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“Growing” communities with urban agriculture: Generating value above and below ground

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon original research examining urban agriculture projects in Denver, Colorado, this article explores the “growing” metaphor used in community development circles, especially those involving food-growing schemes. The authors propose the following analytic distinction: above ground/below ground. The former refers to those capitals we count as community development scholars, whereas the latter speaks to the values shaping the capitals that community members feel ought to count. The article also brings together previously disparate literatures that have more in common than their respective track records suggest – the (above ground) community capitals and (below ground) diverse economies approaches. While explorative, this article aims to help others understand the complex processes involved in not only the generating of community capitals but in the practices and discourses that lead to them being valued by stakeholders.

KEYWORDS

Community capitals; diverse economies; food justice; social capital; urban agriculture

Introduction

“Growing” is an especially common metaphor used to frame urban agricultural (UA) efforts as they apply to community development. For example, projects often claim to be “growing community.” But what does this mean? The aim of this article is not to nail down the expression – to *grow* community – but engage with it in a manner we believe could be analytically and conceptually fruitful to community development scholars and practitioners. To do this, we bring together two models that, while remarkably similar, are rarely discussed within the same article: the Community Capitals Framework (e.g. Emery & Flora, 2006; Flora & Allen, 2006), commonly employed in community development circles (especially within North America), and the Diverse Economies Framework (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 2008; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healy, 2013), well known in post-structural feminist and community activist circles (especially in Australia and New Zealand).

This article draws upon research on food-based community projects in Denver, Colorado. The concept of “growing” was brought up repeatedly during our time in the field, in our

interactions with practitioners, politicians, business leaders, community activists, residents, and farmers. Their ideas about growth spanned a variety of topics, including food, community, people, and the economy. At one level, much of what our respondents wanted to grow speaks directly to the phenomena of community capitals, of building – or “spiraling up” (Emery & Flora, 2006) – social relationships, political participation, volunteerism, community identity, local investments, and the like. And yet, among those interviewed, notions of growth were not limited to traits that could be readily counted, as many also pointed to values that underpinned the aforementioned capitals. This brings us to an analytic distinction that we believe could be a useful guide for those working on and thinking about community development: above ground/below ground. In other words, when we seek to grow community, we would do well to focus on the growth that occurs *both* above ground and below it.

As we think through this analytic distinction, we suggest that the Community Capitals Framework is particularly attuned to above ground growth (though not to suggest that this approach ignores entirely what goes on below the surface, a point we will return to). Community capitals’ emphasis on invested and increasing *assets* (e.g. Emery & Flora, 2006) and their measurement assumes to some degree that we already know what ought to be valued, and that those value judgments remain fixed throughout the development process, even bestowing on those phenomena the prized term “capitals.” However, not everyone working to improve communities agrees on what ought to be valorized. Similarly, we cannot assume that the capitals prioritized by stakeholders will remain unchanged over time. And then, finally, what is to be done in situations in which stakeholders choose to valorize only some capitals, or one? Too often, economic capital, for instance, takes priority over other capitals, as evidenced by development schemes that focus on “industrial attraction” (tax breaks, etc.) with little attention given to the types of “returns” such enticements bring to a community.

Community Capitals Framework scholars rightfully emphasize the need for *community involvement* when constructing these indicators, and the more inclusive that involvement, the better (Flora & Flora, 2015). Yet we argue this still does not sufficiently explain where those values come from. Traditionally marginalized groups may value things differently, perhaps even prioritizing friendships (social capital) over money (financial capital) (de L’Estoile, 2014). This is undoubtedly an important reality that all scholars, practitioners, and activists need to be aware of when conceptualizing and working toward growing prosperous communities. We think more attention could be paid to understanding *why* groups value the world the way they do. Otherwise, there is the risk that the capital-inclusive nature of the Community Capitals Framework could result in a perception of values being imposed, either from dominant to marginalized groups or vice versa. What would this approach say to someone (or a group) that ardently proclaims, “I/we don’t want to value social or cultural or political capital!”? This is where attention to “below ground” growth is important, to the values held within and across communities and the practices, habits, and deeply visceral (human *and* more-than-human) interrelationships that those *oughts* are tethered to. Better understanding of the sociomaterial “soil” upon which communities’ grasp of value is based would help redirect statements, whether justified or not, like those from stakeholders who wish to prioritize financial capital at the expense of, for instance, cultural capital. And so, ultimately, we can more forcefully argue that the aim is not about *making* people value the world differently, but instead coming up with community-specific strategies that result in residents actually *choosing* a more inclusive outlook on what ought to be valued.

The Diverse Economies Framework can help us incorporate these evaluations into our analysis. Given its associations with post-structural political economy, this approach looks at “the economy” not as a fixed thing but as a series of fluid relations, a perspective that casts neoliberalism less as some thickly muscled monolithic juggernaut whose effects are inevitable and universally felt (neoliberalism) and more as something contested, and contestable, and that varies across space and time (neoliberalisms). Traditional agrarian political economy approaches, for instance, tend to hold tight to the former view (e.g. Foster, 1999; Mann & Dickinson, 1978). (The Diverse Economies Framework has some intriguing overlap with the interactionist perspective (Wilkinson, 1991) known to community development scholars, though that analysis will have to be explored at another time.) What interests us specifically about the Diverse Economies Framework is its attention to the ways in which citizens come to negotiate understandings of “value.” Viewing economies as highly situated performances, rooted in sociomaterial networks, the Diverse Economies Framework helps us understand why communities value the things that they do. It is therefore our contention that these approaches complement each other, with community capitals focusing on phenomena we can grasp methodologically and that generate wealth within communities, and diverse economies reminding us that what counts is not objectively given and that practices shape what capitals are valued in the first place, though, again, this distinction is more about analytic emphasis than suggesting a conceptual blind spot on the part of either approach.

The article proceeds as follows. We begin by briefly reviewing the Community Capitals and Diverse Economies frameworks. This is followed by a discussion of methods, followed further by a short background of UA activities in Denver. The article concludes by reviewing various empirical vignettes. The aim of these short analyses is not so much about making definitive statements, such as about what is working from a community development or food/nutritional security standpoint, but more about making conceptual and empirical connections between the contested values below ground and the capitals spiraling up above it. By doing this, we hope to contribute to the literature some novel ways to think and talk about growing community capitals, realizing that this process involves more than just (objectively given) capital flows. It also involves working the soil upon which those communities rest, thus giving rise to diverse community economies that value more than just the “fictitious commodities” (Polanyi, 2001) of land, labor, and money.

Above ground: Community capitals

Growing healthy, just, and sustainable communities, according to the Community Capitals Framework, involves paying attention to the triple bottom line – economic, social, and environmental accountabilities. These three sustainability pillars come together when a variety of capitals are present in sufficient degree. Those include natural, built, financial, political, social, human, and cultural capitals.

Research on the interactions of these capitals shows some to be better starting points toward the triple bottom line than others. According to Emery and Flora (2006), social and human capitals are the ideal entry points, leading eventually to a “spiraling up” effect, whereby all capitals are enhanced over time. Beyond analytically teasing apart the various capitals at play in community development, this approach focuses on the interaction among the seven capitals (see Table 1) and how they build upon each other. Using this framework, scholars have shown how investments in human capital at the community level through,

Table 1. Seven capitals and their role in sustainable and just agroecosystems and communities.^a

Capital	Definition	Role in sustainable and just agro-ecosystems and communities
Natural	The natural biophysical assets of any given locale; can include natural resources (e.g. water, soil, air, and minerals), amenities (e.g. trout streams and National Parks), and ecosystem services	Represents the ecological productive base for the long-term growth and maintenance of other capitals
Cultural	Cultural understandings and practices that shape how we grasp the world, including what we take for granted and how we envision possible alternatives for social change	Represents a measure to understand embodied knowledge and worldview diversity within a community. The richer the stock, the greater the options for envisioning social change. Embodied knowledge is vital for “problem” definitions and the creation of just solutions
Human	Representational knowledge and skills (as opposed to embodied knowledge) acquired through more formal educational channels	Represents a measure of a community’s formal knowledge base. Representational knowledge is vital for problem-solving
Social	The social glue of a community, which includes mutual trust, reciprocity, and respect and empathy for others	Represents a measure of community cohesiveness. Social capital is a social lubricant that reduces the transaction costs of enhancing the other capitals
Political	Access to structures of power and power brokers as well as the ability to influence the rules and regulations that shape access to resources	Represents a measure of a community’s power as well as a way to assess its distribution across stakeholders. The more evenly distributed, the better the likelihood for just, equitable solutions
Financial	The financial resources available to invest in, for example, community-capacity building, knowledge exchange, the built environment, and entrepreneurship	Represents a measure of a community’s economic wealth. The more evenly distributed across the community, the better the likelihood for just, equitable solutions
Built	The built environment, which includes constructed natural areas (e.g. parks, reconstituted wetlands, and ski runs) and physical artifacts within communities (e.g. sidewalks, Internet access, and public transportation)	Represents a measure of a community’s physical assets; assets that not only support other capitals but which could be repurposed for multiple ends and thus substituted for economic assets (e.g. utilizing an existing physical structure vs. constructing something new)

^aWhile the authors utilized these definitions, it is understood that there is variability in the literature in how these concepts are understood and applied.

for instance, leadership training, can impact financial capital as those leaders employ their newly acquired skills to obtain new funds and better manage existing funds, all of which, in turn, bolster political capital (improved access), social capital (as social networks expanded), and so forth. The Community Capitals Framework expands our understanding of “return on investment,” noting that it should be measured in terms of an increase in *all* capitals – not just financial. Furthermore, the approach makes the case that stakeholder involvement is essential, so change can be directed from within a community.

This process of “spiraling up,” however, assumes those within a given community already value all capitals; perhaps not are all valued equally but are valued nevertheless, otherwise the process of *cumulative causation* would not be able to take place. This brings us back to a point made earlier – spiraling up also involves a change in the communities’ calculations about what counts. The Community Capitals Framework hints that this “below ground” work is going on. Rather than merely hint at these embodied, practice-based belowground processes and patterns, we believe it is fruitful to explicitly recognize the role they play in the spiraling up process. For instance, as Emery and Flora (2006) note about their work in rural Nebraska:

Without changes in the traditional leadership structure and actors, the community could not have mobilized citizens to support changes. The collaborative partners provided technical assistance and coaching that encouraged 35 people to graduate from two leadership classes. Buoyed

by this success, the leadership team promised to offer the class each year. They will increase the value of the program each year as they learn from their experiences. [...] The involvement and support of youth was particularly important to the team's sense of accomplishment. The leadership team reported that more people increased their involvement in community groups, and the leadership core expanded somewhat to include new voices. (p. 25)

And later in the same article:

The team worked to revise a local investment club to use its capital to support local business development. [...] A local person was hired as an entrepreneurship coach to benefit young people and existing businesses. [...] [The hope is that this] work will result in a community that is supportive of entrepreneurial efforts and small but growing businesses. [...] The entrepreneurship coach's portfolio of active business clients grew to over 100 businesses. (p. 27)

We contend that these various community-building activities – the inclusion of new voices, youth in leadership positions, entrepreneurial coaches to stimulate conversations about the “value” of small, local businesses, etc. – are also processes whereby what is valued within the community is being negotiated, challenged, and ultimately changed. This point needs to be made more explicit, in terms of not only how we talk about growing communities but also in terms of how communities implement social change. For without a strong grasp of how practices, organizational forms, networks, and embodied experiences alter peoples' conceptions of what *ought* to count within a community, there is a risk of values being imposed (or at least the perception of this) from the outside or by others within the community.

Recent work, which supports our argument, more directly addresses community values by focusing on changes in cultural capital (e.g. Keating & Gasteyer, 2012). To be clear, we are not suggesting that Community Capitals Framework scholars are uninterested in values. Yet the nature of an approach that emphasizes indicators, the importance of which we are not questioning, tends to result in scholarship that analytically privileges questions pertaining to measurement – that which lies above ground. Meanwhile, questions pertaining to why communities recognize and embody particular values – those that lie below ground – are left under theorized. This is where the Diverse Economies Framework can be helpful.

Below ground: Diverse economies

The Diverse Economies Framework challenges us to emancipate ourselves from more traditional political economy approaches when assessing existing processes and practices. Rather than totalize the effects of the state or economy in terms of how they measure up against seemingly objective economic norms, this approach seeks out difference and avoids narratives that act to lock us into capitalist growth trajectories (Carolan, 2013a,b, 2016; Gibson-Graham, 2008). Within economic sociology and geography, attention is increasingly being paid to how notions of value – indeed, notions of economy, capitalism, and neoliberalism itself – are deeply contested (e.g. Larner, 2003; Lewis, 2009). The intervention made by these scholars is to replace the binary opposition of mainstream (thickly muscled Goliath) vs. alternative (scrappy resistant) with the conception of economy as a space of difference. “The diverse economy framing,” to quote Hill (2015, p. 7), “offers an ontology in which the economy is understood as being composed of an array of markets, transactions, forms of labor, enterprise, property, and finance that constitute multiple and diverse economic worlds.” Without delving into a nebulous discussion around issues of ontology and the nature of capitalism, we wish to highlight from this approach its commitment to thinking about what goes on

below the surface, namely, those processes that shape what individuals think a healthy community ought to look like in the first place.

The concept of “reframing” is important here. As Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) explain, “Reframing the economy is a critical step in building community economies” (p. 7). They go on to note that, “through a process of reframing, familiar understandings are shifted and new norms and thinking and acting emerge (often supported by government legislation)” (p. 8), later adding, “Our interest is in creating community economies by opening up the economy to a wide diversity of practices that contribute to social, material, and environmental well-being” (p. 10). We want to emphasize, however, that in this context, “reframing” conveys more than just discourse in the conventional sense and is therefore meant to go beyond how issues are discussed and socially constructed. To reframe an economy, according to this approach, is to engage in *activities*. It is, in other words, an active process that goes well beyond how people think about things, noting especially the interrelationship between thinking, feeling, and doing (Carolan, 2016).

We now turn to illustrating empirically these interpenetrating planes, whereby values (visions of how the world ought to be) and capitals (the expression of those values) are negotiated and interrelated.

Methods

The research examined UA performance in Denver, Colorado, in terms of opportunities and barriers for stakeholder collaboration. One of the authors remains heavily involved with various UA groups in Denver, which gives him firsthand experience working on these efforts. This background includes volunteering, interning, and working in UA organizations and researching efforts through positions at two state universities. These experiences occurred over eight years and provide a backdrop for the current study, which began in the spring of 2013.

The data described in this article are drawn from face-to-face interviews based on inclusive sampling strategies that involved soliciting input from possible (and actual) participants during the data collection process to allow the instrument to be sensitive to their context. Early participants were asked what they would like to see in terms of research on UA. The focus on understanding UA outcomes was informed by these initial conversations and interviews. Ongoing conversations also helped shape the analysis and reporting of this research. The aforementioned author’s experience working as a practitioner and researcher on UA in Denver helped overcome some of the barriers to entry that can threaten qualitative research, especially when it came to obtaining a diverse sample. The setting was chosen partially because of this access to the research population, but also due to the large number of UA projects and collaborations in the area. This sample included current and former representatives of non-profit and for-profit UA groups; funding groups such as foundations; city officials; and supporting public institutions such as schools, program partners, technical advisors, and food purveyors. Conversations with key participants have suggested that UA projects commonly entail the collaboration between several if not all of these groups. This is what led to pursuing both breadth and depth of representation among these key stakeholders.

Interviews, participant observation, and content analysis began in May of 2013 (supported by a fellowship and grant to fund continued research through the summer of 2018). Acknowledging a blurring of lines between when this research began and ended, due to

both authors' ongoing research involvement with UA efforts in the area, this project has an approach similar to an extended case method (Burawoy, 1998). We sought out unique cases and interviewed individuals from a range of positions and sociodemographic backgrounds. We contacted people known directly, as well as those recommended by others. We reached out to 83 individuals but ultimately interviewed 52 due to time constraints and resource limitations.

The approach taken also relied at least in part on grounded theorizing. As noted, the data are from the early stages of a broader five-year project. This allowed us the flexibility to be explorative in the project's initial stages. That is not to say we entered the field entirely void of research questions. We knew we wanted to (1) better understand the landscape of UA in Denver, in terms of barriers to entry (for producers as well as consumers) and (2) learn about how these UA projects are "enriching" neighborhoods, the city, region, and state (and learn which spaces are being more enriched than others and why). An initial instrument was developed to guide interviews and was modified with additional questions as new themes and concepts emerged. As these emergent themes became saturated, questions were reframed to allow other concepts to develop. This process drew us to the Community Capitals Framework, while also highlighting this framework's aforementioned analytic asymmetry between what we later came to describe as "above" and "below" ground. We also discovered through this approach a performative aspect of food economies that we felt paralleled that described in the diverse economies literature.

The interviews aimed to develop trust, respect, and mutual understanding in a conversational partnership (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) about UA, in terms of its aims as well as tensions, challenges, and opportunities associated with it. The interviews lasted approximately an hour, were audio recorded, and were conducted in a place comfortable to the participants. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

Urban agriculture in Denver: Setting the stage

UA has been defined as "the growing, processing, and distribution of food and other products through intensive plant cultivation and animal husbandry in and around cities" (Kaufman & Bailkey, 2000, p. 3). Considerable empirical research touts the benefits of UA. For example, it has been found to increase civic capacity (Teig et al., 2009), improve health and well-being levels within communities (Hale et al., 2011; Litt et al., 2011), repair socioecological relationships (McClintock, 2010), and contribute to pragmatic social change (McIvor & Hale, 2015). While there are many supporters of UA projects, it does have its share of skeptics (e.g. Guthman, 2008; Lyson, 2014; McClintock, 2014). One frequent criticism of UA-based community development projects is that they reproduce neoliberal subjectivities and help facilitate the continued erosion of state services. That said, some of these same critics caution that we should not abandon UA entirely but instead be mindful of the structural inequalities that can influence the outcomes of any community-oriented scheme (e.g. McClintock, 2014).

"Urban agriculture" has become a common catchall for various types of food-related projects in cities. The term began to be used more frequently in Denver around 2008. Before then, community and home gardens had been the primary modes of growing food in the city. There were over 150 community gardens in Denver as of 2014, and these gardeners share the food they grow with some 24,015 residents. Community gardens are spaces in which city dwellers garden their own small plot. Sometimes these plots are free, and in other

cases, there is a yearly fee of around \$100. Resources such as tools and water are commonly shared among community gardeners in a particular garden. Most community gardens in Denver are backed by an organization that provides technical and program support.

In 2008, there was a groundswell of interest in such projects. A number of organizations and collaborations began to form around additional activities beyond community and home gardens. These included school and community farms, edible landscaping, community-supported agriculture (CSA), farm to restaurant, farm to cafeteria, aquaponics, farmer collaboratives, and greenhouses. UA activities have occurred on private and public land (i.e. schools, parks, and hospitals). Many organizations formed to support these activities by offering cooking education, volunteer coordination, preservation businesses, and composting services. Some restaurants and grocery stores in the area also began carrying food grown in the city, and conversations have suggested that there has been an increase of Colorado-grown food on menus in Denver restaurants.

As mentioned, schools are also getting involved. In 2013, a Denver public school-based community farm grew over 11,000 lb of food (personal communication with non-profit representative, December 11, 2013). This food was distributed through a CSA to the school cafeteria and food banks. Over 450 individuals volunteered on the farm, totaling 4650 volunteer hours. Further, 815 students have visited the farm to take part in educational activities. Another Denver Public School onsite school farm initiative grew 18,000 lb of food for school cafeterias (personal communication with for-profit representative, January 14, 2014). There are also high-profile farms, such as Blue Bear Farm, located outside the Denver Convention Center. Blue Bear supplies vegetables to the Convention Center kitchen and has been used to market Denver as an innovator in urban sustainability.

UA projects often include the support of a diversity of stakeholder groups – for-profits, non-profits, government offices, foundations, universities, and other public institutions. Collaboration and partnership characterize all UA projects in the area. UA efforts are occurring throughout the city in a variety of neighborhoods, including a spectrum of sociodemographic and cultural settings (see map in Hale et al., 2011).

This short background is not meant to be an exhaustive description of UA-related activities in Denver. Adequately describing the diversity of history, practices, and values in all these projects is beyond the scope of this article. However, the above should provide a sense that UA is occurring in many different forms, through various business models, collaborations, growing practices, city locations, landownership models, and food processing and distributing arrangements. And in the aggregate, as we will now discuss, UA projects often aim at growing more than just food.

Growing economy

In 2013, a report looking at the benefits and challenges of food localization in the city was drafted for the Mayor of Denver taskforce (Shuman, 2013). The benefits were determined using an economic model known as IMPLAN to calculate that a 25% shift toward local food could result in the creation of 4002 new jobs, generate \$202 million in new wages per year, and increase the city's annual GDP by \$346 million. The report also cites a number of challenges to the "25% Shift" to local that it proposes, which include a competitive market environment, lack of human and financial capitals, uneducated consumers, and access to land.

As a whole, the report lacks engagement with a diversity of assets outside of neoliberal, mainstream economics. It focuses on jobs and monetary income, rather than how cultural, social, or political capital could or should be built. Following a more conventional view of “growing” economies, built and financial capitals are often seen as drivers toward change. Language in meetings, reports, and websites was often framed in such terms, including claims from groups interested primarily in economic development or groups whose interests shift with the public’s (some respondents placed the Mayor’s Office in this latter camp). By obscuring alternative non-market relations in their characterization of economic growth, these ideals can create more homogeneity and squelch experimental entrepreneurial relationships, thereby perpetuating a distorted view of existing and potential projects.

However, it is important to remember that this narrative does not exist in a vacuum. While we may be quick to criticize the report as reproducing the status quo and/or being blind to issues of power, the underlying values held in the community, which are admittedly glossed over by the document, are playing a role in opening up new spaces for growth. For example, one participant described economic development as a “byproduct” of their efforts:

I think making sure that food is available to people and affordable is a part of it. But I would say an equally powerful goal [is that] healthy eating/active living and economic development are always hand in hand. It’s very rare that they deviate from each other, and in fact, we are only typically successful when economic development is also a byproduct of what we’re doing. – John, foundation representative

These combining interests in healthy eating/active living aspects of UA allow actors to collaborate and draw on a wider range of resources while renegotiating what they believe should be valued in the first place. The economic development narrative may adhere to a more homogenous economic ideal, but in practice, this ideal gets used and mixed up with many values and goals. Again, this is in part due to the many different organizational interests and stakes in the projects. For example, one participant described the complexity of collaborating and making decisions with many different stakeholders in the following terms:

The amount of departments that had to be a part of approving the farm was astronomical – legal department, safety and security, plumbing, maintenance, grounds, and food and nutrition services. [...] That is five departments right off the top of my head. – Sam, partner and host institution representative

As a potential source of economic growth and food access for low-income communities, UA creates tension between growers and various other stakeholders, including city officials, funders, planners, and landowners. The non-grower stakeholders generally tend to have an eye more toward financial capital when talking about how projects do, or should, sustain themselves. This is often at odds with the experiences of those working more on the ground – growers and those being nurtured (in the broadest sense) by these spaces. However, the practices UA practitioners have developed to sustain their efforts shape and are shaped by such tensions. These practices often draw on synergies between various motivations and carve out new partnerships, organizational forms, and transactions.

There is a farm, for example, on the grounds of the Denver Convention Center that is a partnership between the Center’s food purveyor, a for-profit UA business, and the Mayor’s Office. A main motivation of the food purveyor was to make the Center more attractive and “green” to prospective clients. The Mayor’s Office, for reasons described earlier, is interested primarily in job creation. The UA group aims at generating income through the creation and maintenance of edible landscapes. Though the main narrative may often be about

generating financial capital, the landscaper is getting paid an hourly rate maintaining and growing produce, vs. being paid by, say, the plot's yield. The farmer is therefore less driven by "productivist" (Wilson, 2001) impulses and allowed instead to pay more attention to *all three* legs – ecological, economic, and social – of the sustainability stool, and all while making what approximates a livable wage. The high-profile nature of this project is also helping build social, cultural, and political capitals for UA practitioner groups.

Growing healthy people

Another common theme found within UA narratives might be described as "growing healthy people." The principle aim of this rhetoric is education – human capital – though clearly the building of social networks is at least strongly implied. The intent is to develop the skills and practices to, for instance, grow, process, cook, and recycle food. Within these intentions, there are also subthemes, such as the one directed at growing food for others. A number of issues have been raised in the academic literature concerning such approaches – examples that point to the prioritizing of already-privileged cultural practices and "white" foods (Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2007). Some participants described similar views. Still, a "growing healthy people" theme was understood by some respondents as a means to allow more "apolitical" groups – such as schools – to support UA growth.

Take, for example, the following partnership between a public school district, a for-profit farmer, and a non-profit youth group that grew food for Food and Nutrition Services on three acres on the grounds of two public elementary schools in 2014. The project provided fresh and healthy food to school cafeterias. These schools each offer between 50 and 60 and 90 and 95% free and reduced lunch to their children. The for-profit farming group was paid by the school district using funds that would normally go to food procurement and landscape maintenance. The partner non-profit that provided summer jobs to inner city youth heavily subsidized farm labor. Further, community members and other organizations volunteered on the farms. Such volunteerism and need–need relationships help a partnership keep labor costs down, though projects still rely on funding for supporting other efforts. These relationships were made possible through the initial and ongoing focus on growing food for people and the growing of values, which in time will fertilize the soil allowing for a spiraling of all capitals.

Some might argue that this reliance on volunteerism is the result of neoliberal ideology and practices, as evidenced by such partnerships placing further responsibility on community members in the absence of state regulation and government support for farm to school programs. Through the lens of the Diverse Economies Framework, we prefer to view these activities as experiments in getting people – e.g. school-aged children and school district representatives – to rethink how they grasp and value such phenomena as food, economy, community, and citizen engagement. It is worth noting that the inner city youth, most of non-European decent, are paid to learn and work on the farms. The organization also prioritizes staffing its organization with low-income individuals who are often people of color. While such practices are clearly not addressing all the facets of inequality, its innovative configuration has arisen through the negotiating of different values – an active heterogeneous process whereby people and things come together and collectively refashion and reinvent what *ought* to count.

For many, the value of the food grown is found in the process of growing it, in “getting one’s hands dirty;” and of knowing where one’s food comes from. However, many gardeners also come to value the connections UA allows individuals to make with others in their neighborhood and beyond. Many respondents grew some of their own food and in many cases ended up sharing some of it, as well as resources, duties, knowledge, and recipes – practices that can over time elicit a change in values (Carolan, 2011) and have a spiraling up effect as more capitals come to be valued in their own right. Through these active connections, the “growing people” theme may broaden into stakeholders valuing more of the connections, rather than separations, between people and places. One participant expressed just such a view:

One of the things that is exciting about UA is that it is pushing the boundaries with many things like how we interact with each other, the government, the environment, the built environment.
– George, non-profit representative

Growing community

One public school farm is described as a “community farm.” Here, the partnership and program explicitly seek to develop other social and political values, often in ways that break down boundaries by challenging existing conceptions of what ought to be valued. The project is led by a partnership between a public innovation school and a non-profit organization, with a focus on building community through the farm and its programs. The project educates youth from a host school and other public and private schools and also offers classes and events aimed at a variety of people from the surrounding area. There is a community advisory council that helps steer the farm. Some farm tasks are also shared with this group. However, these various programs and activities struggle to reach a full breadth of representation from the surrounding area. For example, the people coming to events and volunteering are typically white, young, and financially secure. At the moment, it therefore could be said that the farm is growing a particular type of community.

Still, innovative relationships, solidarity, and agency have developed as a result of the project. For example, the farm was originally approved by the school district (which is the landowner) in 2010, with the interest of saving the district money. One district official expressed the following sentiments:

This is a really good use of our water and land. We were looking at it from a cost savings perspective. We have this outside group come in to create these awesome programs and we don’t have to maintain the land anymore. – Kelsea, host institution representative

While this statement could be seen as an example of shifting such responsibilities onto the community, the excitement and connections created through community engagement on the farm has spilled back into the public school district. Thanks to these practices, there has been a shift in terms of what ought to be valued, as the partnership is no longer viewed simply as an effort to save the district money. Now grants, fundraising activities, and even budgetary line items are going to support these efforts as notions of “what counts” are transformed and broadened. Respondents talked about learning to better appreciate and trust others with whom they work on such projects and the positive attention they received from members within the district and community. The collective action associated with the farm, made possible by a reconfiguration of the underlying values of stakeholders, is building

social capital – due to more stakeholders now valuing it – and this in turn is helping establish new networks and mobilize resources for future community development.

However, one challenge we have come across repeatedly is the tendency among politicians and institutions to create “replicable models” that can be used at other schools, cities, states, and beyond. This tendency can lead to moments that discourage experimentation and the various forms of difference and value negotiation that we believe ought to be encouraged. For example, in 2014, the non-profit described above attempted to transfer its model to a community comprised of mostly low-income, Hispanic-Latino residents, rather than the primarily white, middle-income residents of the original school partnership. This new setting also included a different institutional partner (landowner) – Parks and Recreation. The initial feedback from much of the community surrounding the farm is that it does not grow food they like, that what is grown is for “white people,” and that they cannot afford what the farm makes available.

When discussing the drivers of, and solutions to, tensions around one-size-fits-all models, one respondent referenced the need to make sure “the politics of those who don’t have a voice are brought along” (Ted, non-profit representative). In the spirit of growing values, with the aim of growing of community-appropriate capitals, we believe that community-based projects are “sticky,” which is to say that they do not travel well. In other words, each needs to be grown *within* a given community, not transplanted from elsewhere.

And yet, limiting understandings of “community participation” to only local residents has its drawbacks too. The individual just quoted (Ted) felt strongly about the potential benefits of linking underprivileged voices with more established industry actors. If UA networks remain isolated from differing political and cultural orientations, innovation may be limited, and the assets generated may be inappropriate for the stakeholders involved. This is not to deny the need for partnerships with institutional actors. After all, established industry networks often have the infrastructure and other forms of capital to help support the goals of a given UA project.

Again, the more that community members fail to feel that certain capitals ought to be valued, the less likely we will see a spiraling of capitals in those areas. This is precisely why we need to understand the processes that give rise to why communities and individuals evaluate – value – the capitals as they do. By doing so, foodscapes can be reorganized in such a way that encourages a more symmetrical valuation of all capitals. We suggest, in other words, that UA is most successful when community members feel like they are *choosing* to value all capitals equally, or at least with some degree of symmetry, as opposed to feeling as though they are being forced to do so.

Discussion and conclusion

While we understand the importance of calling attention to discourse and practices associated with UA that (intentionally or not) perpetuate existing inequalities (Guthman, 2008), we do not want that critical lens to unintentionally perpetuate the very practices we are hoping to dislodge. Twentieth-century anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) warned of how strong theory can lead scholars to wrongly interpret data by leading with theory and thus imposing assumptions upon one’s field of study. Through an application of strong theory that leads to the imposing of a worldview on data, we risk finding what we are looking for as social scientists, such as support for the narrative that neoliberalism is monolithic. The

data described above resist this one-size-fits-all narrative. The stories we heard point to there being many ways to grow community, that neoliberal economic models are not monolithic, and that actors can experiment and resist even in spaces initially constrained by strong market logics, a demonstration of what Carolan (2013c) calls “difference power.”

We also think our case study offers a novel intervention in how we talk and think about community development. Often, communities in the community development literature remain defined by repeated face-to-face interaction giving rise to norms of generalized reciprocity and trustworthiness (see e.g. Putnam, 2000). This description, however, no longer accurately describes many – arguably the majority of – “communities” around the world, especially in North America, Europe, and the Antipodes (Bridger & Alter, 2006). The Front Range of Colorado remains one of the fastest-growing regions in the US, and over the last decade, Denver County has repeatedly led the state in population growth. The Front Range, and the Denver case especially, looks little like many of the rural communities studied by Community Capitals Framework scholars. By making this point, we are not trying to take anything away from this valuable body of scholarship. Rather, we want to suggest that greater attention be placed on those communities that lack a cohesive sense of “community-ness.” Rather than viewing that absence as inherently problematic, we wish to propose that this lack of collective identity – these tensions-through-difference – might actually be a positive element. Such tensions point to the existence of a wealth of value diversity below the surface, which when given the chance to be exposed, encountered (in a visceral sense), and discussed, could fertilize more resilient capital spirals within the space in question. Moreover, by scaling up our unit of analysis – community – to be more inclusive, we believe one could track how diversity below the surface may actually produce *multiple* upward spirals within a region. Unfortunately, we do not have the space to explore such points. However, there are indications that those actions below the surface are rhizome-like (spread out and replicate through this “underground”) in their ability to create multiple community capitals offshoots across the Front Range. We recognize that economic logics already claim to do precisely that – create what look like multiple spirals – under the guise of entrepreneurialism. A look below the surface of these schemes, however, reveals a narrow suite of values that prioritize financial capital and profit maximization. These values are noticeably different from those that promote *community* wealth development and understandings that prioritize “enough” profit (so as not to risk cutting into other capitals) over a dog-eat-dog approach to doing business. Thus, social entrepreneurialism and classic entrepreneurialism differ as much by what you see above ground as they do by what lies beneath.

The 2013 Colorado floods (September), for instance, adversely affected farms throughout the Front Range. A number of groups in Denver raised awareness about this through social media (linking social capital), newsletters, and fundraisers, as well as through their strong (bonding social capital) and weak (bridging social capital) ties. In short, the success of spiraling up resources in projects throughout Denver has led to linkages with more regional efforts and events. Similarly, successes in more rural communities along the Front Range, involving such phenomena as food hubs and co-ops, have begun to be explored in the Denver area. These initial steps may not have been possible without the diversity of resources and values being grown in this region.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of UA is that its existence necessitates that at least some city dwellers become more socially, culturally, and politically active in the food system (Carolan, 2011; Travaline & Hunold, 2010). Resources, and the values that recognize

them as such, are being co-constructed in networks of meaning within UA projects. While a group may initially get involved in UA for one reason, such as saving water or improving food access, the experiences of working together and of “getting one’s hands dirty” (a statement used often by UA participants to acknowledge the tactile, embodied elements of the craft) can create new organizational and individual values. These changes can open up still additional possibilities for future UA efforts.

As more people from disparate backgrounds are exposed to and participate in alternatives to the industrial food system, the greater the potential becomes for people to imagine and enact alternatives (Carolan, 2013b). Through experimentation, many of the UA projects studied – save for, for instance, those based on “replicable models” – allowed city officials, foundations, farming groups, regional and program partners, and community members to learn about how to “grow” communities. And they did so, importantly, in a way that allowed community-appropriate community capitals to take root.

In sum, drawing upon research on UA projects in Denver, Colorado, this article explores the “growing” metaphor used in community development (and especially UA) circles. In doing so, we offer what we believe is a fruitful analytic distinction: above ground/below ground. We propose this distinction is a useful tool when designing and evaluating experiments with strategies for growing healthy, sustainable, and just communities. We also bring together previously disparate literatures that arguably have more in common than their respective track records suggest – the Community Capitals and Diverse Economies frameworks. While explorative, we hope this article helps others think through the complex processes involved in not only generating community capitals, but in all that goes into making people feel as though certain things ought to be valued in the first place, even those that cannot be readily counted.

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