

Raíces Del Sur: Cultivating Ecofeminist Visions in Urban New Jersey

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Abstract

Significant research has been devoted to analyzing community gardens, including their benefits and problems. This article contributes to debates about community gardens by using concepts from feminist geography and food justice research (Slocum, Cadieux and Blumberg 2016) to reflect upon the challenges and possibilities of community gardening in small, peripheral cities with large immigrant populations. We argue that these concepts provide a useful framework to enact ecofeminist visions through community gardens, especially in places dominated by immigrant populations that are particularly marginalized in the present political era. Our case study garden, Raíces Del Sur, was located in the City of Passaic, a low-income, post-industrial urban center surrounded by suburbs in Passaic County, New Jersey. As activists involved in the making of the Raíces Del Sur community garden to different degrees, and as researchers committed to an ecofeminist vision, we draw attention to the need for greater ecofeminist engagement with community gardening initiatives in cities throughout New Jersey.

Keywords: community gardens; food justice; ecofeminism; decolonization; New Jersey

Introduction

On a winter morning in 2017 the news came as an unwelcome surprise: the Raíces Del Sur community garden in the City of Passaic, NJ, had been demolished. A mother and community member whose children had often visited the garden called one of the garden's organizers with the distressing news. Although the garden's organizers spent the next several hours trying to obtain more information about what had happened, the outcome was already clear: the garden would not exist as it previously had. Our objective in this article is not to delve into the immediate cause of the demolition—this issue remains mired in fraught municipal politics (the garden was located in a municipal public park) and relations with a local non-profit organization. Rather, we seek to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of horizontal commoning practices undertaken in community gardening initiatives in small, post-industrial cities

with large immigrant populations like the City of Passaic, NJ (henceforth, Passaic). The demolition of the garden was an act of enclosure that in other places may have been challenged openly, but for activists in Passaic resistance takes different forms due to the characteristics of the city itself and the way political changes at the national scale have influenced the local community.

Passaic is a small but densely-populated post-industrial city nestled in the middle of the urban and suburban landscape that surrounds New York City (NYC). Like other urban areas in NJ, it is disproportionately affected by poverty and food insecurity. Despite its location, just a 15-mile drive away from NYC, and the popularity of community gardening initiatives in the region, Passaic largely lacks grassroots initiatives to foster community-building around urban space. Raíces Del Sur was created in 2014 to address the needs of the Passaic community and to empower the community. One of the purposes of the garden was to amplify the voices of those who have been historically marginalized, such as migrants, womyn, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (see Solón 2016). Beyond its function as a space for plants to grow, the garden would become a place to further an “ecofeminist politics of counterplanning” (Turner and Brownhill 2006, 95), which would build alliances between struggles and create and enliven the commons with new networks of social relations.

Although the demolition of the garden was unfortunate and unexpected, it has provided us with an opportunity to more openly analyze the garden as a place, and to broaden the conceptual toolbox used to inform our practices as scholars and activists. Our reflection is based on experience gathered from over three years of community organizing at the garden and in the extended community. The authors of this article include two of the garden’s founders/organizers and two engaged academics who have both been involved as participant-observers in the garden at various times. All authors are/have been residents of Passaic or the surrounding communities. Although we straddle diverse positionalities based on identity and institutional privilege (Kusek and Smiley 2014; Nagar and Ali 2003), we are united in our interest in advancing food justice and ecofeminist visions in a non-hierarchical manner that empowers marginalized communities and defends/enables practices of communing.

As a result of an informal reflective process we have formulated two interrelated arguments. First, we argue that feminist geography provides useful conceptual tools to situate urban gardening projects in their sociospatial contexts. Second, we argue that the “food justice organizing nodes” proposed by Slocum, Cadieux, and Blumberg (2016) provide a template for understanding both what enabled the garden to thrive and the challenges that it confronted in enacting ecofeminist visions. In the following section we use feminist geography to reimagine the spatial politics in Passaic, and then we proceed to explain how the food justice organizing nodes provide a framework for explaining the garden’s possibilities and challenges.

Reimagining Spatial Politics: Ecofeminist Visions in Passaic, NJ

The ecofeminist vision that animated the Raíces Del Sur community garden was based on a gendered and relational understanding of place. A relational understanding of place underscores that places are meeting points created by flows of people, goods, and ideas, and as such they are also always in process (Massey 1994, 2005). A relational understanding of place disavows essentialism and fixity and underscores that the uniqueness of places results from interconnections with other places and an “accumulation of weavings and encounters” (Massey 2005, 139). This accumulation of encounters between flows connects distant and proximate places in both shifting and path-dependent interdependencies (Sheppard 2002), which are also imbued with power. Owing to these “power geometries” (Massey 1994, 2005), some people and places have greater control over flows, but this control can also shift and be challenged. Because places are not static containers, understanding them and how they are constituted requires a global sense of place that highlights the significance of both proximate and distant flows (Massey 1994, 2005). In Passaic, the non-human flows that forged the city as an industrial center emanate from the river that runs along the city’s northern and eastern boundaries and shares its name.

The Passaic River’s powerful currents provided the energy to fuel industrialization along its banks, while its floods fertilized the river valley and created productive farmland. Like its neighbor, Paterson, Passaic became an industrial textile powerhouse in the 19th and 20th centuries, and was largely known for producing worsted wool. While the area had been long settled by Indigenous inhabitants, and much later by the colonizing Dutch, industrialization brought waves of immigrants in search of job opportunities. Although the large factories have disappeared, their legacies remain in the form of polluted soil and water and densely-built, old housing. With approximately 70,000 inhabitants, the City of Passaic ranks as New Jersey’s 15th largest municipality (US Census 2017). However, it ranks amongst the highest in population density nationwide, with approximately 20,000 people per square mile.

The ethnic and racial composition of Passaic has always been shifting, and the city has remained an important destination for immigrants, most recently from Latin America. The same processes that led to the displacement of manufacturing facilities in the global North have also instigated migration from rural and provincial areas in the global South. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) paved the way for intensified industrialization and neoliberalization in Mexico, and it also impacted agricultural livelihoods due to the influx of cheaper, subsidized foodstuffs from the US (Nadal and Wise 2004; Otero 2011). Practicing a global sense of place in food justice organizing involves recognizing the relationality of place and the power-geometries that have constituted places historically and in the present. The Raíces Del Sur garden was located in an area of Passaic that is populated by residents of Mexican heritage, many of whom have migrated to the area since the implementation of NAFTA. The

power-geometries that influenced the constitution of this community relate to the expansion of globalized neoliberal capitalism through NAFTA and through the marginalization of this community based on the race/ethnicity and migration status in the United States.

Race and ethnicity are not the only differences that were significant for the garden's formation. Scholarship and activism in feminist geography helps reveal and challenge how spaces are gendered (Moss and Falconer Al-Hindi 2008). The park in which the garden was situated had many sports fields but few other public spaces. Because of the presence of loitering men it was also widely considered by the local community to be an unwelcoming place for families and womyn. Initially, organizers intended on making the garden there in order to help reshape the place and therefore ensure access to green space to the families in the area.

Another purpose of the garden was to further food justice. In recent years access to healthy and affordable food has been highlighted as a problem to be addressed in urban communities like Passaic, which are often labeled as "food deserts" due to the lack of conventional retailers like supermarkets. Widely-touted solutions to this problem include the construction of supermarkets or the creation of farmers markets or mobile markets. However, these solutions often do not address the complex forms of oppression and systemic inequality that produce a lack of healthy food access in the first place. In her food justice work at Soul Fire Farm in New York state Leah Penniman has critiqued the underlying assumptions behind the concept of "food desert," and she has argued instead for the use of the term "food apartheid" (Meadows-Fernandez 2017). In contrast to the term "food desert," which implies a natural phenomenon, the term "food apartheid" underscores the fact that problems with the lack of access to healthy food stem from a socially-produced system of multiple forms of inequality, including racism (Meadows-Fernandez 2017). Given the complexity of systemic oppression, food justice activists often have difficulties attempting and achieving meaningful change in their communities. To provide food justice activists and scholars with a template for how to move towards transformative change and encourage solidarity, Slocum, Cadieux and Blumberg (2016) created a framework with "nodes," or entry points, that broadly cover equity and trauma, land, exchange and labor (see Table 1). Each node draws attention to specific areas that need to be addressed in food justice work. For example, creating sharing economies will not by itself foster food justice if persistent inequalities are not addressed as well. Similarly, celebrating diverse agroecological knowledge systems will not further food justice if capitalist enclosures continue to eviscerate agroecological commons. We use these nodes to critically analyze the possibilities and challenges the garden confronted in its sociospatial context.

Table 1. Applying the Food Justice Organizing Nodes at Raíces Del Sur.

Food Justice Organizing Nodes (Slocum, Cadieux and Blumberg 2016, 9-10)	Application at Raíces Del Sur	Challenges confronted at Raíces Del Sur
<p>“Equity and trauma: Acknowledge historical, collective social trauma and undo persistent race, gender, religious, citizenship, and class inequalities.”</p>	<p>Recognize the trauma caused by state-imposed borders. Undo persistent inequalities by providing an agroecological educational space. Use open space funding to support garden initiatives. Advocate for eradicating inequalities and establishing policies that advance equity.</p>	<p>Marginalized communities face significant and complex trauma. Existing policies are insufficient to address inequality in opportunities to create and maintain functioning urban community gardens.</p>
<p>“Land: Create innovative ways to equitably control, use, share, own, manage, and conceive of land, and ecologies in general, that place them outside the speculative market and the rationale of extraction.”</p>	<p>Manage the garden as a common space organized by a non-hierarchical collective. Garden based on agro-ecological principles and diverse knowledge systems.</p>	<p>Pollution remains a problem. Lack of water at the site. Precarious land tenure.</p>
<p>“Exchange: Recognize, design, and support exchange mechanisms that build communal reliance and control through cooperation, trust, and sharing economies that are not dominated by the profit motive.”</p>	<p>Garden harvest was given away. Sharing of knowledge was encouraged. Events emphasized sharing economies.</p>	<p>Harvest could be larger with more space and resources (water).</p>
<p>“Labor: Pursue labor relations that guarantee a basic (minimum) income ... and are neither alienating nor dependent on (unpaid) social reproduction by women or low paid dangerous work by people of color and the working class.”</p>	<p>Garden project run and controlled by community members, primarily womyn of color.</p>	<p>A few organizers, primarily womyn of color, do most of the work. Community without social capital.</p>

Equity and Trauma

The origins of the garden stem from its organizers' desire to create a more equitable city and to creatively address the past and current trauma inflicted on Passaic's society and environment. The original activists involved in creating the garden had already participated together in a non-hierarchical and grassroots bicycle advocacy group, Passaic Pedal, which organized regular bike rides throughout the congested streets of Passaic. Although the rides only attracted a small group of committed cyclists, like critical mass rides in other places, they empowered the riders and others to reshape relations with their everyday spaces. However, the rides could only achieve so much with respect to environmental organizing and community engagement. A community garden, on the other hand, could provide both a meeting place and a resource for more expanded environmental education. In 2014 Passaic Pedal organizers applied for a grant to establish a community garden that would reclaim and recreate green space in/for the local community, address food justice issues, and enact an ecofeminist vision of community organizing.

The garden consisted of numerous raised beds that produced a fragrant abundance of herbs, flowers and some vegetables in a public park that is covered with sports fields on the banks of the Passaic River. In contrast to the sports fields, which were dominated by games played by men and boys, the garden provided a peaceful and welcoming educational space for families with children. The raised beds were adorned with colorful signs with illustrations made by one of the garden's organizers and with text in English and Spanish. These signs highlighted the voices of migrants, womyn, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, and they also addressed issues pertinent to the community. One sign in particular directly addressed the trauma felt deeply by many inhabitants of Passaic, namely that of immigrants separated from family and friends by state-imposed borders. Using the monarch butterfly as a symbol of possibility for a borderless world, the sign stated: "This garden is dedicated to the hope of the immigrants, that they one day will be able to reconnect with families and travel freely across the artificial borders which separate them...." In presentations both in and out of the community, garden organizers made an effort to acknowledge the trauma experienced by this community and to help situate it in within global power-geometries to further understanding and alliance-building.

In an attempt to undo persistent inequalities and promote equity, the garden was situated in a particularly disadvantaged neighborhood where most residents live in apartments and have limited access to green space. The garden provided these residents and their children with the opportunity to engage in gardening and also to learn about diverse agroecological systems and cultures, including the culture of the Lenni-Lenape who inhabited the area before European colonization. Notably, one educational sign described the Lenni-Lenape word that means "a good dream," and related it to the Passaic community's dream of a better future. Even when events were not taking place, this sign and others like it invited passers-by to envision a different and better future.

While the garden's activities were self-funded by the collective of organizers, the initial funding to build the garden was provided by a grant from the "Dig In!" Community Garden and Neighborhood Farming Program. For the past few years the funding for this program has been allocated from the Open Space Trust Fund by the Passaic County Board of Chosen Freeholders. While this funding was available to residents throughout Passaic County, which includes not only impoverished cities like Passaic, but also wealthy suburbs, the grant did provide a source of funding that would not have otherwise been available. In addition, the garden provided a space for broader discussions on other related policies, especially as they relate to the food system.

Land

Like many urban community garden projects, access to land and resources like water was particularly problematic. Raíces Del Sur was located in a public park with the consent of the municipality. Therefore, the garden always faced a problem related to the permanence of its land tenure. Despite the problem that the garden was situated on land that was not controlled by its organizers, the organizers still decided that the project was worth putting effort into for several years. With Passaic's densely structured urban core, there were simply few other options.

For the period of its existence the collective running the garden was able to manage the allocated space in a non-hierarchical and participatory manner. Anyone who was interested in getting involved could contact the organizers (contact information was provided on the signs throughout the garden), and all events were open to the public.

The garden's organizers attempted to garden based on agroecological principles and to decolonize nutrition and showcase diverse knowledge systems at multiple events. Specific signs and beds paid tribute to farmers of color, and to advocates who worked on behalf of farmers and farmworkers, such as Dolores Huerta. One sign highlighted the Zapatistas and their fight for another world that provided space for many possible worlds. This sign was placed in a garden bed that was planted with vegetation that symbolized "many worlds."

However, the challenge of gardening in an urban area with a severely polluted environment remained. Although all the soil for the garden beds was brought in so that the plants could grow in uncontaminated soil, dust would still settle on the plants and the neighboring river was still heavily polluted. Due to a lack of running water for irrigation, water had to be regularly carried to the garden in containers. In other words, maintaining the ecology of the garden required significant labor and strategizing to minimize exposure to pollutants.

Exchange

Despite the challenge of maintaining an agroecological commons in a public park without running water, the garden did produce a harvest. Like other gardens in Passaic County, such as the Green Acre Community Garden in Paterson, the harvest was distributed to the community. At Raíces Del Sur, harvesting was an activity that organizers involved children in during periodic events. For example, children learned about different herbs and then they created herbal bouquets.

The garden also served as space to share knowledge and traditions, a site for celebrations, including the annual Day of the Dead. A commemorative altar was placed in the garden, the harvest was displayed, and children engaged in arts and crafts. A spirit of sharing and exchange that goes beyond capitalism was thus fostered.

Labor

The organizers of the garden all worked as volunteers on behalf of their communities. Most were womyn of color who came from Passaic and the surrounding communities. On one hand the garden depended on the unpaid labor of these womyn, but on the other hand the womyn maintained control over the garden's activities. A larger collective could have run more events, engaged a larger number of participants, and mitigated problems that activists of color face (see Pulido 2006). But maintaining a small group of organizers facilitated an ongoing commitment to horizontal organizing practices that minimized power differentials in order to create a commons within the collective and between the community and collective members.

Reflection on Commoning Practices

The horizontal commoning practices that Raíces Del Sur promoted, based on non-hierarchical organizing methods used to reclaim and repurpose urban space, were essential to the garden's success. People were easily attracted to the garden because efforts were made to connect to the local community on multiple levels. While horizontal commoning practices were developing strongly within the garden, they still could not undo the fact that control over the garden as a place ultimately rested with the municipality. Due to historical and contemporary trauma, few community residents, including the garden's organizers, are empowered to directly contest and transform power relations locally. Although the food justice organizing nodes were not utilized during the creation of the garden, they have provided us with one way to analyze the challenges and possibilities of horizontal commoning practices through urban gardening. While these nodes are analytically useful, they must be supplemented with a feminist understanding of spatialities.

Few initiatives like Raíces Del Sur exist in Passaic, NJ, but that is not for a lack of interest among its residents, and among young people in particular. One prominent obstacle is that Passaic is losing young people whose visions align with the ecofeminist imaginary that the garden cultivated. With its wealth of food justice organizations and community garden projects, New York City attracts many of New Jersey's young,

progressive activists. Despite the need of the surrounding community, initiatives like Raíces Del Sur are faced with the challenge of starting from scratch with little institutional support. Although funding is available and there are grant programs for community garden development that do not require development of the infrastructure of a non-profit organization, most of these small grants do not cover the operational and labor costs involved in maintaining a garden. This is a particular disadvantage in low-income and migrant-dominated communities of color like Passaic, NJ.

Conclusion

Since the presidential election in 2016 the priorities of the garden's organizers shifted to address the immediate health and safety needs of the garden's community. For example, the garden's collective of organizers put together several "Know Your Rights" workshops, which were geared towards immigrant womyn. Although the garden has lost its physical presence, the organizers remain active in the community and in other gardens. Upon the garden's demolition, the organizers explored many possible options about how to bring the garden back but ultimately decided to postpone this project because the only option offered to rebuild it would end up compromising the organizers' core values, fundamentally changing the structure of the garden, and limiting commoning possibilities. Through the organizers' work in immigrant justice and urban agriculture with surrounding grassroots groups in communities of color, the mission of the garden lives on. While the prospect for another similar garden in Passaic remains unclear at this time, the activities/workshops we continue to organize carry Raíces del Sur's name and essence. The organizers are hopeful that in the future there may be another opportunity to rebuild and that this will be spearheaded by migrant womyn from the community who, little by little, are expressing their voice and agency.

The need for horizontal and non-hierarchical organizing in cities with large populations of immigrants is greater now than back in 2016. Problems related to food access have been exacerbated as the fear of being detained has gripped the community, and many residents seek to limit the number of outings they make. The needs of the community therefore remain great, but the social and political capital that the community generates, especially among its younger people, is often lost as youth move out of the city. In particular, there is a need to challenge the power geometries that cause so many of New Jersey's activists to flee to places like New York City where there are a multitude of established food justice organizations and community gardens. In urban New Jersey the struggle is significant as well, but there are much fewer established organizations that could support new initiatives. There is a need for participation by others with a commitment to engaged ecofeminist practice. Community gardens have been the focus of significant amounts of academic research, but thus far, few studies have been carried out in New Jersey, let alone in its major cities (see Drake 2015 for an exception). While inequalities exist within New York City

gardens (Reynolds 2015), much scholarly and activist attention has been devoted to them. Other cities have received similar amounts of attention, including Baltimore, Detroit and Oakland. The problems related to community gardening in small, immigrant-dominated cities like Passaic, NJ, remain underexplored. In this article we have argued that feminist geography and food justice organizing nodes have helped us understand the challenges and possibilities of community gardening with ecofeminist visions in the City of Passaic, NJ. We hope that by reproducing the story of this garden we will help empower others who want to make transformational change in similar places.

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