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***Growing a Sustainable City?: The Question of Urban Agriculture* by CHRISTINA D. ROSAN and HAMIL PEARSALL**

University of Toronto Press, 2017 \$19.95

Reviewed by **MATTHEW ZANTINGH**

One of the most pressing contemporary concerns in the environmental humanities is rethinking how we live in cities. In 2014, the World Health Organization estimated that more than 54% of the global population lived in urban settings while, here in Canada, the 2016 census revealed that Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver are now home to some 35% of all Canadians. Christina D. Rosan and Hamil Pearsall's *Growing a Sustainable City?* is a timely contribution to the diverse discussions about the sustainability of cities. Their slim volume, part of the University of Toronto Press' Insights series, offers a detailed account of the history and politics of urban agriculture in Philadelphia. Rosan and Pearsall are geographers by trade and they analyze Philadelphia's long history of urban agriculture, new trends in urban policy, and the cultural, racial, and class politics surrounding the last 20 years of developments in the city using more than 35 interviews with gardeners, activists, and city staff.

Why Philadelphia? Because the city is ideally positioned for urban agriculture to play a transformative role. In 2008, newly elected mayor Michael Nutter promised to make Philadelphia the "Greenest City in America" (1). Between 1950 and 2000, the city had lost more than 500,000 people, a quarter of its total population. As a result, it currently has more than 40,000 vacant lots within its urban boundaries. Many of these vacant lots have been turned into urban gardens. These initiatives are diverse,

ranging from neighbourhood organized community gardens to commercial for-profit farms, and on to the more radical guerrilla gardens of select individuals or groups. Hence, Rosan and Pearsall use the term urban agriculture as an inclusive umbrella to cover numerous kinds of food-growing practices. At the same time, the authors are at pains to point out that urban agriculture is not new in the city, identifying three different waves of growth beginning in the late 19th century and continuing to the present. Rosan and Pearsall's nuanced historical approach helps to delineate the complexities of present-day Philadelphia.

These complexities arise from the intersections of race, class, and migration. Philadelphia has been heavily hit by economic downturns with citizens suffering from a deep-poverty rate of 12.2 percent, almost double that of the United States as a whole. This poverty and the urban blight of uncared for vacant land has made the city an attractive landing spot for young, college-educated, and primarily white activists who want to address poverty and food security in the city by starting urban gardens. These newcomers to Philadelphia have been leading the charge for an official adoption of urban agriculture as a sustainable strategy in line with Nutter's promise. Rosan and Pearsall spend significant time thinking through the complex politics of the tensions between these new arrivals and long-time, primarily African American citizens who are invested in different forms of urban agriculture.

What becomes clear in *Growing A Sustainable City?* is that urban agriculture is seen as a desirable activity to promote, but often only as a temporary measure to attract new development that will solidify the city's tax base. As a result, urban agriculture tends to be deeply precarious as

it is always under threat of development, even if the current landowners are amenable to it. One of the unique contributions of Rosen and Pearsall's volume is to explore Philadelphia's policy around urban agriculture in detail, highlighting both its progressive intent and the underlying problematic assumptions about land use. The authors also offer a helpful final chapter laying out what lessons might be learned from Philadelphia. Urban agriculture is no silver bullet to solve the environmental crisis, but it might offer important ways of rethinking current environmentally-destructive urban habits and practices.

As a former urban gardener in Hamilton, Ontario, I found this volume deeply insightful. The detailed picture Rosen and Pearsall offer of the city they live in provides a clear sense of the current cultural position of urban agriculture. Yet they also maintain a critical edge that deflates any utopian thinking which often accompanies urban agriculture in various forms. Their attention to race, neighbourhoods, class, and belonging is particularly useful. Unfortunately, race and class have too often been swept under the rug in the pursuit of environmental agendas, with the exception of the environmental justice movement itself. However, *Growing a Sustainable City?* productively makes these two elements of

identity a key part of understanding Philadelphia's urban agriculture. The volume is quite accessible, yet Rosen and Pearsall admirably illustrate the difficult work of building community in broken places. They write "the story of Philadelphia demonstrates that this process of engagement and policy change will take time and will not always be easy" (159-60).

This volume will be useful for anyone with an interest in urban agriculture, for those thinking about the relationship between urban locations and broader environmental concerns, and for those interested in urban environmental policy. While a reader could simply take in the suggestions that Rosen and Pearsall offer, these suggestions are deeply enriched when the full context of Philadelphia's relationship with urban agriculture is understood. Thankfully, this volume does just that in a concise yet engaging manner.

MATTHEW ZANTINGH is an Assistant Professor of English at Briercrest College & Seminary in Caronport, Saskatchewan. His research focuses on the imprint and impact of nature on culture in Canadian literature. He is particularly interested in the ways it manifests itself in urban nature, imagined environmental futures, and wilderness narratives.