

Growing food and radical hope in Glasgow: A review of *The Practice of Collective Escape*

Book review by

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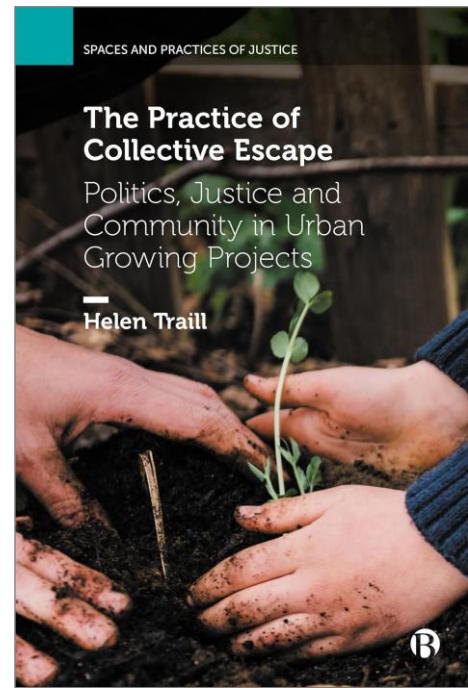
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Review of *The Practice of Collective Escape: Politics, Justice and Community in Urban Growing Projects*, by Helen Traill. (2023).

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In the *Practice of Collective Escape: Politics, Justice and Community in Urban Growing Projects*, Helen Traill gives us a personal tour through the social complexities of community growing projects, accompanied by the rich insights of her ethnographic work over six years in Glasgow, Scotland. She follows two community growing sites during the Brexit transition and the COVID-19 pandemic. Her ana-

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lytical lens weaves the work of authors who have navigated topics of inclusion and exclusion in the Commons, negative and positive freedom, social justice and political activism, and the overall benefits and challenges of urban agriculture projects. The author illustrates her claims with illuminating stories and choice quotes from gardeners and the wider community connected to the case studies. Truly, reading this as a researcher who has spent both a fair amount of time with my hands in the soil in urban growing projects and behind the desk reading about them (studying public health benefits and governance challenges), Traill's book stands apart as an illuminating examination of an infrastructure feature increasingly accepted as a net positive in cities. Yet, these gardens are rarely critically

looked at as Petri dishes for individual and community transformation, which this book does through examining concepts of inclusion, individual escape, and political activism.

Embedded in the nature of an ethnography is inclusiveness, and Traill strives to enter these spaces with open-ended questions, contextual sensitivity, relational depth, and ample attentiveness, as has been prescribed by Ingold (2014, p. 384), admitting her own inherent bias as an expecting mother and parent throughout her field work. The multiple identities that allow her to seamlessly enter these spaces also give her an excellent vantage point to witness exclusionary practices. Traill presents the idea that despite the known “Glaswegian inflection,” “the staunchly held notion of inclusion, the strong vein of social inclusion and a deep suspicion of those in power” (p. 27), the reality is that there may be limits to the type of inclusion practiced and she shares her insights around the social demographic and race boundary work that surfaces in communality. The author’s findings suggest that inclusivity is an evolving concept in growing projects, shaped in part by one’s preconceived ideas of community and current popular social justice themes (e.g., racism, veganism, and gender disparities). The temporal range of the study as well as the comparison of two growing sites with different founding intentions, landscapes and community structures further strengthens the generalizability of her claims on inclusivity and the central theme of “collective escape.”


Traill brings us closer to some of the intricacies of a common paradox found in community growing projects, such as giving up some identity for the greater good, yet allowing space for diversity. She proposes the idea of escaping *into* community, where “community presents a paradoxical kind of freedom” (p. 5), in an age of growing disconnection brought about by the “negative freedom” of capitalism. In these spaces, people can enter and exit conversations easily, connect with nature, be a part of radical and “re-imagined” community rhythms and rituals (such as mealtimes) and feel a communal pull toward service to each other. Traill illustrates how this natural impulse also manifests in the maintenance of green spaces and in the shared hope for radical change and social justice.

Through her research at these sites, she claims “to see the everyday resistances, politics and practices of justice of mundane local projects” (p. 89). She demonstrates the ethics that emerge from the positive freedom of “escaping into obligation” of the commons and the “reaffirming interdependence” (p. 92) in these projects through powerful narratives.

The comparative case studies Traill presents in her book also demonstrate that the reality of political activism in growing projects is complicated, irrespective of what motivations people enter these spaces with. One point she raises is that politics takes many forms. For example, some of her study subjects see the act of land use in opposing a capitalist system as political, while others see publicly fighting for a cause, such as veganism or gender rights, as political. Another point she raises is that political inclinations may be fluid and not inherent, arising from a natural consciousness raising that occurs in these growing projects, but highly dependent on their relationships with funding mechanisms, and wider social shifts. Traill highlights a challenge in the study of emergent politics through qualitative research: there is an inherent cultural bias in individuals’ perceptions of the concept and implications of “politics” depending on education, income levels, and individual cultural experience. She questions whether a default to “social justice” and “common justice” might be a better frame of reference for research eliciting opinions on politics.

The Practice of Collective Escape is a fascinating deep dive into the social and aspirational dynamics that emerge in communal growing projects. Many previously studied themes in this space are exposed for observed questioning, and many new questions surface, which makes this work useful for researchers in social sciences, sustainable agriculture, and urban planning, among many other areas of study. Traill writes with honesty in her conclusion of her hope for this work of ethnographic research: “If this book has succeeded, it has built on these tensions, demonstrated the interplay between attempts to escape and create something collective and autonomous in the city and the broader structures of opportunities that constrain and facilitate action” (p. 154). In my opinion, this book achieves this and

more. What might take it beyond an illuminating analysis for researchers or enjoyable required reading in graduate school classrooms would be an

accessible playbook of recommendations for community stakeholders in urban growing projects and urban planners. 

Reference

Ingold, T. (2014). That's enough about ethnography! *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 4(1), 383–395.
<https://doi.org/10.14318/hau4.1.021>