

## Teetering Garden Memories<sup>1</sup>

Mariya Shcheglovitova, Ph.D.

*Department of Environment and Society, Utah State University*

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*“God gave me a vision. I could have been somewhere, making money to put in my own pocket, but instead I came here to spend money on the garden that I didn’t really have; whatever I had, I split it with the garden. This was my heart’s desire: Get this place fixed up nice and beautiful.”*

– Mr. Barton<sup>2</sup>, quoted on a Baltimore-based non-profit website

This essay is a sensory recollection of personal experiences reflecting on daily work in an urban garden. It is guided by photographs I captured in the summers of 2018 and 2019. I do not present photographs in a chronological narrative structure; instead, I use writing and photographs as a performative multimedia practice of remembering. I experiment with “memory writing” that does not reproduce “the original experience as it was lived but is necessarily always constituted from a particular time and place and discursive frame” (Gannon, 2006). The setting of these memories is Baltimore, Maryland, USA, and they are inevitably influenced by Baltimore’s geographies of disinvestment and segregation. Against a background of uneven development, I present my garden memories as snapshots that explore the roles of senses, bodies, and decay in producing urban food landscapes and garden legacies. I begin by Positioning myself, other gardeners, and the garden, and then I describe memories of three garden processes: Planting, Picking, and Rotting. I conclude with two sections reflecting on Remembering and Legacy.

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<sup>2</sup> All names used here are pseudonyms.

### *1. Positioning*

The central character in my recollections is Mr. Barton.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Barton is a Black man who was raised in rural Virginia. He was 80 years old when we met and would often remind me of that while doing demanding physical garden labor—like wielding large shears to prune a tree branch. Mr. Barton is the primary steward of an urban garden that originated from the shared vision of a group of Black men who belonged to a fraternal organization located on a nearby block. At the time he joined the garden in 1988, Mr. Barton was the youngest of these urban farmers. Today he is the only remaining garden steward from this core group.



The garden Mr. Barton stewards was once a series of small inner block row homes surrounded by larger exterior houses; the gravel path leading down its center was once a city street. Vegetables, flowers, and fruit trees on either side of the path now occupy building footprints, and the garden is a surprising expanse surrounded by alleys and row house backyards. During my time in the garden, volunteers, representing a diversity of genders and races, came intermittently from all over the city to perform day-to-day tasks. Mr. Barton and others would often attribute the shift from community-based to external volunteer labor to a lack of community interest. But a view around the garden would reveal material changes that may suppress local engagement as well. For instance, the garden is surrounded by an imposing six feet of chain link fence that Mr. Barton once described as a response to theft. And the demolition of row homes surrounding the garden by city work crews makes it feel further isolated, surveyed, and inaccessible.





I, like many of the other garden volunteers, am white. I was drawn to the garden because of my research focus on urban greening but stayed occupying dual positions, as gardener and researcher. I was born in Soviet Ukraine and immigrated to the US with my family in 1993. My earliest memories of possibility were formed when visiting the homes of relatives who were more established in the US than my recently immigrated family. These homes always had small yards and gardens. For me, these formative memories have shaped gardens as spaces that speak to finding ownership and home, and they influence my feelings and writing on loss and legacy in Mr. Barton's garden.

## ***2. Planting***

I met Mr. Barton while doing fieldwork for my dissertation. From local sustainability meetings, I knew that he was a prominent garden steward in Baltimore. The garden Mr. Barton tends was located near some of my research sites, and one day I drove up the alley leading to its entrance to see if I could visit. When I stopped by, I met Dana, a Black woman who had been gardening with Mr. Barton for several years and was responsible for garden paperwork such as applying for grants. I told her that I was a graduate student studying greening in Baltimore and speaking with members of the local community and asked if she would mind showing me around. Dana led me down the gravel path and showed me the different garden zones: an orchard with grapes, apples, and peaches; a flower garden; and several vegetable gardens, including her own.

Mr. Barton was in the back working in the largest and sunniest garden laying out vegetable transplants near recently dug holes. Dana told Mr. Barton that I was a gardener interested in doing some work. Mr. Barton tentatively accepted my help, telling me: "OK, you can be my knees." Mr. Barton and I spent our first day together planting as a team: he dug a hole and left a plant nearby; I put the plant in the ground and filled the hole. We planted peppers, tomatoes, and tomatillos in dry dusty soil. At the end of the day, Mr. Barton stayed behind to water and asked if I would return next

week. I did. I spent two summers making weekly visits to the garden. During my dissertation, the garden existed in a liminal space, adding context to my research though not explicitly a research site. I was grateful for the opportunity to leave my basement office at the university and experience the smells, sights, and sounds of an urban garden intermixed with those of the city and reflect on their relationship to decaying infrastructure and visible abandonment.

### ***3. Picking***

Many of the garden activities involved picking. Picking ripe fruits and vegetables. Picking through overgrown plants to sort vegetables from weeds. But my most vivid memories of the garden relate to picking trash. I would mainly pick up trash consisting of food wrappers and bottles from the garden's front lawn while Mr. Barton mowed. As I moved across the lawn, inhaling the freshly cut grass, I would fall into a trance of bending, grabbing, and disposing while the rustling of my trash bag intermingled with the purr of the lawn mower and the distant sounds of city traffic.

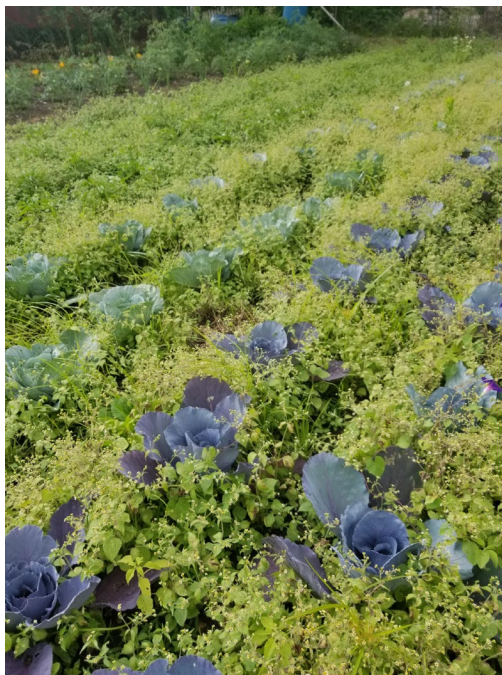
One particularly memorable piece of trash was a soiled diaper I found behind the flower garden. The diaper looked enlarged from absorbing water and was laying on a narrow concrete path that once traversed a row house backyard. I could smell shit and had to weigh the risk and revulsion of handling it. But perhaps out of a sense of duty, I used a plastic bag on the ground to pick up the distended, dripping diaper and move it into a trash bag. As the summer progressed, I and the other garden volunteers continued to find diapers and excrement in the same spot. Garden volunteers had access to a porta potty behind the garden fence. But the flower garden was located outside the fence, on the garden's periphery, adjacent to the remains of a newly demolished building. It is difficult to say with certainty who was defecating in the garden and for what reason; however, the presence of shit on the periphery illustrates the diverse ways urban gardens serve the needs of people navigating spaces of (infra)structural abandonment.



There are 73 properties surrounding the garden. Since 2015, 40 of these properties have been demolished or are scheduled for demolitions, and 16 properties have been issued vacant building notices. Only 6 of the properties are owner occupied with the remainder owned by property speculators, the Baltimore Housing Authority, or the Mayor and City Council (City of Baltimore, Baltimore County Government, n.d.). Despite the many abandoned and demolished houses, the streets surrounding the garden were often full of people walking by or sitting on the stoops of boarded up houses. If I or other garden volunteers were working outside the fence, people would come by and chat. Conversation topics orbited around the garden touching on work and food. Over time, I learned people's names and bits of their histories. Some people were houseless, some lived in the neighborhood, while others were visiting for services offered by the nearby substance use treatment center. The people that populate my memories offer a contrast to the voids—of homes and other infrastructure—left by demolitions. These voids and the conditions of housing inequality that produced them, channeled debris and bodily fluids to the margins of the garden to be picked up.

#### *4. Rotting*

Most Fridays it was only me and Mr. Barton in the garden. We typically divided our time between the three main garden plots. Following the roles we set when we first met, I played the knees and back, spending most of the day kneeling to pull weeds and pick vegetables. Mr. Barton cast himself as the arms and legs—he mowed lawns, pruned branches, walked to the store to get us soda, and packed the picked vegetables into the back of his truck to bring to his church and neighbors. I struggled to keep up with weeding and was glad on days when there were other volunteers. Other days, things were left undone. Sometimes this was a strategic decision. Mr. Barton once reproached me for over-enthusiastic weeding, telling me that some weeds should be left intact rather than pulled: “leave the white flowers—the bugs like to eat those and leave the vegetables alone.”





Other tasks and materials got put off or forgotten. One day, while weeding around the zucchinis, I noticed some left on the ground, spilling out of a plastic bag. The zucchinis were soft and beginning to show signs of rot. As I placed them back in the bag and walked to the trash can along the gravel path, I remember the rocks sinking slightly under my weight, each step emitting a soft crunch. It was the end of the summer and there were more vegetables than we could keep up with. The garden smelled like compost. But we did not have any compost bins because, I was told, like the vacant houses, they attract rats. While the garden resists displacement simply by existing, this internalized restriction of possibilities for what can and can't be part of garden infrastructure points to how it is shaped and limited by the surrounding demolitions.



Rats and rotting vegetables can be a visceral reminder that fixing up “nice and beautiful” can take confronting voids, excess, and revulsion. While up until now I have presented memory snapshots focusing on vegetation, waste, and rot, the following two sections place garden work in a broader context to explore how targeted disinvestment perpetuates precarious conditions that can leave urban gardens teetering between fixing up “nice and beautiful” and falling into disrepair.

### ***5. Remembering***

The last time I saw Mr. Barton we remembered. We sat at a table in his narrow living room, from which we cleared off stacks of papers, and drank syrupy sweet wine fermented from garden grapes. We looked at a binder containing photographs and newspaper clippings about the garden. One from July 23, 2000 caught my eye. The article was titled *From eyesores to gardens*. The “eyesores” described in the article were vacant lots—land remaining in the footprint of demolished buildings. The article’s anonymous author described Mr. Barton’s garden as an “exceptional” example of a vacant lot. It was exceptional, the author wrote, because unlike “a majority of Baltimore’s more than 14,000 vacant lots” it is “productive” and “pleasing to the eye.”

Twenty-one years ago, the article's author identified the fragility of urban gardens, and despite declaring the success of Mr. Barton's garden, warned that it was "teetering" due to a lack of "younger gardeners [...] to take over when members of the aging core group become incapacitated or die." Mr. Barton is now the last remaining gardener from this core group. Baltimore Green Space, the non-profit that the article's author cited as bringing the concern of "teetering" urban gardens to light, has taken an active role in increasing enthusiasm for Mr. Barton's garden. They support a community garden liaison and partner with AmeriCorps volunteers to help ensure that the garden remains staffed, productive, and beautiful. I saw these initiatives during my time at the garden and saw a rise in the presence of volunteer days and clean-up efforts as Baltimore Green Space and their partners prepared the garden for its 30-year celebration in 2019.

Elaborating on the image of precariously "teetering" gardens, the same author went on to state that if gardens are "not kept tidy, they can add blight to neighborhoods that are already waging a losing battle against deterioration." While this statement points to the ongoing work needed to maintain urban greenspaces it does not explicitly address who does this work nor does it place this work in the context of structural causes of deterioration. In the two summers I spent in the garden, I saw the surrounding neighborhood continue to experience displacement and demolitions, despite the day-to-day work of Mr. Barton and volunteers to keep the garden "tidy." While a precarious existence threatens the longevity of urban gardens, it may be the only reality they can fit into within uneven racialized development schemes that thrive from concentrating decay in majority Black neighborhoods so that displacement and redevelopment can be justified. In this violent existence sustained by entwined anti-Blackness and capitalism (Bledsoe and Wright, 2018), urban gardens like Mr. Barton's become sites of a contradictory dual struggle—finding the time, resources, and bodies to fix the garden up "nice and beautiful" amidst a backdrop of continued targeted deterioration.

## 6. *Legacy*

Some scholars have referred to cities, like Baltimore, with an overabundance of vacant lots, as "legacy cities." These scholars identify legacy cities as those that have "experienced significant job loss and population decline over the past few decades and have had a difficult time bouncing back" (Carlet et al., 2017). Both top-down and grass-roots greening efforts have been promoted by urban scholars and planners as strategies to re-imagine "legacy cities" as vibrant and productive (Carlet et al., 2017; Pallagst et al., 2017; Schilling and Logan, 2008). Interpreted broadly, "legacy" in this writing can refer to "landscape-memories" (Wylie, 2009) that recall industry, homes, and businesses. Legacy can also refer to policy and planning legacies, such as mortgage redlining, block-busting, and neighborhood covenants, that targeted disinvestment in majority Black neighborhoods across US cities so that the value of majority white neighborhoods could be maintained. But legacies can also speak to the future. In gardens that exist alongside targeted demolitions, gardeners often rely on already strained systems of support, like non-profit partnerships and informal volunteers, while working to cultivate the garden's uncertain future existence (Reese, 2019). Dana once told me that all Mr. Barton wants for his work in the garden and service to the community is recognition, but not just for himself. There is a mural of Mr. Barton that adorns the side of a building located in one of the garden's most visible areas, and he would like to see the mural expanded to contain photos of everyone who has worked in the garden but is no longer with us. I did not see this happen during my time in the garden, but I did witness the demolition of an adjacent building featuring a mural of Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, and Malcom X.

Community gardens are sites for balancing impermanence and legacy. They reflect the impermanence of plants that must be planted, replanted, weeded, and picked. They remind us of the impermanence of gardeners who come and go: Dana left the garden in my first summer there and I left when I moved away from Baltimore for a new job. There are also gardeners who pass away, like the garden's founding members. Their deaths challenge me to question the privilege inherent in my ability to leave and reflect on the daily work and people who remain to steward the garden.

Here, in writing with my own garden memories, the images that stand out are the ones that center on what may feel out of place—rot, trash, excrement. These sensory memories highlight how day-to-day garden tasks aim, and sometimes fail, to maintain a space that exists in a presumed impermanence (Drake and Lawson, 2014). These memories also bring to light how the production of food in community gardens is an activity distributed through time and bodies. Garden work to fix up “nice and beautiful” is never done, it is just passed on, and the trajectory of gardens is always teetering. Last March, at the start of widespread recognition of rising COVID-19 cases in the US, Mr. Barton told a local newspaper that there would be nothing planted in the garden that summer due to a lack of volunteers. “Last year I had more hands than I needed, this year I could use a whole lot.”

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