

## 4.5. English Allotments as Sites of Utopic Super-Diversity

JC Niala

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the banality of urban gardening as a utopian practice and interrogates inclusiveness on allotment sites in the city of Oxford, England. Growing in Oxford on allotments has increased in significance due to the convergence of food provenance issues, environmental concerns, and the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Utopia is not a destination to arrive at but is in a constant state of production and renewal that carries echoes of the gardening calendar. This paper illuminates the ways in which urban gardeners, through their practices, complicate traditional Euro-American imaginings of utopia. It looks at the reproduction of urban gardening sites, specifically allotments, over time. Despite allotment sites being seen as a quintessential piece of English material cultural heritage, they have in both human and more-than-human gardeners been more diverse than the rest of the UK for over half a century. Human gardeners with origins in different parts of the world talk about a process of “re-rooting” through which allotment sites offer a possibility for them to simultaneously express the cultural identities of their heritage as well as participate in British cultural identities.

**Key words:** utopia, urban gardening, allotments, super-diversity, banality

### **Re-rooting**

The gate locks behind me, freedom lies ahead  
I embrace the earth's welcome smell.  
There's no return so here's paradise instead.

Old country shovelled into bags as I fled  
Collecting the traces of lives where they fell.  
The gate locks behind me, freedom lies ahead.

My real name hangs up on a nail in my shed  
 They won't pronounce it, anyway who would I tell?  
 There's no return — here's paradise instead.

Today's job is to make sure that my plants are fed  
 In the old country, I ran a business as well  
 The gate locked behind me, freedom lies ahead.

Allotment soil is a warm, soft bed  
 A new home where ancient plants can dwell  
 A locked gate behind me, freedom lies ahead  
 No return, here's paradise instead.

(NIALA, 2022).

The poem above encapsulates the central argument of this paper, which analyses the English allotment as a form of utopia. As another allotmenteer said, “And it seemed to be when I first went there, I thought this was kind of utopia”. This paper argues that allotments are recognised by the people who practise urban gardening on them, not just as utopias but as places where a plurality of people practise with and alongside diverse plants, animals, and other more-than-human actors.

Allotments are sites of land often glimpsed out of the corner of one's eye. They are subdivided into plots, which are individually rented out to members of the public for the relatively low annual fee of fifteen to thirty pounds a year. English allotments are utopic in three ways that are critically different from traditional Euro-American renderings of utopia. They are of collective imagination but individual effort, they are ordinary and everyday, and they are a process rather than a destination. They are a quintessential and enduring form of English material cultural heritage, what Niamh Moore *et al.* have termed “everyday utopias” or “intimate privatepublics” (2014: 327).

Allotmentees' conversation with the city is a quiet and state sanctioned embodiment of a different way of being through a cultivated relationship with city soil. Or, as Michael, an allotmenteer, described them, “These micro communities come together and celebrate our differences and our shared passion too”.

First, I will present a brief introduction to the work that I have been carrying out over the last couple of years with allotmentees on allotment sites across Oxford. Then I will outline the methodology used to carry out this work, and finally discuss some of the conclusions to which I have come through this work.

My research is about the practice of hope at a time when human beings are being stretched in their capacity to believe in a better world. Allotmenters are people who transform city spaces into utopic places. By growing alongside each other, they create sites of super-diversity with communities that travel through time and encompass different peoples and species. As human beings we are driven towards self-improvement. Using the imaginary as a way to think about how we can make the world a better place has a long history both as an oral tradition and in literature, and also through various forms of practice. Urban gardening as a practice offers the possibility of improved health and well-being and although there are many studies that have shown this to be the case (Wakefield *et al.*, 2007; Wood *et al.*, 2016; Soga *et al.*, 2017), there are far fewer studies that explain why the imaginary is an important part of this process.

One example that crosses with my research about the power of the imaginary comes from Benedict Anderson's (2016) work on imagined communities. Anderson illuminates how a shared practice such as that of reading a national newspaper individually or maybe even collectively in our own homes can draw us into a particular national imagination of who we are collectively.

On allotment sites there is also a shared practice that is carried on alongside each other, but what is critical is that allotmenting is primarily an individual practice. Or, as the allotmenter Matthew illuminates, it is a type of growing that is done alone, together:

So most people ... including me, would say it's a kind of sociality or socializing where you don't have to socialize ... So you be digging away, and someone passes at the top of the plot and you say "Hi", and you might pass two sentences but there's no obligation to. But it's nice to have people around, and when people are not here, it feels slightly creepy but slightly, you know, I prefer to have people around, working on their plots, not necessarily talking to them.

This *alone, together* sociality is a critical paradox in the utopic method of allotmenters. By examining it, my work is a counterpoint to research in utopian studies that presupposes utopias as primarily sites of social cooperation. What brings allotmenters together is not their relationship with each other, but their individual relationships to the land which they cultivate alongside each other. This leads to a complex interplay between individual practice and collective moments in order to produce a place of collective value. It means balancing

working together to maintain the site with a type of “civil inattention”, a term coined by Erving Goffman to describe the neutral interaction that takes place between strangers in public space (1963: 83).

The focus of utopian studies on the collective, while understandable, has led to the oversight of places like allotment sites that city dwellers experience as utopic. Within the context of utopian studies, basing utopia on the collective is a reasonable assumption given the description of Thomas More’s *Utopia*.

Urban gardeners in Oxford are not the first group of people to wrestle with this question of materializing a perfect world. There are many types of utopic projects where people work hard to materialize what they consider to be a perfect world. Such projects include democratic schools such as Summerhill in the UK or local exchange trading schemes. A key difference between these projects and urban gardening is the relationship to identity. The identity of an urban gardener is based on place and practice. What I mean by that is, you cannot be an allotmentee unless you are practising allotmenting on an allotment site. There is a dynamism about these utopic places that allotmenters materialize. And in being aware of the constant changes, allotmenters do not expect their sites to be perfect. A shift in wider utopic studies as detailed by authors such as Davina Cooper recognizes that utopia is an evolving method rather than a specific goal (2013: 5).

Although my work on allotmenters in Oxford is in many ways an everyday utopian project, it is also about a practice of hope. The allotmenters I researched and grew alongside in Oxford are not doing so as part of a collective effort. Although there are indeed collective moments as part of the practice, it is not an essential prerequisite to carrying it out. This specific form of alone, together sociality is also echoed in the allotmenters’ practice of growing. Everybody is growing, but not everybody is growing in exactly the same way. It is this recognition of difference, this acceptance and celebration of difference, that allows allotment sites to be places of super-diversity. Every single site in the city of Oxford has at least ten different nationalities growing alongside each other. If we take into account the plant species and insects that grow alongside the humans in these spaces, we are talking about a super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007).

It is important to note that this diversity is not new. For over half a century, people, plants, and insects from all over the world have been growing alongside each other at rates of diversity that are higher than in the rest of the UK that surrounds the allotment sites (Moran, 1990: 130). What I have learned from my thirty-six months of fieldwork is that there is the possibility for us to build a world together that works well, that is described by its participants as a utopia, but that does not, as a prerequisite, require us to give up parts of how we see ourselves

as individuals or indeed subscribe to communality; a world that operates with common values but allows for a plurality of purpose and practice.

I was involved in participant observation on four different allotment sites for a total of thirty-six months. Because of the way that networks in the allotment community operate, I also visited several other sites over the course of my fieldwork, as people would say to me that I must meet, visit, or see somebody who was cultivating on a different site. As well as the practice of becoming an allotmentee myself, I carried out semi-structured interviews with thirty-three allotmentees from sites across the city. In addition to my interviewing and participant observation, I was fortunate that a secretary on one of the sites which I cultivated volunteered, without prompting, to give me the archives of that allotment site, which go back over eighty years. As a result, I was able to carry out archival research. I also used fieldwork sketching and public engagement with research as part of my methodology.

A key question I had was how do urban gardeners in Oxford materialize a utopic place within a city space? This reflects the shift from utopia as a concept to an active and dynamic method in which participants are practically involved in the creation of utopias that are not necessarily perfect but nevertheless offer spaces of hope.

The twentieth century marked three clear developments in allotment history that are less well researched within a utopian framework: the formation and maintenance over time of urban allotments; the policy moments that enshrined allotments in law; the understanding of allotments as being more than functional spaces in which to grow food. This last point, in particular, situates my research within a developing body of work that unsettles the idea that the primary reason people grow plants in cities is because they want to be self-sufficient in food. Allotmentees also grow plants for their beauty, plants that actively support the growth of pollinators they garden alongside, plants that reflect their heritage, plants to give away to other people in the wider community, and more.

Allotments have survived over centuries because of a complex interplay between long-standing allotmentees in the form of the “old boys”, interplayed with more diverse arrivals in terms of sex, ethnicity, and social class. The “old boys” are a more or less unbroken chain of white working-class men who have been gardening on allotment sites since their inception. Stereotyped by their flat caps and their trousers held up with baler twine, they are still very much the main people working allotments in the public imagination. They have been the mainstay of allotments, and I discovered they have been directly responsible for the survival of many of the sites across the UK today. “One way or another they kept the sites going”, said Peggy, an allotment committee chair.

Critically, the respect “old boys” have for other allotmenters stems from a connection to the land. For them, presence on the land is more important than the shape in which that presence comes. This orientation of “old boys” means that allotmenters from places as far flung from the UK as Trinidad, Zimbabwe, or Nepal are not just tolerated on allotment sites but frequently understood. There is an understanding that the people who are growing alongside them were going through a process of re-rooting, as described in the poem at the beginning of this essay, which supports them to live a more connected life in England.

That is not to say that the “old boys” do not also have opinions on the changes that have taken place on allotment sites over the years. For many of them, the fact that more women now run the sites through the allotment committee is welcome, because it means they have less work to do and less responsibility. However, some particular nationalities have been associated with practices such as intensive water use and not hiding the use of pesticides sufficiently, which raises certain grumbles. Still, in comparison with the city outside the allotment gates, these are minor grumbles. Allotmenters love the land they work on, and they form a connection to their fellow allotmenters through the care that they demonstrate on the allotment site. Their alone, togetherness allows them not to be exclusive in their practice. People, plants, and insects from other places are mainly welcome on the site, and the relationships that are formed are, in the main, meaningful and equitable.

What my research has found is that it is indeed possible to materialize a utopic place within a city space. Allotment sites actively embrace a diversity of people, species, and practice in ways that the wider city aspires to but is yet to fully realize. It is my assertion that they do so by creating a belonging that is centred on three key concepts. The first is that belonging is grounded in plurality. The second is that, although there is a collective vision, it is practised individually. Finally, utopia is not a place to arrive at, but rather a process and a method that allows people to work with an imaginary that takes us to a better place, through a consistent, ordinary, and productive engagement with the realities of our present.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict (2016), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Cooper, Davina (2013), *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Goffman, Erving (1963), *Behavior in Public Places. Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Moore, Niamh, Andrew Church, Jacqui Gabb, Claire Holmes, Amelia Lee, and Neil Ravenscroft (2014), "Growing Intimate Privatepublics: Everyday Utopia in the Naturecultures of a Young Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Allotment", *Feminist Theory* 15.3, pp. 327–43 <<https://doi-org.ep.fjernadgang.kb.dk/10.1177/1464700114545324>>.

Moran, Denis M (1990), *The Allotment Movement in Britain*. New York, Peter Lang.

Niala, JC (2022), "Re-rooting", in *Portal: 1918 Allotment*. Oxford: Fig Studio.

Soga, Masashi, Daniel T. C. Cox, Yuichi Yamaura, Kevin J. Gaston, Kiyo Kurisu, and Keisuke Hanaki (2017), "Health Benefits of Urban Allotment Gardening: Improved Physical and Psychological Well-Being and Social Integration", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14.1, p. 71 <<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14010071>>.

Vertovec, Steven (2007), "Super-Diversity and Its Implications", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30.6, pp. 1024–54 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701599465>>.

Wakefield, Sarah, Fiona Yeudall, Carolin Taron, Jennifer Reynolds, and Ana Skinner (2007), "Growing urban health: Community gardening in South-East Toronto", *Health Promotion International* 22.2, pp. 92–101 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dam001>>.

Wood, Carly J., Jules Pretty, and Murray Griffin (2016), "A Case-Control Study of the Health and Well-being Benefits of Allotment Gardening", *Journal of Public Health* 38.3, pp. e336–44 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdv146>>.

