Harvesting Community from Conflict: Class Divisions and Reconciliation in Earthworks Urban Farm

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The commute from Ann Arbor to Detroit ranges from forty minutes to an hour and a half, depending on the location of your destination. Mine was approximately an hour away, nestled between abandoned buildings and contorted wire fences bearing a plethora of jagged holes. As I rounded the corner of East Lafayette Street onto Meldrum and faced the strikingly clear picture of neglect around me, seeds of doubt began to blossom.

Nevertheless, I stepped out of the car and joined the group of people congregated in the parking lot of Earthworks Urban Farm, ready to begin my fieldwork. One of Detroit's oldest and largest urban farms, Earthworks was founded in 2001 by the Catholic Capuchin Order to address problems such as hunger and food insecurity among inner city residents.

When I began my fieldwork, I was unsure as to what my focus would be, but I received my direction from an encounter I had on my first day. I was sitting with Robbie, a long-time volunteer in his early twenties, over a lunch of vegetable stew, salad, and bread at the soup kitchen; we were engaged in a conversation about the implications of urban farming. He glowingly identified its benefits: the decrease in food insecurity and increase in nutrient consumption among the urban poor and the empowerment of Detroit residents and communities. However, he also discussed what he identified as urban farming's negative aspects: gentrification and the problematic nature of suburbanites interfering in inner city communities. As a suburbanite-turned-Detroiter, he may have been especially sensitive to this dynamic, and as a result I began to notice it more acutely. 'There are so many narratives here', he said to me.

My ethnography highlights an often-overlooked aspect of the story of inner city urban farming: the dynamic between the outsiders and insiders, or in other words, the volunteers who leave the city at the end of the work day and the locals who reside within it. There is an intrinsic conflict between the mobile suburbanites who come and go from the city and the Detroiters whose homes and livelihoods are anchored in it. Yet Earthworks' position as a centre of community in one of the United States' most economically and physically

devastated cities invests it with a unique significance. The boundary which every volunteer crosses to enter the farm frames a setting in which community can form. What Tim Ingold calls the *taskscape* is defined as the manifestation of human activity upon a place; the work forming the taskscape of Earthworks enables it to become a place in which everyday class tensions are eventually reconciled (Ingold 2000: 199). The nature of the work and rituals encoded into the landscape create fleeting moments of the antistructural egalitarianism that Victor Turner labels as communitas (Turner 1973: 193). Earthworks, through its physical surroundings and social activities, creates and facilitates an overarching sense of community.

The Background

Out of Detroit's expanding urban farm movement, Earthworks is one of the oldest successful examples. The farm itself includes hoop-houses, greenhouses, an apiary, and plots where community members can grow produce for their own use. Its main purpose, however, is to provide fresh vegetables and herbs to its affiliated soup kitchen, with which it shares a site. For the Earthworks coordinators to whom I spoke, the mission of the farm was to address the extreme poverty and food insecurity of the urban poor. According to Shane, the current manager of the urban farm, nutrition and food availability are inextricably tied to race and class issues endemic to Detroit. Hunger is not the only problem faced by the underprivileged: access to healthy food has grown increasingly sporadic and dire.

These are problems rampant within American inner cities, but they are intensified many times over in Detroit. After the U.S. automobile industry shifted overseas, unemployment and poverty rose rapidly. If one could afford it, they moved to the suburbs, as my parents did in the 1980s. The boundary of the M-102 Highway, 8 Mile, that separates Detroit from its suburbs, has grown to be incredibly symbolically charged. For years, Detroit was a neglected icon of former prosperity, with poor public transportation and few jobs to offer. The unemployment rate hovers around 30%, and 80% of its residents, predominantly African American, are forced to purchase from fringe food stores because they have no access to fresh produce (White 2011: 407-408). It is within this tense context that urban farming arose. Indeed, the dynamic between the city and the suburbs is extremely visible

within the Earthworks environment.

The Divide

When I left the car to begin volunteering, my initial encounters occurred amongst people similar in background to myself. My first conversation was with a woman standing slightly aside from a group, holding a large cup of coffee; I introduced myself and told her I was from Ann Arbor. Immediately she exclaimed that the coffee she was drinking was brewed out of beans purchased from Mighty Good, a café in my town well-known for its expensive gourmet coffee. This sort of exchange was typical in the way I connected with people from the suburbs: we shared an interest in things that appeared to mark us as cosmopolitan and cultured, such as gourmet coffee (Roseberry 1996: 774). These cultural bonds also separated us from many of the people from Detroit for whom a $4 cup of coffee would be an unnecessary luxury.

When the time came to separate ourselves into work teams, I found myself in a greenhouse with a group of people, all retired, from Detroit's suburbs. They had different reasons for being there: Ann worked at a university and was scouting volunteer opportunities for her students; Christa and Steve had become involved in the urban organic movement through their own farm in Windsor, Ontario, and Sue was a frequent volunteer who was interested in farming. The second time I volunteered, I was similarly grouped: I worked in the hoop house with a group of university students on an alternative spring break and a former junior high school teacher, also from Ann Arbor. Although I made an effort to find, work with and talk to the Detroiters, the initial groupings were indicative of the larger tension between the people for whom farming represented an interesting hobby and those who viewed it as a matter of survival.

I spoke to one young woman from Detroit when we were side by side on the ground of the greenhouse, harvesting spicy greens. After answering a few of my initial pleasantries she asked me if I was at university, and I answered in the affirmative. 'I'm still amazed that you college kids want to spend your spring break doing this instead of going off partying', she said. 'Of course, I have a two year old to look after, so I can't do too much partying.' Although addressed to me, I interpreted her comment as indicative of a larger scepticism

towards assistance from suburbanites, who do not experience the desperation of food insecurity on any level comparable to to the extent that it exists in Detroit. It is in this pointed question with all its contained implications of class tension that I found the root of the conflict to lie.

There is an initial distrust among Detroiters of the transient presence of suburban volunteers. They are not tied to the landscape in the same way that the Detroiters are: their labour is not a source of livelihood, and it does not carry the same significance for them as it does for the city residents. This woman's comment about college students exemplifies the disbelief in the sincerity of the volunteers' assistance. Monica White argues that the historical subtext of abandonment lies behind much of Detroiters' caution towards outsiders. (White 2011: 414). Detroit has been abandoned before, and who is to say that it will not be again? Indeed, it was only when I stayed past volunteering hours on my last day that Shane, the organiser, truly opened up to me about his own life in Detroit and his complicated feelings towards the city. People who have homes, children and roots in Detroit have stakes in its revitalisation which are more intimate than suburban volunteers can truly understand. Yet the suburbanites too bring their own social reality to urban farming, and between these dual experiences the environment of Earthworks is constituted.

The Suburbanites

For those from the suburbs, I found that the notions of community, organic food, and farm work all form a holistic picture of a more 'natural' ideal. The environmental movement that began in the 1960s has persisted, and one's choice in food can now be viewed as a revolutionary action (Belasco 2007: 21). Cooperative gardens, through the culturally shared symbols of roots and growth, appear to be a fresh, environmental start as well as a means for individuals to form a community in the midst of capitalist alienation (Belasco 2007: 22). For suburbanites, because urban farming is not intricately tied to one's own survival, it becomes another organic local food trend. The cultural meanings attached to farming, however, allow it to take on additional significance for its suburban practitioners.

The volunteers from the suburbs conscientiously see Earthworks as an opportunity to

build a community. Many recently retired volunteers told me that, after having lost their previous work community, they sought to create another one. A retired carpenter contributed his skills to building beehives, and Joey, a former teacher, used her links to the education system to lobby for local, organic food in schools. Suburban residents often use the city they orbit as a source of jobs, and in this case, suburban Detroiters use it as a source of community. Suburbs, by their nature, are places created out of convenience: they allow families to live in a safer and spacier environment, and even its residents often complain about its middle-class, homogeneous character (Deben 2001: 90). Indeed, my informants confirmed this depiction, saying that there were few opportunities for close-knit, work-centric communities within their home towns.

Farming, because of its ties to a rural past, presents a perfect opportunity to rebuild a community. This concept of farming hearkens back to an idealisation of countryside life as being simpler and more communal (Egoz 2001: 64). Ally, a senior at university and one-time volunteer at Earthworks, mentioned that when she travelled alone to France and Morocco, she participated in an international farming volunteer program to build a sense of community. Georg Simmel (1950) argues that city life is alienating, and this mindset is extremely pervasive in modern life. Part of the idea of community is tied to a historic rural heritage and work that is performed with one's hands (Coleman 1988: 38). The emphasis on traditional bee-keeping and vegetable growing at Earthworks exemplifies this. Such activities are seen to be more genuine, natural and communal, in a way that industrialised life is not.

Many volunteers had gardens of their own. Steve told me anecdote after anecdote about his Black Cochin chickens' mischievous behaviour. I had worked on rural farms before, and I found the act of telling humourous stories about animals to be very familiar. Steve had come from a rural background, and he found it difficult to adjust to many of urban regulations, such as Windsor's ban on chickens within the city limits. I assume that for him, the idealisation of the countryside related to his own past experience. Yet for many suburbanites, working on a farm is an ode to a lost rural, communal past that exists so predominantly as a cultural ideal.

When I asked Christa why she was volunteering, she said 'I like playing with dirt.'

Although she meant this comment partially in jest, it shows how the rural ideal of physical labour, with all its communal associations, is closely allied to the idea of the urban farm for the people who commute into Detroit to become part of the Earthworks community.

The Detroiters

On the other hand, for the volunteers from Detroit, urban farming is not a hobby, but a survival practise. Due to the '8 Mile divide' between us, it was harder for me to grasp the story of the Detroit residents, and my understanding remains partial. Yet I nevertheless gleaned pieces that allowed me to visualise a semi-coherent picture of their motivations for participating in Earthworks.

For the people of Detroit, urban farming is an immediate necessity rather than the idealised hobby that many suburbanites find it to be. Roxane, a volunteer from Detroit and a member of Earthworks' 9-month local agribusiness program, informed me that she was volunteering in order to learn skills that would allow her to begin her own herb business to provide for herself and her family. Farming and gardening have not yet become idealised things of the past to preserve in all parts of the industrialised world, as many anthropologists assume they have (e.g. Coleman 1988). For many Detroiters, farming is a present reality and source of livelihood.

Nevertheless, there is a link to history in the Detroit volunteers' relationship to urban farming that cannot be overlooked. At Earthworks, the vast majority of volunteers from Detroit are African American; as with many black Detroiters, most of their families migrated north for work from the rural south when Detroit was still a booming centre of industry. This agricultural legacy has not been lost. White believes that for many inner city African Americans, farming is a chance to connect with and reclaim their roots (White 2011: 22-23). When I asked an African American volunteer, Neda, if she had any prior farming experience, she told me that her father had come from Alabama and she had learned a fair amount about agriculture from him. However, during our conversation she did not directly link her work at Earthworks to her family heritage. While for Steve his rural roots were a source of pride to be preserved, for Neda they were an aide in survival. Kala, another Detroit-based

volunteer, told me that she hoped to pass on the skills she had learned to her two children so that they too could fend for themselves. There is a generational motif underpinning the transmission of agricultural knowledge, yet it is of a different nature from that of the suburban workers. The deep undercurrent of survival outweighs any ephemeral nostalgia.

Nevertheless, while identity and community are not the paramount reasons for engaging in urban farming, the work itself and its intergenerational nature help to create a shared identity. John Gray notes how in the Scottish borderlands, the culture and history of hill farming, including repeated resistances and rebellions, create a distinct regional affinity (Gray 2003: 239). In Detroit as well, such historical intergenerational connections imbue urban farming with meaning. Detroit residents are engaged in transforming the place that has traditionally oppressed their ancestors to one in which they and their children can survive. Farming can be seen as an act of tacit resistance against the dominant oppressive power bases (White 2011: 11). By reclaiming and improving the city that has been abandoned by these structures, they are tying themselves to the land and investing in its future. Farming the empty spaces of Detroit creates a shared identification between the farmers, their ancestors and descendants, and the land itself.

The Makings of Community

Despite this intrinsic conflict between locals and suburbanites, I draw upon the concepts of the landscape and taskscape to explain how the Earthworks community functions as a whole. Tim Ingold defines the taskscape as the entire system of actions through which a landscape acquires meaning (Ingold 2000: 195). The taskscape only comes into existence through human activity, so the junction of Detroit's physical landscape with the social reality of urban farming is integral to the formation of Earthworks' character.

It is the taskscape which brings the Earthworks volunteers together. Just as walking the hills in the Scottish Borders helps to cement the collective identity of its shepherds, the physical actions that comprise the taskscape create a sense of community among those performing the same actions (Gray 2003: 225). All volunteers, despite their social backgrounds, walk the same paths to participate in the same labour. These striking anti-structural meaningful actions do not escape the minds of their viewers. Benedict Anderson

discusses how communities are created through the imaginings of those within them (Anderson 2006: 6). The physical landscape of Detroit has a powerful impact upon those who experience it and the symbolically charged physical labour enables a sense of community to form.

Industrial ruins especially have an uncanny effect upon a person. Tim Edensor points to such wreckages as sources of involuntary social memory which recall thoughts of the negative impacts of capitalism (Edensor 2005: 141-143). The drive into and through Detroit ensures that even suburbanites glimpse haunting images of its devastation. The decline of the automobile industry and the current poverty of Detroit are intricately related, and it reinforces the fact that the economy is a force beyond any individual's control. The common landscape of rubble and neglect experienced by all the volunteers as they journey into Earthworks is unifying. It reminds them that they are subject to the same forces, setting the stage for a levelling of social status and structure.

This temporary egalitarianism is what Victor Turner describes as *communitas*. Although he most commonly associates it with religious rites, he also identified it in the 1960s counterculture and other anti-structural situations (Turner 2002: 371). In Earthworks, hierarchy is abolished in that the same kind of work is performed by all, and there are no physically distinguishing status markers. Turner notes that a common symbol of communitas is uniformity of clothing (Turner 2002: 364). The mud and dirt that cakes the volunteers' clothes and fingers symbolically eliminates rank, acting as a visual reminder that all are engaged in the same labour. At the end of the workday, before lunch, the volunteers gather in a circle to tell their compatriots what they accomplished that day, and the rest of the circle then claps for them. Between the 'I made compost!' 'I harvested honey!' and 'I weeded the carrots!' is an undercurrent of community: people clap because all of these actions are interconnected in Earthworks' mission. The structural element of capitalist employment is not present; the voluntary aspect of Earthworks helps to break down traditional barriers of class related to career discrepancies.

After this ceremony, all the volunteers gather to eat in the soup kitchen, sitting together amongst the homeless who have also come to eat. Feasts have long been seen to facilitate social relations and community (Dietler 1996: 91). Michael Dietler calls food an

important symbol because it is a 'basic and continual human physiological need' (Dietler 1996: 89). The uniformity of the simple food eaten reinforces feelings of sameness and communitas. Furthermore, it reminds volunteers of their shared labour and the necessity of being independent from an unreliable food industry that could abandon them at any time. In contrast to this instability, the labour of a combined community produces each volunteer lunch, and everyone reaps at least a fraction of the rewards.

These feelings of communitas do not last forever; they do not even last beyond the hour after lunch as we all begin separate journeys away from the taskscape of Earthworks Urban Farm, each route another spoke leading away from it. But every Wednesday, the volunteers of Earthworks become a community again when they return, passing through the surrounding rubble of buildings, jobs, and lives, and remake the community all over again.

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