

Tower Hamlet's "urban oasis": the re-imagining of identity through volunteer work at Spitalfields Community Farm

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Returning from the farm, I have been forced to reconsider the significance of my encounters, as my initial focus on the sense of identity people enacted through volunteer work in sustainable farming in urban landscapes has been fuddled and reimagined as a result of the actuality I experienced in the field. On arriving at Spitalfields City Farm for the first time it became immediately apparent that any ethos of sustainability enacted in volunteer work was intrinsically inseparable from a sense of identity with the immediate surroundings of the Tower Hamlets community, and so a conscientious knowledge of social life of this community was of the utmost necessity in order to comprehend who volunteered on the farm, why they did the work, and what they hoped to achieve by it. Through my initial conversations with Owen, the head of volunteering recruitment for the farm, it swiftly became clear that a large number of volunteers on the farm belonged to the Bangladeshi-Londoni diaspora, and he explained how the farm provided a different kind of space (as I understood it) amidst a widely impoverished urban setting. Owen's comments, and the subsequent interviews I had with volunteers, led me to instead focus my research on how Bangladeshi migrants have contributed to the creation of this flourishing rural space nestled in the eastern end of a grand metropolis, and how through their imagining of this space, they have consciously sought to remember their homeland whilst simultaneously establishing a new sense of identity in one of London's poorest boroughs.

An Urban Oasis

“Spitalfields City Farm challenges people to respect themselves, each other, their environment and animals. We strive to be sustainable and lead by example.”¹ In this sense, Spitalfields City Farm is typical of the popular contemporary phenomena of urban agriculture, providing a space in which one can grow and harvest crops or raise livestock and promoting an ethos of sustainable living. Furthermore, the volunteers at the farm seek to educate visitors on associated issues of public consciousness concerning healthy living, and contribute to an increased sense of community through a collective positive act of cultivation. Thus, “community gardens enhance nutrition and physical activity and promote the role of public health in improving quality of life” (Twiss, Dickinson, Duma, Kleinman, Paulsen and Rilveria 2003:1435). It is worth noting from the outset that Spitalfields Community Farm espouses an ethos of sustainability that is intended to inspire other such projects and ways of thinking; however, I wish to propose that the emphasis of the farm is placed upon the activity of local volunteers, and so it is these efforts that serve as the locus within which the social life of the community may best be perceived. It therefore follows that the success of the farm is to be viewed as more significant for the immediate surroundings of Tower Hamlets than for promoting principles of sustainability in general. Thus the farm, similarly to other agricultural projects centered in impoverished urban areas, is to be praised for creating “safe haven(s) that provide residents with a sense of nature, community, rootedness, and power” (Schmelzkopf 1996:376).

It is in this sense that Spitalfields Community Farm serves as an “urban oasis”², both in the sense of providing a bountiful source of sustainable crops in an urbanized landscape and by providing a social space, freed of the problems that trouble the surrounding area. Indeed, this is made immediately clear as on entering the farm one sees a sign that pronounces an extensive list of guidelines, including: “No smoking, alcohol or drugs”. The need to forbid “drugs” in particular recognizes a clear acknowledgment of social problems in the farm’s near vicinity. In this sense, Spitalfields City Farm, as an urban site of sustainable agriculture, is similar to other community gardens in impoverished built-up areas, such as Loisaída in New York, where communal gardening has served to create a “safe outdoor place” (Schmelzkopf 1996:373) which provides an alternative locale for those who inhabit small, crowded apartments. Thus, even in the midst of a grand

¹ Spitalfields Farm Association Ltd, <http://www.spitalfieldscityfarm.org/about-us/aims/-/objectives.html>

² Spitalfields Farm Association Ltd, <http://www.spitalfieldscityfarm.org/>

metropolis one can farm, garden and socialize such that they feel attached to the land and part of a community. This proves a particularly liberating and potentially empowering experience for women³, whom Schmelzkopf has established as typical of such urban community gardens; “Many girls and women explain that a garden is somewhere they can feel safe yet still be outside with other people” (Schmelzkopf 1996:373).

The comfort women experienced when visiting the farm was symptomatic of Spitalfields City Farm’s ethic of inclusivity which, like other urban community gardens, serves to allow “individuals and groups to contribute their knowledge, skills, and experience” (Twiss, Dickinson, Duma, Kleinman, Paulsen and Rilveria 2003: 1436). The farm undoubtedly has succeeded in this ethos by attracting volunteers and visitors from various different nations and cultures, in particular the prominent local Bangladeshi migrant community⁴. This outlook was clearly articulated by Owen, the head of volunteering recruitment on the farm who, on my arrival, spontaneously gave me a tour of the 1.3 acre site the farm occupies. He honestly explained how the farm functioned, and in response to my queries as to whether the animals on the farm worked he explained how they only raised rare-breed sheep on the farm, the donkeys occasionally were ridden by children and that the pigs were only there because they were “cute”. Whilst these initiatives were successful in promoting environmental awareness and notions of sustainability, he reasoned that the true pragmatic emphasis of the farm was on the cultivation of vegetables, sold at the farm for a very fair price⁵. It rapidly became clear that the survival of the farm was only possible through donations which were encouraged through various signs positioned around the farm and, especially, funding from the government as a registered charity, in particular the heritage lottery fund. The interview I undertook with Owen was highly informal and the tour he took me on was, he explained, a standard procedure. Furthermore he rarely questioned me on the nature of my project, and his engagement with our discussion seemed fully sincere, so I have no reason to believe that his perspective of me as a researching anthropologist effected the content of his words in any way.

³ One of the first aspects I spotted in my initial observations of the farm was how the number of female volunteers significantly outnumbered the males

⁴ Indeed the prominence of the community is such that the surrounding area of Spitalfields has come to be known as “Banglatown”.

⁵ I purchased a plastic bag full of delicious spinach for only £1. Natasha, a volunteer who had urged me to do so described the farm shop’s produce as “the best deal in London”.

The Coriander Club

My first visit to the farm took place on a Tuesday afternoon and, after noticing a significant number of Muslim women wearing *hijabs*, Owen explained to me that this time had been allocated as a designated weekly slot for the Coriander Club to do volunteer work on the farm. He described how the club only included female volunteers and consisted exclusively of Bangladeshi migrants, who grew and harvested their own vegetables and then met to cook the produce and make traditional spiced curries, which gave the club its name. I was hesitant to interview the women at first, as Owen and another volunteer, Sukved, had explained to me that some of them felt uncomfortable working alongside men, a practice not established in Bangladesh (Gardner 1993). Yet, seizing the opportunity to help two of the club's members to load compost into their bag, I managed to initiate a conversation with them. They explained to me⁶ how they thoroughly enjoyed their time spent on the farm and how they experienced a strong sense of community, even going so far as to say that all their friends volunteered there, such that they chose to visit the place almost every day during the growing season. They furthermore described how they frequently brought their children to the monthly music events on the farm⁷. Whilst my exchange with these women was brief, the strongest sentiment they portrayed to me was of the sense of happiness they experienced on the farm as place they felt comfortable bringing their family. Through this communal identification with an external place "nurturing and an idea of home are explicitly brought out into the gardens" (Schemlzkopf 1996:379), the effect is that a whole new conception of space is established, with which the Bangladeshi diaspora community could identify with.

It was pleasing to see how these women had formed a strong attachment to the farm as many migrants frequently find on arriving in their newly adopted land; "their relation to place ineluctably changed, and the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and the culture broken" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:10). The farm clearly represented a space they felt comfortable identifying with, and in their cultivation of it they juxtaposed a deliberate attempt to remember their *desh*⁸, with a clear adoption of English customs and contemporary social realities

⁶ One woman did not speak any English and so the other whilst not fluent herself did a good job of translating our words to each other

⁷ Owen had highlighted the popularity of the music events, explaining to me how a friend of his frequently brought a bicycle which as one peddled generated the energy for a sound speaker. We agree that this was an apt symbol of the sustainable ethos of the farm

⁸ homeland (cf. Gardner 2008)

that informed this identity. This could be observed in their cultivation of indigenous Bangladeshi vegetables such as the *kobu*, a bitter, marrow-like vegetable traditionally used in curries and said to be easily digestible⁹, clearly growing a crop with nostalgic connections to their homeland. However, I was surprised by the manner in which they so easily tolerated the presence of the pigs on the farm despite the common Islamic practice of not permitting swine-herding, which I had falsely assumed might offend them¹⁰. In this sense they reimagined their homeland, cultivating indigenous crops as “powerful unifying symbols of for mobile and displaced peoples”, whilst simultaneously contributed to a new construction of place in their Tower Hamlets community, established through sustainable urban farming.

Grown from Shit with Love



I met two other volunteers on the same afternoon, Natasha and Sukved, in one of the polytunnels, where they grew various types of spinach and mustard greens. They were keen to stress the sustainable nature of their work and enthusiastically showed me their different produce, with Natasha memorably remarking, “It’s grown from shit all of it! Grown from shit with love!” On enquiring why they worked there, Sukved explained how she adored growing things and felt a closer sense of nature through her volunteer work, as well as the pleasure of having space to cultivate vegetables beyond her small garden at home, where she explained she had cultivated

⁹ Sukved explained to me that *kobu* was dear to the community and could not be purchased in local shops

¹⁰ Natasha ensured me this was not the case.

“classic, classic roses”. Natasha explained how Sukved came to the farm every week day throughout the year, and viewed the place as “home”, the same phrase used by another local volunteer I spoke to called Dan. By contrast, rather than present the farm singularly as a peaceful and enjoyable space as the other volunteers I spoke to had done, Natasha presented her interest in the farm as conceptually antithetical to the surrounding urban landscape, explaining how she found her volunteer work to be “therapeutic” in contrast to her frenzied work life in a pub on the nearby Hackney Road. Thus, they both expressed the farm as a form of “urban oasis” whilst claiming that the strongest quality they identified in its workings was the strong sense of community experienced there.

These views mirrored Owen’s words, as he emphasized how the farm represented the realization of a shared vision of creating a flourishing rural space in London’s East End and how this had been possible only through a sense of solidarity amongst the volunteers. Whilst this was undoubtedly true to a certain extent, I doubted the collectivity of the group holistically as Natasha and Sukved continuously referred to the Coriander Club as “they” which, far from conveying any air of hostility, did not have the effect of making me feel that the community was fully homogenized, though they clearly expressed a strong sense of respect and high regard for each other and their respective work on the farm. I also came to this understanding through my interview with Owen: when I asked if all the volunteers from the plurality of ethnic and social backgrounds worked alongside each other, after a lengthily pause and much hesitation he unconvincingly said they did so.

Owen explained to me that this ethic of universal inclusivity was being promoted through a new initiative to cultivate a communal garden, which he curiously explained as intended to give “power” to the temporary volunteers, whilst the professionals, like Owen himself, had no input for the project, leaving it exclusively to the volunteers. The manner in which power was afforded in this way recalls Foucauldian notions of the progressive nature of power, individuating people and focused on difference. Thus the differing collectivities within the farm itself could be afforded the opportunity to positively exercise some level of power to contribute to the future prosperity of the plot. In this way Spitalfields Community Farm avoids the problems of other urban agricultural spaces, where the self-determination of volunteers and the uneven exorcizing of power have led some communities to feel excluded from the community garden as a result of racial or class differences (Schemlzkopf 1996:379).

The Great-Crested Newt and Some Conclusions

The most familiar ethos I experienced in my conversations with all of the volunteers I spoke with at the farm was how the space in which these people work provided them with an alternative sense of place to the urban surroundings and that, furthermore, this sense of place was experienced collectively as a community. Indeed, through my conversation with Dan I learned that, after several attempts by the government to close down the farm and gentrify the land, the farm had always managed to survive since its establishment in the 1970s, thanks to the willingness of the local community to campaign for its defense. The latest threat to the farm occurred when it was announced that the Olympic Body planned to reconstruct the nearby East London line railway, with the effect that the farm would have to be shut down. Fortunately, however, the discovery of great-crested newts, an endangered species, on the farm's property ensured that the project could not go ahead, an event which Dan took great delight in. In particular he was keen to express the educational nature of the farm, describing how after being requested by his school to conduct some work experience he volunteered on the farm and consequently enjoyed his time there so much he never returned back to school; twenty years later he claims he has "the best job in the world". In so far as the farm has been able to survive such threats, it may be viewed as a contested space and the clear attachment that it has inspired amongst its dedicated group of volunteers has raised important issues concerning "who has the right of access to space and nature and what price society is willing to pay to maintain the spaces" ((Schemlzkopf 1996:380).

Ultimately Spitalfields City Farm may be understood as a space that has inspired the volunteers who work there to individually and collectively re-imagine their identity with the natural land of their wider Tower Hamlets community. For the Bangladeshi diaspora community in particular, this has involved a complex duality of deliberate nostalgia for the past, witnessed in the cultivation of indigenous vegetables such as the *kobu*, juxtaposed with the surrounding urban landscape within a contemporary Western conception of the merits of sustainable agriculture. This has the effect of establishing a clear identity for such people as volunteers of the Spitalfields City Farm community, such that the place of the farm has been reconstituted as shared space.

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