

*Messy Gardening*

I awake one morning  
to the sound of clunking pattering above  
me as if the tumbling sky  
unleashed fury in  
dropping everything it could find —  
the waste of molten  
earth melding  
green on brown in  
my mind my eyes  
now blind and my  
breath as that of a  
worm which, I  
wondered,  
have I come to inhabit  
this body of the underground?

and I,  
was my duty  
to swallow it all  
without a cry or  
anguish

so I reached out:  
only my hands felt the earth,  
but my whole body  
and whole world  
was nothing but the experience of  
being my hands  
buried in moist soil.

I felt their hands reach into the earth  
touch my body

(of hands)  
and there were colors everywhere, though I was blind.  
I felt endless miles  
of branches of  
roots  
of the span of the earth stretching out far  
beneath me,  
all around me  
(bubbling up between  
buildings and asphalt  
remembrance of its own continuity).<sup>1</sup>  
my hands gripped the posts driven into the earth  
like a rope underwater  
as I felt the earth tremble, shiver,  
a quiet, incessant hum falling from the freeway,<sup>2</sup>  
like a lightning split<sup>3</sup> of the ghosts of immigrant homes  
except the thunder never ceased.<sup>4</sup>

The sun still hangs halfway up the sky  
the gardeners stooped in their plots  
share a water hose, and  
I watch  
as the words  
  
fall from their mouths  
  
fall upon the earth  
in accents,  
twisted tongues,

dying dialects,

and some of them understand  
some do not, but  
smile (teeth  
yellowed from  
age, missing  
some,  
crooked with a lifetime of smiles and  
frowns) nonetheless<sup>5</sup> –  
and I hold out my hand to catch their languages  
knowing I might choke  
on every  
word like  
tears cried  
for those years of  
speaking on a different  
land nowhere to go  
and those years  
together finally  
on this land, growing.

I reach, reached out, to touch the waste –  
wondering, what waste?<sup>6</sup>

Here are the old mangled leaves of kabocha squash, vines of chinese long bean and  
yam their body / substance / returning to the depths  
turning slow circles as matter of life wondering to  
themselves when the hairiness of being so many different  
forms at once

at once gaseous, solid, liquid dissolved,  
odorous, visibly falling apart, and invisible  
buried under

congeals to stable state and settles far down in the ground, in the valleys of  
time<sup>7</sup> here are the old cardboard boxes

that contained some other container (yeah, probably plastic)

~~(the magic of carrying something swaddled in multiple layers of  
intensively MANUFACTURED material)~~<sup>8</sup>

soaked sopping pulpifying over

soon I will see its pile of cellulose heading my way again, once in some far away  
land (land of nature, purer than anything here amidst the concrete jungle) in the  
depths of a forest, where its hydrocarbons were pulled slowly from the ground,  
assembled from the place I now blindly inhabit, float in, embody, encapsulate;  
combined with: the air I drink from above, its gift of water, and the ancient  
sunshine

here are the multi-colored plastic

containers single-use: use once

loathed as (in) humanity's consumer excrement  
and still nobly serving their purpose, holding our  
shit and it's harder for me to see,

here,

where they came from,

from what depth of buried earth these fossil kin were  
ripped<sup>9</sup> an eternal sleep broken to stoke the flames of:

the [INDUSTRY] [machine] – every car on the freeway every plane in the air even the  
\*bulldozer\* used to sculpt the hillside that would eventually become the garden<sup>10</sup>

and with the byproduct of these ancient earth

dwellers a single-use afterthought

is brought into the

world I am listening for their

murmur

the way their bodies sound now, in this hardened, mute

form the way they sound when they brush up soft

on each other

on the water pouring out from their obligate

cavities on the gardeners's hands

on me

I see in layers

soil studded and stratified, these little gems of culture,

the drying rack-turned trellis  
the fence made of the plastic frame that holds window blinds to the  
window the old CD hanging from a string as a bird deterrent<sup>11</sup>

every bit of a society built on the act of throwing *it*  
away, putting it out of mind, the excess and waste  
    heaping on piles of sprawling on detritus, teetering inward on the precipice of  
    collapse obscured by the delusion of  
        open earth elsewhere, dumping grounds  
        barren, unnatural sites to bear unnatural waste  
        like the lands that these gardeners call home  
        (and I will hold it all)

I divide and multiply, hands enough to hold together  
every garden structure leaning upon each other,  
knowing  
these elderly gardeners are more than messy hoarders of useless  
    plastic this is all they know  
    taught from childhood to make do with  
    anything to save, stretch resources as far as  
    possible  
and though the messiness is theirs, I claim it as mine too.

I climb up through the fruit trees shading the gardeners<sup>12</sup>  
watch as they plant, pull, move slowly around their small  
plots;  
relentless in their care, I exhale with the wind blowing in from the Sound  
and feel in my roots the press of feet, the feet of millenia, firm on ground now nurtured with  
fallen fruit,  
fresh in its cycle through earth / life / and old as the bones holding the garden together in  
multi-color disarray.

### *Footnotes*

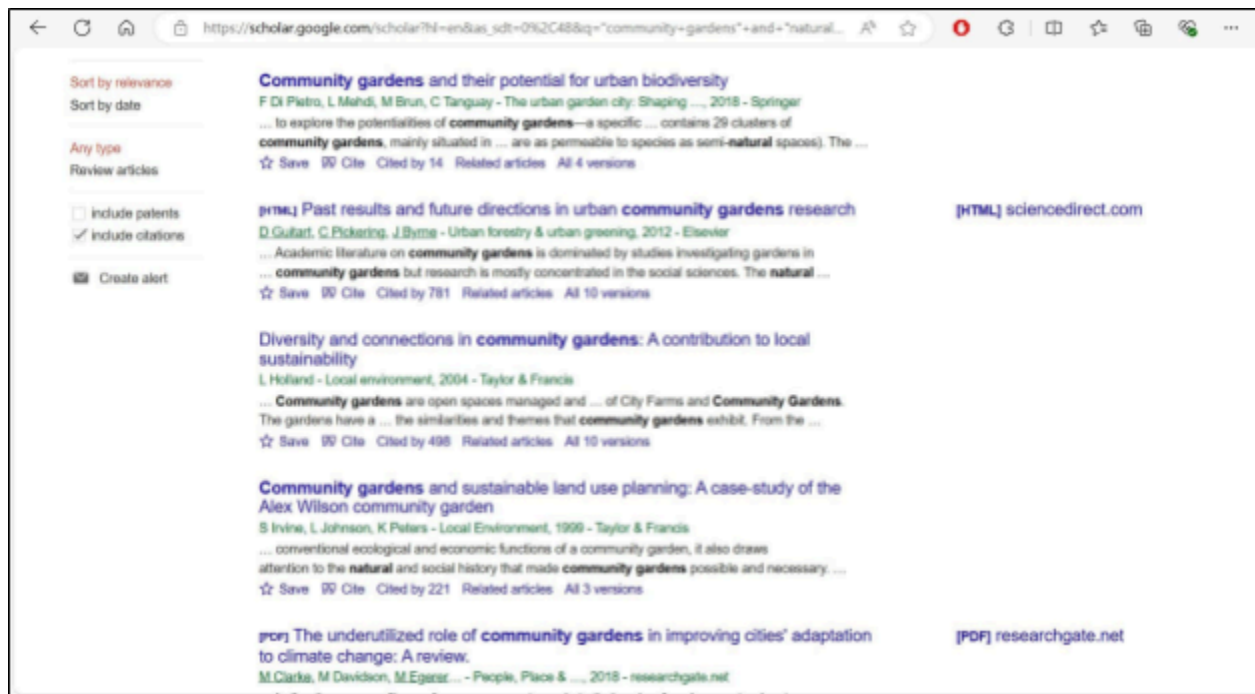
1. I was sitting in Grieg Garden on the UW campus one day, looking at how much space there was (for a built environment) for leaf litter to fall and roots to grow. I think about that a lot: hard surfaces that are expected to be clean vs. “soft” surfaces, like forest floor, that accept debris of all kinds and doesn’t get a second look about what’s in/on it, decay, mess, and all. I thought about how close the soft surface of Grieg Garden was to the hard surfaces of roads, paths, and buildings through campus, and all of a sudden, I could see Earth below stretch out underneath everything. Despite compacted soil, foundations poured tens of feet underground, tunnels, and all the other infrastructure of urbanism, under every surface lay more continuous Earth.
2. The Danny Woo Community Garden is a peaceful place, but it is surrounded by an endless wall of noise. It is located right by I-5, which offers a homogenized stream of tires on asphalt. Occasionally, the noise from the freeway is highlighted by a semi truck’s compression brakes, a motorcyclist gunning the gas, or the unmuffled exhaust of someone tearing through downtown far too fast. Then, there are planes that fly overhead every 1-2 minutes, loud enough to drown out the sound of any reasonable thought in one’s head.
3. I imagine the lightning as the flash of destruction, development – the seemingly unstoppable force that wipes out a whole community in one strike.
4. In the 1960s, the construction of the Interstate 5 freeway razed a whole neighborhood in Chinatown, displacing hundreds of people who used to live on the hillside. The freeway split the district in half and is now a major source of noise and air pollution. The construction of the freeway through a minority community was not unique to Seattle’s Chinatown; it was another instance of environmental racism, in which much of the burden of a large civic project fell on Seattle’s marginalized Asian groups. With the regular sweeps of the unhoused people who live under or around it, the freeway continues to be a symbol of displacement. And so its divisive legacy lives on as a strip of virtually uninhabitable land (Ray).



Construction of the I-5 freeway through Chinatown, stretching southward in the picture. Image from International Examiner, courtesy of Wing Luke Museum (Ray)

5. This intimate image of the gardeners speaking to each other, sometimes in the same language and dialect, sometimes not, defines the garden as a hybrid, *natural* space, a space in which all forms of life, all forms of material, flourish. Natural spaces are not meant to be isolating; they are for humans just as much as they are for plants and animals. Natural spaces are not meant to have some sort of “service” attached to them; even if they do fulfill an “ecosystem service,” they are first and foremost *natural spaces*. Somehow, a natural space in the city is subject to far more *obligations*, i.e. **contributing** to local sustainability, **potential** for urban biodiversity, **improving** cities’ adaptation to climate change. These examples were all taken from article titles in the picture below, and the words in bold show how easily an urban natural space can fall into a homogenous whole of green squares scattered across a city’s map, checking off as many boxes as possible under “ecosystem services.” During my research, one results page from a search for “community gardens” AND “natural” made me feel especially frustrated:





Now, I realize I digressed from community gardens to natural spaces fairly quickly, but! Here's the thing: if a garden, which has a far more utilitarian connotation than a natural space, can only be seen for how it furthers one human agenda or another, whether it be biodiversity or sustainability or food sovereignty, it still loses its inherent value as a garden and a natural space. Perhaps my problem is not so much with the language of different ecosystem services (except that very phrase – “ecosystem services.” I just don't know how else to generalize them), but singling them out within a garden or natural space. See note 6 for a less flustered, more positive (as in, not so many not's/what a garden should *not* be and instead what it is) elaboration on my thoughts here.

6. I'm considering this word in two forms: waste, as in rubbish; and waste, as in a missed opportunity, as if the garden's land could be used for so much more. Here is where the stakes of my poem become clearer, because so much of it grapples with a murky, abstract notion of what is considered “natural.” If our cultural views of what is considered “natural” dictate what kind of land deserves designation as open, natural space and *only* open, natural space, then something like a community garden – especially one that appears as messy as the Danny Woo Garden – is doomed. In *The Informal American City*, Jeffrey Hou writes, “community gardens remain one of the most poorly defined types of land use... Institutionally, gardens are often considered as an interim use, eventually to be replaced by a higher-end development” (79). Hou shows the unstable, temporary positions that community gardens often occupy – not

important enough to save in the face of a high-end development, but important enough to expend the time and energy to create a garden for a short amount of time before being built over.

The fact that community gardens fulfill such a range of roles within an urban space is the very reason why they defy easy definition. Not only are they spaces for food production, but for urban renewal, community gathering space, natural area, habitat for all kinds of life, etc (81). In my poem, I also consider what it means for the life and land of a garden to deserve preservation in their own right, as miracles of life flourishing in the city beyond their services to humans. However, this intrinsic value is complicated by the way land is cared for and how it looks aesthetically, as it is in the Danny Woo Garden. Hou and Chalana echo this sentiment in Chapter one of *Messy Urbanism*, in which he points out that there is a “danger of aestheticizing poverty and the ‘seductive lure of Third World informality’ that further exacerbates the inequalities that already exist in such cities by a misplaced focus on aesthetic improvement of the built environments of the poor” (9). It is not the aesthetic of messiness that we need to praise or be repulsed by, but what we can genuinely learn from it: “The focus on informality and messiness here highlights the **roles and contributions of diverse actors** in the making of the urban environment, economy, and city life” (9). Understanding urban messiness as one of the core aspects of a city – and especially an Asian city – rather than as something to be cleaned up, can inform what kinds of space deserve attention and preservation as inalienable, or rather, inevitable, public and community space.

7. How long will it take for all of this to decompose? More than that, how long will it take to settle, for this matter and these bodies to rest once more? I’m thinking about this all with the fossil kin in mind (see note 9), as well as long-term carbon storage, as well as a routine of care – in the form of gardening, putting hands into earth day after day. How long will it take for this matter to be undisturbed, not something to be extracted from the soil?
8. To think that the pulp of paper (churned from the bodies of felled logs that grew for forty or more years), and the resin of plastic (made from animal bodies fossilized for thousands and millions of years) is the result of our beautiful precision craft processes of manufacturing for the sole pleasure-habit of breaking it down for the trash can.
9. In her article “Fish, Kin, and Hope,” Zoe Todd reimagines petrochemical products like oil, gas, and plastic as fossil kin rather than as weaponized “petro-capitalist extractions” (107). She does

this through her perspective of a Metis woman whose family has long been deeply tied to the North Saskatchewan River, and who must reflect on her “responsibilities to ‘inert’ or polluting materials, like the oil that spilled into the North Saskatchewan River” (106). I wanted to reimagine plastic in the Danny Woo Garden in the same way. By viewing plastic as fossil kin, we must reconsider the origin, function, journey, and endpoint of the reused plastic materials in the garden – as agential and complex rather than *only* as the toxic nuisance that plastic has come to be despised.

10. As mentioned in my artist statement, I thank Steffi Morrison, the collections manager at the Wing Luke Museum, for helping me access “An Oral History of the Danny Woo International District Community Gardens.” I can only highlight parts of the garden’s history because I could not retell it any better than the interviewees who were involved with the garden first-hand.

In order to create the terraces for the garden, a bulldozer was used to grade the hill. This is a particularly vivid image in my mind because, visiting the garden today, it is hard to imagine a large piece of machinery like that in such tight quarters as the garden, overflowing with greenery. The image of the machine also contrasts with the immense amount of hand-labor that was involved in building the terraces and stabilizing the ground on which the garden rested. Like much of Seattle, the hillside was prone to running right off when it rained, so it needed erosion control. Thinking about the history of how the land under the garden was shaped informed my ideas about how a garden can be *natural* even with/after major human interventions.

11. Image below taken by me: the bird deterrent made from a CD on a string. Smart!



12. The Danny Woo Garden has so many layers. Not only is it terraced and built up with wooden structures surrounding the plots, but myriad fruit trees shade the garden and drop fruit into the plots and onto the pathways. In fact, Asian gardens – or at least Chinese gardens, to the extent of my knowledge from research – are characteristically diverse. Conventional gardens grown on a small plot of land the size of the Danny Woo Garden focus primarily on growing vegetables, whereas Chinese gardens act as mini farms (the distinction between “agriculture” and “gardening” blurred), growing vegetables, herbs, and fruit all in a compact area. Traditionally, “individual households were the basic unit of production,” so gardeners/families not only had to grow everything on their own land, but they could choose what they wanted to grow (Boileau 28). This allowed for a great diversity in what was grown in gardens, but the practice inevitably looks messier than a conventional Western garden. Seeing the garden’s layers helps us perceive a seemingly-nonexistent structure and order within the messiness.



An image I took of the garden's layers. In the foreground are trellises and garden structures supporting a flowering vine (I don't know what type), and in the middle ground is an apple tree hanging over the garden.



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