Lawn Dissidents: Performing Whiteness Through Sustainability in Urban Residential Yards

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Lawn Dissidents:
Performing Whiteness Through Sustainability in Urban Residential Yards

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29 April 2015

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Finally, completing this process would have been possible, maybe, but much more dour and lonely without the affirmation and support of my friends, family, and department. Geography family forever.
Introducing the lawn dissident

To begin, let us imagine a residential street in Minneapolis during the summertime. The front yards are pleasantly modest; they play host to blooming gardens, lounge chairs, trees, and stretches of grass that might feel expansive to children playing but entirely manageable to their parents. The houses themselves range from unassuming to charming, all well tended without any sign of disrepair. None of the gardens look particularly manicured, and most all of the lawns are sprinkled with weeds, but it is still obvious that plenty of care and labor contribute to the aesthetic of the neighborhood.

Amidst this scene, one yard stands out—not egregiously, but quite undeniably. This is because there is no lawn—no turfgrass. On the steep slope down to the street, a cascade of wild, flowerless plants defies the conventions of a domestic garden. Where the slope levels out, the yard is planted with vegetable patches, and unruly flowering bushes hug the edge of the house. A basket sits on the walkway to the house, full of cherry tomatoes, with a sign that reads “Take what you want!” There is another, more permanent sign, purchased from a local nursery specializing in Minnesota native species, dug into the ground on the slope: the sign says, “Bee-Friendly Garden.”

The aforementioned outlier is a lawn dissident. It is easy to imagine how dramatically out-of-place the lawn dissident would feel in a suburban neighborhood characterized by a homeowner’s association and a practically neon-green golf course. Here, though, while the lawn dissident certainly chose a path different than her neighbors in creating a yard of her own, her yard does not seem particularly out-of-place. Although she has decided to do away with her entire front lawn and put her edible garden on display for passersby, her values align with many of her neighbors, who also spend lots of time gardening, grow their own food,
care about the environment, and chat about how they prefer “organic-looking” yards to rigidly formal ones.

Lawn dissidents, at least sustainability-driven lawn dissidents, are found commonly in majority white, upper-middle-class urban residential neighborhoods. They proffer their lawn alternatives—edible gardens, rain gardens, native species gardens—as correctives to the input-heavy monoculture of turfgrass, as well as correctives to the decidedly limiting social norm of the lawn. Importantly, sustainability-oriented lawn dissidents are resolute in their differentiation from derelict lawn dissidents, who violate the lawn norm by simply neglecting yard labor; these derelict lawn dissidents are often associated in popular consciousness with low-income communities of color, as opposed to the affluent white landscapes of eco-conscious yard subjects. “Green” lawn dissidents may also be reminiscent of an increasingly popular market niche catering toward the young, liberal, cosmopolitan set who flock to “sustainable” neighborhoods in “livable,” “walkable” cities, sprinkled with more and more fancy farmers markets teeming with white customers toting Whole Foods shopping bags.

The traditional lawn—suburban, input-intensive, poorly draining—can be seen as a multifaceted environmental problem in itself, as well as a problem that sheds light on other harmful systems, social inclusion and capitalism chief among them. While extensive research has been done on lawns and their implications, much more could be learned about sustainability-driven lawn dissidents. These subjects reject the lawn ideal, the places it creates, and the behaviors it entails, and they manifest their rejection through a commitment to sustainability. If lawns constitute “problems” in and of themselves, as well as elucidating broader systems, it follows that the study of lawn dissidents will summon novel ideas and conclusions that extend far beyond an audacious vegetable garden.

Lawn dissidents must not be seen merely as liberatory solutions to the “problem” of an input-intensive lawn and the concomitant social pressure. They must not be idealized as
apolitical rejections of oppressive social norms, as strategies to escape capitalist systems, or as simple substitutions that swap a harmful practice for a beneficial one. Rather, it is crucial to interrogate how dissident subjects and the landscapes they create establish new, exclusive, spatialized norms in neighborhoods. We must investigate how dissidents and lawn alternatives are entrenched in niche markets, which configure sustainability efforts as white, upper-middle-class, and expensive. Finally, the value of sustainability must always be seen as fraught and political; to be sustainable is not simply to adopt environmental stewardship, but also to promote inclusivity and equity. The extent to which lawn dissidents and their yardscapes perform true sustainability (environmental, economic, and social) must be questioned fiercely if subjects hold as their goal the creation of environmentally-sensitive places accessible and welcoming to all, not just an elite few.

Still, while yards in general and “green” lawn alternatives in particular certainly present a “problem,” they also embody significant value for yard subjects. In cultivating a personal yard, residents express their identities, their politics, and their histories. Unpacking the specific virtues held by subjects regarding their personal landscapes, as well as the narratives and scripts they employ to articulate those virtues, can provide a glimpse into why yards matter to individuals and families. Only with an understanding of exactly why yards matter to yard subjects can we proceed in dismantling the current paradigm of sustainability-oriented dissident yardscapes. Finally, then, can we replace it with a paradigm closer to the most romanticized visions of true sustainability in the landscape.

**Genesis**

This project originally arose from the labor performed in Dan Trudeau’s course, Qualitative Research Methods for Geography, for a community partner, the Freshwater Society of Minnesota. While the Freshwater Society is chiefly concerned with keeping rainwater where it
falls, my class’s collective research shed light on several noteworthy frameworks related to urban sustainability on the personal and neighborhood scales. In particular, I became fascinated by the ways that respondents referred consistently to notions of family: gendered distributions of labor, the ideal of the family-friendly lawn and neighborhood, family as encompassing both pets and property, and more. I worked with Dan Trudeau over the summer of 2014 to formally investigate these interests by interrogating how notions of family matter to yard care decisions. As an overwhelmingly white and middle-class survey sample emerged, and as self-selection produced an interview sample that skewed remarkably toward lawn alternatives, I zeroed in on lawn dissidents. These eco-conscious subjects, largely unwittingly, performed whiteness and class privilege through a commitment to sustainability, and their demonstrations of environmental stewardship either explicitly demonstrated or implicitly evoked connections to an elite “green” niche of capitalism. I assembled this project through their reflections and performances, along with a survey of related scholarly literature.

**Argument**

Yards create meaning for yard subjects through the physical manifestation of values and the performance of salient identities. At the same time, however, yards operate as positional goods, signposts and platforms for inscribing exclusion into shared landscapes. Particularly in the case of sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives, the yard’s embodiment of eco-conscious values offers reassurance to yard subjects, who simply feel good about their efforts as environmental stewards. In turn, their conceptualization of the yard as innocently valuable and uniquely personal shields them from the reality that dissident yards perform a privileged subcategory of whiteness, and that yards derive significance not merely from benign values but also from the exchange value of property, propagated through “green” markets. Consequently, the creation of meaning in yardscapes promotes social, emotional,
and environmental benefits that accrue to the yard subject, while concomitantly burying the problematic ways in which sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives are coded by niche capitalist systems and enact a regime of whiteness that is no better for equity and access—principal tenets of sustainability—than traditional American suburban lawns. Nonetheless, the meaningful nature of personal yards may be mobilized for positive change. It is possible to imagine a future in which residents dedicate shared yardscapes to more inclusive notions of sustainability, notions that favor sharing economies over traditional frameworks of property, opening up sustainability initiatives to identities beyond elite, eco-conscious whiteness.

**Terminology**

Throughout the analysis, I employ a number of specialized terms to refer to research respondents. Individuals who care for yards—including lawns and lawn alternatives—are yard subjects. This terminology privileges respondents’ important, if understated, relationships with their personal landscapes, and it encompasses everything from Paul Robbins’s “lawn people” (2007) to all variations of the lawn dissident. All lawn dissidents are yard subjects, but not all yard subjects are lawn dissidents. I borrow again from Robbins (2007) in my use of lawn dissident, alluding to those who choose lawn alternatives over turfgrass, although I add prefixes like “green,” “sustainability-oriented,” and “eco-conscious” to distinguish my respondents—who express environmental, cultural, and political motivations for their choices to grow food, install rain gardens, or plant native species—from the general milieu of lawn dissidents who may simply shirk yard labor or transgress lawn norms in ways not affiliated with environmental awareness. These latter yard subjects, in fact, are often characterized by their neighbors as unscrupulous and therefore must be differentiated from the environmentally-driven subjects who are the focus of this project.
Finally, I refer to a newly emergent white identity, which is deeply entangled with environmental consciousness and niche capitalist markets. The subcategory of whiteness to which I refer is not interchangeable with “green” lawn dissidents, but I interrogate the complicated relationship between the two concepts and explore the extent to which “green” dissidents’ choices augment the rising dominance of this new whiteness, and attendant performances of privilege, in Minneapolis residential landscapes.

**Methodology**

*Foundations*

In the Qualitative Research Methods course, we created and distributed a questionnaire, crafted interview questions, conducted interviews, and coded the resultant data using matrix coding (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2010; King & Horrocks, 2010). During the process of distributing surveys and conducting semi-structured interviews, I developed a strategy that proved instrumental to my personal research later on: in the semi-structured interviews, we requested that residents give us a tour of their yards, asking them, “How did you make your yard yours?” This approach allowed us to understand how homeowners (and renters) personalized their landscapes without dwelling on particular conceptions of ownership or quantifying physical change.

Since the research questions in this current project hinge on an understanding of lawn dissidents’ identities, values, and choices in creating their own landscapes, establishing a baseline of knowledge surrounding yard-related practices and how they matter to family structures proved instrumental to my exploration of lawn dissidents. Subsequently, an appropriately large sample of households in the questionnaire led directly to the participation of 18 of those same households in the interview process. That a widely varying sample of surveys (in terms of a range of lawn people and lawn dissidents) led to an interview sample
that skews dramatically toward “green” lawn dissidents served to focus and orient this project. It bears mentioning that I underwent the SSIRB process at Macalester and received approval to perform original qualitative research.

**Fieldwork: 118 questionnaires**

In preparation for the hands-on component of the research, I prepared a questionnaire, which was modeled after the one used in Qualitative Methods (McGuirk & O’Neill, 2010) but significantly truncated and adapted to the focus on family. I chose a series of streets in the Hale, Page, and Diamond Lake neighborhoods of South Minneapolis to knock on doors and solicit participants in person. Neighborhoods were selected to capture the perspectives of residents who live nearby to Minnehaha Creek as well as Lake Nokomis and Diamond Lake. Ostensibly people who choose these neighborhoods value the proximity to both urban resources and natural amenities, and therefore they are likely able to speak about local sustainability efforts through the lens of a city neighborhood with ample green space.

Although I initially sought to speak with a racially and socioeconomically diverse sample (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2010), of the 118 residents available and willing to complete surveys, 107 identified as non-mixed white and 113 said they owned their homes, which were all in solidly middle-class (or upper-middle-class) areas. I adjusted the focus of the project in order to better fit such a sample. Survey and interview participants were all primary decision-makers for yard care decisions (adults), but they ranged from young, first-time homeowners to middle-aged to senior citizens; single people, people in long-term partnerships, and people with partners and children; and included people of varying genders and sexualities, although the majority were straight, and none indicated that they were transgender or genderqueer.
While a few participants sent their surveys to Macalester through the mail, most either completed them in person or through an online version disseminated through community organizations like Metro Blooms (a Minneapolis nonprofit dedicated to environmental stewardship through gardening), Hale, Page, and Diamond Lake (HPDL) Neighborhood Association, and Friends of Lake Nokomis. I collected most of the in-person interviews by knocking on doors, although I spent one afternoon at the Nokomis Farmer’s Market, where several community members participated as they shopped. At the end of the survey process, I had collected 118 valid questionnaires (discarding those that were incomplete or submitted by people outside of Minneapolis).
Demographic maps: core study area indicated by circles
Subsequently I set out to create a series of analytical codes for the responses. I employed ATLAS.ti for this process and developed a set of themes and frameworks to organize the perspectives generated in the survey collection (King & Horrocks, 2010). Of course, examining the questionnaires (along with having a sense of the interviews) led me to realize that many of the responses begged to be analyzed through the lens of whiteness, privilege, and capitalist engagement (in addition to family). Around this time, a conversation with Dan Trudeau solidified the focus of the project: not lawns, but lawn dissidents.

**Fieldwork: 18 semi-structured interviews**

After collecting the questionnaires, I reached out to those survey participants who indicated their willingness to be interviewed. Over the course of a few weeks, I conducted 18 semi-structured interviews, during which I received a tour of the resident’s yard and opened with the same question: “How did you make your yard yours?” I followed up with questions both predetermined and improvised, and I took photographs of each interviewee’s yard. Because the online questionnaire reached further geographically than my door-to-door journey, the interviews spanned from Hale, Page, and Diamond Lake to Seward and the area surrounding Lake Harriet.

Following the fieldwork, I created a literature review, for which I organized the research process into three scholarly conversations: urban political ecology, critical urban geography, and feminist theory. These complementary yet distinct theoretical schools helped me to fill out my own ideas about Minneapolis-based lawn dissidents, and I emerged with a novel theoretical framework. In addition to the actual literature review, this phase of research provided an outline of what my qualitative data ought to demonstrate. I used the aforementioned outline to organize my thoughts while transcribing, coding, and analyzing the
semi-structured interviews. In what ways do my respondents align with the literature, and in what ways do their perspectives and experiences diverge?

As I transcribed, I highlighted and took note of important and illustrative quotations. Next I returned to ATLAS.ti and developed codes that felt appropriate for the full sweep of interviews. More specifically, I adhered to matrix coding techniques put forth by King and Horrocks (2010), identifying prominent themes that both aligned with and differed from conclusions of related scholarly literature. During the process, I also recorded intellectual breakthroughs and anomalies in the data by journaling, which served to orient and structure the analysis.

Finally, analysis began with gathering important quotations from ATLAS.ti as organized by the analytical codes. This allowed me to gain a sense of the most prominent ideas within each theme, as well as to identify the particularly colorful quotations that epitomized certain themes. With the quotations organized by code, I matched codes with themes from my outline of the literature. With certain themes significantly more filled out than others and several overlapping, I knew which themes to focus on and understood more fully how they relate to each other. The process of coding also uncovered the most crucial questions to pose and interrogate in the analysis.

**Positionality**

In order to do right by a postcolonial feminist approach to analysis, it is vital that I explicitly acknowledge the various facets of my own identity that situate me in this project and color my perspectives on the subjects and narratives I encountered. I am a white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender woman from an upper-class family, and I grew up in an affluent suburb with a pervasive norm of landscaped (often professionally) turfgrass lawns. My experiences, related and unrelated to yard endeavors, undoubtedly inform my project,
from my comfort in interacting with upper-middle-class white yard subjects, to my
familiarity with the quintessential suburban lawn, and beyond.

**Road map**

The thesis will unfold from here with a literature review, beginning with urban
political ecology, introducing the postcolonial approach, and then moving onto critical urban
geography and feminist theory. Next I commence analysis of the interviews. Within the
analysis chapter, I divide the discussion into subsections. The first focuses on how spatialized
norms in landscapes inscribe belonging and how individuals within those landscapes express
value. Subsequently I delve into how sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives are deployed as
positional goods. I next engage with sustainability’s relationship with capitalism and the
creation of a green positionality. Following that, I interrogate how sustainability performs
and codes whiteness among subjects and places. In the penultimate section I complicate the
potential of “green” lawn alternatives by talking about the shortcomings of interstitial space.
Finally, then, I posit sharing economies as potential solutions to the limitations of the lawn
dissident.
How lawn dissidents perform whiteness through yardscapes

Critical review of scholarly literature

By situating “green” lawn dissidents within a particular place—urban residential neighborhoods of Minneapolis—and by surveying the literature of urban political ecology along with that of critical urban geography and feminist theory, I hope to animate the meanings that undergird lawn dissidents and the processes that produce those meanings. I will begin with urban political ecology in order to ground lawn dissidents in the subdiscipline in which they are generally studied. Within urban political ecology, I will discuss the postcolonial approach (and deploy it later through the integration of critical urban geography and feminist theory), which calls for the dismantling of traditional hegemonic categories in order to displace the common-sense assumptions that codify social and environmental ills. Next I will move onto critical urban geography, touching on the Self as defined against the Other, theory of positional good, implications of interstitial space, constructions of place and place-based norms, and sustainability as colonialism, gentrification, and commodity. The study of landscapes as signposts of privilege and canvasses for raced and gendered paradigms of exclusion certainly calls for the lens of critical urban geography, which privileges the built and human dimensions of the environment. Finally, I will apply feminist theory’s idea of performativity to the concepts of plural whiteness, sustainability as elite identity performance, and racially coded places. The concept of identity performance serves to extend the scope of the lawn dissident beyond the mere creation of landscapes, into the creation of spatialized social norms and practices.

Throughout the literature review, I seek answers to several questions: To what extent are lawn dissidents truly radical and liberatory in the quest for social and environmental sustainability? Who creates lawn alternatives? And what kinds of places do they produce?
Urban political ecology

Introduction

From the field of political ecology—more specifically, the emergent field of first world/urban political ecology—sprung the subjectivity of the American lawn person and their natural counterpart, the lawn dissident. Paul Robbins coined these terms in his book *Lawn People* (2007), which exposes the immense anxiety inherent to the production of the traditional suburban lawn. Robbins writes, “the lawn is a system that produces a certain kind of person—a turfgrass subject” (Robbins, 2007, p. xvi), while lawn dissidents “violate rather widely held norms” regarding the lawn (Robbins, 2007, p. 119). Robbins’s work proved valuable in its re-affirming of lawns as a topic worthy of socio-environmental examination, proposing that lawns operate within an immense capitalist economy of chemical inputs, as well as a moral economy in which lawn owners feel obligated to continue the application of harmful, expensive fertilizers so as to contribute to the common aesthetic/moral good of the neighborhood. The book’s explicit focus on suburban lawn people, however, raises questions about the people who reject traditional lawns and for what reasons they do so. Robbins coined “lawn dissidents,” but he elaborated upon them minimally, except to describe common options and to conclude that lawn alternatives represent somewhat esoteric yet surprisingly widespread violations—intentional violations—to the problem of the fertilizer-intensive, often unattainable golf course norm. He sees lawn dissidents, then, as potential agents of change in their respective communities and landscapes, but the mechanism and extent of their change are left hazy.

With lawns as a framework through which to understand environmental ills at multiple scales, accounting for systems as well as situated local knowledge, political ecologists have leapt from interrogations of the rural Global South to urban Global North
contexts in order to understand how the lawn, and its dissenters, operate. Most of the literature surrounding lawn people and lawn dissidents concentrates on suburban or semi-rural locales; a gap exists at the confluence of lawn alternatives and urban contexts.

As of 2006, the emerging field of first world and urban political ecology mostly adhered to traditional frames of the subdiscipline, simply applying them to new contexts. This manifested as two approaches, one structural and one post-structural, both seeking to explain the dynamics of core and periphery in Global North contexts but neither fundamentally altering the assumptions of political ecology (Schroeder et. al., 2006, p. 166).

**Postcolonial political ecology**

Paul Robbins and other political ecologists have demonstrated the benefits of adopting the framework of political ecology to a Global North urban context. Namely, urban political ecology allows scholars to study industrial environments (as well as post-industrial capitalist societies), which can provide insight into major global ecological issues. Political ecology also disrupts traditional notions of marginality, land and resource management, and meanings of nature by examining government structures and environmental change. Finally, this line of inquiry creates a space for questioning and understanding how matters are framed as environmental problems (Wainwright, 2004, p. 1033). Importantly, however, Wainwright stresses the importance of augmenting traditional political ecology by confronting colonialism and its remnants when examining postcolonial places. This is crucial because we cannot understand these spaces outside of, prior to, or apart from the fact of the colonial experience … what is it that produces the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ as distinct spaces—each somehow particular, distinctive, and singular? The conflicts over nature that political ecologists study always already concern the forms of spatiality and worldhood that infuse the very discourses and concepts (‘nature,’ the ‘here,’ ‘home,’ etc) that are contested (Wainwright, 2004, p. 1034).

Doing political ecology in an urban residential neighborhood of Minneapolis necessitates taking a critical look at what “urban” means, how wealth is expressed, what we understand as
whiteness, how they intersect, and more. These are all constructed categories, erected upon stolen land, contingent upon complex histories, and interacting with systems of power and privilege. The categories that comprise an urban residential landscape all came to be through colonial processes, which are circumscribed by hierarchies of social and economic power. Thus it is important to deploy political ecology through a critical postcolonial lens.

More concretely, for example, something as simple as an urban garden carries meanings that reveal a lot about social processes over time and space. Historically, sustenance gardens among Black and Native communities were something to be disdained; victory gardens during World War II were symbols of patriotism, morality, and (it follows) whiteness. As such, the resurgent popularity of at-home urban agriculture among wealthy white communities, like the one I described, can be seen as an appropriation of Black tradition and indigeneity (hooks, 1993). Following these channels of deconstructive analysis rather than remaining content with existing categories is a vital and inextricable part of tackling “problems” through political ecology (Wainwright, 2004, p. 1034).

Wainwright identifies what is most essential to, and exciting about, political ecology: it can facilitate the breaking down of traditional disciplines, challenging the categorization and constitution of the world so that we can examine nature through a radical lens (Wainwright, 2004, p. 1041). By breaking down hegemonic categories of understanding, political ecology can “read the ways that the world is reproduced through environmental conflict” (Wainwright, 2004, p. 1042). The deployment of political ecology in the study of urban lawn dissidents must question all relevant categories—whiteness, taste, appropriateness, urban, suburban, sustainability—and account for seemingly “natural” systems in order to understand the function of lawn dissidents, as well as to understand what they reflect about the surrounding culture. As such, I will complement the political ecology approach to lawn dissidents with discussions stemming from critical urban geography and
feminist theory, both scholarly schools of thought that seek to dismantle “natural” categories to expose the underlying systems of power that produce them.

First, though, I must note that existing political ecology literature represents a more traditional approach to political ecology than that called for by Wainwright. As such, this section on the political ecology literature will merely identify subjectivities and phenomena that have already been categorized and analyzed; the dismantling of these categories will be more apparent in subsequent sections of this critical survey of the literature.

_Lawn people & lawn dissidents_

As Robbins established in _Lawn People_, Americans become lawn people simply by virtue of being responsible for a lawn. A lawn person is a particular subjectivity marked by an investment in the image and maintenance of a lawn as well as the anxiety over the disconnect between values and behavior. They are also marked by participation in a commodity market in which they purchase chemical inputs and maintenance supplies in order to attain the image and meanings that make traditional lawns important.

It follows that people become lawn dissidents simply by virtue of the deliberate and manifested rejection of a traditional lawn ideal. The “lawn dissident” subjectivity is defined dialectically in relation to “lawn people;” lawn dissidents are recognizable by a parallel investment in the image and maintenance of a lawn alternative. Additionally, although lawn dissidents ostensibly ameliorate the tension in aligning values to behavior, they pose the question of the extent to which lawn alternatives are truly liberatory—from capitalist commodity markets, from the white supremacist power structure, from the limitations of liberalism.
Robbins demonstrates that lawns are not a product of American culture: the ideal of manicured grasses appeared first in Europe and is tied strongly to notions of civility (Robbins, 2007). Lawns only became ubiquitous in the United States after World War II, when they became more economically viable (if only to society’s elite center) (Harris, 2013). Thus, whiteness and wealth, not Americanness (i.e. the bootstraps myth and the melting pot narrative), are the hallmarks of the lawn ideal.

Although Robbins does not expand extensively upon lawn dissidents, it is possible to extrapolate: If lawn dissidents are responding directly to lawn people, operating within the same scaffolding of exclusionary race and class privilege, “radical” lawn alternatives are inherently products of whiteness, elite socioeconomic status, and capitalist systems as well, or at least direct reactions to it. Although they dismantle the old signifiers and create new ones, lawn dissidents do not depart from the original historical framework of landscapes as symbols of social distinction. Moreover, while lawn people willfully ignore the environmental ills of inputs like fertilizer in their continued support of the capitalist markets that produce and sell them, eco-conscious lawn dissidents confront those same environmental ills, but they often do so, somewhat paradoxically, through support of niche “green” capitalist markets.

Social: Lawn dissidents as creating meaning

The article “Beyond ‘Lawn People’: The role of emotions in suburban yard management practices” (Harris et. al., 2012) responds directly to Robbins and explains that lawns produce meaning through social relationships that involve them or occur upon them. Any social interaction that occurs in the yard can evoke emotions and build significance for the homeowner. As such, to examine lawns (and, potentially, lawn alternatives) through a social lens is intuitive and necessary.
Beyond the scale of the individual, Ursula Lang reveals how yards, when seen as transcending the public-private binary, can also create meaning through communal experience in urban residential neighborhoods. Yards are meaningful to people through interactions with organisms and objects (the materiality of the yard) and people (family members, friends, neighbors). It follows that, from these diverse interactions, meaning emerges that evades the bounds of individuals or of private property.

In addition to social interactions that occur within yardscapes, yards and neighborhood commons also provide a stage for wordless interactions that assert belonging in a place. In “Migration, acculturation, and environmental values: The case of Mexican immigrants in central Iowa,” Carter et. al. (2011) describe how caring for yards creates the opportunity to adopt environmental values as “work” toward gaining access to a communal identity. Although the article refers explicitly to lawns, lawn alternatives will prove highly relevant to these notions of residential landscapes that can inscribe both belonging and exclusion through environmental practice. We can conceive of environmental values—even those specific to particular places—as social capital in the quest to achieve a (socially) central American identity (Carter et. al, 2011).

Gestures toward belonging can occur even when social relationships are weak or absent—when “outsiders” adopt and showcase local environmental values, “acculturation is revealed and displayed through visible deeds, not only words” (Carter et. al, 2011, p. 139). “Environmental work,” or wordless actions that demonstrate an adoption of an environmental norm in a place, can assert belonging and serve as a stake in the figurative and literal ground of “here” rather than the Othered “there.”

A clean, well-tended lawn that conforms to social norms is a civic good and wordless action that can assert belonging as an outsider in a place (Carter et. al, 2011). We can conclude from the article that “outsiders” view these phenomena as they relate to culture and values, while “insiders” (white Americans) approach belonging via the yard as individual consumer agents.
Paul Robbins describes the historical and contemporary conditions that have created chemical capitalism. Manufacturers needed to get rid of their chemical surpluses after World War II, so they invented lawn inputs and created demand for them through marketing. This phenomenon coincided with postwar suburbanization, when desirable single-family homes with green lawns became available to the middle class for the first time (Robbins, 2007). Since then, marketing for lawn inputs escalated, pressuring consumers to buy more these products (to excess) through imaginaries of the white, upper-middle-class, nuclear family.

Crucially, the excessive use of these inputs leads to observable environmental degradation, most notably runoff into local bodies of waters, resulting in the oversaturation of these waters with nutrients. Thus chemical capitalism proves unsustainable in the
environmental consequences, as well as the sometimes-debilitating social and economic pressure, it produces.

At the same time, chemical capitalism is not the only market economy relevant to the discussion of lawn dissidents. Even if subjects abandon their traditional suburban lawns in favor of lawn alternatives, they may not be freed from capitalist markets entirely. Instead, they may simply join another market niche of sustainable or “green” consumption. Noah Quastel cites scholarship by David Gibbs and Rob Krueger (2007) demonstrating how sustainability has been commodified and therefore is constituent of a new manifestation of capitalist accumulation (Quastel, 2009, p. 702).

Within the framework of lawn people, proposing a lawn alternative is constructed as an apolitical consumer choice when, in reality, lawn culture is part of an ingrained economic and moral/cultural system. Lawn alternatives can never be apolitical; they will always operate within, or at least be defined in contradistinction to, this framework (Robbins, 2007).

**Political: Formal & informal governance of yards**

In addition to market constraints and social considerations, yards are all subject to both formal and informal governance. Robbins describes stringent neighborhood associations and city ordinances that restrict deviations from the traditional lawn norm (Robbins, 2007). Even in liberal places like Minneapolis, lawn alternatives—specifically, urban agriculture and sustainability initiatives—are regulated by zoning and housing maintenance ordinances. Because the Minneapolis planning department mostly enforces yard policy based on residents’ complaints (Lang, 2014a, p. 480), lawn alternatives mobilized in service of local sustainability stand a greater chance at longevity if neighbors are supportive than if the homeowner is the lone, unpopular “lawn dissident” in the area. This speaks to other authors’ gestures toward communal good and communal identity (Robbins, 2007; Lang, 2014b).
Essentially, while formal governance controls the extent to which individual homeowners can “dissent” from the lawn norm, community members also regulate what is deemed acceptable in the neighborhood, either by articulating their objections or by choosing covert means of disapproval (Lang, 2014a). In this way, environmental practice is inextricably linked to assertions of social standing, such as when neighbors “help out” another neighbor by offering to mow what they identify as a bad-looking lawn, and when neighbors go out of their way to identify a particular yard (often native species) as “unusual” or “not my taste.” Lawns and lawn alternatives, then, do not exist as isolated sites of dissidence but as parts of formal and informal political structures.

Environmental: visions of the sustainable city

Finally, an urban political ecology approach to eco-conscious lawn dissidents requires that alternative yards are seen both as individual choices (political, moral, consumer) as well as fitting into larger visions of the sustainable city (Lang, 2014a, p. 481). These visions are built upon assumptions, like the merit of keeping rainwater where it falls through rain gardens or privileging “native” species over “invasive” species. Further, because these visions of sustainability are often perceived as untidy to the general public, many visions explicitly include an educational campaign (Lang, 2014a, p. 481). The inclusion of an educational element speaks to an awareness of a preexisting aesthetic ideal. It also speaks to a determination to prove the worthiness of the alternative by disseminating education. The vision of the rain garden, to be sure, is one aware of its own shortcomings in the dominant aesthetic imagination. As such, all lawn dissidents must be, to some extent, self-conscious about defending their aesthetic deviance, assuming that their behavior is indeed a direct reaction against the traditional lawn ideal. Again, political ecology shows us that lawn
dissidents are not isolated actors; they must exist within a framework of larger visions of sustainability and acceptability.

**Conclusion**

In sum, political ecology challenges us to synthesize and complicate established frameworks. Postcolonial places and systems, lawn people versus lawn dissidents, signposts of belonging to accepted identities, shackles to capitalist commodity markets, participation and stake in the common good, visions of sustainability—these all interact with and inform each other in creating meanings and experiences in yards.

**Critical urban geography**

**Introduction**

While urban political ecology facilitates analysis across scales, the additional lens of critical urban geography emphasizes how nature-society interactions across space are structured by systems of power and privilege. Notions of radical interstitial space, creating boundaries, and transgressing boundaries all animate discussions of lawns and lawn dissidents. Urban geography also lends insights into the ways hegemonic norms are rendered invisible and “natural” in landscapes and narratives, such that the taken-for-granted ways of being are only articulated overtly through resistance to those norms. By illuminating where boundaries exist and for whom, we can understand how neighborhoods become raced, classed, and gendered, determining who belongs and who does not.

**The Self vs. the Other**

Much of the urban geography literature pertinent to the study of lawn dissidents is contingent on an understanding of the concepts discussed in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*
Said establishes that the Self (the hegemonic center) defines itself in dialectical opposition to an Other, which is positioned as different and inferior. We can apply this framework to how whiteness is defined against blackness, masculinity against femininity, and wealth against poverty. More concretely, an exploration of lawn dissidents introduces cases in which people and institutions erect physical or symbolic boundaries through the yard in order to substantiate a centered Self as opposed to a marginal Other. Individuals and communities create meaning through the landscape by embedding the Self and Other in places, thus enacting highly political (yet often invisible) schemas of belonging and exclusion that both constitute and are constituted by systems of urban life.

**Positional goods**

Additionally, the theory of positional good contextualizes lawn dissidents within landscapes that manifest social hierarchies and hegemonic norms. Positional goods refer to property or commodities that bestow elite social status upon the owner. In the context of the personal yard, the cultivation of a certain normative landscape—and the suggestion of the attendant leisure time and capital investment—confers social distinction upon the homeowner. Positional good theory holds that taste, consumption, and aesthetic are inherently political and tools of power.

In *Landscapes of Privilege: The Politics of the Aesthetic in the American Suburb*, Nancy and Jim Duncan examine the production of communal identity and cohesion through landscapes that systematically exclude the Other. Through positional good, they illustrate how aesthetic is intrinsically political in the accumulation of social status through material control of the landscape. Duncan and Duncan demonstrate that even earnest intentions like environmental preservation are fraught with harmful social impact (Duncan & Duncan,
We can ask in the case of Minneapolis whether this same dynamic extends to environmental best practices in urban residential yards.

**Interstitial space: Public vs. private & the commons**

Yards, situated between the home and the street, are interstitial space, the borderlands of public and private, of common and restricted. It follows that the act of claiming these in-between spaces and re-appropriating their uses may constitute a site of resistance, but it is also necessarily an assertion of power and belonging. The myriad ways yards can be claimed—and for whom they are claimed—elucidate larger processes of inequity across race, gender, and class (Gandy, 2012). Access and rights to the commons are circumscribed by positionality, and therefore common space (like yardscapes) become meaningful to and for specific people and communities (Lang, 2014b, 4). Still, theorizing yardscapes as commons situates the lawn dissident as building community good and neighborhood identity.

**Interstitial space: Resisting capitalism**

Social and environmental conditions of urban residential neighborhoods also create sites for homeowners to deviate from the typical contract of the shared landscape. Through the communal experience of creating meaning and relationships in the city, Lang argues, residents create platforms for sidestepping dominant capitalist systems through strategies like community gardens (Lang, 2014b, 3). Instead of conforming to traditional notions of property and remaining dependent upon global capitalist markets, communal gardening strategies facilitate the sharing of land and resources, so that both the responsibility and the bounty fall only upon the community and are disentangled from problematic capitalist systems. Still, it is important to problematize the notion of escaping these dominant markets. Although sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives offer respite from chemical capitalism,
niche markets exist specifically for “green” consumption, meaning that many lawn dissidents, like urban gardeners, still participate avidly in capitalist systems (Quastel, 2012). Furthermore, the manner by and extent to which media and marketing have commodified lawn alternatives for “green,” “sustainable” markets ensures that even lawn dissidents who truly withdraw from capitalism (such as through sharing economies) are still coded as elite “green” consumers. This becomes important in connecting the social meaning of lawn dissidents to capitalist signifiers of power.

*Interstitial space: Promoting sustainability*

Interstitial spaces also matter because they offer sites that can be claimed for sustainability initiatives, as we deem it more appropriate to enact visions of sustainability in spaces of amorphous purpose rather than in strictly zoned spaces. Dedicating privately owned space for urban agriculture or better water management is relatively novel, although yards may be a site of bridging that gap. Moreover, dominant visions of sustainability may be developed more formally and received more dedicated space, while alternative visions are relegated to more marginal or less visible places. The dubious ownership and purpose of interstitial space makes it attractive for initiating non-dominant visions of sustainability, especially when those visions bolster the creation of meaning in communities (Lang, 2014a).

In Minneapolis, those who are invested in reworking the landscape to be more environmentally conscious also view the embodied labor of installing rain gardens as tools of community building. In fact, the assurance of community building actually mobilizes these projects, even among those who might be wary of the aesthetic change or the physical effort. The promise of belonging and building community prove essential to the success of these projects in urban residential neighborhoods (Lang, 2014a).
Interstitial space: The rural, suburban, and urban

Yards are also interstitial in that they straddle the urban, suburban, and rural. Quastel et. al. argue that the development of more “sustainable” neighborhoods “is interpreted here as a particular postmodern, postindustrial ethos that is, in one sense, defined by opposition to living in suburbs” (Ley, 1996; Fishman, 2005; quoted in Quastel et. al., 2012, p. 1066). This definition of the urban “sustainable” neighborhood situates Minneapolis lawn dissidents and their anxiety about the many suburban qualities of their own neighborhoods. Gestures toward sustainability in the yard, whether they constitute gentrification, consumption, or both, are meant to be associated with the city or the country, not the suburbs.

Furthermore, there are striking similarities in descriptions of urban communities’ and rural communities’ creation of shared “nature.” The conflation of urban and rural values and sensibilities, along with the resolute rejection of all things suburban by “green” consumers and lawn dissidents, is a common thread in situating the inherent “sustainability” and worthiness of living out one’s values in the city.

Landscapes of Privilege examines the ways suburbia is positioned within a framework of urban versus rural. Duncan and Duncan assert that suburbia “has become a signifier for placelessness” (Duncan & Duncan, 2004, p. 51). Residents value amenities like privacy, quiet, and green space, but most commute to work in the big city; nonetheless, they insist that they live in a rural area, not a suburb, gesturing toward the aesthetic capital of their home community. In contrast, residents of suburb-like Minneapolis neighborhoods insist that they live in the city, although they value the same amenities of privacy, quiet, and green space. When taste becomes inscribed in landscapes as well as social identity, urban and rural are seen as desirable, while suburban is antagonized. The polarization (and simultaneous
conflation) of city people and country people will prove provocative in the study of lawn dissidents through a politics of taste.

**Interstitial space: Reproducing exclusion within communal spaces**

Although interstitial spaces such as urban yards can be seen as liberatory in various aforementioned ways, interstitial space is still colored by broader social dynamics. As such, hierarchies and exclusions can be reproduced within the interstitial space of yardscapes. While certain families share their space as well as their resources and time, boundaries exist across lines of identity and privilege. Thus, the potential of yards to act as commons is subject to other social forces of the community operating at broad scales (Lang, 2014b, 7).

**Constructions of place: Norms rendered invisible**

Through the text *In Place / Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, Tim Cresswell uncovers how hegemonic scripts of appropriateness are rooted in constructions of place. Essentially, he discusses “the way in which space and place are used to structure a normative landscape—the way in which ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate are transmitted through space and place. Something may be appropriate here but not there” (Cresswell, 1996, p. 8). Cresswell shows how the social and spatial are interconnected and mutually constitutive. His ideas about appropriateness situated in places echo how lawn dissidents both challenge and reproduce hegemonic ideologies and landscapes.

Cresswell asserts that systems of power can be particular to places, and they are reinforced and made permanent through their invisibility; they are naturalized into the landscape and the public consciousness (Cresswell, 1996, p. 16). More specifically to residential landscapes, in *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America*, Dianne Harris provides a historical perspective on the suburban single-family home
(and lawn) ideal, most importantly how that ideal came to be raced, classed, and gendered. Harris argues that the very design of postwar suburban homes reflected (invisible) hegemonic desires and norms, but the design also produced and perpetuated those desires and norms (Harris, 2013). Echoing Cresswell, this argument persists throughout the literature: society constitutes and is constituted by our built environment. In the case of the single-family home, spaces were constructed with a white, heterosexual, upper-middle class nuclear family in mind; they were meant to evoke a specific idea of morality. Consequently, the same people came to occupy those homes, initiating a cycle of mutual reinforcement (Harris, 2013).

It is helpful to connect the historical origins of this raced, classed, gendered definition of the ideal home (and yard) to modern discourse, in which single-family homes and lawns can be seen as structuring lives as well as structured by them through markers of identity. Further, connecting the original lawn ideal to a white, upper-middle-class identity allows us to situate modern lawn alternatives within the appropriate framework of whiteness and class privilege. We can imagine that, in such a framework, if lawn alternatives are coded as for white, wealthy families, those codes will structure who feels welcome in particular neighborhoods, which will in turn inform codes and scripts that are continually reshaped. Markets produce these codes that pervade broad consciousness, so that the codes of whiteness and affluence are legible, if subtle, to all members of society. In other words, capitalist commodities are marketed not just through materiality but also meaning, and meanings appeal to values that in turn appeal to social standing. Markets color popular perception and perpetuate scripts that are disseminated across systems of race, class, and gender.

In their book, Duncan and Duncan also rely upon the truth that invisible hegemonic norms can be understood easily through the construct of taste: although taste is often referred to as subjective and inarticulable, in truth taste confers cultural capital, and shared “good” taste leads to belonging. Thus, aesthetic (or the cultivation of particular landscapes) is not at
all neutral but rather political, determining inclusion or exclusion and inscribing hierarchies of elite versus non-elite (Duncan & Duncan, 2004).

The question of taste matters immensely to lawn dissidents: although lawn people accuse lawn dissidents of poor taste, in Minneapolis many lawn dissidents defend their alternative choices by appealing to notions of taste. In other words, they defend invisible social norms through gestures to cultural capital, deploying a new aesthetic that is equally political.

Constructions of place: Transgression

In order to expose the taken-for-granted ideology of appropriateness in places, Cresswell relies upon transgression, or behaviors that are immediately recognizable as out-of-place. Since norms are often intangible and difficult to describe, yet transgression is much more easily identifiable as inappropriate, Cresswell argues that transgressions can uncover the hidden assumptions and orthodoxies of places. He says, “by studying the margins of what is allowed we come to understand more about the center—the core—of what is considered right and proper” (Cresswell, 1996, p. 21).

In the schema of lawn people and lawn dissidents, although dissidents logically seem like the secondary object of study (since they react directly to lawn people), they act as tools to expose the hegemonic assumptions of the normative lawn landscape. Importantly, though, Cresswell defines transgression as flexible and contingent upon place. Because transgression is judged not by the behavior itself but by the impact or reaction, an act or behavior may constitute transgression in one place but fit smoothly into the normative culture elsewhere (Cresswell, 1996). As such, it is important to ask if sustainability-oriented lawn dissidents are truly transgressors, where, and to whom.

Although understandings of norms in places are premised upon what behavior is “appropriate,” places (and therefore orthodoxies) are constantly renegotiated through
transgression, boundary-drawing, and shifting notions of what constitutes “in place” versus “out of place.” Dan Trudeau explains, “transgressions are moments in which landscapes are (re)constructed in order to fix a particular meaning to a place” (Trudeau, 2006, p. 434). This definition suits the conundrum of lawn dissidents because it creates a flexibility in which a dissident behavior or landscape can incite ridicule and resistance, or it can reformulate the meaning of a particular place. Nonetheless, it is still important to remember that “landscapes, as a particular way of seeing, are visual and spatial articulations of orthodoxy” (Trudeau, 2006, p. 434). Thus, if lawn dissidents become naturalized within a landscape, perhaps they assume the status of unspoken norms. After all, landscapes (and norms) are situated in a place and social context; what appears to be transgression somewhere may be normal elsewhere.

Self vs. Other as embedded in landscape

Briefly, Cresswell addresses how “‘out-of-place’ acts are frequently described in terms of disease and contagion” (Cresswell, 1996, p. 24). It is easy to see how discussion of invasive species and weeds, family-friendliness of neighborhoods, and the “healthiness” of convening with nature fall squarely within this metaphor. Moreover, it is important to connect the disease and contagion framework to racialized codes of Othering and blackness. Similarly, when lawn dissidents differentiate between an organic yet well-maintained versus a truly unruly and unkempt yard, they imagine a sometimes-visible, sometimes-absent, morally suspect Other.

Relatedly, Fraser et. al. describe a “fear-based narrative” that can be transposed to the lawn people/lawn dissidents schema, creating a boundary between the environmentally sensitive versus insensitive, or the hardworking versus lazy. The premise is that owning a home, being environmentally sensitive, and investing labor in the yard encourages subjects to care for the communal good of the neighborhood (Fraser et. al., 2013, p. 538). In creating an
“us versus them” mentality, homeowners “tend to muddle criminal and social activities and behaviors” (Fraser et. al., 2013, p. 543). Lawn dissidents and lawn people both conflate unsavory yard care choices with moral deficiencies or lack of education. Drawing parallels between the colonized, diseased, unclean, immoral Other and rhetoric of Othered lawn subjects allows us to interrogate more deeply the scripts and imagery that delineate the boundaries within places.

In “The Geographies of Marginalization,” Dan Trudeau and Chris McMorran examine how boundaries are embedded physically and discursively within landscapes. They show that the experience of a place is not derived from the “natural” conditions of that place but rather constructed by the constant negotiation of social groups to claim and appropriate it, as well as to control the narratives surrounding it (Mitchell, cited in Trudeau & McMorran, 2011, p. 440). Such a conclusion informs the study of lawn dissidents in asserting that a so-called radical landscape is accompanied by systems of access and belonging as well as salient social narratives. These systems of access and social narratives are communicated in code. Codes are especially evident in the history of the suburban ideal, through which society came to understand that “tidy” and “private” signaled whiteness, while scenes of people socializing on front stoops amidst noise and urban grit signaled the racialized Other (Harris, 2013).

Self vs. Other: Reproducing systems of power

In a similar vein, Cresswell emphasizes how appropriateness and transgression are undergirded by systems of power. The social dimension of lawn dissidents elevates the discussion beyond simply identifying non-traditional landscapes: it allows us to interrogate whose transgression molds the dominant landscape and whose is continually chastised and erased. The question of “for whom” is an important one because “the meaning of a place is the subject of particular discourses of power, which express themselves as discourses of
normality … The meaning of place, then, is (in part) created through a discourse that sets up a process of differentiation (between us and them)” (Cresswell, 1996, p. 60). After all, transgression, just as much as hegemonic ideology, is about creating meaning, and lawn alternatives necessarily create different meanings depending on what is naturalized as normal within the context. Namely, in liberal, white, upper-middle class neighborhoods in Minneapolis, the radical potential of “green” lawn dissidents is subsumed by a particular norm of liberal, elite, environmentally conscious whiteness, as will be discussed in depth later.

Crucially, “practices of marginal groups can lead to the creation of new spaces of exclusion that are at once unanticipated and integral to the processes that construct and relate privilege and marginality” (Trudeau & McMorran, 2011, p. 446). Lawn dissidents are certainly transgressive subjects within a traditional suburban context (social and spatial), but within a liberal, white, urban-residential neighborhood with class privilege, the marginalized become those who perform privilege and enact a new schema of exclusion. Thus the violence that occurs is not just a physical or corporeal violence; it is also a violence of displacing ideas and erasing histories. By naturalizing sustainable lawn alternatives in elite white residential landscapes, non-white histories of urban gardening are lost, as are voices reminding us that “green” consumption is coded as a niche for the wealthy.

On the other hand, Trudeau and McMorran suggest that, in addition to their divisive function, the borders between norms and transgressions can “bridge divides and serve as meeting points, providing locations around which alternative inclusions can occur” (Trudeau & McMorran, 2011, p. 446). Lawn dissidents demonstrate that this is true, but for whom? At the intersections of which identities can borders become sites of alternative inclusions? For Minneapolis lawn dissidents, alternative yardscapes can enact visions of the sustainable city, foster community, and promote alternative sharing economies—but perhaps only among those who possess one of several normative identity formulations.
Sustainability as colonialism, gentrification, and commodification

Although it may seem a stretch within the discussion of lawn dissidents to consider how colonialism, gentrification, and commodification interact with visions of sustainability, a postcolonial approach insists that we dismantle how places are claimed and created for certain people and exclude others. As such, we will see that a framework of colonization and Othering augments the understanding of gentrification, how sustainability initiatives can be seen as the front line of gentrification (or, at the very least, exclusionary coding of places), and how “green” consumption interacts with the gentrification of urban places.

In “HOPE VI, Colonization, and the Production of Difference,” Fraser et. al. position the establishment of neighborhoods as inherently colonial, theorizing how “disputes around whether residents should have the right to occupy public space are raced, gendered, and classed” (Fraser et. al, 2013, p. 529) and how processes of Othering are central to claiming places as communities. They hold that colonialism is a deeply cultural process and that the production of alterity is central to the creation of boundaries (Fraser et. al, 2013).

Also relevant is Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) theorizing of smooth space, which is absent of meaning within hegemonic narratives, and striated space, which is saturated with meaning within hegemonic narratives (Trudeau & McMorran, 2011, p. 444). Although many lawn alternatives (food gardens, native species gardens) are striated spaces within non-hegemonic narratives, they become smooth in the hegemonic (coded white and upper-middle class) imagination, allowing powerful (white) subjects and communities to colonize places as well as ideas. For example, urban agriculture and “sustainable” neighborhood development occur without acknowledging the painful histories of non-white urban agriculture and indigenous removal from “nature.”
In “Political Ecologies of Gentrification,” Noah Quastel frames sustainability initiatives as gentrification and as green consumption. He identifies a frequent convergence of top-down gentrification with pushes for eco-conscious consumption in privileged urban communities. Since recent environmentally-focused “sustainable” development in cities has not concerned itself with issues of equity and gentrification, Quastel posits that examining gentrification in cities can provide insight into how urban landscapes produce and project social hierarchies (Quastel, 2009, p. 696 & 700).

Those who are able to participate in “sustainable” consumption may embody “green positionality,” a subjectivity derived from environmentally-conscious consumption and class privilege (Quastel, 2009, p. 716). It will be useful to keep “green positionality” in mind throughout the discussion of lawn dissidents—to what extent are they gentrifying their neighborhoods, and to what extent are they commodifying the radical potential (transgression) of lawn alternatives? It is also important to consider whether or not gentrification and green consumption simply coincide, or if green consumption constitutes its own form of gentrification.

Additionally, Quastel offers insight into what he calls “discursive constructions of desirability” (Quastel, 2009, p. 716) that code for a restricted vision of belonging and appropriateness. Developers and gentrifiers refer frequently to “livable neighborhoods,” which employ narratives of nature and environmental sustainability that eventually become conflated with cleanliness and other codes for whiteness (Harris, 2013).

**Sustainability as positional good**

In connection with Harris and the Duncans, Quastel asserts that green consumption constructs a new type of elite status symbol, with green commodities and signifiers serving as positional goods (Quastel, 2009, p. 705). In another article Quastel, along with Markus Moos
and Nicholas Lynch, elaborate on “livable,” sustainably-developed elite neighborhoods as sites of “meaningful” consumption. They draw on the concept of positional good to unveil the commodification of sustainability as a selling point for “clean and liveable” neighborhoods (Quastel et. al., 2012, p. 1060). Predictably, the commodification of sustainability relies heavily upon the fact that “‘harvesting nature for a psychic yield has become a defining middle-class pastime’” (Price, 1995, p. 190, quoted in Bryant and Goodman, 2004, p. 354, quoted in Quastel et. al., 2012, p. 1066). Of course, access to “meaningful” green consumption is contingent upon class-based factors deciding access to financial and cultural capital.

Finally, if “sustainable” (dense, walkable, “livable”) neighborhoods continue to be commodified and coded elite, restricting access to the extent that they become elite enclaves, perhaps the environmental benefits will also be contained to a few places rather than trickling down spatially and socially across different types of neighborhoods, races, classes, etc. (Quastel et. al., 2012, p.1077-78). Thus, even if lawn alternatives present an environmental good in their precise location, it is worth considering how social narratives, place-making, and codes wrought by media and marketing can ripple outward. If lawn dissidents are merely engaging in “green” consumption, or are seen as such, perhaps the power of the lawn dissident will be diminished and its positive impacts concentrated in privileged enclaves.

Conclusion

In the study of lawn dissidents, critical urban geography lends a keen eye to the embeddedness of power structures in the landscape. In the negotiation of public versus private, appropriate versus transgressive, claims to places, and ideology, the lessons of urban geography remind us:
It is clear that the question of whose world is being written over—the crucial ‘where’ of appropriateness—is never a purely aesthetic judgment. The question of geographical hegemony—the taken-for-granted moral order—inevitably imposes itself on the politics of aesthetic and moral evaluation. (Cresswell, 1996, p. 46)

If the Self is defined in dialectical opposition to the Other, and we create meaning in our identities through the acquisition of positional goods, urban landscapes are never apolitical.

**Feminist theory**

*Introduction: Performativity*

The feminist scholar Judith Butler made famous the theory of performativity. She suggests that, rather than simply inhabiting them, we perform our identities (race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) constantly. Performance is configured through physical practice (of the body, of action) as well as through discourse (language and power expressed through scripts). In the central example, Butler says “it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler, 1990, p. 3). While Butler discusses gender explicitly, she uses an intersectional approach by problematizing the decontextualization of gender from “class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations that both constitute ‘identity’ and make the singular notion of identity a misnomer” (Butler, 1990, p. 4). The study of lawn dissidents fits into intersectional identity performance in two major ways: lawns and lawn alternatives act as extensions of identity performance vis-à-vis positional goods, and yards serve as the stage upon which subjects can perform (and narrate) their identities.

*Plurality of whiteness*

An intersectional approach to identity, in which each facet of an individual’s identity conglomerates in mutual constitution, is fairly intuitive. Race can only be understood as it
intersects with gender, gender with class, class with sexuality, and so on. Within a society that regards whiteness as the unspoken universal rather than as a racial formation, however, it is especially important to emphasize that whiteness as a race is constructed through links to class, gender, and political identities (Alkon & McCullen, 2012, p. 953). Just like any identity marker, whiteness is not uniform and monolithic. Rather, it is plural and can appear in multiple guises. A conservative, rural, Southern, NASCAR-loving, gun-toting subject represents one dominant image of whiteness; a white-collar, suburban, country club-belonging, designer clothes-wearing subject represents another (Alkon & McCullen, 2012). Furthermore, since whiteness is a hybridized identity, it is possible to understand both of these examples as representing whiteness, yet both are distinct.

More to the point, neither of the above is commonly tied to urban sustainability initiatives, the alternative food movement, or other spaces associated with “green” lawn dissidents. Instead, amidst lawn dissidents we recognize the “affluent, liberal habitus of whiteness,” a subcategory of whiteness. These are subjects who care about eating well, environmental sustainability, multiculturalism, and other elite and/or “progressive” values (Alkon & McCullen, 2012, p. 940-41). As such, lawn dissidents represent a particular vision of whiteness that is constructed by a specific suite of class privilege and political orientation.

*Valuing sustainability as identity performance*

The “liberal, affluent habitus of whiteness” is perhaps a newer, less obviously exclusionary breed of whiteness since it deviates from the overt exclusion of the bourgeois elite; nonetheless, it depends upon invisible privileges and thrives on obliviousness to the exploitive, complex systems in which it participates, marking it distinctly as a hybrid of race and class privilege (Alkon & McCullen, 2012, p. 954).

As an example, members of the “liberal, affluent habitus of whiteness” pride
themselves on supporting local agriculture; among lawn dissidents, we see this through the emergence of vegetable gardens in urban residential yards. There is a tendency among these subjects to frame local food as an ethical choice rather than one restricted by access and identity. This tendency only serves to further reinforce exclusion, both from specific spaces and from belonging in elite social groups (Alkon & McCullen, 2012, p. 950). Framing behavioral or consumer choices as ethical, rather than as circumscribed by power, also serves to erases histories of “local” agriculture in non-White communities. Still, propagated by representations in the media of white nuclear families farming their own land, there is a powerful connection in the popular imagination between goodness, authenticity, and sustainable agriculture (Pilgeram, 2012, p. 49-50; Slocum, 2008, p. 851). Lawn dissidents’ version of affluent, liberal whiteness sustains itself based on an illusion of authenticity, goodness, and quality—not to mention aesthetic and taste—that ignores how “sustainable,” “organic,” choices are only available to elite communities and coded as white. Whether conscious or unconscious, the valuing of sustainability through a framing of morality and authenticity is a strategic and highly political performance of identity. More specifically, valuing sustainability constitutes a performance of race and class privilege that excludes less privileged groups, and it must be recognized as such.

*Coded, racialized places*

Just as individuals perform identity, places can perform identity, too; at the very least, places can become coded by race and other identities. Places created by lawn dissidents are, generally, coded white. Sites and landscapes are coded as white based not on counts of white bodies, but on imaginaries that create the space, cultural activities within it, patterns of participation, and signposts of its purpose (Pilgeram, 2012, p. 53; Alkon & McCullen, 2012).

Certain narratives allow whiteness to permeate spaces. Of course, one of the major
attractions of lawn alternatives is their potential to grow food outside of the dominant food system. In both narrative and market systems, though, local food markets literally capitalize on imaginaries of the white family farm, drawing on romantic notions of agrarian life and the yeoman ideal, which subtly yet surely obscure histories of slavery and sharecropping in the past as well as majority POC and migrant farm labor in the present (Alkon & McCullen, 2012, p. 945). Similarly, backyard (and front yard) edible gardens appeal to the importance of knowing where one’s food comes from (related to the locavore movement and a general sustainability-minded white identity) and the romance of growing one’s own food, but this logic erases histories wherein communities of color were either bound to agrarian production or chastised for maintaining those traditions within urban spaces. It also ignores how communities of color might be viewed if they were to restore traditions of urban agriculture in the same ways whiteness allows eco-conscious lawn dissidents to do. Thus the exclusionary privilege of whiteness is essential to yet unspoken within the narrative.

In addition to powerful narratives, identity performance occurs through the mobilization of certain aesthetics and their attendant meanings. An “‘unkempt’ character” in urban green space can elicit emotional responses related to “cultural loss and disorientation” (Gandy, 2012, p. 729); untidiness is a common critique of lawn dissidents by neighbors. It makes sense, then, that when lawn dissidents are accepted and applauded by their communities, their yards perform a balance of affluent, liberal white values—organic, sustainable, natural—and more dominant white values—tidiness, cleanliness. Yards as extensions of identity performance must be judicious in the aesthetic sensibilities they employ.

Finally, the ways places are coded and racialized are always contingent upon how their surroundings are coded. Any sustainability initiative is geographically and socially situated—when it exists within a city that prides itself on being “green,” the values of the city
shape the values of the individual institution (Pilgeram, 2012, p. 44). The same logic, however, applies to a place that seeks to become more inclusive but is heavily coded white.

Likewise, in a community that prioritizes sustainability, spaces like farmers markets are seen to emerge naturally or organically and therefore are seen as inclusive. In fact, because farmers markets and similar sustainability initiatives spring forth from specific positionalities (whiteness, upper-middle class), they reinforce the systems that privilege those positionalities and perpetuate gaps in equity (Pilgeram, 2012, p. 44). Even in places where Othered groups ostensibly have access and could participate, values and behaviors of whiteness permeate the scene so as to create a cycle of exclusion, as signifiers of whiteness are continually recreated and reasserted (Pilgeram, 2012, 52).

**Conclusion**

Granted, the very premise of performativity is that every person constantly performs identities; the point of this analysis is not to demonize the performance of whiteness and privilege. Rather, my aim in adopting performativity is to expose lawn alternatives, sustainability initiatives, alternative food systems, and “green” consumption—which are often proffered as apolitical and moral—as situated within a nexus of whiteness and class privilege. Indeed, lawn dissidents do not perform traditional, dominant versions of whiteness, but they perform a different version that is undergirded by wealth (coded or real), deceptively limited liberal politics, and narratives of romanticism and justice (which lack substantive support in actual systems). To expose this truth is to destabilize lawn dissidents as socially “better” than lawn people, which is vital to the improvement of future sustainability initiatives, specifically those on the scale of the urban residential yard.
Conclusion

Lawn dissidents participate in economic, social, environmental, and political systems. They create specific types of places for specific types of people. More specifically, they value the environmental at the expense of equity, and they draw boundaries to determine who belongs and who is excluded. They perform a novel subcategory of whiteness, which is built by liberal politics and financial and cultural affluence. By augmenting the literature of urban political ecology, from which the lawn dissident emerged, with the more postcolonial conversations of critical urban geography and feminist theory, I constructed scaffolding through which to understand lawn dissidents and why they matter.
Encountering and deconstructing white dissident landscapes

Road map

In this chapter, I examine the subjectivity of the sustainability-oriented lawn dissident, as enacted by respondents in the research, through interactions with several systems and frameworks. First I discuss how sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives inscribe belonging within the community by contributing to the local norm—a landscape that signifies privilege yet is rendered unremarkable (Duncan & Duncan, 2003)—either through conformity to or challenging of that norm. I elaborate by identifying which yard elements are valued and which are disdained by “green” lawn dissidents, how the materiality of values emerge as positional goods that are naturalized through narrative scripts, and how communal belonging is policed informally. Next I describe the ways in which visions of sustainability interlock with and are complicated by capitalism. As an illustration, I explain how “green” lawn alternatives function as positional goods. Additionally, I investigate the manner by which community and educational engagement operate as social capital, as well as how “walkable,” “livable” neighborhoods are defined through coded class and race distinctions and are commodified by markets. Third I account for the novel subcategory of whiteness discussed in the literature review and show how research respondents throw this subjectivity into sharp relief through identity performance and the landscapes they create. This section also interprets a colorblind racial paradigm (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) developed by strong anti-suburban sentiment and the fraught nature of the common sense that getting dirty in the garden is therapeutic. Moving forward, I expound upon the concept of interstitial space and its shortcomings. Specifically, communal yardscapes become yet another platform for boundary-making, and the fact of owning a yard encompasses all the baggage of property no matter how much respondents downplay their capitalist engagement, thus frustrating the
possibility that lawn alternatives could emerge as vehicles for social change. Finally, I shift to a hopeful note in an explanation of the radical potential of sharing economies. I discuss how, in respondents’ communities, sharing economies emerge as informal ways to connect with friends, neighbors, and family. They operate in ways that subtly dismantle traditional observations of property. I end with observations and recommendations for naming, claiming, and formalizing sharing economies in both discourse and landscapes as a way to challenge the commodification and white-codedness of sustainability initiatives. Through this analysis, I hope to animate the particular values held by dissident subjects and how they are expressed through the yard, connect those dissident subjects to the powerful systems that construct and subsume their choices, and offer a glimpse into practices—which already exist—that hold promise for changes in this schema of sustainability-oriented landscapes of privilege.

I. Inscribing belonging through naturalized norms

“Appropriate” aesthetic as norm

Before diving into the complexity of “green” lawn dissidents and dissident landscapes, it is crucial to establish that all yards and yard subjects operate within the framework of neighborhood norms. These norms dictate what is appropriate—referring to aesthetics, but implying the labor responsible for those aesthetics and, consequently, the politics that coincide with that labor. Although yard subjects are often able to gesture toward green lawns as that which is broadly appropriate, norms are also articulated through that which is decidedly not appropriate.

Norms differ dramatically across neighborhoods, as well as across what is perceived as private versus public space. In the surveys, respondents expressed that they value
everything from children playing to lack of harmful chemicals to “showing what is possible” in terms of lawn alternatives. At the same time, only four survey respondents indicated that “mowing the lawn” is not part of their regular yard care routine, suggesting that turfgrass lawns and their maintenance represent a common norm across South Minneapolis. Given the prominence of edible gardening in the surveys as well as the interviews, however, it should be noted that growing food may constitute an emergent norm, while creating family space and generally minding the local environment are more widespread common denominators across space.

Individuals also operate differently in relation to varying norms: whether a subject conforms to the norm, challenges it, or outright violates it, hegemonic ideas of appropriateness influence how neighbors perceive various yard presentations. When a particular aesthetic presentation dominates a yardscape, the visual uniformity of the built environment signals to residents and passersby that this prevalent aesthetic is accepted by, and perhaps even facilitates acceptance into, the community. Norms also influence how subjects discuss particular elements or aesthetics of a lawn alternative. They do this by establishing commonly held values and commonly held grievances related to yardscapes through signposts, both positive and negative, in the built environment that are then transferred into scripts. Groups of neighbors refer to particular signposts as either valuable or worthy of contempt, and these discussions are replicated across communities, demonstrating the discursive dissemination of norms. For example, a suburb might proffer the common value of a well-fertilized lawn, as well as the common grievance of junky objects left in the front yard, and subjects within that suburb would both recognize these norms visually and reinforce them in repeated conversation with each other.

In South Minneapolis, common values and grievances differ widely across neighborhoods: some champion a traditional green lawn, some are better described as a
patchwork of choices and practices, and some clearly espouse organic principles and are dominated by prairie and edible landscapes. In general, most respondents felt adamant that they did not act under social pressure, although many could recognize a norm, even if that norm was amorphous or an anything-goes mentality. The myriad ways in which yard subjects, dissidents and otherwise, articulate naturalized landscape norms prove critical in understanding how sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives concurrently create meaning for individuals and families while also performing whiteness through a capital-coded green positionality.

**Pronouncing the norm**

Subjects express norms by identifying both positive values and detrimental aspects in yard presentation. Respondents in the research adopted several rhetorical frames to communicate elements of the yard that marked it as either valuable or contemptible. The most coherent narratives emerged in the pronunciation of values.

Subjects’ responses built patterns of consistently held values manifesting in the yard. Although certainly the articulation of values alludes to the generation of meaning in and of itself, common threads of collective values construct norms that dictate the appropriate aesthetic and behavior of each neighborhood, albeit informally and perhaps fleetingly.

**Connections to family and the implications for race, class, and gender**

Notions of family surfaced as a prominent and pervasive value in conceptions of the personal yard. The desire to capture family traditions through both objects and action, the passage of skills and values onto younger generations, gendered aspects of labor performance, and creating landscapes friendly to children and pets all factored into narratives of the yard among respondents.
Multiple interview participants habitually used garden tools that once belonged to their grandparents, and two even lived in houses they inhabited as children. These subjects told stories about how the yard used to look and how they used to interact with it, and their nostalgia infused with confidence that the changes they made to the yard improved it yet retained its character. As one respondent said, “And everything was, like, all about straight lines and geometric stuff. … When we moved in, I made everything more organic. But you can see really the bones of the garden.” This woman reflected a sense of pride in sustaining the same landscape through generations of a family while adding improvements that aligned with other personal values of hers.

Even more respondents lived in the same neighborhood where they grew up and where their parents still lived, and they expressed the importance of family continuity in the neighborhood. One man explained, “Yeah, I grew up in South Minneapolis, yeah. … Yeah, I had family on—also in South Minneapolis. Our whole family has actually stayed in South Minneapolis.” Inhabiting a yard nearby to other family members also facilitated interaction between multiple family members’ yards; in several instances, adult children were encouraged to dig up species from their parents’ or grandparents’ gardens and transplant them into their own. This practiced occurred most often within Minneapolis, but one woman shared that her mother would soon arrive to help her transplant “some of the family plants,” including “a peony that came, supposedly, from great-great-grandparents from Europe.”

Gardens, then, foster family connection through the very flesh of plant matter. Of course, family connection also flourishes through the practice of gardening together, as many respondents demonstrated. These subjects value gardening as a passion, and they readily note its import in sustaining close relationships with family members. A South Minneapolis woman said the following about her mother: “We will go to the garden store together and we will, um—well, she got me into the straw bale gardening. We went to
the straw bale gardening workshop. I hadn’t heard of it, and she heard of it. And so we went to the straw bale gardening workshop. And then we each set up straw bale gardens last year.” This shared hobby facilitated time spent together as well as an opportunity for joint learning.

Familial connection wrought through the garden flows in all directions, age-wise: caring for the yard pertains to living out generations-old traditions as an adult, teaching children how to garden, observing gendered (or gender-neutral) divisions of labor, as well as the broad ideal of a white, affluent nuclear family that occupies its own home. While not all research participants were invested in traditional gender roles in the yard, it seems that either the labor was shared evenly between partners, or the woman in cisgender straight couples adopts the role of gardener while the man mows the lawn. No straight men claimed the garden as their “domain,” although that language popped up several times referring to women. Even straight-cisgender couples who were aware of gendered labor patterns and strove to be gender-neutral often found themselves falling into male- and female-coded chores. Of course, not all respondents were partnered, and not all respondents were straight; nonetheless, patterns of gendered labor proved significant enough to warrant their mention, opening up the possibility that family units construct meaning through heteronormative gender roles within the personal yard.

Relatedly, respondents with children expressed their commitment to creating a landscape that was “kid-friendly.” This sentiment indicates not just grass by itself, but also encompasses space to play and run around as well as the capacity to educate. Evidently it is important to parents that their family life includes the opportunity to teach gardening and demonstrate how plants grow. This ideal was common across neighborhoods and expressed with confidence: “I mean, in our neighborhood, I would say people with kids have really gone out of the way to make their yards kid-friendly,” one respondent emphasized, reiterating the importance of a landscape suited to families.
Interestingly, respondents with pets treated the animals as members of their families, speaking to them like humans during the interviews and weighing their interests heavily during processes of decision-making. Among interview respondents, all pet owners described a decision—not applying chemical inputs, fencing in the yard, and/or to restricting outdoor access (either to avoid bird casualties or to protect the domesticated animals’ health)—with pets as the chief consideration. One respondent hired a landscaping company that specializes in dog-friendly designs. Another described an idyllic scene of himself and his cat in the yard:

In the evenings, um, I love to, when I take Sarah out for her evening constitutional, I’ll always take her out the front door, and I’ll just sit on the front—whooa! I’ll just sit on the front steps, and, uh, you know, keep an eye on her in the front yard … And it’s fun to just watch her and her relationship with nature, and sniffing things, smelling things, and hearing things, and it heightens my appreciation of it. You know, it causes me to kind of slow down and realize that there’s great value to being, you know part of the world, and part of nature, and just to slow down and, you know, listen to the sound of the wind ruffling through the trees, and the shrubbery, and that kind of thing.

Among yard subjects, making meaning through the yard is sometimes as simple as sharing experiences with family and cultivating outdoor spaces with those experiences and connections in mind.

**Gardening and food production**

While family proves crucial to many subjects’ understanding and valuing of the yard, flower and edible gardens in particular comprise a great deal of meaning-making for the majority, if not all, of the respondents.

There exists an idea of the basic garden as a default for the appropriate aesthetic norm, a rudimentary flower patch to supplement a turfgrass-dominated landscape. Many Minneapolis residents, and lawn dissidents in particular, take gardening in several different directions. A great deal of labor is required of ornate, manicured gardens; alternatively, a lot
of labor as well as intentionality and politics contribute to an organic, native, or edible garden. In respondents’ neighborhoods, the pleasingly “easygoing” garden aesthetic prevails.

Incredibly, nearly all of the interview participants had food growing in their yards, and 10 out of 18 interviews featured some sort of intensive vegetable or fruit cultivation. Additionally, 72 out of 118 survey respondents mentioned food production in their yards. While aesthetic norms (as well as norms for work ethic) varied in different neighborhoods, food production appeared to be a consistent trend. Few respondents explicitly articulated the trendiness of home vegetable gardening, although it was implicit in many subjects’ comments. Instead of referring to being trendy or enjoying edible gardens as a voguish amenity, respondents placed a lot of emphasis on the home-grown food tasting good, as well as the convenience of having one’s own food readily available in the yard. As a new homeowner said, “It’s really cool to be able to just go in your backyard and pick something, and, I mean, like, a lettuce or something, and eat it, and go, ‘I literally grew this and picked it minutes ago.’” Of course, the easy references to freshness and convenience belie histories in which home-grown food and truly organic gardening were associated with marginal communities and communities of color; as such, it is possible to recognize this somewhat carefree iteration of valuing gardening and food production as a white privilege in an unspoken common consciousness.

In addition to the obvious value of fresh, healthy food, many yard subjects identify strongly with gardening: they proclaim their skill at the labor, the mastery and knowledge involved. They demonstrate an intimate knowledge of plants (species) and history (timeline) of the garden, telling stories that are inextricable from life experiences:
Figure 2: A respondent maximized the space in her Minneapolis backyard by cultivating a great diversity of fruits and vegetables. Source: Author.

Figure 3: Due to both a lack of sun in the backyard and an interest in defying turfgrass norms in the shared yardscape, this respondent installed raised bed vegetable gardens in the front yard. Source: Author.
I still remember when I, when I first moved out and had my first apartment down on the West Bank, I had a long, skinny garden along the side of my house, and then I had a little box under the window. And I came over to get plants from my mom to plant in my garden. And she was going through the garden: you know, ‘This is this, this is this, this is this.’ Naming all the plants. And at some point I stopped and I said, ‘You’re making that up. You are making up all of these names. You have no idea what any of these things are.’ She’s like, ‘No, no! I really know!’ [laughs] And then, um, I don’t know, maybe fifteen years ago, I was going through the garden with a friend, digging up perennials … And, um, my friend Barb said, ‘You’re making this up!’ [laughs]

These yard subjects construct their own personal narratives, at least partially, in relation to the garden. This tendency, it seems, is often passed down through parenting: the skills and values of cultivating a garden were learned and absorbed, in the cases of many respondents, through their upbringing. Several gardening subjects expressed that they would be unlikely to attend classes or learn formally, but that their upbringing enables them to maintain gardens effectively.

That said, many respondents take a markedly different approach to gardening than their parents. Spontaneous adoption occurs in the sense that individuals take on specific values, especially championing organic or native elements of the garden, but the foundational knowledge usually already exists. One woman reflected, “I can’t imagine, like, not having had that in my life and then, Oh, I’m gonna go learn to garden. You know? Like reading a book or going to a class. I can’t imagine being that intentional about it.” In this instance and for other respondents, gardening comprises an important part of their identity, one that is both learned during childhood and honed in adulthood.

Outdoor living and social space

Along with cultivating garden space, many subjects place value in the ability to live outdoors and socialize within designated areas of the yard. Specifically, 46 of 118 survey respondents referenced some form of outdoor living—a patio, eating outside, having space
for children to play, entertaining friends—when asked which features of the yard are most important to them. While oftentimes floral and edible gardens contribute to these spaces, outdoor living requires more than greenery: it usually includes built infrastructure for social interaction and leisure time.

Respondents hold summertime outdoor entertaining as a shared value, and having friends over and hosting gatherings in outdoor space is known to be a common activity across neighborhoods. There is a collective desire to extend living space into the outdoors during the warm months, so although all research participants are residents of Minneapolis proper, many expressed pride in possessing a large yard within the city. They spoke of the pleasantness of enjoying the flowers and general greenery; that pleasantness was a value that respondents seemed to consider self-explanatory, some even going so far as to connect living outside to well-being and spirituality.

Many also took for granted that entertaining should be contained to private space, usually in the backyard. One man said, “It’s just like, if we’re out in the front playing, then other neighbors will walk up. And you can’t do that in the backyard. Like, you have to—in the backyard you have to say, you know—‘Be here at seven. We’re gonna hang out.’ Versus if you’re just hanging out in the front yard, someone, you know, takes their dog for a walk, and then they stop for 20 minutes, and they talk.” Relatedly, those subjects who maintained an intentional space for socializing outside tended to focus on the functionality of that space and the value derived from its practical use. Such a lens bears relation to the notion of use value in Marxist economics. Subjects tend not to discuss exchange value in the context of improvements for outdoor living, although certainly they may prove lucrative in real estate markets. Instead they center mainly on use and function, as well as aesthetic appreciation, in assigning value to the yard.
“Quality” of the neighborhood

In a similar vein, many respondents relate the value of the yard to the “quality” of the neighborhood, most often referring to the level of privacy and walkable proximity to natural amenities.

The dominant rhetoric surrounding privacy, especially with regard to fencing, is positive. Whereas in other neighborhoods one might encounter a rhetoric of keeping out that which is undesirable, residents of Minneapolis referred to fencing using words like “enclosure” and “sanctuary.” Backyards in South Minneapolis are often fenced, but rarely front yards. The notion of privacy is appealing and valuable to subjects almost universally, perhaps reflecting a balance of the desire to live in a city with the desire to occupy and enjoy private space. Additionally, there exists a prominent idea that fences should be attractive, an idea propagated both by homeowners and city ordinances. While dividing landscapes and clarifying property lines, fences also contribute to aesthetic value and are considered part of the communal landscape, a somewhat paradoxical position. Most importantly, fences provide a sense of enclosure and privacy for individual backyards, which lends them value in the eyes of residents.

Neighborhood quality also connects to values of “walkability,” “livability,” and natural amenities. While several respondents appreciated the “human scale” of their neighborhoods, as one man said, so that they could walk to commercial areas on sidewalks and all the houses were sturdily yet modestly constructed, natural amenities proved the most compelling in residents’ assessments of their neighborhoods. Many respondents appreciate the proximity to businesses and schools, but lakes, parks, and the creek proved easily the most desirable elements within walking distance. Residents seem to value the balance of urban resources, quiet residential streets, and accessibility to nature. As one interview
Figure 4: In a testament to the value of outdoor living, this respondent turned his backyard into an extension of his house, a complete infrastructure for socializing and entertaining. Source: Author.

Figure 5: Along with his wife, this subject installed the patio, which he said is his favorite part of the entire yard. Source: Author.
participant affirmed, “I’ve never wanted to live in the heart of the city. I love this neighborhood because you just walk a block and a half down that way and you’re at the parkway and you can walk along Minnehaha Creek and through the woods, really. You know, it’s just really quite astonishing.” Many respondents even credited their choice of house or neighborhood to the closeness of natural amenities.

**Gestures to sustainability: organic, native species, pollinator-friendly, and rain capture**

Local natural amenities represent opportunities for outdoor recreation and general appreciation of green space, but they also function as many Minneapolis residents’ first point of reference in their efforts to be environmental stewards. Among survey responses, participants mentioned local lakes six times and mentioned Minnehaha Creek eight times;
Figure 7: This yard houses a rain barrel, edible gardens, and a chicken coop that the homeowner custom-built for the outdoor space. Source: Author.

Figure 8: With the help of a company that specializes in energy-efficient, ecologically-sound, native landscapes, these respondents filled their yard with native species. They also use a rain barrel and prioritize a drought-resistant landscape. Source: Author.
although these figures may seem nominal, they always arose in the context of respondents’
favorite parts of their yard or their rationale for decision-making in yard maintenance. That
survey respondents (not to mention interview participants, who referenced the Creek and
lakes even more often) reached so immediately for local water systems when describing these
personal preferences suggests that, while nearby lakes and streams are among the first
ecosystems to be affected by environmentally detrimental behaviors, they also serve as
symbols in the minds of many “green” yard subjects. These subjects add value to their
landscapes by implementing sustainability-oriented elements, if not entire lawn alternatives.
Through adherence to organic ideals, the installation of rain capture systems, and prioritizing
of pollinator-friendly and native species, many respondents derived value in their yards from

gestures to sustainability.

Loyalty to organic gardening comes in many guises among Minneapolis residents. The “true,” holistic organic subject obeys organic principles of the original movement, eschewing all chemicals. The corporate organic subject feels comfortable using products purchased from the store that are branded as “certified” organic and hiring organic lawn services, both of which may use chemicals that simply fall under the regulations of mass-produced organic guidelines. The term organic is also used to describe a natural, “easygoing” aesthetic without any practical or behavioral component. To be sure, the existence of a corporate organic practice certainly frustrates the “true,” holistic organic practice, and perhaps the marketing of corporate organic contributes to the emergence of a solely aesthetic organic. One woman attempted to describe the look of her neighborhood, which she described as a Midwestern garden look:

I just see these people with what I think are these gorgeous, beautiful gardens, and there’s just a lot more of an organic feel to it, like nobody did the, you know, like, they didn’t set out and do, like, ‘I want one square of this and then backed by this and this and this,’ but they have, you know, like, there are lots of different things, and some places it’s
overgrown, and some places something has creeped into something else, and then it all somehow looks really good together.

The fact that actual organic gardening requires a great deal of attention and planning seems incongruent with this popular conception of “organic,” taken solely as an aesthetic value. Thus, while some respondents practiced intensive organic gardening, others applied store-bought, certified-organic products, and still others simply preferred a “natural” look to the garden, this amorphous idea of “organic” stemming from environmental consciousness certainly proves pertinent to how yard subjects assign value to their landscapes. Namely, yard subjects who practice several distinct approaches all claim the “organic” label, approaches ranging from capital-intensive and deeply entrenched in commodity markets to those more self-sustaining and linked to a philosophy of gardening.

Similarly, the interest in and implementation of rain capture mechanisms varied widely across respondents. Rain barrels saw greatly differing levels of use: some use them for all of their watering needs, some use them for spot watering, and some do not use them at all. Some residents have owned rain barrels for several years, while others purchased them recently. This variance begs the question: why are rain barrels so prominent if so many of them are not even in regular use? A few respondents referred to barrels’ popularity among their neighbors, and several admitted that barrels required more energy than they wished to expend to water a small flower plot. Still, the amount of rain barrels present in yards seemed disproportionately higher than the amount most people used them, suggesting they may be valuable for some sort of environmental-capital stock recognizable in the visual landscape as well as neighborhood scripts. To be sure, that rain barrels may be so popular simply for the social distinction they confer, despite the cost of purchasing them, implies that they are an accessory of the eco-conscious white subjectivity, communicating both the ability to own them and the knowledge capital to consider them important.
Figure 9: This rain garden was installed on communal land, part of a townhome complex where my respondent became a champion of rain capture to save money on water runoff fees from the city of Minneapolis. Source: Author.

Figure 10: Below this rock-fountain water feature is a cistern designed to capture rainwater. The fountain ensures that the water will continue to circulate, but the cistern can be attached to a hose. Source: Author.
Rain gardens proved far less ubiquitous than rain barrels. Among survey respondents, 42 said they manage water using a rain barrel or another similar system, and three more said they plan to install rain barrels. Contrarily, only 13 survey respondents mentioned existing rain gardens or plans to install them, and only five interview subjects mentioned them as present or future components of their yard. Interestingly, among the interviews, the presence of rain gardens corresponded almost entirely with participation in Metro Blooms workshops; few yard subjects installed rain gardens without that prior engagement. This factor distinguished rain gardens from rain barrels, which almost everyone in the surveyed neighborhoods seemed familiar with, even if they did not own one. Several respondents had attended a rain garden workshop and cited plans for future rain gardens. These gardens seemed only to be on the cusp of common knowledge, with a few respondents noticing new installations around their neighborhoods but many entirely unaware of how a rain garden may differ from a native species garden—or, for that matter, from a weedy garden. Still, compared with the survey population, which largely favored turfgrass, the interview subjects demonstrated a disproportionately wide awareness that gardens in general are better for drainage than turfgrass. Those who possessed this sort of environmental knowledge seemed to take pride in it and were able to place value upon their own landscapes with the environmental good in mind. More specifically, “green” dissident subjects who had installed rain gardens—or other gardens that promote drainage—generally felt that they were actively contributing to the health of local ecosystems and the prosperity of nearby natural amenities. Moreover, one interview participant said, “I don’t think that anyone would buy a place here without realizing the proximity of the lakes, and without realizing how what you do affects the lakes,” suggesting that stewardship of local waters is a package deal with living in South Minneapolis, at least for many residents. Sustainability-oriented dissidents also seemed satisfied that they were able to manifest their environmental values through their personal
landscapes, in the sense of identity performance as well as promoting a viewpoint on the 
public platform of the yardscape. The ability to physically enact these values through the 
yard appeared to be a point of pride and a signpost of distinction. Given the significant 
resources required to install a rain garden, that signpost of distinction should be examined as 
it contributes to a “green,” white positionality.

Recent attention toward bee-friendly plants and pollinator species lent a different 
level of awareness to these eco-yard elements. Many people demonstrated a heightened 
interest in pollinator species and promoting bee populations, relating their enthusiasm to 
recent news items on the topic. Some of these respondents were actively planting pollinators, 
and others just took note of and appreciated the plants in their gardens that already attracted 
bees. Based on how subjects discussed bee populations in their yards, it seemed a simple yet 
fulfilling way of adding value to a sustainability-oriented yard. The mere presence of bees in 
an alternative yard offered a visible signal to dissident subjects and their neighbors hinting at 
cutting-edge environmental consciousness. The simplicity of the visual cue, of course, 
obscures the cultural forces that propel pollinator species as a worthy consideration, not to 
mention as a new trend; these forces, from media outlets to social entities, are coded as white.

Last but not least among “green” components of the yard, native species occupied a 
unique niche among respondents, as they seemed the foremost trend for certain households 
and the most dubious blight for others. Many respondents alluded to the fact that natives look 
like weeds and appear messy, even those who value native diversity. Many valued native 
species for their assistance in managing water and runoff, but several respondents also 
gestured toward a simple appreciation of the beauty of the prairie landscape. Thus, natives 
represent a new and desirable trend that falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of 
ecological to aesthetic imperatives. If pollinators and rain gardens are more
Figure 11: When this respondent moved into her house less than one year ago, the native species garden was already planted in the front yard. She was attracted to native principles, but she is also allergic to grass and preferred a yard without it. Source: Author.

Figure 12: The owner of this yard founded the aforementioned landscaping company that specializes in native species and ecologically sound designs. His yard serves as a preserve and laboratory for plants not commonly available from nurseries. Source: Author.
concretely situated on the ecological end (albeit complicated by the social status afforded by public environmental awareness) and ornamental flowers are concretely situated in the aesthetic, native species fall somewhere in between, creating a very specific look but also undergirded by ecology, or at least one school of ecological thought. Most respondents, with all types of yards, seemed aware of the growing popularity of natives, and most acknowledged that natives contribute to a dissident-type aesthetic. While they are somewhat controversial, their visibility and distinctness seem to be qualities in which eco-conscious dissidents take pride. Like other implements of sustainability in the yard, native species draw value from their ecological function as well as from the knowledge and cultural capital accrued to the owner. Importantly, however, it must be noted that native species as a trend, given their strong resemblance to weeds, may operate as a privilege of whiteness, in which only white dissident subjects coded as privileged are viewed as trendy for their native landscapes, while dissident subjects of color may be assumed derelict or otherwise excluded from the aforementioned knowledge and cultural capital.

**Demonstrated commitment to yard labor**

Integral to the valuation of yardscapes is the labor necessary to maintain them. Mowing the lawn is the default for yard labor, but simply mowing is insufficient if one seeks acclaim or recognition for their yard. Yard subjects can demonstrate their commitment through actual time spent in the yard as well as the finished product, a well-kept appearance to be judged by neighbors. It is also important, within the norm of Minneapolis residential neighborhoods, to perform the labor oneself rather than hiring it out to a service; the satisfaction of a job well done, in addition to the shared value of actually performing hard work, constitute a dimension of value all their own.
In sorting through the research respondents, it is possible to divide labor practices into four levels. At the first level, the yard subject simply mows the lawn. At level two, they practice basic gardening, which usually entails the upkeep of a few beds of perennial flowers and perhaps a tomato or basil plant, but not requiring a great deal of energy or skill. At the third level, yard subjects perform intensive gardening, which could include vegetable, native, growing plants from seed, or other specialized techniques. Finally, level four encompasses the physical construction of features of the yard as well as major DIY projects. This could mean rain gardens, patios, water features, chicken coops, compost bins, fences, or more. Research respondents occupied all of these levels, although interview participants skewed to the higher levels.

Interestingly, regardless of the approach to gardening—whether organic or highly traditional—words like “fastidious” and “meticulous” were commonly employed to
describe respected yard laborers in the neighborhood. In other words, even if respondents espoused an entirely opposite approach to gardening as an oft-toiling neighbor, they almost universally admired such devotion to the task. In this way, demonstrated commitment to yard labor merits value in the landscape, a value that is estranged slightly from the politics of environmentalism but highly linked to the politics of taste and the imperatives of capital and property.

Most respondents reflected that they gained a greater degree of enjoyment from a completed DIY project than one that was hired out; DIY elements also justified a greater sense of pride in ownership than purchased or hired yard elements. The elevated pride attached to DIY stemmed from the ability to create a yard in exact alignment with their values and desires as well as residual satisfaction at succeeding at a challenging physical task. The combination of personalization and the constant reminder of completing that challenge lends yard subjects a stronger sense of ownership than for impersonal or mass-produced elements, which are attended by the memory of a purchase rather than the richer memory of a process.

It is also common among lawn dissidents to reflect that lawn alternatives are actually more labor-intensive than “boring” yards with just a lawn or a basic garden, even though many lawn alternatives were originally installed to cut back on dreaded lawn-mowing labor. Despite the extra labor investment, lawn dissidents usually spoke warmly of the extra effort, gesturing again toward the satisfaction of a job well done and fulfilling a challenge. Additionally, yard subjects overwhelmingly deemed worthwhile the added labor involved in truly personalizing the yard through DIY projects. As such, although labor separate from politics warranted admiration and value, it seemed that, among lawn dissidents especially, labor of the DIY variety resulted in the greatest sense of value (especially relating to personal identity), at least as awarded by the owner.
Out of place

Certainly the assertion of communal values contributes to a sense of belonging in the neighborhood. All speech, however, communicates what is explicitly said as well as implying its inverse. As such, it is crucial to consider what yard subjects identify as detractors from the common yardscape and which elements they believe are out of place. Discussion of what is appropriate versus what is displeasing provided insight into how certain yard aesthetics are informally policed. Beyond mere identification of certain yards, respondents dole out judgments directed at the people who own them. A lack of commitment to yard labor is inferred from a poorly maintained (or even just a basic) yard. Through explicit and implicit speech, many subjects label moral deficiency in neighbors who violate the norm rather than just challenge it, especially with regard to neglect of labor.

Negative aspects of the yard tend to directly violate commonly held values. For example, sustainability-minded subjects eschew egregious chemical application. The presence of weeds irks subjects focused on meticulous lawn care, and invasive species bother those who champion native species. Most universally, however, yard subjects report offense when their neighbors appear completely disinterested in upkeep, disregarding the perceived responsibility to care for the yard.

Some respondents were transparent about how they viewed the connection between their neighbors’ morality and yard maintenance: “I guess I’m very German in the sense that the outside of your house should look spotless and neat and orderly so that it looks good for everybody else’s benefit. No matter what the inside looks like. And so, I do believe that it reflects somewhat on the character of the people living in the house,” one man said. A different respondent, another man, began more subtly: “There’s one jerk who lives over here, that has just a complete dump for a house, and, you know, just, his yard looks like hell. And
it’s like, come on. Can’t you do a little better? I mean, we live here and we take pride in our neighborhood, and we sure wish you could, too.” After initially ending on an optimistic and inclusive note, this same respondent soon elaborated on his neighbor:

I: But, you know, I will, I alluded earlier to that horrible house—see that dilapidated brick chimney over there?
A: Yeah.
I: And look at how terrible the eaves look. See that board hanging down there?
A: Yeah.
I: That guy is just such a clown. He just doesn’t give a rip about his, uh, his yard. And I guess that kind of bothers me. Um—
A: Do you know him?
I: N—uh, his name’s Jerry.
A: [laughs]
I: Don’t interview him, whatever you do.
A: Okay.
I: Because he’s probably pretty dangerous. I think he might be like a sociopathic personality.

Based on the conversation, it seemed that the respondent did not know Jerry personally beyond interactions surrounding the yard, including an incident in which the respondent reported Jerry to the authorities for not clearing the snow on his sidewalk. Still, he felt confident describing him as a “jerk,” “clown,” “dangerous,” and a “sociopathic personality,” evidently based upon his neglect of yard-centric labor.

Importantly, of 18 total interviews, men comprised all instances of a respondent harshly judging or condemning their neighbors for detracting from the common aesthetic (although not all men did this). Women indicated their admiration of certain yards, but in general they simply indicated their personal preferences rather than assigning poor morals to those neighbors who do not foster the aesthetic of the neighborhood. Even in the surveys, one man rationalized his yard care maintenance decisions by saying, “You’re either neat or a slob; I don’t think I’m a slob”; otherwise survey participants did not insert negative views of their neighbors to their responses.
To be sure, all respondents expressed distaste for various negative aspects of the yard, although sentiments differed when speaking about neighbors versus referring to their own space. In discussions of others’ yards, there seemed to be a general distaste for—or at least awareness of a general distaste for—harmful chemicals, especially ones about which there is not a lot of common knowledge, and those that are commonly misused, like fertilizers. Even yard subjects who applied chemical inputs spoke about them somewhat cautiously. Additionally, in accordance with the broad preference for DIY labor, most respondents expressed disinterest in hiring lawn services and felt that the expense was not worthwhile since performing one’s own labor was entirely achievable and ultimately satisfying. Lawn dissident subjects often declared that they found traditional yards boring, but these statements did not usually correspond with a moral judgment. Finally, respondents viewed intrusive and judgmental neighbors in a negative light, but they were more guarded in speaking about people than about the physical yard. Pushy neighbors tended to be lawn people, and some residents offered that these neighbors were bastions of the old neighborhood norms, which were slowly but surely changing.

When speaking about their own outdoor spaces, the nature of negative sentiments shifted dramatically. Some fell into a more superficial category, like complaints about arduous yard labor that was deemed somehow unnecessary, like meticulous weeding or mowing the lawn up a steep hill. Several described feeling overwhelmed and confused by how to proceed with yard improvements because they could not identify a clear plan of action or conceptualize the landscape exactly how they wanted it. In many cases, these issues corresponded with a desire to make drastic changes in the yardscape.

At times, respondents spoke negatively about their yards in ways that shed light indirectly on their values. For example, many subjects disdained using too many corporate products or shopping at big-box chain stores, although many differentiated between
Bachman’s and, for example, Home Depot or Menards. It seemed that the best places to shop are local businesses and nurseries, especially organic or native, followed by crowd favorite Bachman’s, followed by the often-detested Home Depot and Menards. While certainly not all residents shopped at small local businesses or in niche markets, those who did proudly asserted their allegiances, indicating a desire to publicize the ways of the “green” lawn dissident. Similarly, other grievances of respondents’ own yards were the disadvantages of sustainable elements, like the stinkiness of corn gluten or the inordinate expense of installing multiple rain-capture components at once. A few also mentioned poor soil quality or a lack of functionality in the yard setup. With these complaints, residents seem to assert belonging through the desire to make change rather than cast themselves as excluded from a norm. In fact, most people seemed to situate themselves, loosely or concretely, within the norm of the neighborhood, even if their description of values or labor suggested that they could be considered outliers.

Respondents returned to the realm of morality most often when speaking in the hypothetical. Although some spoke self-deprecatingly about the weediness of their yards, others indicated that they would judge themselves harshly if they let their yard go astray: “And I would feel not good if my lawn was overgrown and full of weeds and didn’t look good, and everyone else around me did. I wouldn’t feel good about myself.” In these instances, the respondents were rigorous in their yard labor. Yard subjects who preferred a more easygoing approach tended not to speak in explicitly negative terms about any people or choices, except perhaps the careless application of harmful chemical inputs. Still, even those statements restricted whom they imagined as belonging within their personal yard ideal.
Tradeoffs and weighing

It would be a fallacy to imagine detractors of the yard ideal as being evaluated evenly. Respondents demonstrate consistent weighing and tradeoffs of negative elements in the yard, both with regard to their own choices and their neighbors’. In a salient example, one woman decided to use Roundup to eliminate an invasive species from an area immediately adjacent to her native garden. She was committed to maintaining its all-native quality, so even though she abstained from chemical use otherwise, she decided this particular invasive species represented a great enough threat to warrant chemical intervention. Several subjects professed a strong distaste for weeds but an even greater distaste for weeding, so they lived in a limbo of creeping charlie and the chore of removing it. In another example, many of the most environmentally conscious yard subjects, who had installed several elements of sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives, also owned dogs, and they warned me to watch out for dog waste that had not been picked up. Even low-level environmental awareness teaches that dog waste should be picked up to protect the health of local waters, yet these “green subjects” embodied the tradeoff of native, well-draining, vegetable-producing, and poopy yards.

Additionally, there seems to be some grey area for situations in which a particular yardscape may not fit into the neighborhood norm, but its intentionality and educational aspect make it acceptable, if not fully normal. These instances proved noteworthy: four respondents mentioned a particular prairie landscape at 52nd & Bloomington Avenues, featuring a fence and educational signage. Some of the respondents who mentioned this landscape felt sure they would never plant a prairie themselves, but they admired the cleanliness and success of its execution in the neighborhood. It is significant that this
landscape, while perhaps not inspiring other neighbors to change their own yards, became visible enough that four people independently referenced it.

In a parallel construction, many yard subjects applied a grey area to their own landscapes when it became obvious their choices did not conform to the common ideal of the neighborhood. When respondents acknowledged that they fell outside the norm, they generally took care to explain how their choices contributed to the communal good, often through a particular narrative. Conversely, when pointing out negative elements of others’ yard, research participants generally did not make the same accommodation, although they sometimes alluded to differing choices in lifestyle or a lack of time.

Another grey area involves the common sentiment that a yard need not look perfect as long as it is apparent that somebody lives in the house. It is more difficult to articulate, however, how to demonstrate a sufficient lived-in, cared-for quality to which so many respondents refer. Three separate respondents shared the following:

- “It seems to me as long as the grass is cut and there’s no trash laying around, people don’t really care.”
- “As long as it doesn’t look lousy and terrible, it’s okay.”
- “I think basically people figure as long as you’re doing something to not have your house look like crap, that’s good.”

It is quite obvious that many people do, in fact, care about how the yard looks beyond a state of utter “trash” and “crap.” It is unclear whether neighbors truly believe they do not care, or if yard subjects share an investment in understating a common norm while nonetheless adhering to it and subtly referencing it.

In closing, all yard subjects, and “green” lawn dissidents in particular, articulate notions of belonging through both signposts in the landscape and discursive scripts. Belonging is asserted through the prevalence of certain visual cues as well as through prominent patterns in discussion. The means by which subjects identify what is important or
exciting versus what is contemptible assembles a particular suite of values and politics associated with the subjectivity that belongs in a place and creates the landscape. Furthermore, since here the subjectivity of note is an eco-conscious, privileged whiteness, in order to unpack the naturalized elite quality of this white subjectivity it is essential to build understanding of how certain values and politics in the yard are deployed as positional goods that convey social distinction.

II. Positional goods and redirecting the conversation

Although subjects articulate norms through an implicit juxtaposition of positive and negative components of the yard landscape, there exists an unspoken element of this comparison: positive values in the yard—like pollinator-friendly signage and pleasantly “easygoing” gardens—serve as positional goods, by which yard subjects elevate their social status in opposition to a traditional lawn norm, while negative values (like a lack of demonstrated commitment to yard labor) serve to indict those who violate the lawn norm while also failing to conform to the emergent white, sustainability-oriented lawn dissident norm.

Positional goods

In the case of Minneapolis neighborhoods, which the original developers designed as elite residential areas boasting easy access to luxurious natural amenities, opportunities for outdoor living and walkability to lakes, streams, and parks coupled with sustainability (and particular aesthetic) imperatives in the yard—organic, native, DIY, pollinators, edible gardening, rain capture—comprise the precarious makeup of positional goods for emergent “green” lawn dissidents. The balance of a “nice” neighborhood with “character,” local
“nature” with manifold benefits, and the performance of sustainability articulate an iteration of positional good specific to these communities and this novel subcategory of whiteness. Once again, positional goods elevate the status of the owner within a particular social framework, such that certain yard aesthetics and accessories in South Minneapolis assert belonging to a community of privileged, sustainability-oriented lawn dissidents. The manner by which positional goods operate depends on the neighborhood—in places with landscapes that resemble the quintessential suburban norm, eco-conscious positional goods may mark yard subjects as early adopters of new sustainability-centric trends. In places with more flexible yard norms, or with decidedly organic norms, positional goods simply place yard subject within the center.

One example of positional good among respondents occurred in a neighborhood accepting of all types of yards, from rain gardens to basic lawns. The woman moved into the house with a pre-existing all-native front yard, and although she only takes responsibility for weeding what was already planted, she receives positive feedback regularly from passersby. Despite the landscape not having been her original effort, she feels it necessary to put more effort into maintaining the front yard, even though it was not a landscape she installed, because it is so visible in the neighborhood, because it is her front yard as well as because it stands out from more generic yards. She also feels somewhat of a responsibility to answer neighbors’ questions about which species are growing, performing the role of an expert even though she does not actually know what was planted. This subject seemingly enjoys the credit she receives for her unusual native yard, although she expresses a bit of guilt that she does not deserve the acclaim.

In a simpler example, enough residents of the neighborhood own rain barrels that one respondent felt a degree of pressure to buy one: “We don’t have a rain barrel. And I’ve been thinking we need to get one. Lots of our neighbors do. And we just haven’t gotten around to
it or gotten the right stuff for it.” In this case, the communal identity to which the yard subject sought to belong corresponded with the immediate neighborhood, but it is important to distinguish between the emergent “green” lawn dissident positionality versus all of the respondents’ individual neighborhoods. In some cases, the positionality and the place align perfectly; in other cases, yard subjects performed this sustainability-oriented subjectivity as ambassadors in their neighborhoods, and their personal landscapes did not align with the surrounding common yardscape.

Additionally, sometimes there existed disagreement within subjects’ families on what held value in the yard, and at times positional goods served to resolve these discrepancies. In an especially colorful example, a woman’s husband seemed to disregard her gardening and landscaping pursuits, treating them as a frivolous expenditure of time and money. As the garden emerged as a positional good, however, the husband came to support it vocally and, eventually, through participating in yard maintenance himself:

For years, all of the yard work was sort of viewed as my hobby, something I did for fun, expenses that kind of went in some unstated way against my “fun ledger” rather than, like, the house maintenance and repair ledger, do you know what I mean? And there were just a lot of kind of submerged things about [my husband] being resentful about the amount of time I spent gardening, or being frustrated by the amount of money and not seeing it. Do you know what I mean? But over time, we have gotten a lot of—and I don’t want to overstate this, but like, I don’t know, like social credit. Or social kudos. Of people liking our yard and liking our garden. So we’ve hosted a lot of parties in our yard for other people. Because we have a big yard that’s easy to entertain in. And we rent—we’ll rent tables and set up tables and chairs and white tablecloths. And you know, we’re able to do huge bouquets of flowers, and we’ve done flowers for people’s weddings. And, you know, my parents both had their sixtieth birthday parties here, and her mom—his mom, my husband’s mom, had her graduation party here when she got her PhD. And so over time we’ve accrued kind of this social capital from our yard. And the more social capital we accrue from it, the more involved my husband has become. So now, he no longer sees it as being—like, now it’s sort of—and not that this has ever been explicitly stated, but now it’s—maintaining the garden and the garden investment is part of the house maintenance, and it kind of in this very subconscious way comes out of a different mental ledger, if that makes sense. My husband and I have had combined finances for, you know, twenty-five years now, so, um. And it’s all very submerged. Like, and I’m sure he would be outraged if he heard me saying all of this. But it’s completely true. [laughs]
Figure 14: Pictured here is the front yard of the space described in the previous quotation. Source: Author.

Figure 15: Pictured here, again, is the backyard described above. The space includes several more garden beds, both edible and horticultural, and additional lawn space. The respondent gardens densely and organically. Source: Author.
Of course, there is a particular gendered dynamic to this anecdote, in which gardening may be perceived as feminine labor until it produces more tangible benefits to the family. There is also a classed component, given that events held in the space connote a level of leisure and resources circumscribed by wealth. Finally, the ideal of holding rites of passage and other celebrations in outdoor spaces, or simply augmenting festivities with home-grown nature, refers to a specific identity performance, one that is coded white and affluent. Stemming from the development of postwar suburbs for white nuclear families, advertisements vaunted homes that featured outdoor living space. Designed as actual outdoor rooms, extensions of the home into “nature,” these residential landscapes were modeled in marketing by all-white families who could also afford the latest in pastel-colored refrigerators and picture windows. Moreover, outdoor living emerged after World War II as a value of a leisure class literally only accessible to those belonging within whiteness (Harris, 2013). While in the modern era, certainly, outdoor living may be accessible to many yard subjects outside of whiteness, the pervasiveness of classed and raced marketing must not be underestimated, so that even if subjects engage in an activity like celebrating with family in outdoor areas of the home, that activity is undoubtedly coded as white due to years of impactful, widespread imagery and scripts of capitalist consumption.

In all likelihood, most respondents and yard subjects in general do not deploy positional goods in conscious pursuit of elevated social status. Rather, all people constantly perform identities and inevitably exist within social frameworks constructed by larger systems: economy, politics, culture. As such, pointing out the use of positional good in constructing the sustainability-oriented lawn dissident should not indict any individuals or even communities. Rather, it is a strategy for understanding how value is defined, and how status and measures of belonging are accrued, for this new wealthy, “green” subcategory of whiteness, and how value and status are expressed through the yard.
Naturalizing narratives

While lawn dissidents accumulate positional goods in the yard, they also (mostly unconsciously) deploy scripts that naturalize the status-laden norms wrought by positional goods, thus redirecting the conversation from one of privilege and cultural capital to one of simply being “easygoing,” or one referring to how a person was raised. By focusing on the manifold benefits of their alternative choices and couching those benefits in particular narratives, lawn dissidents skirt the question of who actually has access to these particular lawn alternatives. While scripts are sometimes best illustrated by single quotations, the striking patterns and repetitions of respondents’ ideas in conversation suggests that the naturalizing scripts are constituted collectively by neighborhoods and broad subjectivities.

Naturalizing: family tradition

Especially with regard to gardening, many respondents naturalize their practices by referring to skills learned through family tradition. Many acknowledge that they would not take the initiative to learn gardening were it not for absorbing that knowledge as a child. They also emphasize the value of teaching gardening skills to their kids, when applicable.

One respondent romanticized her experience with a large, labor-intensive yard:

And just, like, when I was growing up, we had a huge—we had a corner lot, and it was really big, and my dad had all these different areas that would be, like, the vegetable area, and the, um, you know, the—just different gardens that he planned. And it was so magical, as a kid. You know? Like, you had all this space to explore, and it just felt like—I don’t know. Just really special. And I thought, like, when I have kids, I want them to have the same experience with their backyard.

In adopting an idealized narrative of family and childhood, this subject overlooked the expense of owning property and cultivating it in an intentional way. Instead she used the word “magical,” focusing on the positive emotional heft of growing up in an alternative yard. At another point in the conversation, she mentioned again, “because I was raised by a
gardener and by people who like to entertain, I have this sense of pride, where it’s like, I want everything to be nice.” By alluding the values of her upbringing, she circumvented the possibility that tending for vegetable and flower gardens might be constrained by resources or valued differently by subjects who are positioned differently in structures of race and class.

**Naturalizing: “easygoing”**

Family represents just one naturalizing narrative, however. Subjects with a strong interest in sustainability, or just generally subjects whose gardening habits violate the neighborhood norm, often adopt a self-deprecatting persona or invoke the “easygoing” nature of their choices. It was common to hear respondents refer to themselves as “crazy garden people” or “crazy weed people,” even though they identified strongly with their landscapes and practices. Several of the most sustainability-oriented yard subjects employed a self-deprecating tone even while praising their choices, possibly to demonstrate an awareness of their failure to comply with a larger societal norm.

Amidst yard subjects who claim an “easygoing” approach, there exists a range of sentiments and practices. Some respondents demonstrated a “true” easygoing approach: they let the yard evolve with minimal worry, and they cultivated a yard in opposition to the local neighborhood norm. At the same time, a “casual” aesthetic often corresponds to a lot of specialized knowledge, so the characterization of non-traditional yards as “easygoing” or “casual” really only refers to an aesthetic quality, not to the level of labor or intentionality. Still, labor is inferred through aesthetic, so even a woman entirely confident in her thought processes and abilities assumes that she will be perceived negatively if she does not balance an “easygoing” look with some more traditional grass and flowers: “Like, I don’t want them to go, oh, some crazy, you know, the-whole-front-yard-is-weeds person lives there. Um, and that’s why I do—I have a lot of asiatic lilies out front, and kind of more, um, I think the front
is a lot more structured.” Even a respondent who owns a landscaping company, which focuses on native species and ecologically-sound designs, called his approach “casual.” In this way, yard subjects obscure the specialized knowledge and investment of resources involved in cultivating a lawn alternative by claiming the common perception that alternative yards are championed only by “easygoing,” “casual,” or even “experimental” yard subjects.

Of course, it is important to hold “easygoing” in contrast to the derelict and delinquent judgments cast on yard subjects who actually neglect yard labor, or at least seem to neglect it. The “easygoing” narrative eschews formality in the yard but often stresses the importance of certain maintenance rituals and an aesthetic minimum. In deploying this narrative, yard subjects raise the question: who is labeled “easygoing” while others are labeled “jerks” and “sociopathic personalities”? Based on the sample, it is unclear whether there is a racialized component to this discrepancy, although I suspect “easygoing” may be a privilege of whiteness and wealth, such that yard subjects who live in middle-class white neighborhoods can “get away with” being “easygoing,” while residents of low-income areas of color are perceived very differently. There is likely also a gendered component, with women more likely to describe themselves and others as “easygoing” and men more likely to assign harsher judgments, but it is difficult to draw a sure conclusion from such a small sample. Regardless, the “easygoing” narrative proves compelling for “green” lawn dissidents who want to appeal to a broader landscape norm while downplaying the significant efforts involved in cultivating a sustainability-oriented landscape.

**Naturalizing: money as secondary**

Finally, the seemingly inherent value of outdoor living served in many cases to eclipse the financial barriers of yard improvements and the possibility that an environmentally-conscious individual may choose to express their values completely outside
of a sustainability-oriented lawn alternative. Money was mentioned far less frequently than more abstract (yet decidedly social) values of the yard. Although certainly present in articulations of decision-making, money operated as a decidedly secondary narrative, always an additional consideration rather than a primary one.

I am under no illusions that money existed as a secondary consideration in practice, but its presentation as such in the narratives deployed by yard subjects creates specific impressions of priorities and justifications for lawns as well as “green” lawn alternatives. The use of naturalizing narratives like family, “easygoing,” formalized knowledge, and money-as-secondary contribute the normalizing of sustainability-oriented lawn dissidents and the choices they inscribe in the landscape.

Collective values that shape notions of belonging and inscribe them in the landscape, alongside naturalizing scripts that render these signposts of belonging and exclusion common-sense in the built environment, allow the eco-friendly lawn dissident to quietly emerge as a prominent subjectivity that molds new landscapes of privilege. As yardscapes and their attendant narratives create meaning for dissident subjects, they also bury the raced and classed politics of taste—and politics of environmental consciousness—that characterize this subjectivity. Thus, despite being coded as elite (and sometimes truly requiring significant resources), the white, privileged, eco-conscious lawn dissident continues, with little fanfare, to create landscapes that inscribe belonging only for the white, privileged, and eco-conscious; because of naturalizing narratives, this phenomenon goes largely unrecognized.

III. Sustainability and capitalism

Of course, positional goods function within the framework of commodity capitalism, in which capitalist subjects purchase commercial goods for the meaning they confer as much
as for their utility and materiality. Positional goods facilitate identity performance as both vehicles and platforms; most basically, though, they are purchased in markets. Often these markets are oriented toward specific demographics and subjectivities, and therefore specialized markets emerge when a niche grows prominent enough. In this way, a green positionality—which capitalizes on eco-consciousness and proffers it as an accessory to cosmopolitan (and white) social distinction—subsumes efforts to promote environmental sustainability by marketing them as elite signifiers and commodities. The “green” market is far-reaching enough to code “sustainability” as a concept within its capitalist scope, such that things like sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives are understood to fit within upper-middle-class white neighborhoods designed for a leisurely urban lifestyle. These neighborhoods, too, are products of capitalism, built environments erected for and by particular subjectivities with particular concern for “nature” and particular notions of belonging. As such, visions of the sustainable urban community are inextricably linked to capitalism, and more often than not, signifiers of sustainability function simultaneously as positional goods, regardless of the intentions and resources behind them. (Relatedly, whiteness operates as a driver of capitalism, in which commodities accumulate belonging within the most elite subsets of whiteness.) The manifold ways in which sustainability-oriented lawn dissidents interact with capitalism matter immensely to how they are understood as subjectivities creating elite white landscapes that become both naturalized in the built environment and overtaken by markets in popular consciousness.

**Green positionality**

Through the cultivation of green positionality, niche capitalist markets capture the emergent trend of environmental awareness and commodify it for an elite demographic, so that it is possible to accrue status for “good taste” and sustainability all at once. The manner by which
green markets have commodified components of “dissident” yards means that even lawn
dissidents who are not participating in capitalist systems (or participate in them minimally) are
coded as capitalist and elite. In other words, the pervasive nature of media and marketing
surrounding sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives and green market subjects constrains their
potential for inclusivity. Thus it is vital to take note of how respondents engage with and discuss
capitalist systems, especially in pursuit of a green positionality. Before diving into respondents’
choices, however, first it is essential to engage with the history of Minneapolis in order to
understand why green positionality is entirely compatible with a relatively elite landscape.

**Walkable, livable neighborhoods**

Lawn dissidents are defined just as much by where they shop and what they grow as
by where they live. The “walkability” and “livability” of South Minneapolis neighborhoods
mark them as appealing for the outdoorsy and sustainability-driven. Additionally, the
“walkability” and overall character of the neighborhoods contribute greatly to perceptions of
who belongs (lawn people and, to varying degrees, sustainability-oriented lawn dissidents)
and who does not (disinterested, neglectful turfgrass subjects). This boundary of exclusion
has, of course, a racialized component, albeit usually unspoken.

Green positionality proves instrumental in the construction of belonging because it
stems from elite market status coupled with environmentally conscious practice. The history
of Minneapolis residential neighborhoods illustrates that affluent white identity is actually
built into the landscape, such that green positionality is easily incorporated as a novel yet
securely middle-class subjectivity.
Minneapolis neighborhoods: a brief history

After 1910, at the dawn of the auto era in the Twin Cities, developers began to fill in between streetcar lines in the land south of downtown Minneapolis, aiming specifically at car owners who could access those in-between zones. These people sought hilly, tree-filled neighborhoods with water amenities, so developers built swanky Period Revival houses in the areas surrounding Minnehaha Creek and Lake Nokomis from the 1920s-1940s (Borchert et. al, 1983). Moreover, duplexes and apartments yielded so many foreclosures during the Great Depression that most housing development in Minneapolis after the Depression focused on the safer option of single-family homes (Adams & VanDrasek, 1993, p. 83). This meant that easily-developable land, like that of South Minneapolis, needed to orient new construction toward the desires of those who could afford their own houses. Home-buyers acted as powerful consumers, participating in a marketplace that sold meaning (social status, often communicated through commodified local nature) as much as it sold physical property (land, houses).

As a result, pre-war amenity districts of Minneapolis catered to middle- and upper-middle-class homeowners and were characterized by single-family, moderately-dense neighborhood grids interspersed with scenic natural amenities like lakes, creeks, and parks. Homes in these areas were designed to be stylish and amenable to the first automobile owners. The convergence of environmental features with city living attracted upwardly mobile nuclear families (Martin & Lanegran, 1983, p. 9), thus inscribing a modestly bourgeois sensibility, and the commodification of nature through leisure, into the landscape. Specifically, South Minneapolis homes were “not ostentatious, though they tend[ed] to be larger than average” (Martin & Lanegran, 1983, 116), with spacious yards and often within walking distance of the Minnehaha Creek, a lake, a park, or several of these. In effect, natural
amenities and the romantic narratives of the outdoors that attended them were monetized and mobilized to create residential landscapes for the middle class.

Now, since an increasingly prominent way to garner raced and classed social distinction in Minneapolis is to care about sustainability and hands-on engagement with nature, the landscape takes on these meanings as well. The same residential streets, adorned by the original architecture and interrupted occasionally by a winding creek or majestic lake, express the values of those who claim these landscapes. South Minneapolis has always been a middle-class neighborhood, so its environment has been shaped by—and continues to shape—ever-evolving notions of what it means to be middle-class. Furthermore, although the environmentally-sensitive vision of nature common to the present-day Minneapolis yard subjects seems to suggest a loosening grip on middle-class identity, sustainability-oriented yardscapes are just another version of commodified nature, reflecting a modern manifestation—a “green” or eco-conscious manifestation—of middle-class values and behaviors.

**Capitalist engagement**

Beyond their choice of neighborhood and contributions to the politics of the landscape, participants in the study also spoke openly of their direct involvement in the “green” marketplace. Many respondents shared in the desire to minimize capitalist engagement or to limit it to the few companies that most aligned with their values. One woman said, “I don’t actually really want to support companies that aren’t at least making some attempt to be good for the environment.” Others named local businesses they like to support, especially ones selling native species or espousing an organic approach. One respondent actually owns a company devoted to designing ecologically responsible
landscapes; another couple in the interview participant pool hired that company to landscape their all-native rain garden yard.

By selectively indicating loyalties to businesses for reasons that aligned with their values, yard subjects seemed to assert that their participation in capitalist systems was both responsible and sparing. In truth, however, capitalist engagement that is focused on a specific market still constitutes capitalist engagement, and that engagement may be significant in bolstering an emergent niche market. That so many respondents easily reached for their go-to stores and brands indicates the extent to which niche markets facilitate and produce green positionality, a vital component of the subcategory of environmentally-conscious whiteness.

**Community and educational engagement as capital**

In addition to direct participation in the marketplace, other actions become commodified through the marketized imagination. Basically, due to the way green positionality pervades a common consciousness, practices and behaviors associated with green positionality become associated, by extension, with elite markets. Namely, lawn dissident subjects’ engagement with community organizations requires an investment of time and resources only made possible by a flexible schedule and bank ledger—or, even if that is not the case, it is coded as such by green marketing. Regardless of how subjects attained their education, their scientific knowledge, and their community savvy, it is important to interrogate what they are performing when they invoke these values and mention these experiences. There is also a particular trendiness of certain behaviors—think public radio—that corresponds to a privileged positionality, regardless of how much capital the behaviors require.

For example, many respondents have experience with rain garden workshops, although not all who participate ultimately install a rain garden. The fact of having participated in these workshops lends subjects credibility in their environmental and
community consciousness. Participation also ostensibly expands their social network of like-minded people, since organizations like Metro Blooms run the workshops. Similarly, joining community organizations, like Friends of Diamond Lake or Hage, Pale, Diamond Lake (HPDL) Neighborhood Association, is a common manifestation of civic engagement, demonstrating a commitment to the common good. One respondent mentioned that she is a Master Gardener and devotes her required volunteer hours to tree plantings and playground cleanups at her daughters’ elementary school. While the time investment required of these volunteer engagements is unclear, the satisfaction with which yard subjects mention them suggests that they accrue social capital, especially for a privileged “green” subjectivity.

Ultimately green positionality means that all identity performance and action that falls within the purview of the “green” niche market is subject to evaluation based on how that market has been coded. This statement does not condemn all sustainability initiatives or all subjects interested in sustainability; it merely recognizes that capitalism permeates popular perceptions of identities and choices. Therefore, the novel “green” subcategory of whiteness and dissident subjects’ interventions in yardscapes cannot operate in isolation from capitalist systems; instead they may be subsumed by these systems unless they actively work against them or offer meaningful alternatives.

IV. Sustainability creating white subjects, white places.

Sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives create and are created by a novel yard subject, a particular iteration of whiteness that is tied to class privilege, environmental awareness, and an urban (and perhaps Midwestern) context. In cultivating yards that both reflect and generate their very situated politics of taste, these lawn dissidents construct a racial paradigm that is naturalized in the landscape. This paradigm encompasses an erasure, if
unwitting, of racialized ideas and histories associated with gardening and food production. It also allows the new white subjectivity to distinguish itself from the broader positionality of whiteness—associated with exclusion, conservatism, and wealth—by positioning itself in opposition to all things suburban. Implicitly, then, this whiteness is not only environmentally conscious, but the implicit opposite of the general (bad) white and affluent subject.

**Complicating the novel white subject**

The “green” lawn dissident places enormous value on in-yard food production, native species, pollinator plants, home compost, rain capture systems, and a “natural,” “casual” aesthetic. Beyond the mere presence of these elements, the “green” dissident subject holds education in high regard—because sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives oppose commonly held lawn ideals, dissident subjects are aware that their alternative yardscapes often must be accompanied by educational components, either performed by the subject or physically inscribed in the landscape. One interview participant said that he planted his boulevard with native species with the goal of “having another place to plant native diversity. Kind of show it off in a public way.”

More abstractly, this emergent subjectivity values the organic, the high-quality, and the “authentic.” They eschew chemical inputs, enjoy eating home-grown food (and are vocal about it), and make sure to teach their kids to how to garden and be environmentally aware. While previous sections engaged with the many values held by this subject as performed through the yard, this discussion will unpack the ways in which this new subjectivity of whiteness—novel as opposed to more traditionally known tropes of privileged whiteness, like the suburban country club member, Upper East Side philanthropist, aristocrat, etc.—should be viewed as problematic, especially in relation to the goals of social sustainability.
All of the values and principles espoused by this novel white yard subject are fraught, entangled in history, systems of power, and capitalism. Organic, as discussed previously, has been co-opted by niche markets, such that many subjects conflate adherence to true organic principles with the purchasing of Certified Organic corporate goods. This dubiousness can even result in a subtle mistrust of the term. An interview participant referred to his neighbor’s hired yard care service: “her lawn service, um, claim—I don’t mean that by saying I don’t believe it, I’m just saying, they say it’s organic.” Another respondent told me, “We buy organic fertilizer spikes,” a mass-produced product.

Native species certainly offer ecological benefits to the yardscape in that they are best adapted to local conditions. One man offered an easy justification: “[Native species] can handle the extremes. They can handle too much or too little. They’re, um, they’ve adapted to the worst that Minnesota throws at them.” This means that they drain water effectively, and as another respondent explained, “When you plant native plants, then you don’t have as many pest problems. Because they’ve evolved with the local pests, and everything works great.” On the other hand, native species are commonly known to have a “weedy” appearance, so that ostensibly, only sufficiently attractive, well-kept houses can maintain the minimum aesthetic required to be seen as appropriate within the neighborhood norm. Even a respondent with an all-native garden in front of her house, which receives a great deal of positive feedback from the neighbors, admitted that “a lot of the natives look kind of like a weed until they start to bloom.” Additionally, since “weed” is a geographical term, not a biological one (Robbins, 2007), the presumption of deciding which species are native and which are invasive bears a startling resemblance to the way belonging and exclusion are policed in elite neighborhoods. If weeds and native species appear quite similar, the difference may manifest through social distinction—race and class as performed in the landscape.
Edible gardens and home compost can be traced in United States cities to marginal communities of color, where families grew food to supplement their meager incomes and fed their gardens cheaply by using waste from the home. Of course, vegetable gardening and compost merit praise from an ecological, sustainability-minded perspective, but to claim their chief virtue as the domain of green positionality is to deny a troubled history of inequity. Furthermore, in the very recent past, communities of color have been chastised for the practices of cultivating in-yard gardens. To identify edible gardening as a trend—“It’s such a huge trend these days. Absolutely,” one respondent exclaimed—constitutes erasure.

It should also be noted that, beyond roots in Blackness and indigeneity, there exist other antecedents of urban gardening to which subjects might refer; most prominently, victory gardens of World War II encouraged Americans of all classes to produce food as a way to support their country. This example, too, proves highly raced in its appropriation of subsistence gardening in service of an imagined-white, patriotic American subjectivity.

**Colorblindness in the anti-suburb**

The “green” lawn dissident also demonstrates an investment in being diametrically opposed to the suburban lawn and lawn subject. By appealing simultaneously to urban and rural values, this subject establishes a clear politics that clings to “nature” while also claiming all the cultural capital of the city. One man spoke glowingly about his Minneapolis neighborhood:

> And then that, that’s a very rural sort of thing, you know? The knocking on somebody’s kitchen door for a cup of sugar and a couple of tomatoes, you know, kind of deal. And I like that. I like that human connection, and, um, in tying it into, you know, the, sort of the human scale and the welcoming, and sort of the friendliness of the whole concept. It’s like, um, I think it’s important to have, to cultivate a yard, and a home life, that includes, uh, neighbors, and, you know, allows you to make new friends.

Nevertheless, a particular paradigm of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) emerges through anti-suburban sentiment coupled with a rootedness in a green positionality. In
distinguishing themselves from those suburban people, who are broadly known to be white, rich, and conservative, “green” yard subjects living in residential urban areas obscure their own privilege. As such, they are able to discuss the value of neighborhoods populated by nuclear families in their own homes, along with the value of nearby greenery, while constructing themselves in opposition to a white, wealthy Other. In this way, subjects circumvent the subjects of race and class by elevating the discussion to one of lifestyle choice, morals, and taste. The same respondent continued:

It’s something I really object to, to people living in these soul-sucking suburbs that can spend ten years living in a house where they have absolutely no idea who lives on either side of them. I think it’s really tragic. And there’s something fundamentally, socially wrong about it.

Rather than positioning communities of color in their traditionally-held role of derelict Other in yardscapes, several Minneapolis yard subjects identified a suburban villain. Since that Other must be white and affluent, the new white subjectivity must be, by contradistinction, something besides white and affluent. In fact, as mentioned previously, of my survey respondents 107 identified as non-mixed white and 113 said they owned their homes, which were all in well-regarded neighborhoods; however, the construction of the Self and the Other through the antagonism of the suburb proves strategic. The new subjectivity of “green,” urban whiteness differentiates itself from the broader, exclusionary category of whiteness.

Moreover, by talking about the loveliness of proximity to nature, the new white subject is able to speak about values and cultural capital, which are circumscribed by systems of power, without talking about race or class. The green, middle-class quality of Minneapolis neighborhoods lends itself to various white-coded adjectives—warm, welcoming, neat, tidy, quiet—that allude to the natural landscape while marking the neighborhood for a particular elite positionality. One woman reflected on her South Minneapolis street, “I really like that it
is very close to the city and a lot of those things, but it still feels a little bit separate and quiet.” In fact, many Minneapolis neighborhoods resemble suburbs in their low-density layout and their generous yards, but the novel dissident subject is invested in the almost contradictory combination of rural and urban that is decidedly not suburban.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that environmental consciousness and outdoor landscapes are by no means limited to white communities, but their entrenchment in capitalist systems codes them as such, and costs are often prohibitive as well.

“Dirt under my fingernails is the better part of life”

Relatedly, many respondents referred to their interactions with nature through the yard as therapeutic, and some revealed that they valued nature in an almost transcendent manner. It was common for respondents to make statements like, “Dirt under my fingernails is the better part of life,” as one woman stated several times. A few other interview participants referred to their outdoor spaces as “sanctuary” and “spiritual.” Weeding in particular emerged as a “therapeutic” activity for multiple respondents. While the genuine enjoyment of and inspiration wrought by these activities is certainly valid, they also constitute appropriation of Black and Native tradition.

Close engagement with nature, formerly a necessity that attracted chastisement among marginalized, racialized communities, are now seen as trends that accrue social credit and cultivate a particular performance of elite identity. Again, it is abundantly clear that individual people do not consciously appropriate gardening and other naturalistic traditions. Rather, subjects adopt frames—connection to the earth, authenticity through gardening, the spirituality of nature—that are both attractive and strategic to the “green” dissident subject. These frames allow subjects to demonstrate hands-on commitment to ideals of sustainability, and they prove legitimately attractive in combating the alienation of modern urban capitalist
life. Nonetheless, the appropriation implicit in subjects’ engagement with nature through the yard must be examined as a formidable obstacle to true inclusivity in “green” yardscapes.

**Coded landscapes**

Finally, while gardening and sustainability initiatives act as the front lines of gentrification in some areas, in already-affluent neighborhoods like those of the research respondents, the new “green” lawn dissidents create coded places that communicate the exclusion of those yard subjects who fall outside the established norm, whether that norm be an easygoing patchwork or a more “natural” landscape.

Only two respondents explicitly described a neighborhood as mostly or all white, and the only instances in which race or sexuality were mentioned were prompted by questions about what types of families live in the respondents’ neighborhoods. There seemed to be a buried universal of whiteness throughout these neighborhoods, which perhaps contributed to local norms and social pressure. Most respondents felt adamant that they did not act under social pressure, although many could recognize a norm, even if that norm was a patchwork or a broad openness. Additionally, that respondents inhabit their outdoor space and spend time looking out into the neighborhood means that a type of friendly surveillance is always occurring: neighbors know how each other take care of their yards, when they mow the lawn, their approaches to gardening, and even the types of activities they perform while outside.

One respondent said:

> The rest of us [in the neighborhood] pretty much put in the same workload. Go out and, you know, mow once a week. Everyone’s got their own—I mean, you could set a clock by it. It’s bizarre. Um, he mows every Wednesday night. Though he mowed today, so must have been on a business trip. He mows every Friday, er, every Thursday afternoon, and I mow like religion every Friday. Afternoon. It’s bizarre.

Despite the potential disconcerting nature of this informal surveillance, most respondents reflected happily that they have positive relationships with their neighbors, and many spoke to how
the physical neighborhood becomes a community. Still, it is vital to interrogate how yard and
garden norms across neighborhoods intersect with demographic norms.

As mentioned previously, white-coded adjectives were prevalent in respondents’
descriptions of their residential areas. One man summed them up succinctly: “Just
welcoming! Well, I’ll use some more subjective sort of adjectives. Welcoming. Cozy. Um,
nurturing. Uh, safe.” Furthermore, the very construction of Minneapolis neighborhoods as
elite, their connectedness to greenery, and their convenient opposition to suburbs code them
pointedly in alignment with the new “green” dissident subject. One woman noted about her
area, “There’s a big variety in the way the houses look. Um, on our street particularly, and in
this part of South Minneapolis. Um, and you’re never gonna see houses like this in the
suburbs.” Another man assured me, “But you, you become attracted to a quieter aesthetic.
And this, this kind of life, sitting in this nice, quiet backyard here with this green space and
whatnot, it becomes something that you need sort of on a spiritual level.” Without explicitly
mentioning the resources required to access these types of “welcoming,” “quiet” places—not
to mention who creates them, and for whom they are created—respondents painted a portrait
of neighborhoods coded distinctly white and elite, if increasingly environmentally conscious.

V. The shortcomings of interstitial space

Interstitial space as a platform for boundary-making

Although yards may function as shared landscapes contributing to a communal good,
they are also spaces within which boundaries are continually erected, and in which access is
circumscribed by power, exclusion, and the subtle work of markets. As long as morality is
assigned to neighbors based on yard care and positional goods pepper residential streets,
landscapes will continue to be politically fraught. Consequently, it is important to survey the
shortcomings as interstitial space as a platform for transgressing norms and changing them for the better. While the "green" lawn dissident is a loaded subjectivity in itself, the complex public/private dynamic of the interstitial space of the front yard constrains it liberatory potential even further.

To reiterate, the act of deciding which species are native and which are invasive (weeds), especially when they look exactly alike, represents a form of boundary-making. Subjects restrict which plants belong in their landscapes, and in doing so they restrict which people are welcome in the neighborhood—namely, the sorts of people who understand and value the distinction between natives and invasives. Setting up this dichotomy also imposes a power structure upon the yardscape, which may have acted as a commons; instead, a hierarchy is erected in which subjects under the new subcategory of whiteness gain the power of deciding whom and what belongs.

Perceptions of yardscapes as somewhere in between public and private also play a significant role in the potential of interstitial space. One respondent described his immaculate, turfgrass-and-flower front yard as follows: “I really like having the lawn: I think of it as my moat, and the public is on the other side of the lawn and I’m on this side of the lawn. And I get to see them, but I don’t need to have them quite so close to me.” Rather than a platform for expression, this subject viewed his front yard simply as a buffer zone protecting him from interaction with his neighbors.

While no other research participants articulated the interstitial quality of front yards quite so clearly, others alluded to the fact that front yards warranted compromise, straddling the public and the private. One woman said of her front yard, “I do try to have some grass because I think it makes it more accessible to other people, and makes the dense planting, and makes the organic approach a little bit more user-friendly.” This woman boasted an all-organic, densely-planted oasis of lush foliage and vegetable plots in the back; nonetheless,
she felt obliged to conform ever so slightly to the more traditional lawn norm in order to appease her neighbors, even in a neighborhood that espoused organic principles at large. This is all to say that despite constituting the Interstice of public and private residential landscape, front yards are often subject to a backpedaling conformity to traditional norms. Rather than using the visible landscape to challenge norms, even the most assertive of “green” dissident subjects felt pressure to create a sufficiently “appropriate” yardscape.

In general, most respondents subscribed to dominant norms of public and private, where public means subdued and appropriate, and private can be personalized. The following exchange typifies this dynamic:

A: So was there a specific reason why you put the vegetable gardens in the back?
I: I would say there’s not a specific reason. It just sort of seemed natural. But I suppose when you bring that up it was probably a subconscious thought. Like, oh, yeah, that’s just where people put those things? It actually, until you said that it didn’t even cross my mind that we could or should put it in the front yard. So, I mean, maybe we’ll do that. It depends on how things go, but I wouldn’t say anything is preventing us from using the front yard in that way. It was just sort of the natural inclination to use the backyard.

Clearly, while interstitial space may be theorized as a platform for radical interventions into property and public space, in practice, front yardscapes are constrained by the instinct to create a “moat” between the house and the street, as well as by normative notions of how to appropriately present the front yard. As the sustainability-driven white subject intervenes in residential landscapes, it will be interesting to discover whether this phenomenon changes.

**Property is property**

Decidedly less flexible yet equally crucial is the phenomenon of claiming yardscapes and yard care as property—or, often, the failure to claim them as property. Green positionality is prevalent (if implicitly) in respondents’ discussions of engagement with their yards, but capitalist entrenchment extends beyond niche markets into the very act of owning
property. This very simple fact of ownership was rarely discussed among research participants, and in deemphasizing all capitalist engagement, yard subjects dismissed the critical truth that the very act of owning and cultivating one’s own landscape must be recognized as a keystone of capitalist function.

None of the interviewed subjects moved into their homes and changed nothing; they all took care to modify and personalize their outdoor space. In their imagination, the yard as they came to control it constituted smooth, rather than striated, space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)—they usually conceptualized the yard in terms of the improvements they added rather than equal tradeoffs of differing preferences. In other words, property ownership turnover assumes that a new house starts as the Interstice (neither owned nor claimed) (Trinh, 1991) and is subsequently claimed by new owners as both a means and a platform for identity performance, as well as for positional good. This seems to be the case, to some extent, even when ownership shifts within one family, like when a daughter purchases her childhood home, or a partner takes over the yard after the other partner is deceased. One respondent, whose partner was dying and on hospice, and whose partner was the third generation of her family to inhabit their house, said the following about the yard when away from that partner:

I: I would like it more organized, more symmetrical. It’s kind of like me to do that. And I can’t make any changes at this time because it’s [my partner’s] family’s yard, you know what I mean?
A: Yeah.
I: So, when the time comes that she’s gone, I’ll do things differently.

Powerful notions of ownership enable yard subjects to act as they please in caring for the yard; this sense of property may be disguised, but its impact is profound. Yard subjects, even the new, sustainability-oriented dissident subject, are compelled to cultivate identity-laden landscapes in conformity to bourgeois mentality.
The yard is significant for its use value, which is most often discussed, but also for its exchange value, which is mentioned less often. Moreover, almost all respondents downplay their capitalist engagement; they emphasize their store and brand loyalty only in specific instances, favor local and organic businesses, say that they prefer not to use much equipment or buy many products, and place value on what is not commonly commercially available or pushed aggressively by marketing. One respondent said, “I’m really kind of a freak that way. And more than a little bit neurotic about this. I hate advertising. And if anything, I tend to rebel against, uh, anybody that I, that I, you know, anytime somebody sort of is trying to thrust some sort of brand name down my throat, I really dislike it.” This man, at the same time, took obvious pride in the patio and outdoor living space he and his wife installed, as well as other elements of the yard that required significant capital, both time and money.

Even for those who participate in sharing economies, it is nearly impossible to cultivate a yard that accrues the type of status these subjects seem to enjoy without some degree of capitalist engagement. For example, one respondent habitually borrowed his neighbor’s pickup truck in order to buy bulk supplies from a local wholesale garden business. Despite sharing the vehicle and bypassing big-box chain stores and several steps of the capitalist supply chain, the act of purchasing was inescapable. More obviously, this man performed all of the labor in service of bolstering his property. No matter how much “green” lawn dissidents downplay their capitalist engagement or emphasize commitments to niche (ethical, local, organic) markets, the act of claiming, personalizing, enhancing, and performing privilege through the yard must be read as an inherently capitalist production because of the politics of taste and the codedness of green positionality. We must view sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives through both of these critical lenses in order to disabuse ourselves of the notion that property can be anything but capitalist and taste can be anything but political.
The interstitial space of the yard—neither private space of the home nor public space of the street—represents a limited vision of intervention in property and normative yardscapes. The novel yard subject performs identity through the front yard, but even identity performance is constrained by the tension of straddling public and private. Moreover, the front yard reinscribes notions of property and reinforces the idea that there must exist a buffer between public and private. As such, front yards prove to be tenuous platforms for inscribing belonging and exclusion in landscapes. Instead of acknowledging their investment in property and exchange value, subjects instead focus on membership in an imagined community of the elite and eco-conscious, and they construct their landscapes with the latter at the forefront of their consciousness, the former a subconscious but ever-present concern. Perhaps strategies that circumvent the dilemma of the front yard by further dismantling claims to property may offer greater possibilities for inclusivity deriving from the “green” lawn dissident and their landscapes.

**VI. Sharing economies**

After the rigorous disassembling of an emergent subjectivity of whiteness and the problematization of the landscapes cultivated by that subjectivity, a small dose of hope and possibility is in order. Amidst all the conversations with interview participants, the existence of sharing economies stood out as a common and inspiring thread. Yard subjects shared food, horticultural plants, tools and gadgets, books, labor, advice, and quality time. They shared with friends, family, neighbors, and strangers. Although the sharing that occurred constituted economies (in the sense of flows of energies and resources), they were not identified as such. Respondents simply spoke from a desire to connect with people they care about, as well as to
make the most of resources, especially resources as infused with love as home-grown vegetables.

**Sharing informally to connect**

While sharing practices generally were not formalized, they were widespread. Several respondents referred to “for free” signs they had encountered in the neighborhood and in parks, urging passersby to help themselves to freshly harvested foods or other goodies. Sometimes respondents swapped crops with their vegetable-producing neighbors. A few interview participants habitually borrowed tools from neighbors or simply exchanged gardening wisdom. A significant number of yard subjects told stories about specific plants, which had been dug up and gifted from friends’, neighbors’, and family members’ gardens. In these cases, respondents almost always knew exactly where the plants came from, and sometimes they recalled narratives to go along with the plants. Among the more serious gardeners, several admitted that they had planted so much organic matter, they were constantly digging up parts of their yard to transplant in friends’ gardens: “We’re giving stuff away now, we’re not putting a lot of new in,” one man said. Another woman admitted, “I mean, everyone I know has plants from my garden. Because, and that’s the thing about overplanting. You have lots of divisions to give.” While these subjects did not circumvent capitalist markets in the installation of their gardens, they enacted new sharing economies once their gardens were established. In the spirit of sharing, several research participants offered me tastes and samples from the gardens while I interviewed them.

Beyond food and gardening, a few yards even featured trees that had been gifted or planted in honor of friends’ weddings. Additionally, Little Free Libraries were visible in subjects’ neighborhoods, and several of them commented on how they enjoyed these libraries
during interviews. All in all, sharing economies pervaded neighborhoods, and their influence proved deceptively far-reaching despite the parallel existence of “green” markets.

**Destabilizing property**

In addition to tangible sharing economies, it is possible to reimagine property through the common front yardscapes of neighborhoods. Although, as previously outlined, front yards present a dilemma of balancing the imperatives of public and private, a few interviews offered insight into paths for change.

Several respondents spoke fondly of children traipsing across the span of multiple yards (back and front) with no regard for individual ownership. Although this phenomenon occurred in a few neighborhoods, this man articulated it most colorfully:

> There’s this connection between those houses in the backyard, that they really, they almost, like, uh, it’s more communal, uh, in the sense of, like, property line isn’t such a big deal. … Like, there was this gang of girls that, there were several houses that had girls the same age. … So they were just, like, little fairies that were just, you know, property lines didn’t mean anything to them, you know? [laughs]

Of course, this particular instance refers to backyards rather than the front, but other respondents spoke of similar activity in their neighborhoods. Appealing to the value of family, which is impossible to overstate in its importance, these children destabilized how residents understood property in their neighborhood. Sometimes homeowners even made decisions based on this value of children’s play across suddenly-porous property lines, like choosing a durable ground cover or not fencing the yard. This demonstration of flexibility proves that property, while powerful, can be shared, especially through engagement with values that are salient to yard subjects. As explored in the work of Ursula Lang, rethinking yardscapes as urban commons offers resistance to oppressive norms in the socio-environmental landscape, but shared landscapes also put forth opportunities for the creation
of meaning across communities rather than just for individual residents. While pushing yardscapes into the territory of urban commons is no easy prospect, it certainly illuminates an avenue for dismantling property as well as creating meaning in shared landscapes.

**Promoting sharing economies**

Pushing sharing economies to grow and become more visible, like holding neighborhood skill shares or promoting produce swaps, could instill a truer communal value in the community. J.K. Gibson-Graham put forth a model of community gardens and economies, which share common resources, produce and consume together with both individual and collective interests in mind, make responsible decisions about surplus, and continually re-invest in the garden/economy (Gibson-Graham, 2013). Importantly, sharing economies proffer values consistent with those of the “green” lawn dissident subject—while extricated from “green” niche markets, sharing economies promote values of community and sustainability without the entrenchment in capitalism. Although landscapes bolstered by sharing economies may still be marked by codes of elite, environmentally-conscious whiteness, sharing economies represent a genuine push for multifaceted sustainability in landscapes and communities. Furthermore, efforts to inscribe these non-capitalist activities in the landscape, like signs urging neighbors to pick whatever they want from the garden, may help in counteracting the persistent white-codedness of green dissident landscape norms.

Given the extent to which lawn dissidents perform an affluent, eco-conscious iteration of whiteness in and through the landscape, it is crucial to seek out ways to distance sustainability initiatives from “green” markets and signposts of distinction. Capitalism will continue to pervade widespread consciousness and constrain access to lawn alternatives, but on the same token, yard subjects will continue to derive a great deal of meaning from their yards. Consequently, a cultural shift away from landscapes of privilege and toward a truly
sustainable urban commons could offer the same benefits to yard subjects while promoting inclusion in landscapes, communities, and the broad movement toward greater sustainability.
Conclusion

Now let us return to the same Minneapolis residential street that I used to introduce the lawn dissident. The “organic-looking” gardens, the sprinkling of tomato plants, and the efforts to reduce the dominance of turfgrass—at a second glance, these signals are apparent. The appearance of this street may not be the glossy one from TV sitcoms; still, there are things about it that make us understand that it is coded as white and fairly wealthy. The native species gardens are tended painstakingly to demonstrate an intentional choice, not a default on responsibilities. The grassy areas are large enough for children to play in, but patchy and dull enough to let all passersby know that these homeowners disapprove of harmful fertilizers. Several side gardens grow kale, squash, strawberries; they are all outfitted with charming accessories and specialized tools.

The one that stands out—the one without any turfgrass at all—is distinct, but it most definitely belongs in this place. This lawn dissident has withdrawn from the capitalist complex of chemical fertilizers. She also cares about the yard looking welcoming, although the definition of “welcoming” may be different than “welcoming” in the nearby suburbs—or, for that matter, in nearby low-income neighborhoods. She cares about sustainability enough to claim her yard for the cause. Also importantly, she wants you to know explicitly that she cares about sustainability, and she wants to teach you why sustainability matters.

In sum, they matter because they are limited—because they create exclusive and racialized places and constrain the liberatory potential of small-scale sustainability initiatives. Yards create meaning for yard subjects, but among “green” lawn dissidents, that meaning is fraught with exclusive identity performance and entrenchment in capitalism. Sustainability-oriented lawn alternatives operate as positional goods that perform whiteness yet also convince dissident subjects of the goodness of their environmental stewardship. Thus, while
they foment a new paradigm of liberal, affluent whiteness in the landscape and in discourse, lawn alternatives simultaneously reassure subjects by embodying their values and reflecting their identities. While lawn alternatives maintain the facade of existing outside of dominant capitalist systems, in reality niche “green” markets capture many of the efforts to promote sustainability through the yard, and they subsume non-capitalist sustainability efforts through the pervasiveness of capitalist consciousness. Still, that yards are sites of immense value and significance for yard subjects should offer hope that new visions of sustainability in urban residential landscapes may prove just as meaningful and fruitful to increasingly more people.

Moreover, although the sustainability movement is premised largely upon the future consequences of environmental degradation, these consequences will be experienced unevenly according to differing identities and privileges; namely, they will be experienced less by those in charge of elite sustainability initiatives, and they will be experienced more by those who cannot afford (or believe they cannot afford) those initiatives. If “sustainable” (dense, walkable, “livable”) neighborhoods “become exclusive enclaves for the affluent, the results may not only be spatial injustice in the city: they may be of limited environmental benefit … if environmental improvement becomes widely seen as a vehicle for promoted class-based values and privilege” (Quastel et. al., 2012, p. 1077-78). Therefore, it is crucial to integrate social sustainability with environmental sustainability so that positive as well as negative externalities may extend to the most marginal communities (Pilgeram, 2012, p. 58). Amidst the rising prominence of urban sustainability initiatives in cities, it is crucial to understand the social impacts of these initiatives—the extent to which they perform and facilitate the performance of whiteness and class privilege, and the extent to which they are restricted by capitalism—so that future efforts may prioritize equity and inclusivity.

Importantly, communities of color are already practicing sustainability in a holistic sense, often stemming from necessity. These separate practices must be decoupled from
performances of whiteness. Rather than erasing the successes of holistic sustainability initiatives in communities of color, this project seeks to reveal how an environmental sensibility is deeply insufficient among white privileged communities in pursuit of sustainability. Further, white supremacist capitalist systems subsume sustainability practices developed in communities of color and reshape them to be coded as white and elite.

While the study occurred in South Minneapolis among a fairly small and largely white, middle-class population, several conclusions should prove broadly generalizable. The white, affluent, eco-conscious subcategory of whiteness emerges increasingly across U.S. cities, and a few interview respondents spoke anecdotally about their experiences with “green” lawn alternatives in other cities. While spatialized norms are uniquely situated and contingent upon the politics and demographics of a place, growing concern for climate change and threats to the environment will continue to galvanize urban residents to reimagine their personal landscapes in ways that are congruent with their values and politics. Of course, the ways in which yard subjects produce and interact with dissident landscapes will differ from city to city, as they already differ from neighborhood to neighborhood in Minneapolis. Nonetheless, “green” positionality and “green” markets reach nationally and even globally, so the codedness of sustainability efforts as white and elite will likely manifest, albeit with slight variation, across space. Similarly, the co-occurrence of gentrification and “sustainable,” “livable” initiatives in a host of cities ensures that the questions raised in this analysis—about the performance of whiteness and the perpetuation of capitalist systems through seemingly benign sustainability initiatives in yardscapes—will prove pertinent across contexts, even if the answers differ slightly.

On that note, other researchers might consider embarking on parallel studies in other major U.S. cities, since factors like racial and class segregation, a Midwestern mentality, relative isolation from other metropolitan centers, liberal city governance, and ample support
from local organizations may have influenced the findings in Minneapolis. Other cities with different standards for sustainability could yield new insights into how subjects perform whiteness through creating “green” landscapes and how “green” landscapes are tied to niche markets. Most excitingly, perhaps further research in other cities could reveal more strategies for disentangling lawn dissidents from a performance of privilege and an engagement with capitalism.

Given more time and resources, I would have prioritized investigating how low-income communities and communities of color perceive the white-codedness and elite market status of sustainability efforts in the yard. This project focuses almost exclusively on white narratives and behaviors as performed by white subjects, but since the ultimate goal of the thesis is to uncover obstacles to equity and access in sustainability initiatives, my next step would absolutely be to attempt an understanding of how non-white, less privileged yard subjects experience the phenomenon of “green” lawn dissidents. Since my positionality predisposes me to an ease in speaking with privileged white subjects, I would also take care to address the extent to which I would need to speak (and research) across difference. Nonetheless, I am adamant that any serious inquiry into inequality as inscribed in landscapes must not limit itself to the perspective of those performing privilege and exclusion.
Works Cited


Cresswell, Tim. 1996. *In Place, Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Ch. 1, 2, 3.


