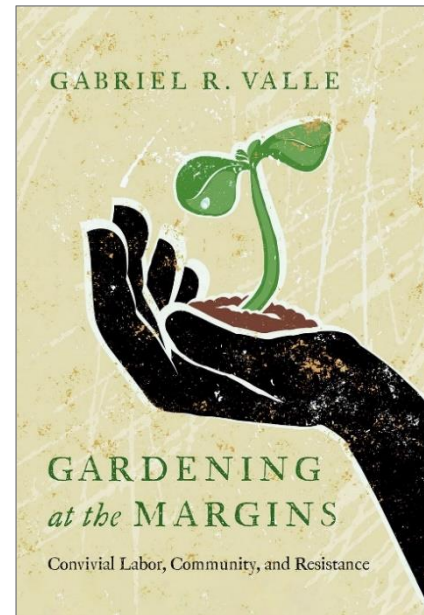


## Contending food sovereignty with cultivating kinship through community gardens

*Book review by*

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Review of *Gardening at the Margins: Convivial Labor, Community, and Resistance*, by Gabriel R. Valle. (2022). Published by University of Arizona Press. Available as hardcover and Ebook; 240 pages. Publisher's website:  
<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/gardening-at-the-margins>



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Gabriel R. Valle's *Gardening on the Margins* underscores the importance of engaging in anthropological research through community building in a way that resonates with my entry into food systems research. In embedding himself in Santa Clara Valley, he had the chance to meet with members of the La Mesa Verde community, many of whom are community gardeners who entered community gardening not just out of necessity to

meet their needs but also through an “ethic of care,” which the author defines as “caring for others and the relationships that caring creates ... make us human” (p. 8).

As Valle accurately points out, “the current neoliberal food system has the tendency to separate people from their very means of production. This process is damaging to our environments, our communities, and our bodies” (p. 10). The objectives of food sovereignty were laid out in 2007 through the Declaration of Nyéléni in Mali, the culmination of bringing together hundreds of community movements from across the globe to rally together to address the devaluation of their livelihoods and the interconnectedness to nature that is increasingly lost in the reigning neoliberal economic order. The declaration states in part that,

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Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers. (para. 3)

In the United States, food sovereignty acts as a fulcrum for self-determination, especially in urban areas where access to arable land is a privilege in and of itself. In *Gardening at the Margins*, Valle explores the concept of convivial labor concerning individual agency, particularly in working-class communities in the Santa Clara Valley of California. These communities aspire to regain a semblance of control over their relationship to the land and what they consume amidst the rising cost of living and gentrification resulting from the Silicon Valley boom of the last three decades. According to Valle's research and the scholarship he cites, "people in the most unlikely of places use labor to create escapes from the oppressive nature of industrial capitalism" (p. 13).

In some of Valle's interviews with community gardeners such as Jessica, the labor and energy dedicated to land stewardship and gardening were "not [viewed] as political acts but as acts of enjoyment" (p. 140). Jessica, with roots in both Indigenous and European heritage, lives in East San Jose as a community gardener who "does not exist by merely being in relation to those in her sharing network; instead, she is her relationships, and she holds herself accountable to others who also make that social bond. Unlike the Western notion of individualism, the good life that Jessica pursues cannot be accomplished alone, but only as part of a 'complex whole'" (p. 106).

Gabriel touches upon the legacy of grassroots activation within working-class communities and communities of color to establish semi-autono-

mous institutions and structures to build self-sufficiency and comradery through the production of culturally appropriate food. As Monica White points out in her book *Freedom Farmers* (2019), agricultural cooperatives in Southern states throughout the post-Civil War era have influenced the contemporary food justice movement nationwide. The resilience of Black landowners, sharecroppers, and domestic workers in establishing autonomous food systems was made possible by a theoretical framework known as collective agency and community resistance (CACR). Coined by White, CACR is a form of everyday resistance that is less combative and more accessible since it can be initiated by individuals or small groups in any community. Drawing on influences from "feminist, collective, community, and political dimensions" (White, 2019, p. 6), people in a community build a collective consciousness rooted in the food system they create; in turn, this food system provides a safe space to educate themselves on the realities of their political situation and mobilize without fear of state retribution.

For example, the Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC) was established in the 1960s by the political organizer and former sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer. Freedom Farm was created for three primary purposes: providing affordable, safe housing; establishing an entrepreneurial incubator for new business owners and training undereducated workers; and meeting the nutritional and dietary needs of people through an independent food system. Collaborative gardening was a cornerstone of the FFC approach.

The CACR framework is a helpful model for viewing Valle's analysis of the La Mesa Verde community. I did not see this framework explicitly mentioned by Valle; however, I took a step away from this book with a broader understanding of what labor means in the context of food production and food sovereignty. Not only that, but I realized how "radical" the act of finding joy and investing time and energy in work that enriches the soil, the soul, and the source of nutrition for food is. Food sovereignty means addressing the impact of what Valle describes as the "metabolic rift initiated by settler colonialism ... contribut[ing] to our alienation from nature" (p. 84).

After reading this book, I felt inspired by the resilience of a community that redefines kinship with the land and mutual accountability despite

the structural barriers prioritizing convenience over comradery and agency to decide the food we consume.



## References

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