difference under the communitarian goals of gardening. Yet, social capital enhanced by collective participation in the gardening project is not a means of retrieving an idealized preindustrial *Gemeinschaft*-type community in a post-industrial setting. Rather, it serves as a conduit to bottom-up community-led regeneration premised on affective investment in the garden.

While the fictional community garden could serve as a temporary anti-crisis measure, akin to Detroit's "potato patch" in the 1890s or World War II "victory gardens,"[5] the motivations that drive the project turn out to be diverse and grounded in the characters' ethnic cultures, family histories, and emotional needs: remembrance of ancestors, reconnection with one's rural roots, the healing of personal traumas caused by the loss of loved ones or the hostility of the urban environment, and, finally, dreams of financial success. Historically, such fragmented and individuated projects, evolving in a piecemeal manner, originated in times of urban crisis caused by shifting economies and globalization of capital and labor, but *Seedfolks*' characters are not undernourished or needy enough to classify for welfare benefits. Some adult immigrants perform service jobs or run small businesses (Amir has a textile shop, Sae Young—a laundry, Virgil's father—a taxi). The old timers are either state employees (Leona—a teacher, Wendel—a janitor) or retirees (Ana, Sam, Florence, Mr. Myles, and a man in a rocker). If they start gardening to supplement their modest food budget or poor diet, this is in no

5 The first urban gardens were established in the 1890s in crisis-ridden industrial cities such as Detroit, New York, Boston, Chicago, or Seattle. The municipalities encouraged the poor to cultivate root crops and vegetables as a temporary work relief measure. In Detroit Mayor Hazen Pingree's "potato patch" program targeted around fifty percent of all affected by the crisis and long-term unemployment. Most of the gardeners were first-generation immigrants with a farming past in Europe ("Mayor Hazen Pingree and the Potato Patch Plan of the 1890's").

way highlighted or even referenced. Rather, what many of the gardeners and their supporters are hungry for and what transpires from their narratives is a desire to belong to a place where contact and interaction would occur naturally, and where cooperation would breed familiarity and dispel distrust and fear of one's cultural strangers. For instance, Sam, a 78-year-old Jewish retiree, treats the garden as a site of neighborhood regeneration. Likened to a fisherman, he feels accountable for "sewing up the rips in the neighborhood['s]" social network (30–31). Even if the remaining gardeners initially do not share this communitarian impulse, with time the interconnected network of personal relationships yields a territorial community.

The narrative development from the atomized individuals' insecurity and alienation towards collective place-making across ethnic and age divisions in a culture where, as Indian immigrant Amir puts it, all are "foes unless they're known to be friends" (73), makes the garden a testing ground for communitarian ideals, with liberal multiculturalism as a political model. A utopian endeavor and a speculative exercise, *Seedfolks* points to enhanced social capital as the mainstay of the multicultural project.

There are many definitions of social capital, but the one that triggered engaged debates on the American society comes from political scientist Robert Putnam. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam defines social capital as

> connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue.' The difference is that 'social capital' calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital. (19)

What insights does Putnam's notion of social capital shed on our reading of *Seedfolks*? Published a few years before *Bowling Alone*, Fleischman's short novel shows a concern with lost social moorings and restoration of what sociologist Amitai Etzioni calls the "moral infrastructure" (89) of American neighborhoods. If ethnic roots, traditions, and customs are part of their identity and each narrator is embedded in a particular way of life, their ties with the larger ethnic community are not explored. Rather, Fleischman's narrators are depicted as dispersed individuals, separate from their ethnic clusters or even families, who by creating the garden put down community roots. Thus they are the eponymous seedfolks, the ancestors, the founding fathers of the Gibb Street garden.

The tangible effects of the gardening project can be measured with a progression from anonymity, suspicion, and distrust towards a gradual respect for cultural strangers and openness to cultural idiosyncrasies of others. This com-

munity of gardeners evolves organically with no prior assumptions concerning membership, plot division, or rules of operation. A work in progress that accommodates the gardeners' individual needs, the green space also becomes a commons[6] that encourages neighbors to make an investment in the community. Even though it might appear that the project's success could be stultified by the immigrants' poor English, since "pantomime was often required to get over language barriers" (65), *Seedfolks* underscores the power of affect to bind a community together. The initial feelings of inaptness and disconnectedness give way to shared experiences. As Mr. Myles's British nurse, Nora, put it, "we were all subject to the same weather and pests, the same neighborhood, and the same parental emotions toward our plants" (65).

The emergent community of affect is the synergistic effect of individual work, contact with the soil and the plants, exposure to the smells and sighs of greenery, and the "parental" attachment to the crops. For Virgil, a young Haitian boy who knew nothing of growing lettuce, this experience involves both care and responsibility: "It was like having a new baby in the family. And I was like its mother. . . . It was like a baby always crying for its milk" (43). For many, looking after their plants rekindles precious memories of loved ones, of rural origins in distant places. To a young black man named Curtis, tending tomato plants is an expression of deep affection for his former girlfriend Latisha, a symbol of his readiness to take up the responsibility for a relationship.

Apart from the emotion-charged attachment to their plants, be it carrots, squash, cauliflowers, cilantro, or flowers, the gardeners seem to naturally seek each other's physical presence and, in the common act of cultivating plants, find respite from estrangement in their adopted home. For instance, the Korean Sae Yong recovers the trust lost in people after she was assaulted in an armed robbery. She appreciates the company of others working their small lots of land, the non-intrusive sharing of public space, a non-imposing yet rewarding human presence. Amir, an Indian immigrant, expresses a similar feeling of comfort and safety: "The garden's green was soothing to the eye.... But the garden's greatest benefit, I feel, was not relief to the eyes, but to make the eyes see our neighbors" (74). Soon a sense of connectedness develops and expresses itself with warm, casual

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6 Commons are publically shared spaces that facilitate human contact and exchange, such as sidewalks, parks, public markets, squares, where people can freely come together for social, political, or commercial reasons. Vibrant community life and healthy democracies depend on the commons. The mass enclosure or privatization of public spaces under neoliberal municipal policies in the U.S. and Europe have in recent years generated discussions about and protest against the disappearance of the commons, be it through exclusionary access or surveillance. For a comprehensive discussion of the urban commons, read David Harvey's chapter on "The Creation of Urban Commons" in *Rebel Cities*.

exchanges that breed mutual interest and concern for others. Amir's eggplants and Sae Young's hot peppers encourage friendly conversations. Tío Juan, who speaks an Indian language only, shows Curtis how to grow beefsteak tomatoes, while others teach him to protect them from pests and disease.

The gardeners smile at each other a range of meaningful smiles: a breaking-the-ice smile, a befriending smile, an affirming smile, or an appreciative smile. Then follow reassuring gestures of territorial belonging that evoke associations with the safety of the hearth, close family, kin and friends. In the gardeners' own words, they feel "almost like a family" (50), "a part of community" (76), that the "small circle of earth became a second home" (63). This emotional rootedness of being "planted in the garden" (65) and the personal ties that bind them breed reciprocity, trust and care: when Royce, a homeless African American adolescent, helps them with watering plants and minor repairs, they return favors by feeding him or giving him vegetables; others offer tips on parenthood to the pregnant Mexican teenager Maricela; when Mr. Miles does not show up for a few days, all express concern. This effect of bonding spreads onto the sympathetic onlookers, Ana, Florence, and an anonymous man in a rocker, whose apartment windows look onto the green lot. They are avid participant observers of the community as it congeals around the garden. The emergent spirit of care, cooperation and involvement resonates with Etzioni's communitarian appeal, articulated in the mid-1990s, for a "change of heart," "a new way of thinking, a reaffirmation of a set of moral values that we may all share" (18).

Seedfolks suggests that enhanced social capital can breed place-based identities with their own sense of "morality of community." Developed by political scientist Yael Tamir with regard to the liberal state, the concept stresses the importance of affective bonds as the foundation of the liberal state, but also of any constitutive community. Thus, it can be equally applied at the scale of the neighborhood. The "morality of community," explains Tamir, affects our thinking about moral issues in the following ways:

> it encourages members to develop relations based on care and cooperation…. [I]t can account for our intuition that we have a reason, at least in some cases, to favor those who share their life with us, and about whom we care deeply…. [I]t is possible for individuals who care about individual others and who are well aware of their affiliations, to agree on principles of justice…. [T]he implications of the morality of community regarding attitudes toward nonmembers are no more and, in fact, probably less self-interested, than those derived from liberal theory. (96)

The morality of community is complementary to liberal morality rather than supersede it, Tamir observes (95). Yet, should a cultural community curtail an individual's rights and entitlements, the liberal state will offer protection to all

members of the political community (Szahaj 52). Modeling the fictional garden community on the principles of liberal multiculturalism, Fleischman points to the politics of recognition as a conduit to neighborhood regeneration. Philosopher Charles Taylor, in making a case for the politics of recognition, argues that "where the politics of universal dignity fought for forms of nondiscrimination that were quite 'blind' to the ways in which citizens differ, the politics of difference often redefines nondiscrimination as requiring that we make these distinctions the basis of differential treatment" (276).

How, then, does *Seedfolks* apply the multicultural agenda at the narrative and ideological level? The narrative told from multiple points of view allows for an even distribution of voices as regards race, ethnicity, gender, or age. This equality of representation does not seem to privilege one voice over another or discredit any culture-specific or race-based point of view. Even if, initially, *mis*recognition finds expression in the stereotyped images of others' ethnicity, the narrators' self-reflexivity, prompted by cross-cultural contact, leads them to affirm the cultural specificity of the participating members. Although the gardeners organize into clusters—blacks and whites at the opposing ends of the garden, with Asians and Central Americans in-between (33)—they do not perceive others' race and ethnicity in terms of exotic "otherness" or irreconcilable group interests. Nor do their diverse experiences, motives, and expectations create significant value dissonance or hierarchies of morality. At most we can speak of an axiological tension between what C. B. Macpherson calls "possessive individualism" and communitarianism, between pursuit of egoistic ends on the one hand and civic cooperation and trust on the other.

When the Vietnamese girl Kim starts growing lima beans amidst heaps of trash inhabited by rats, others follow by clearing small pieces of land for their individual needs the way homesteaders did. Officially a *community* garden after Leona, a black teacher, signs the land lease with the city, this project does not involve communal ownership of plants grown. Rather each new gardener chooses, cleans, and "appropriates" a piece of land for his or her own needs without interfering in other's designs; membership is not formalized, nor does it involve paying fees or complicity with a set of written rules. This spontaneous and haphazard grassroots endeavor involves an investment in the community founded on equal access to nature and respect for private property. Only in reaction to the violation of these basic rights does the garden transform from an open public space to a limited-access garden with vernacular forms of protection against vandalism: a board fence, chicken wire, a gate here and a padlock there, a KEEP OUT sign and, tellingly, barbed wire (35), and even an all-night watch of the crops.

The project evolves as the neighborhood experiences a general corrosion of trust in public institutions. This is exemplified by Leona's frustrating efforts to

determine the vacant lot ownership. After numerous time-consuming calls she makes a wry comment: "the people running Cleveland don't usually come down here, unless they take a wrong turn on the freeway. You can't measure the distance between my block and City Hall in miles" (27).

This disconnection from the larger polity along with excessive pursuit of self-interest at the cost of the common good, are symptomatic of the neighborhood's weak civic engagement to which the garden seems to be a viable antidote. Virgil's father, a Haitian taxi driver, stands as a parody of self-centered individualism. He treats the community in an instrumental way, as "a necessary burden and [he] cooperate[s] only for the sake and pursuing [his] private ends" (Sandel 148). He lies to others to hide the pecuniary motives of growing lettuce on a lot six times the size of others. This recourse to deceit in pursuit of self-interest is seen as sabotaging the morality of the emergent community. Disapproval of Virgil's father's anti-communitarian attitude is vividly expressed in Maricela's account: "He'd drive up in a cab, slam on the brakes like the Pope just stepped in front of him, run through our squash, cut a bunch of lettuce, and run back with it in a bucket of water. Then he'd peel out, leaving lots of rubber" (70). Thus, *Seedfolks* seems to validate the conception of the good of community based on a shared sense of belonging and solidarity, trust and cooperation rather than mere respect for individual rights under cultural pluralism. A standing example of such a practice is the barbecue party held in the Gibb Street garden during which the gardeners show off and share crops. Amir compares it to a harvest festival in his native India but, if anything, this multicultural feast evokes associations with the Plymouth Pilgrims' and the Wampanoag Indians' Thanksgiving celebration of a bountiful first harvest.

It transpires, then, that community gardening as a means of urban regeneration is possible as long as cultural communities do not threaten their members' exercise of individual rights and entitlements secured them as citizens within the political community.[7] But if the multicultural political project is to succeed, then, the role of the collective cannot be treated in an instrumental way as derivative of "what it contributes to the lives of individuals" only (Kymlicka 140).

What is at stake in the Gibb Street multicultural community garden? The narrative trajectory of Fleischman's novel from disconnection to a sense of "we-ness," from uninvolved indifference to congeniality, corresponds to the spatial and aesthetic makeover of the blighted vacant lot into a lush multicultural community garden. The regenerative aspect of the project can be discussed through the prism of social capital and its ramifications for democracy, neighborhood safety and economic

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7 For a detailed discussion on the two kinds of communities, go to Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (1989).

growth, as laid out by Putnam in *Bowling Alone* and by Jane Jacobs in *Death and Life of American Cities*.

As regards democratic institutions, Putnam holds that their performance depends in measurable ways upon social capital. Voluntary organizations, such as churches, advocacy groups, bridge clubs or reading groups, are an inseparable element of civic training. They develop skills and practical knowledge necessary for political participation and cooperation towards achieving common goals, be it in local or nationwide politics. In uniting citizens around a common cause, formal and informal social networks create a forum for public deliberation, and introduce their members to such civic functions as organizing to gain political clout, holding their elected representatives accountable but also protecting their communities from abuse by political leaders. Civic groupings create avenues for political action even among the most marginalized, whose voice, fragmented and dispersed among uninvolved individuals, would not otherwise be heard in public (337–340).[8] *Seedfolks* offers one example of how to teach civic skills such as participation in community life to solve local problems. Sam, an old-timer with an activist past announces a contest among neighborhood children under 12 to solve the problem of water provision (the winner will get $20). He puts up a makeshift speakers' corner and lets the contestants present their ideas on a wooden box to the audience gardeners. Once they chose the best solution, the gardeners implement the plan and make the communal use of the improvement. This grassroots initiative substantiates Putnam's view that neighborhood empowerment and civic engagement are mutually enhancing and, by participating in voluntary associations or informal networks, citizens are more likely to affect the political processes so that they better address their needs and grievances (343–344). Thus *Seedfolks* bears the promise of political regeneration via neighborhood empowerment.

Next to teaching democratic participation, the multicultural garden serves the local goal of safeguarding the community against crime. In neighborhoods where people feel bound by ties of familiarity, friendship, and trust, they are less likely to engage in activity that would be harmful to their neighbors. In the early 1960s, urban scholar Jane Jacobs made a compelling argument about the role of casual contact in bringing about safe neighborhoods.[9] Public peace "is kept primarily by an intimate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves" (32). A vibrant street life, a continuous flow of people in the streets, and the

8 Putnam relies on Alexis de Tocqueville's classic discussion of voluntary associations, as articulated in *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840).

9 Although Jacobs is more willing to use words like "safety" than "crime," her focus is, indeed, on the crime-preventing or crime-combating functions of sidewalk life.

traffic generated by local shops, bars, restaurants, and other businesses all ensure sidewalk safety. Where casual sidewalk contact takes place, for instance among neighbors running errands, “a web of public respect and trust” develops (Jacobs 56), residents feel connected to the local community, and are more likely to control public space to increase neighborhood safety.

Seedfolks offers ready examples corroborating Jacobs’s insights. Once, early in the evening, Amir and two other men give up gardening to chase an armed robber who attacked a woman in the garden’s vicinity. The successful intervention gives Amir a rewarding feeling of identification with the place and its residents. Likewise, Florence displays a sense of what Jacobs calls a “proprietorship of the street” (*Death and Life* 38) when revealing her relationship with the garden in a descriptive manner:

> I’d always stop there, to see what was new. I was just a watcher, but I was proud of the garden, as if it were mine. Proud and protective. I remember how mad I got when I saw a man reach through someone’s fence by the sidewalk and try to grab a tomato. I said “How dare you!” He pulled back his hand and said he’s heard it was a *community* garden. (84–85)

The man’s insistence on the garden belonging to the community as opposed to being private property raises the question of inclusiveness and openness. Physical location near the garden does not give one automatic membership in the project, nor access to the produce grown and tended by others. It is a commitment to the community that confers insider status on individuals.

Yet another aspect of the communal vs. private dichotomy is highlighted in Florence’s narrative which meaningfully closes the novel. Her cursory foray into the garden’s future lays bare the complementary and mutually-enhancing processes that stimulate economic growth. After the first year of the garden’s operation, landlords increase rents on apartments overlooking the garden (83). A result of the quality-of-life improvement, the garden and the empowered and safe community are caught in a double bind. Because the landlords and developers detect the neighborhood-level regeneration, other investors and businesses will follow. Thus, the market will be more likely to capitalize on the volunteers’ sweat equity, often in ways that countervail the original intentions of community gardening.

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In the late 1980s and in the 1990s communitarian thinkers began to revise liberal theories of the state and turned towards the institutions of the civil society as conduits of a positive social change. Finding the effects of individualism corrosive

to American social and political life, they turned towards community building as a model of urban regeneration. Given that by then American cities had become the destination points for culturally diverse and distant groups of immigrants, those regenerative measures could not neglect the impact of ethnic identities on the forging of multicultural citizens within the liberal state. Paul Fleischman's *Seedfolks* seems to address all those concerns by using the community garden as a testing ground for neighborhood regeneration. Dispelling the threats of ethnic ghettoization shared by opponents of multiculturalism, the novel suggests that the politics of recognition can be successfully integrated into the larger goal of place-based community building. Premised on the emergence of affective bonds and a voluntary commitment to the common good, the Gibb Street garden is a wellspring of social capital that can be used as currency in rehabilitating urban spaces and reinvigorating participatory democracy.

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