Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development
Iss. 23, 2021, pp. 30-47.

CONSILIENCE

THE JOURNAL OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

When Nature Invades: Resident Perceptions of the Austerity-Driven "Re-Wilding" of an Urban Park in Rock Island, Illinois

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Abstract

In an era of rapid urbanization, a changing climate, and deepening political division, parks represent increasingly important places for urban residents to interact with, and feel connected to, the natural environment and the mental and physical health benefits it provides. Unfortunately, in an age of austerity politics, parks and recreation departments in Midwest Rust Belt cities often lack adequate funding to maintain such public spaces. Recently, the business-minded Rock Island, Illinois Department of Parks and Recreation has implemented a creative cost-saving management solution: "naturalizing" sections of its city parks. Using a mixed-methods approach, this interdisciplinary study aims to discover how the community members near two representative urban parks in Rock Island perceive this economically motivated "re-wilding" of long-manicured and domesticated urban nature. Resident reactions reveal enduring conceptions of a nature-culture divide, as well as the upper class, White ideologies that have historically shaped park construction and use in the United States.

Author's Note

My interest in this research topic stems from my studies in environmental science, human geography, and cultural anthropology. I grew up exploring Rock Island's urban green spaces, and this project allowed me to reconsider these childhood destinations as complex and multidimensional social constructions, "naturecultures" worthy of study using ethnographic methods. During five months in the summer of 2019, I spent my days in the city's parks, interviewing recreationists, distributing surveys, and conducting structured observations. What I discovered was a community of people who cared about and valued their local green spaces, but also struggled with deeply entrenched and problematic views about what those spaces should look like, how they should be used, and to whom they "belong." I hope Rock Island's parks, as described in this article, can function as an informative case study for other Parks and Recreation departments across the United States that are struggling to manage such important public spaces in environmentally and socially sustainable ways during an age of austerity governance.

Keywords

Urban green space, naturalization, austerity, nature-culture divide, ethnography, mixed methods

Figure 1: Naturalization sign in Lincoln Park (Author photo)

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I. Vignette: A Park in Flux

It's another hot afternoon in July, a few days after the Fourth. The pothole-filled road through the middle of Lincoln Park in Rock Island, Illinois is still strewn with firework and sparkler detritus. Recorder in hand, I'm walking along the gently sloping road with two of my participants, a couple in their seventies that I'll call Don and Dana. They have lived at the base of the hill at the foot of the park for six years now, and have walked its curving, oak-lined paths almost daily since they moved to Rock Island in 2014. They rave about the summer concert series that the Rock Island Department of Parks and Recreation hosts in the old bandshell, and tell me how much they love watching sunsets from the top of the hill with the city and the Mississippi River spread out for miles below them. They are the quintessential old couple—they hold each other's hands as they lead me through the park, have matching eyeglasses, and constantly finish each other's sentences in a way that I know will make transcribing this interview a particular challenge. Birdsong fills the air, and children laugh in a nearby playground. As we walk, Don starts to point out fallen tree limbs and overgrown grass, and the tone of our conversation quickly turns somber. Don and Dana want me to plead their case to the city—Lincoln Park is in trouble, they tell me, and it might be too late to save it.

"In 2017 things changed," Don starts. He throws his hands into the air as we walk through one of the park's new "naturalized areas" of unmowed grass. "It really went downhill," he tells me, "I think there was a change in management, and now there's no one taking care of this park! They don't mow the slopes anymore. They say they want it to go back to prairie, but it just looks unkempt."

"The Parks Department doesn't do anything," Dana agrees. "It's only the money makers— the golf courses and soccer fields—that get attention."

Don nods his head, frowning. "I've met a man who's 91, and he's walked the park since he was 65, and he, too, says that it's totally unacceptable that they don't mow anymore."

We've passed the playgrounds and basketball court by now and are walking down the overgrown concrete stairs at the back of the park. Dana points to a wooden garden bed full of thistles and decorated with an empty McDonald's cup.

"You see what I'm talking about? It just looks like an abandoned place. And ever since then, we've had more problems with graffiti, and there've been a few shootings at the basketball courts."

"Crime-related things have really risen," Don agrees. "And the general feeling of safety is less since then, the last couple of years. Dana always says…"

"…I wouldn't come by myself in the evening anymore." Dana finishes. "And it's really related to the basketball courts…"

I ask Dana what she means.

"Well I don't want to be a crabby old lady, but when the kids are shooting baskets there might be fifteen cars parked there and there's trash all over. One time I came up by myself and it took a half-hour to pick up all their bottles and junk." She looks me in the eye. "And I don't want to be prejudiced, but they're Blacks."

II. Introduction

Parks are important features of cities. Since the urban parks movement began in the mid-19th century, scholars and city dwellers alike have appreciated public urban green spaces as necessary for the creation of "communal life" and the city itself (Halprin, 1979). In an era of rapid urbanization, changing climate, and political division, public health officials and urban planners are increasingly recognizing the potential of public parks to buffer negative climate effects through ecosystem services and ameliorate common urban social problems like obesity and social isolation (Wolf, 2012; Pickett et al., 2011; Irvine et al., 2013; Cartwright et al.,2018). Yet, while urban parks are being asked to provide these increasingly important services for cities, parks departments across the country are facing significant cuts to funding and staffing—investment in public space tends to be "disproportionately subject to tight fiscal pressures" (Dempsey & Burton 2012). Despite their benefits, public green spaces are often under-appreciated and targeted first for budget cuts when cities' economic situations worsen (Tyrvainen & Vaananen, 1998; Jim, 2004; Chiesura, 2004).

In attempts to reduce "green space deficits" and ensure park benefits are equitably distributed, cities often set minimum area targets for park provision. Recent research, however, indicates that geographic proximity and access do not effectively predict the level of usage (Wang et al., 2015). In response, scholars have begun to

focus on intrapersonal (psychological) and interpersonal (social) factors in addition to objective structural ones like physical access. They find that perceived access is more significant than geographic access or proximity to parks for predicting park use (Wang et al., 2014; Rigolon, 2017; Donaldson, et al. 2016). Subjective perceptions of park cleanliness, attractiveness, safety, and the character of surrounding neighborhoods also significantly influence the level of usage (Ho et al., 2005; Madge, 2008).

While studies comparing physical access using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and attitude surveys have become common, less common is the use of qualitative ethnographic methods to investigate the cultural preferences of individuals to discover why different groups use parks differently and what perceptions and positionalities drive such disparate use patterns (Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Cohen et al., 2009; Chan et al., 2011). In one example, Taplin and colleagues (2002) used ethnographic methods to conduct a "rapid ethnographic assessment" (REAP) of an urban park in Philadelphia to complement opinion survey data on park management projects. Such methods of "action anthropology," they argue, include local communities in the decision-making process and acknowledge cultural ties between those communities and parks, all in a quick assessment.

To better serve the public and promote park use in an era of fiscal austerity (especially in Rust Belt cities already suffering decades of economic decline), managers need a complete understanding of who uses the parks and for what purposes. Such an understanding, based on data from mixed-methods studies of park use—including ethnographic methods—can enable more informed budget and policy debates in city government and solidify the important role of urban parks in the pursuit of more sustainable cities. As former Rock Island Senior Manager of Community Development Alan Carmen told me,

> When you are dealing with specific park issues, if you don't consider the intimate relationships between citizens and parks, if you don't involve the public […] it will be a short-term decision with long-term implications.

However, city officials argue that, since Rock Island lacks the resources, it cannot always follow best management practices that involve public participation, despite awareness of the benefit it brings to the parks long-term. The most accurate measurement of park use in Rock Island, according to Parks Department Director John Gripp, is from estimates of the amount of trash removed from receptacles. Given the department's lack of resources and the paucity of data on park use currently available, I offered to help. Thus, the initial goal of my study was to conduct a mixed-methods pilot study as a model for gauging park use (see Taplin et al., 2002) and to help the Parks Department make future management decisions.

To better understand resident use and perceptions of parks in Rock Island, I conducted GIS analyses of surrounding neighborhood geography and demographics using Census Bureau data; distributed an online attitude survey and analyzed the survey responses using software from the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS); interviewed residents and city representatives; and conducted structured observations using the System of Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC) methodology (McKenzie et al., 2006) by dividing the parks into sections based on use-type and counting and categorizing recreationists within each section at set times of the day. The analysis presented in this paper focuses specifically on data collected through the semi-structured in-person and phone interviews with survey respondents who live within a quarter-mile of Lincoln Park (n = 19) in Rock Island and with park and city government officials (n = 9).

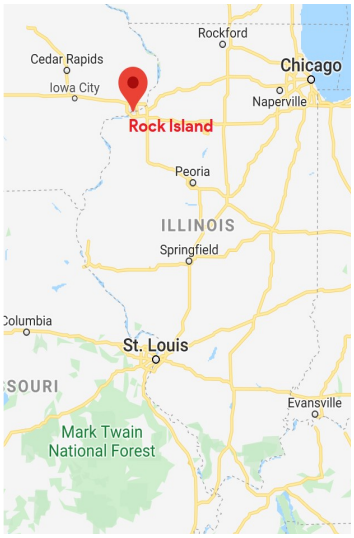

Figure 2: The City of Rock Island in Illinois (Google Maps)

In this paper, I will use insights from anthropology, geography, and urban political ecology to show how the Rock Island Park Department's recent economically-motivated management intervention of "re-wilding" areas of Lincoln Park reveals urban residents' underlying perception that the disordered, messy, "wild" nature is invading the park's manicured, domesticated nature and that urban green spaces are potentially exclusive and distinctly White places. Residents' rejection of the "messy" naturalized areas reveals that neither alternate conceptions of urban nature nor the use of park spaces by minorities are necessarily welcome.

III. Urban Parks in America: Green Spaces, White Places

In his famous work, "The Trouble with Wilderness," historian and geographer William Cronon (1996) dismantles America's great wilderness "myth." By the mid-1800s, romantic Christian valuations of the "sublime" and nostalgia for the disappearing American frontier created a powerful sense of the "wilderness ideal" in the hearts and minds of city dwellers in the United States. During the height of the Industrial Revolution, wilderness became the last "bastion of rugged individualism," starkly contrasting the polluted cities of "civilization" (Cronon, 1996). For example, at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in soot-stained industrial Chicago, historian Frederick Jackson Turner gave an impassioned speech for expansion into the "wild" western frontier, which reflected a simpler, truer America. The socially constructed separation of human civilization and natural wilderness was born, even though no part of the natural world is truly "virgin," having been altered by Indigenous peoples for millennia before Europeans arrived in North America (Mann, 2005). Soon, a rising middle class began using the remaining "pristine" countryside for recreation and consumption, and the government began creating "conservation refugees" by removing populations that did not belong from areas they deemed in need of protection (Dowie, 2011). This human/nature duality and its effects persist today, not only in national parks and wilderness but also in local sections of conserved nature—urban parks and green spaces.

Historically, urban park design has been informed by this dichotomous understanding of culture and nature (Chiesura, 2003; Cronon, 1996; Loughran, 2017; Meeker, 1973; Stormann, 2009). Parks and protected areas are ways of "seeing, understanding, and producing nature and culture," reinforcing Western ideas of a division between the two (West et al., 2006; Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Stormann, 2009). Because parks are created and cultivated by people, their design necessarily reflects specific ideas about what nature should be and how it should be used. Urban parks, like Olmsted's Central Park in New York City, began as "elitist culture-natures" to capture "wild" nature in cities for urban dwellers to consume (Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Loughran, 2017). In such carefully cultivated pastoral landscapes (safer than the "true" wilderness of the West), the rich could participate in sports and race carriages on park roads—often some of the best maintained in the city—without encountering the urban poor.

The idea of nature, not nature itself, forms parks, and these designs often reflect mostly White ideas of what nature should be and how parks should be used. Therefore, parks are inherently racialized and exclusionary (Loughran, 2017). As historically elitist places for recreation, urban parks excluded the urban poor and people of color. When parks were finally delivered to the poor, they were specifically designed to socially reform and assimilate immigrants. Racial segregation of parks under Jim Crow laws continued into the 1950s (Byrne & Wolch, 2009). Redlining, institutionalized racism, suburbanization, and white flight in the latter half of the 20th century left many Black Americans living in park-deprived city centers while new park construction followed whites to the suburbs (Byrne & Wolch, 2009). Today, park creation is closely linked with gentrification and exclusion, often clearing certain communities to make way for parks that serve others (Taplin et al. 2002). Studies show people of color often report feeling underrepresented in parks' histories and have more limited access to park space (Taplin et al., 2002; West 1989). As a result, affluent White communities benefit disproportionately from public green space. Some scholars have rightfully framed this inequity as an environmental justice issue (Heynen, 2003; Nicholls, 2001; Wolch et al., 2005; Byrne et al., 2009; Boone et al., 2009).

With this complex history of parks and urban green spaces—as constructed, racialized forms of nature—in mind, I turn to the site of my ethnographic study, Lincoln Park in the city of Rock Island, Illinois. Unsurprisingly,

the same historical power structures that drove park development across the United States have not left this city's green spaces unscathed.

IV. Urban Parks in Rock Island, Illinois

Rock Island is a city of around 37,000 people on the Mississippi River at the western edge of Illinois. Though well outside the region traditionally considered America's Rust Belt, Rock Island's history of industry and economic decline shares similarities with other more well-known Rust Belt cities such as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Youngstown, Ohio. Rock Island is considered one of the "Quad Cities," along with Moline to the east and Davenport and Bettendorf on the Iowa side of the river. Among the Quad Cities, Rock Island is the least economically prosperous and one of the most racially diverse ($43,558 median household income, 22.5% non-White according to U.S. Census Bureau 2018 data).

Rock Island has 850 acres of public green space in 28 parks of various sizes and designs, plus two golf courses, a water park, an outdoor sports complex, and a fitness center. Park staff members are quick to state that Rock Island boasts more "parks per capita" than any of the other Quad Cities. My project focuses on Lincoln Park, located between 7th and 14th avenues in the city's KeyStone neighborhood. Lincoln Park is a large, traditional city park close to a high school and Augustana College (a 2,500-student residential liberal arts college) featuring a large bandshell and outdoor theatre, playgrounds, gazebos, and sports fields.

Established in 1909 to commemorate Abraham Lincoln's centennial birthday, Lincoln Park is a particularly good example of an urban park as an "elitist culture nature" with settler-colonial origins. The park's northern edge is delineated by the arbitrary Indian Boundary Line, created by an 1816 treaty that forced Illinois Sauk and Meskwaki tribes further north out of their ancestral lands. In 1920, Augustana College attempted to purchase the (at the time) undeveloped green space for development, but a citizen protest, led by KeyStone neighborhood founder and wealthy lawyer E.H. Guyer—who wanted to create a "utopian city" with luxurious houses and theatres and Lincoln Park at its center—successfully opposed the sale. As Guyer wrote, "Lincoln Park […] in reality belongs to the people and any effort to deprive the people of it should be strenuously resisted" (City of Rock Island, 2020). In 1924, the wealthy Davenport family donated funds to build a fountain and bandshell in the park (City of Rock Island, 2020). The park's rolling hills and oak-lined paths were carefully sculpted by Davenport landscape architect Russell L. McKown in 1928 in the style of other early 20th-century American parks, which were originally modeled after European pleasure gardens for the upper class. In its early days, the park hosted basket picnics and athletic events for neighborhood residents. During the Great Depression in the 1930s, tennis courts, an Italian Renaissance Revival-style arboretum, an elegant wading pool surrounded by Greek columns, and a Bedford stone dressing room building were added and funded by the wealthy Denkmann family. They were constructed by otherwise jobless men employed by federal programs. Today, the old pool building houses a Greek theater guild.

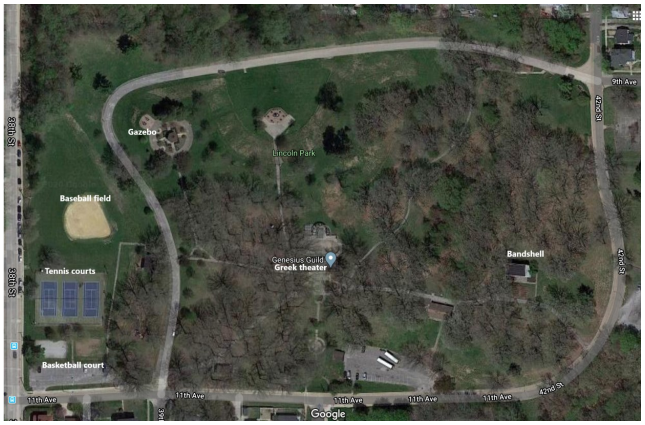

Figure 3: Lincoln Park satellite image (Google Maps)

The park sits in a liminal space between the historically segregated "above the hill/below the hill" divide—with poorer Black and Latinx neighborhoods "below the hill" closer to the river—in Rock Island. As Rock Island Reverend Melvin Grimes reflected in 2016 on growing up "below the hill" in the 1960s, "If you lived below the hill, you were nothing. If you lived above the hill, that was the cream of the crop. And certainly no one at that time was going to allow Blacks to buy any property […] up the hill." That same geographic divide has historically played a role in park management; in an interview, a previous Parks Director described a long and protracted conflict between "above the hill" and "below

the hill" residents about the location for the future water park.

My participants, a self-selected group of KeyStone neighborhood residents—89% White and on average female (66%), 50 years old, and college-educated (62%)—who responded to my survey, certainly love the park. Based on survey responses, participants visit parks in Rock Island on average 12 days per month, with some visiting as often as every day, especially on summer evenings. Like their KeyStone neighborhood ancestors, they certainly possess a combination of race and wealth privilege that make such frequent visits possible. Living near parks—and living in park-dense Rock Island in particular—was very important to them. Many are long-time Rock Islanders, having lived, on average, 16 years (and as long as 69 years, in one case) in their current homes and at an average driving distance of three minutes from Lincoln Park. Several, including a 70-year-old nurse, shared that their children had been married in the park. One of my respondents, a 68-year-old schoolteacher, told me Lincoln Park "feeds her soul." Comparing Rock Island to the nearby city of Moline, she emphasized that, though "things were more expensive in Moline," she "really loved the park system in Rock Island."

As I sat on a park bench once with Don and Dana from the opening vignette, they reflected on a similar lengthy love affair with the park:

> It's our neighborhood park—we live less than a block away, and we've known [Lincoln Park] all our lives. We love these old oak trees, it's a jewel of a park. In the winter you can see for miles.

Another elderly woman told me about picnicking in the park as a child, and described how the wading pool was closed amidst a polio epidemic during which she was sick. However, despite their love of Lincoln Park, many residents—like Don and Dana—expressed concerns about what they saw as a decline in the quality of park maintenance over the past several years. They felt city staff had "given up" on the parks, although many also understood that "Rock Island isn't financially in the best of shape." To understand the recent history of park management and maintenance in the city, we turn next to data from my interviews with city officials.

V. Park Management in an Age of Austerity

Urban geographers have studied the neoliberal restructuring of Rust Belt cities facing "downscaling" and disempowerment since the beginning of the "long downturn" of deindustrialization—the 1980s, in the case of Rock Island (Davidson & Ward, 2014; Peck, 2012). More recently, scholarship has focused on a significant "deepening" of neoliberal urbanism following the 2007-2008 financial crisis, labeled "austerity urbanism" (Pottie-Sherman, 2017; Davidson & Ward, 2014). In many Rust Belt cities, acute deficit crises and declining property tax revenues have led to cuts in public sector funding, increased privatization, enforced reliance on grant seeking and precarious revenue sources, and "rightsizing" plans to green or demolish abandoned property and to rescale city infrastructure (Hackworth, 2015).

As in many Rust Belt cities of similar size, park management in Rock Island reflects this age of fiscal austerity. In face of a rapidly declining population, for example, the Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce has implemented a "development-oriented inclusionary" policy to welcome refugees and immigrants to the area, a common theme among Rust Belt cities (Quad Cities Chamber, 2018; Pottie-Sherman, 2017). Austerity urbanism has also significantly impacted public funding for urban green space in Rock Island, where the "more parks per capita" narrative is continually framed negatively in city government budget discussions, as several city officials said in my interviews. Parks Director Gripp echoed a common sentiment when he told me, "We have a great community here and we are blessed to have our parks. Sadly, we don't have enough money to maintain them the way I would like to see them maintained."

For decades, Rock Island has been governed by a "directive of frugality"—as one city official put it, "Don't increase property taxes, find alternative revenue sources, contain budget creep, and do things more efficiently." The Parks Department's funding structure reflects a neoliberal approach to local government that emphasizes the problem-solving capacity of free markets and a reluctance to increase taxes—75 percent of all revenue comes from memberships and programming while only 25 percent is subsidized by property taxes, opposite that of nearly all others parks departments in

cities Rock Island's size and larger. As a result, the Parks Department gets a "drop in the bucket" compared to other city entities receiving property taxes and faces more cuts each year, according to several officials in the department. This unique operating structure has forced the department to take a "business-minded approach" to management. As a former Parks Director explained, "We are really running a business because of the weak tax structure. If we aren't providing services people are willing to come and pay for, we're out of luck."

In 2011, following the economic recession, major changes in city government driven by the austerity urbanism ideology—including the controversial electoral victory (in a coin toss) of a new mayor, appointment of a city manager, and replacement of the city council—further imperiled the Parks Department's economic situation. The new city manager quickly replaced many longtime city officials. As a former senior urban planner told me, "We were made very uncomfortable and it was either jump off the Centennial Bridge or decide to go." By 2013, a collective 200 years of senior management had been forced to retire.

The Rock Island Department of Parks and Recreation has a staff of 23 full-time employees and 190 seasonal and part-time employees managed by Director John Gripp. Many of the staff members are lifelong Rock Island citizens deeply committed to the wellbeing of the community. Park policy decisions are made by the Park Board (appointed by the mayor), and the city council sets the department's budget each year. Thus, Parks Department employees' management priorities largely follow the political whims of the city.

Rock Island's lurch toward austerity urbanism also increased the city's reliance on more precarious funding sources. With city government "cleaned up" but still facing a deficit crisis, the new city manager next spent $15 million on land clearance in Rock Island on an agreement with Walmart to construct a new store on the site. This "handshake" agreement later fell through as Walmart began losing revenue to online retailers like Amazon, quadrupling the city's per capita debt. The city manager's response was to cut green space funding yet again and privatize many of the city's historic parks. As Parks Director Gripp (then newly appointed) told me, "[The city manager] came through our department and wanted me to sell half our parks—they were going to develop them." Luckily, like in the early 20th century when Augustana College tried to buy Lincoln Park, public outcry again prevented the sale of any parks. However, privatization remains a looming threat; as studies of urban parks in other places have shown, the result of privatization is always a "population disposed of an essential urban amenity" (Álvarez, 2012). Of course, the socioeconomic and historic factors that determine which parks tend to get sold (those in low-income neighborhoods) reveal privatization is a "symptom of a structural political disorder that perpetuates social and environmental injustice" (Álvarez, 2012).

Gripp's department has had to operate in what he calls a "culture of scarcity" ever since the failed Walmart deal. The planned minimum wage increases in Illinois and more frequent flooding in parks adjacent to the Mississippi River due to climate change promise to provide continual challenges to management going forward. These problems have led Gripp to make significant staff cuts, merge the Parks maintenance division with the Public Works department, contract out park mowing to private companies, and defer maintenance indefinitely on lesser-used parks. "Flagship" parks and revenue-generating attractions like the golf courses are prioritized for maintenance over older, less-visited, or less economically productive properties. The department has also inventoried all park features in disrepair to help justify their already-small budget when targeted for cuts. As one parks official told me, "[The inventory] gives us ammunition, so to speak, so we can articulate what we are doing and make the residents trust we are acting responsibly with their tax dollars."

VI. Naturalization as an Austerity Measure

The policies of fiscal austerity that drive park management in Rock Island have recently led to a creative cost-saving management intervention—the naturalization or "re-wilding" of selected areas of some of the city's parks. 22 million acres of tallgrass prairie once covered Illinois, of which only around 2,500 acres remain today. Before the Sauk and Meskwaki were forced out of its rolling hills, the area that is now Lincoln Park likely contained prairie or oak savanna habitats. Reintroduction of native prairie grasses and forbs (flowers) to urban parks is another one of those "industry-wide trends" (see Cook County, DuPage County) that fits well with the Parks Department's business-minded approach to management.

Reintroducing prairie provides a number of environmental benefits and ecosystem services—preventing erosion, aiding carbon sequestration, providing wildlife habitat, etcetera—but the city's primary motivation is to reduce mowing and maintenance costs and the risk of injury inherent in mowing hills, according to several Parks officials (Stephen & Mutel, 2005; Smith et al., 2010; Borsari et al., 2014).

Currently, 11 acres of Lincoln Park are selected for naturalization—mostly hillsides and other "unused areas" that "don't interfere" with park functions. Current management of these naturalized areas involves "letting them go" and mowing twice a year. With each mow, the Department chooses whether to add to, subtract from, or move the naturalizations. As Parks Chief Horticulturist Marcus DeMarlie told me, "[Naturalization] is not an overnight process. The overnight process was us not mowing, and that's what caught everyone's attention." The naturalized areas, marked only by simple signs reading "Naturalization in Progress," have indeed caught the public's attention, and aldermen and Parks Department employees have fielded a lot of calls from upset residents in the past year.

Of course, ceasing mowing is not a best management practice for prairie restoration, a process that typically involves regular controlled burns and native plant seeding on a continuous basis indefinitely. Parks officials do intend to follow such best management practices in the future, but for now, the Parks Department is employing naturalization as purely a cost-saving measure. So far, DeMarlie told me, the Parks Department has partnered with the Rock Island County Forest Preserve to get burn certifications for maintenance employees and with Augustana College to conduct ecological research on the naturalized areas. In order to commit to proper naturalization in Lincoln Park, the Department will have to convince the public that conducting controlled burns in an urban area is safe, and that the city government that prairie restoration's high price tag is worth the cited benefits. As of now, the Parks department has no clear-cut, unified restoration plan in place that would implement best practices going forward.

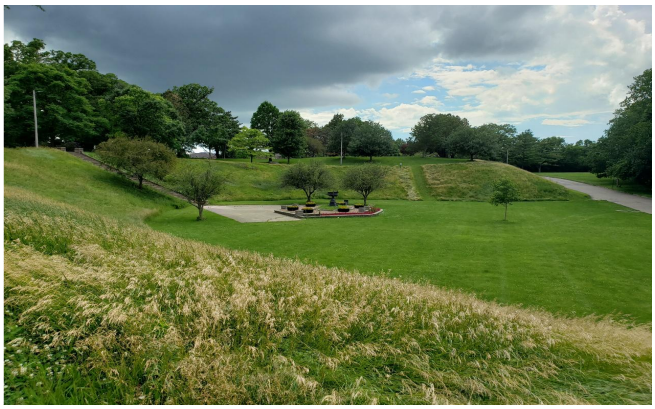

Figure 4: Naturalized hillside patches around the "bowl" area of Lincoln Park (Author photo)

Prairie restoration in urban parks, done correctly, is an effective environmental conservation measure and promises positive environmental and economic benefits for the city. Naturalization can be a win-win, resulting in biodiverse, aesthetically pleasing, and ecologically vibrant restored prairie areas that serve as attractions and save the austerity-minded Parks Department money on storm water management and mowing. Prairie restoration can also function as an important element of "plant advocacy," helping to "decolonize" settler-colonial landscapes (Mastnak et al., 2014). However, while the Parks Department's current noncommittal and partial approach has reduced mowing costs, it has caused a remarkable amount of public backlash. The approach has also produced "naturalized" areas shown by Augustana College studies to consist of little more than overgrown Kentucky Bluegrass and invasive shrubs—providing only minimal environmental benefit. Neoliberalism and austerity drove the city to attempt this management intervention, which led to an uncontrolled and chaotic re-wilding effort in the parks. While Parks Department employees strive to follow best practices to restore native plants, high costs and adverse public opinion are still prominent hurdles.

VII. Culture/Nature Conflicts Revealed by Naturalization

Political ecologists have long considered not one wild nature but rather a multitude of "natures" that are socially produced continuously. Urban political ecology (UPE) understands that the (re)production of urban landscapes is contingent on a history of unequal power

relations and a complex human-nature dialectic relationship (Álvarez, 2012; Roy, 2011). In one UPE study (Kitchen, 2012), interview respondents in an urban area largely perceived a nearby forest as a burden, not a benefit—the trees were seen not as providing environmental or social benefits but as aiding the accumulation of capital for future harvesters. Similarly, participants in my study called out the Parks Department's re-wilding initiative as economically motivated. One resident questioned the supposed environmental basis of the city's decision, saying, "To me it's stupid, because what are you doing except not mowing? It's a sign that 'we are not going to spend any money to have people mow' […] it's an excuse for laziness." Next, I will show the spectrum of residents' reactions to the Parks Department's naturalization initiative, which reveals the complexity of this human-nature relationship and its effects on the urban landscape.

In the many interviews I conducted with Rock Island residents, I was surprised to hear how many people were viscerally repulsed by the tall grasses and shrubs they felt had invaded their neighborhood park via the naturalization project. The sentiment, echoed by many, was clear: "When they used to mow it was beautiful and pristine, and now it just looks like, excuse my language, it *looks like shit*." As one resident told me, "They're not mowing the hills and it looks *overgrown and nasty."* Another expressed frustration that the parks no longer looked like his own lawn, accusing the city of hypocrisy: "If I stopped mowing my grass, I would get city ordinance tickets." Clearly, residents expect parks to behave and look like their own yards, not like "wild" nature. Residents' complaints about "wild," un-mowed grass in the naturalized areas reveal deeply rooted upper-class notions regarding the proper behavior of domesticated nature bound by the "culture" of the city in an urban park. To them, Lincoln Park was no place for prairie: "They said they want it to go back to prairie, and in my opinion, *it's not the right setting* for returning to prairie. It just *looks trashy*." These participants expected Lincoln Park to be manicured, as it was historically.

Significantly, some residents also connected the changing aesthetic of the park's domesticated nature with a diminishing sense of place and pleasant feelings of comfort. The naturalized areas looked "unkempt," and in contrast to the manicured areas, made the park feel less welcoming:

> It looks *unwelcoming* […] it looks *unkempt*, like nobody takes care of [the park].
>
> It just gives you an *icky feeling instead of a pleasant feeling*.
>
> In the ten plus years I've lived here this is the first time I've actually been *disgusted* by the park […]. It just doesn't look aesthetically pleasing. *It looks very, very not inviting*.

The aesthetics of public green space and parks are very important to urban residents, or at least to my participants in Rock Island. One resident pleaded with me to tell Director Gripp to stop the project: "Just make it look beautiful again. The park can go back to the way it was […] have more *compassion* for the aesthetic nature of the park." In a conversation I had with Gripp, he acknowledged the un-mowed grass produced by re-wilding is not aesthetically pleasing: "[The areas] look kind of ugly, I'm not going to lie. It looks like we forgot to mow." The Parks Department's Chief Horticulturalist told me the department plans to cater more to residents' aesthetic senses in the future—he wants to plant the areas near roads with a wildflower mix so people driving by can see colors "at 30 miles per hour."

Some residents with whom I spoke were in favor of naturalization efforts in general but disagreed with the Parks Department's approach. As one man told me, "It looks like a *hodgepodge.* […] They could have planted *certain things in certain places*, like one area that was all prairie grass and that was it, and one area that was all prairie flowers and that was it. […] *It just looks very patchy*." They pointed to examples of other re-wilding efforts they had experienced—like Black Hawk State Park's single-fenced prairie restoration—and preferred because the borders were clearly defined. One participant cited the unmanaged ravines on Augustana College's grounds as an example of good "wild" or "natural" nature separated from the main quad's flowerbeds and close-cropped lawns: "There's a time and a place for naturalization. […] I now walk through Lincoln Park to get to Augustana, where I can experience wild nature's *true peace and beauty.*" In Lincoln Park, where small sections of naturalization are spread throughout the park, the separation of "wild" nature from manicured lawns

was not clearly delineated, ruining the "true" beauty of nature.

While most residents opposed the invasion of "wild" nature into the park outright or on the grounds that it was too "patchy," some believed the opposite: the naturalized areas in Lincoln Park were not "natural" enough to be truly "re-wilded." One participant told me, "It's not *truly* naturalized anyway because they still mow it in the fall. So, it's not a *real* natural area." Another told me while petting one of her bloodhounds, "[The naturalized areas] are not cultivated enough to be a natural habitat anyway. I've got three hunting dogs, and I let them run through there and they don't flush anything out of there." To these residents, the naturalized areas, rather than being too "wild," were merely a disappointing facsimile of "true" nature—the confusing result of the city trying to cut mowing costs.

All of the residents with whom I spoke possess preconceived ideas about what defines nature and the role it should have in public parks, which color their perception of the Parks Department's naturalization efforts. To some extent, the naturalized areas produce confusion and contradictory reactions among residents because the Park Department's approach to naturalization has been perfunctory and superficial. The naturalized areas, as they are now—unmaintained—are liminal spaces to residents; they exist not quite within the domain of "wild" nature (like the tallgrass prairies in Illinois's history or typical contemporary restorations) nor within the domain of urban nearby nature (like the maintained monocultural green lawns found elsewhere throughout Lincoln Park). Furthermore, while "letting it go" is an ineffective restoration strategy, it reveals that the Parks Department *also* possesses preconceived notions about nature. Nature free from human intervention is a romanticized idea based on an invented human-nature dualism, so restoration "aimed at a return to pristine nature is not only unrealistic but contradictory" (Mastnak et al., 2014). Historically, prairie ecosystems were carefully managed by the Indigenous peoples who called the Quad Cities area home (Mann, 2005). This laissez-faire attitude toward re-wilding—the assumption that without human attention, "wild" nature will return—coupled with the choice of sites for naturalization—hillsides—that aren't "useful" and frequent changes in site location, reveal that the Department shares residents' simplistic and problematic perception of a human-nature and wild-domestic nature divide.

I should point out that not all residents with whom I spoke viewed the naturalization efforts negatively. Several told me that they had called the city and learned more about the Parks Department's long-term plans and were now "on board" because they viewed environmentalism as important. Still others told me they had changed their minds after I explained the long-term goals and benefits the city saw in prairie restoration. As one man told me, "I was one of the guys that contacted John Gripp about what's going on […] and now that I understand what they're doing I think it makes sense, and I think it's going to be good for the wildlife and the city." Clearly, a concerted education campaign by the Parks Department could potentially sway public opinion—but only if the Department also commits to undertaking naturalization properly. To do so, the Department needs to critically evaluate its conceptions of the role of nature in cities, and reorient away from its "cutting costs" narrative toward one about improving environmental health. Furthermore, they must help Rock Island residents see Lincoln Park not as a publicly accessible extension of their own lawns, but instead as a "multitude of natures" critically important to the future sustainability of Rock Island that the residents all have a role in producing and maintaining.

So far, I have shown how austerity-driven park management in Rock Island, an economically distressed Rust Belt outpost city on what was once the Midwestern prairie, has led to what could be a viable environmental conservation intervention. While many residents were amenable to the Parks Department's re-wilding plan after learning more, it is also significant that the residents' initial reaction to experiencing the overgrown and "wild" naturalized areas firsthand was almost overwhelmingly a sense of disgust and discomfort. Resident reactions to the invasion of "wild" nature in their neighborhood parks reveal deep notions of a culture-nature dichotomy that, while unequivocally rejected within UPE, generally remains in urban residents in (and within the Parks Department of) Rock Island. Next, I will connect this austerity-driven accidental re-wilding to social exclusion using Lincoln Park as a case study. As I'll show, resident rejections of naturalized areas as messy, disordered, unwelcoming, and unwanted are crucial for explaining the long and deeply held racial prejudices in Rock Island.

VIII. Racialized Conceptions of Park Naturalization: Disorder as a Proxy for Criminality

While interviewing residents about their park use and perceptions of Lincoln Park, another striking theme emerged: some residents with whom I spoke seemed to connect the Parks Department's naturalization or re-wilding of the park—to them, representative of the department's decreasing management attention in general (seen in the way that they leave downed trees, do not replace broken equipment, do not clean graffiti, etcetera)—with an increase in "undesirable" use of the parks. One of my participants, very concerned about safety and Lincoln Park's recent "decline," pointed to one of the "Naturalization in Progress" signs and suggested it be replaced with one that read "dirty grass, don't touch." To some, the "dirty" and "neglected" naturalizations were a gateway to something much worse.

As I walked through Lincoln Park a few days after the Fourth of July of 2019 with Don and Dana, they pointed out park problems they wanted me to note: downed limbs, dead bushes, and, of course, the naturalized areas. As we crossed the grassy oak-lined expanse at the top of the park and reached the basketball courts, one of them took their observations a step farther, gesturing at the courts:

> My biggest concern is if [the park] continues to look unkept there is going to be more crime. I can live with [the Parks Department] turning it into a prairie when I don't like how it looks, but I've been told [naturalization] *invites vandalism and crime*.

They went on to explain the "broken windows theory," introduced by the couple's friend within the Rock Island County Sheriff's department, which is the idea that the "vandalism and crime" occurring in Lincoln Park were the result of the Parks Department "not taking care of the property." In the coming months, several additional participants independently invoked what they called "broken window syndrome" to explain changes they observed in Lincoln Park:

> It's called broken window syndrome. When a neighborhood is neglected and ignored […] when stuff gets broken and no one addresses it, the *criminal element starts to notice*.
>
> I would say within the last three to four years, [Lincoln Park] went from being this peaceful well-groomed park to them not taking care of it as much and […] then *the criminal activity and the defacement of stuff* […] because [the Parks Department] are kind of neglecting the park.

Many of my participants indicated that they had requested an increased police presence in the parks. The Parks Department, responding to residents' phone calls, has partnered with the Rock Island Police Department to increase the frequency of foot patrols in Lincoln Park. The "broken windows" policing to which several residents referred was infamously used in former Mayor Rudy Giuliani's approach to "cleaning up" New York by using "criminological theory to conflate 'dirtiness' with deviance." In this view, decline in poor urban areas is due not to poverty or systemic institutional neglect, but to immorality—the Black people Giuliani targeted were "insufficiently respectful of the value of property" (Solomon, 2019; Sharkey, 2018). It's significant that multiple Rock Islanders' perspectives on urban nature—"wild" and "dirty" unmaintained nature in particular—were informed by this racist and baseless criminology theory. To the Lincoln Park residents, long unmaintained grass is dirty; dirtiness invites crime, so the overgrown naturalized areas were conflated with criminality.

This problematic association requires further analysis. How do unkempt, messy, naturalized areas invite crime? To answer it, we must turn again to urban political ecology theory. UPE studies have shown that, despite their many benefits, urban parks are not necessarily universally seen as a positive asset for some residents; they can be a source of "fear and insecurity," especially when visitors' subjective experiences of a given park are negative, such as when they perceive the park as "unclean" or unsafe (Madge, 2008). In Kitchen's (2012) UPE-framed study, the "not natural" urban forests that managers had created were perceived as generating "criminal" and "delinquent" behavior. Similarly, in anthropologist Vassos Argyrou's (1997) study of waste in Cyprus, one housewife's concern with an overgrown

vacant lot was not that it was an "eyesore" but the "lurking dangers of the 'wild' symbolized by the tall, dry weeds." In response to a general question about aspects of Lincoln Park perceived as problematic, one of my participants told me, with obvious concern, that the overgrown naturalized areas the Parks Department produced in Lincoln Park "give criminals cover." The invasion of "wild" nature into their favorite park symbolized the loss of that park to "undesirable" individuals and behaviors associated with the unmanaged, unkempt, "wild."

To some residents, at least, the encroachment of the "wild" into urban parks—where only cultivated, manicured, domesticated nature belongs—undermines those spaces' ability to regulate and support appropriate patterns of use. Due to the recent lack of maintenance and the Parks Department's somewhat haphazard naturalization management interventions, Lincoln Park has become disordered. It is no longer doing its job of providing a place for White people to recreate. The idea that the manicured nature of an urban park can be socially useful, "uplifting" lowly individuals from anarchy and crime, historically played a key role in the ideology of park construction, and that mindset clearly persists in Rock Island today (Taylor, 1999; Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Loughran, 2018). There is some scholarly evidence that "abandoned" places like vacant lots can attract criminal activity (and that investment in such places can reduce crime rates) (Klinenberg, 2018), but this problem is only perceived—not actual—in Rock Island's parks. The Parks Department is actively attempting to improve these public spaces, not abandon them, but common perceptions of cities, race, and crime, such as the broken windows theory, still hold a powerful influence over residents' responses to the Department's efforts.

Naturalized areas, fallen trees, and increased litter generated a sense of unease and loss for the participants in this study, a sense that the park was no longer comfortable or "theirs." When asked to describe the "undesirable use" that they observed, these residents and others pointed to Lincoln Park's basketball courts to explain their reasoning in both racially coded and racially explicit terms:

> My wife and I have walked around [the Lincoln Park basketball courts] and […] there's some very unruly behavior and large, dangerous groups of people, we've seen fights and the group is completely *disrespecting* [the park] and throwing *garbage everywhere*.
>
> If a group of people is there and they're being wild and crazy […] we will change our plans and walk along the river instead […] and it's frustrating, it's angering, because I feel that's *our* neighborhood park and *it should be our* neighborhood park, it shouldn't be a police crime scene.
>
> The general feel of safety is less in the last couple of years. It's related to the basketball courts. In the evening we walk [in Lincoln Park] and there's 20 or 30 people in parked cars being real *disruptive*. They're playing and having fun, but the place is *trashed* when they leave. And I hate to be prejudiced but *they are Blacks*.
>
> I have heard there are shootings, and I often see the police hanging around the basketball court when there are teens there. The teens are *always Black.*

Residents connected the groups of Black teens littering in the basketball courts to messiness, garbage, and criminality—the Black "undesirable groups" were "trashing" "their" beloved Lincoln Park. In doing so, these participants made an "ideological and aesthetic equation whereby dirtiness signals deviance" (McKee, 2015). Like in Giuliani's broken windows policing of New York, these Rock Islanders believed Black people—invited by the city's reductions in mowing and maintenance—caused Lincoln Park to be dirty by defacing and misusing it, and thus needed to be "cleaned up" (Solomon, 2019).

Anthropologists have deemed such discursive associations of disordered landscapes and the morality of socially undesirable groups "trash talk." Theory on trash talk began with anthropologist Mary Douglas's influential work *Purity and Danger,* in which she explains how "dirt" or "matter out of place" is socially constructed as a system of classifying inappropriate and appropriate elements in a culture. Theorists of trash talk draw on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to explain the

symbolic power of such language to naturalize social distinctions. Geographer Sundberg (2008), for example, found Americans used trash talk to describe how their "national and intimate spaces" were "invaded and trashed" by undocumented immigrants from Mexico. As anthropologist Emily McKee (2015) similarly writes in a study of marginalized Bedouin people, trash talk "naturalizes links between dirty places, disorderly people, and the need to remove (or reform) them." As a result, designations of disordered landscapes are "inextricably enmeshed in relations of power and domination" (Argyrou, 1997). Darwish (2018) similarly invokes the concept of "moral geographies" and the "idiom of pollution" to explain how waste can "sully" both physically and morally "polluting people and places and defining or altering their position within social and spatial hierarchies."

Trash talk has significant implications for parks. For one thing, trash talk's naturalizing effect obscures the basic cultural assumptions and histories of power that urban political ecologists have shown to shape park construction, distribution, and access. Trash talk also naturalizes ideological assumptions about who belongs. As geographers and political ecologists have long shown, since self and place are co-constitutive, defining who gets to use parks and how the said group uses that green space significantly influences how the parks are designed and vice versa, enabling those with power to use trash talk as a tactic of "land contestation" (Winegar, 2016). Similarly, moral geography shows the "moralizing binary" of clean/dirty can separate and confine people to particular places, creating "socio-spatial orders" (Darwish, 2018). When these boundaries are transgressed, like when Black people enter Lincoln Park and "trash" the basketball courts, the existing moral order is polluted and imperiled (Darwish, 2018; Bender, 1993; Bender, 2002).

Since trash inspires "gut repugnance," trash talk is an "evocation of the most visceral revulsion of cultural Others" (McKee, 2015). The disgust with which residents described the naturalized areas and litter in the basketball courts reveals a functional, aesthetic notion of the environment. As the trash talk theory shows, the "aesthetics of landscape are not innocent"—power relations, maintained through trash talk, shape people's "most intimate experiences of a place" (McKee, 2015). In a phenomenological sense, landscapes are thus inextricably tied with people's emotional lives. In the case of parks, aesthetic evaluations are indeed not innocent or even individual; instead, they reveal and perpetuate social relations. As previously mentioned, Rock Island city official Alan Carmen said that, "When you are dealing with park issues, if you don't consider the intimate relationships between citizens and parks […] it will be a short-term decision with long-term implications." Thus, we must consider what these intimate relationships reveal about the social relations of a community.

Argyrou (1997), in his ethnographic study of differing perceptions of litter in Cyprus, describes how, beginning with the industrial revolution in the 19th century, "mastering" nature (an idea dependent on the dichotomous view of nature and culture) became an indicator of "higher civilization." Much more recently, with the wilderness and then environmental movements in the United States, nature became a "sacred domain" of aesthetic importance able to be studied by science and "comprehended in all its complexity." Indeed, the idea that waste threatens "the environment" is a recent conception (Oldenziel & Weber, 2013). This new valuation and conception of nature became possible with the emergence of mental labor and the middle class. Argyrou (1997) argues that the middle class "vision of the world where litter has no place presupposes a man-nature relation where people do not need to grapple with the world physically because there is no economic necessity to do so […] it is only when the world can be kept at arm's length […] that one can begin to constitute the world as a spectacle." Since "different conditions of existence predispose people to view the world, and themselves, in different ways," working class people in Cyprus generally didn't share middle class participants' disdain for littering (Argyrou, 1997).

The older, White, self-identifying environmentalist participants in my study were highly concerned about litter. A number of participants took pride in reporting that they always picked up litter when they saw it. After an older man's dog died, he purchased a mechanical "grabber" and replaced his daily morning dog walks with laps around the park collecting trash. Many expressed concerns about groups of African Americans, disproportionately working class in Rock Island, littering and "disrespecting" the park. As one man told me,

> The groups of undesirable people will go up and play basketball and then […] dump garbage and litter all over the ground […] it's just like someone dumped a dumpster of garbage all over the park

Others explained they had picked up litter in the past, but felt like doing so had now become a futile task:

> When we see garbage, we pick it up, but it's just overwhelming, the litter.

> Last year I picked up tons of stuff and I just refuse to do it this year. I'd pick up three or four handfuls of garbage every time I went up there and I go up there twice a day. I can't do it anymore.

Borrowing terms from the study of material culture in a study of waste in Egypt, anthropologist Jamie Furniss (2017) writes that recent studies show litter has a "practical value in a system of agency" and characterizes certain people or populations as "litterers." This seems to be the case in Rock Island, where White study participants describe Black people as "trashing" the parks with litter while they, in contrast, volunteer their time to clean up and restore the park's aesthetic order. As studies have shown, waste has an ability to "absorb ethical and aesthetic concerns…through notions of disorder, abjection, and disgust" (Martínez, 2017). People and places, Martínez (2017) writes, can become associated with waste and as a result, become waste themselves. Many of my participants shared they felt Lincoln Park was not what it once was, that it had lost value: "It's *not a source of pride anymore*, it's more of a pain in the butt, like 'this is a problem we have to deal with' instead of 'oh my gosh it's a beautiful park,' you know?" Another told me that "overall, I dislike my park that I have lived next to for 56 years." In a strange and seemingly contradictory way, litter and "wild" invasive nature had worked together to turn the park into waste itself for the residents.

Resident comments, in this case, reveal perceptions of Lincoln Park's green space as an exclusionary place and, significantly, a White space. The residents' claims of ownership over the park—invaded both by nature and by Black people in their view—are shockingly exclusionary but important for understanding the greater culture of parks in Rock Island and of the city itself. Since we shared the same skin color, it's possible some participants saw me as an empathetic advocate—"one of them," the rightful owners of the park. These responses are not representative of all the interviews I conducted, but the amount of coded language present is worth pointing out. Although residents don't always state it explicitly, this implicit bias is strongly suggestive of a larger and older pattern of racial inequality in Rock Island.

IX. Conclusion: Lincoln Park Today and Tomorrow

In May and June of 2019, Rock Island police responded to two separate incidents of shots fired at the basketball court in Lincoln Park. In August of 2019, in response to pressure from nearby Augustana College, Longfellow Elementary School, Alleman High School, and mounting concerns from "just about every neighbor who lives within a five-house deep circle of Lincoln Park," as Parks Director John Gripp put it, the Parks Department removed the basketball hoops from the court (Jenkins 2019). The police department dramatically increased foot patrols in the park and installed cameras at key entry and exit points to the city, as they believe those involved in the violence actually came from outside Rock Island. Gripp plans to also install cameras at the basketball court, but money, as always, is an issue.

In Gripp's opinion, removing the hoops is not the answer to what is clearly a deeper problem in the city, and their removal bothers him "on a few different levels," but he says it was a necessary move. In the short-term, it was considered to be a successful collaborative broken windows policing effort—effectively eliminating visible messiness (litter and graffiti in the courts) and visible Black people. Gripp told me he hopes to return the hoops to the park in the future. In the meantime, the Parks Department is working on gathering grant funding for a recreation manager position that would organize basketball games at the park and have "boots on the ground." The addition of cameras and supervised activities, he said, could "get people feeling safe coming back there and […] a lot of [problems] kind of sort themselves out then, rather than just removing something because it attracts a certain element." Another alternative, he told me, would be to accept Augustana College's recent offer to replace the court with a tennis

court to accommodate additional classes—the school's latest attempt to influence Lincoln Park.

It's ironic, Gripp told me: "80 percent of the problems I have in Lincoln Park after dark are from Augustana students [during Greek life "pledging" season] drinking too much, doing a little vandalism." Several of my participants also referred to problems Augustana students have caused in the park. The former president of the KeyStone Neighborhood Association told me that members cleaning up Lincoln Park used to joke the neighborhood got its name from all the Keystone Beer cartons and cans students tossed into the park's ravines during fraternity and sorority "rituals." While White college students litter Lincoln Park, the park's residents do not blame them. Instead, they place the blame on Black teenage basketball players.

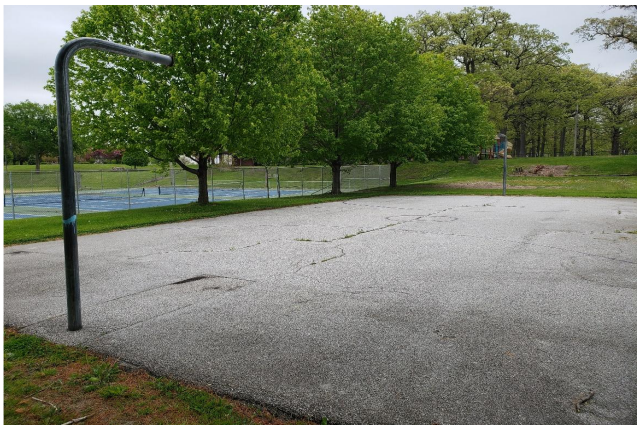

Figure 5: Lincoln Park's basketball court, hoops removed (Author photo)

Rock Island residents with voices in the community, Gripp included, seem to see the temporary ban on basketball as a sad but required step. Grip told me that "basketball has been part of Lincoln Park for a long time," and described playing there as a child. In an opinion piece for a local paper, Rock Islander John Marx lauds Gripp's leadership but mourns the hoops' loss (a "sad indictment on society") and nostalgically reflects on his own youth playing basketball at the park, during a time when "guns weren't used to settle disputes": "Most summer nights if you did not have an organized baseball game, you played [basketball] at Lincoln […] African-American, white, Hispanic—it didn't matter […] It was a different era" (2019).

What is to be done about Lincoln Park? Clearly, despite problems with money and maintenance, a lot of people love the park, and a lot of people feel like it belongs to them. Many of my participants voiced interest in starting a Friends of Lincoln Park group to build a sense of community and improve maintenance. As Dana told me, pointing at an overgrown flower plot during our walk through the park,

> If there was a group, a "friends of the park" kind of thing, that would be really nice. There are little things we could do, like maintain some plantings or split up flower beds between a group.

Friends groups can help sustain parks in cities where austerity-driven management has taken hold, but they can be difficult to start and maintain. The former KeyStone Neighborhood Association President told me interest in the organization has declined recently, especially since the city stopped supporting local organizations in 2011. The KeyStone neighborhood has transitioned to mainly rentals over the past decades—six houses on her block are home to Augustana College students, she said. Organizing is difficult in a neighborhood consisting of senior citizens and college students who don't have time to "integrate" enough to volunteer. Still, she hopes to start Friends of Lincoln Park sometime soon. An alderman with whom I spoke similarly cited a "struggle to create a sense of community and civic engagement and participation […] and taking pride in the area that you live in," with a mixed population of elderly residents and college-age renters. With parks, especially in a "more parks per capita than anywhere else" city that lacks the money to take care of all of them equally, he believes, "it should be all-hands-on-deck." He's afraid Rock Islanders have developed a culture of "expecting services" and have lost the sense that "we're all in this together." He cited the example of a church garden that had looked overgrown until he volunteered to regular mow there—"And you know what was really funny about that? Not once has that garden been vandalized now."

The answer clearly is not as simple as "if you make something look nice, the neighborhood starts to pay attention," however; as we've seen, aesthetics aren't innocent. Reactions to Lincoln Park's messiness provide us insight into the complicated history of racial inequality

and conflict in the city. As long as Rock Islanders continue to distinguish "above the hill" and "below the hill" neighborhoods and worry about "riffraff" and grass "giv[ing] criminals cover," they can't simultaneously call for a coming together as "Friends of the Park." It is important to note that Don and Dana, the same elderly couple who expressed interest in volunteering in the park, also made the "I hate to be prejudiced but they are Blacks" comment. A Friends group might be an important step in supporting Lincoln Park, as in other Rust Belt cities, but first, White Rock Islanders (regardless of their life-long emotional ties to the park) must stop claiming complete ownership over green space and start accepting a more inclusive definition of what types of "nature" and, more significantly, what types of people, belong in "their" urban parks.

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