

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Wednesday, July 18, 2007

Subject: Follow-up interview with Tom Goodridge

Location: My office, Teachers College

Time: 4:05-6:10

This time was intended as a follow-up interview with Tom, particularly to ask about and request to meet the 10 gardeners/greening activists he visited with his students. We accomplished this, and also talked about his work. It seems that this is a good method for us: an exchange that leaves him feeling inspired about his writing and me feeling that he will help me with the Harlem project (as well as bolstering my confidence as a teacher). Tom understands that I want to meet these gardeners with whom he has worked, that I am interested in “political education” as well as the garden as a space of imagination, and that I need introductions as an outsider to Harlem.

Tom was wearing a short-sleeved, lavender button-down shirt with dark purple shorts, white socks, and brown suede trail running sneakers. This time, he had no sweatshirt to ward off the air conditioning chill and eventually draped his towel over his shoulders. He often talks with his head leaning over to the left (his right). Today I found myself mirroring this action, leaning to my left. He also turns his head completely to his right (and sometimes his torso) in an apparent posture of thinking.

I will not transcribe the interview/writing session here, but here are some major points:

“Root work”: This is Tom’s term for the work I described as “learning to organize”:

- finding and securing land
- learning to navigate city bureaucracies, specifically Green Thumb, the city agency developed to deal with community gardens
- developing and maintaining a garden
- political organizing
- developing child- and youth- oriented programming/approaches

Green Guerillas: “greening activists” who pioneered community gardens. I am skeptical about this history, but perhaps it is true that they were the first to seek government recognition. Tom added a piece about NY real estate being “slow” at the time. He mentioned “Liz Christie.” Later when I ask if I should see the Lower East Side gardens first, he says I need to see them, but this can be done “in parallel” to looking at gardens in Harlem.

Gardens as Improvements: Tom used various words to describe vacant lots: eyesores, toxic, black hole. He described them as full of needles, trash, and junkies, bad places from which parents warned their children to stay away. Related to this is the idea that he and the students had to deal with the vacant lots as a “phobic space,” and work to reimagine and rework them as “safe” and welcoming.

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Role of land in African American cultural history: Tom called the various meanings of land a “complicated overlay.” He talked about black people being slaves to the land and appreciative of what it can yield. “Land is independence.” “To know its ways,” “The only thing you can trust.” Land symbolizing both freedom and the yoke, independence and oppression. Currently, contrasting himself with AfAm gardeners, gardens as “release” vs. “work.” This prompted him to wonder about asking “city dwellers” what land means to them. Later he also talked about “land is power,” pointing out the significance of who controls land and the practices of its use.

Culturally Relevant Models: his way to describe introducing the children to African American and African gardeners with roots in the South, family histories of sharecropping, African plants and ecology. I use it also to capture his sense of himself as a white man with something to contribute within a black community. He understands that people see his view of the garden as romantic (wildness as release, nurturing, etc.) and not particularly political, specifically, a “white man’s” perspective. Yet he credits his approach as “not depressing” and developmentally appropriate for children too young to deal with global environmental problems such as the disappearing rainforest. Later in the conversation he also talked about connection to ancestors.

Raymond Figueroa and political education (my term): A gardener that guided middle school students to research their home communities to find places where they could buy organic produce. They conducted a survey and wrote up a report showing that nowhere in 20 blocks could they get “real food.” These young people eventually were invited to Washington DC to “present their findings.” Tom describes Raymond as a “powerful catalytic teacher.” He also says that Raymond is more interested in “production” than he, meaning growing “food that can be shared.” Raymond’s young people gave collard greens to local homeless people.

Education of an outsider: Tom drops asides to teach me about Harlem children, e.g. saying that these children all have encountered homeless people. Tom illustrates by holding out a cupped palm, as if asking for money.

Sensory education: Tom describes this as antagonistic to academic or a solely intellectual approach. He talks about rooting yourself “back to the land” (he believes that each of us “know” that we are part of the land, and that we are now living as aliens; I urged him to learn more about the term “alienation”).

Kinds of gardeners: Tom described Raymond as someone who “took it to a political place.” Other gardeners are more “artistic,” approaching gardens with an “aesthetic sense.” He describes his garden as “a place to grow children” rather than food or political sensibility.

CSA (Community Supported Agriculture): An organization that Tom wants me to learn about, in addition to Green Guerillas. He’s a member. He mentions that most of these are farmers outside of the city, but there is a model in Havana, Cuba, where a great deal of produce eaten in the city (he guessed 40%) is grown in the city.

Taking collective ownership: community gardening as a communal activity in a communal space. Space is negotiated rather than owned, particularly among adults who have different purposes (see kinds of gardeners). His examples:

- I want a place for my 6 year old to take his first steps on grass
- I want to grow food
- Artists who want an aesthetic place
- I need the outdoors for my mental health; wildness (Tom)

Use of space as cultural: Tom's questions: how has the space been used? What does this say about the culture? He begins to say that in male-dominated gardens "there might be more structures," then takes it back, thinking of Willy Morgan. He talks about the Wild Patch in his garden as having a great deal of meaning for him, but other adults thinking he was strange (or maybe just wasteful) for inviting weeds into the space. He then spoke of gardens as a "negotiated space between what the earth will give and will not give." He returns to the collective ownership idea, saying that this is "unlike the American dream" of "this is my property, I'm gonna do what I want with it." I say something about a possible tension between gardeners who really seem to shape their spaces versus a more communal enterprise, although it seems that all gardeners are doing the work in part as a community service. This leads to a conversation on

Bureaucratic constraints (my term): Green Thumb, a city agency that leases land to community gardeners, insists that they "show me that this is not somebody's backyard." Again, back to the power of having an empty space in the city. He talked about Green Thumb as developing a more formalized process to apply for a lease. When people first started community gardens, "they saw that, my god!" The vacant lots, which were "more than an eyesore, a black hole, really, became a treasure." He says that Classy Parker has lots of stories about how people linger.

Biodiversity: Tom's word for how people and plants and animals all depend on each other. He talked about an Ethiopian Coptic Church on his block (presumably of the school). He and Bishop Apollo went to Green Thumb and said, "We want to make a green space." "They had wheels, a car, and manpower. I had storage space at school." The church was giving jobs to the unemployed and one of these jobs was to build the garden. He described latticework put in by one of the craftsmen in the church garden, plus a lion's head that spit out water, used for revival meetings.

Room for child development, getting to know oneself, developing resilience (my terms): Tom takes children to the garden and tells them, "You are a seed. What do you need? What makes you feel safe? What nurtures you?" His questions then turn to the child themselves. What do you need? "What do you think you're bringing to the earth that has never been here before?" if a child were to bear fruit, "what do you think that fruit might be?" He says that this is "to put a child in touch with who they are." This is when he talks about "greening types afraid that children are being exposed too soon" to doomsday environmental talk. He contrasts Raymond as nurturing critical thinking and dealing with a political system, versus himself as encouraging children to explore.

Hadja Worley. I ask if Willy Morgan is the one with the pond and Tom quickly corrects me. “Many people would say, that’s not a garden, some kids might call it a rain forest.” He says that Hadja build a lattice, an original fence, with “bits and ends of metal” that a friend salvaged for him. he holds his hands in front of his face, looking from behind a “lattice” made of spread-out fingers.

Fences: This got him started on fences, gardens as “fenced-in places,” with a tinge of regret in his voice. He said that children associate fences with jail, and asked, “Is this fence keeping in, or keeping out? Who is the fence for?” He made a joke about the fence at his garden being a “cat door,” since cats could easily fit in between the spaces. He mentioned rats under his breath.

Tom’s association with Hadja Worley, who is part of an interracial couple. (I didn’t ask what the inter races are.) “This man and his wife” had “saved” his garden “through incredible political warrior action.” When Tom’s Garden of Love got razed, “I ran to the Worleys. And it was Cindy Worley that called the New York Times.” He promised to get me this article, too. He said, “Something bulldozed me.” We talked briefly about how this traumatic event politicized him.

Children’s trauma (my term): The children watched the bulldozing from the school. “These children were used to having their dreams bulldozed. This is nothing new to them. Children who had endured hardship. [] more able to rebound.”

Hadja “is now in the city land use of his council,” Tom looks down, thinking hard, “nine or ten. He is fighting for open space and bringing along others.” We agree that I should meet Hadja, and that Tom will arrange the meeting. He asks me where I want to meet him, if I want to watch an activity or interview Hadja. I tell him that this is up to Hadja, that he can take me on a tour, or have me come and observe, or talk with me, whatever makes him most comfortable. We do not set a date for this, since I tell him this will depend on Hadja. I tell Tom to find two different dates in case I am not free for one of them.

We end with more talk about Tom’s work. I give him some homework assignments, drawing from our conversation threaded throughout this “interview.” His homework, basically, is to clarify his thinking. (1) to contrast the School with the Garden, and (2) to look at 3 weeks worth of his notes (any 3 weeks) and write a paragraph or more about what he finds. I tell him to approach it with a spirit of exploration and discovery, like what he wants for his students. He seems to respond well to this. I tell him my purpose is to get a little distance from himself as educator. Earlier I had also told him to write down all the “lessons” he was trying to teach. He understood that this was a way to get him to admit that he had ideas about what he wanted the children to learn that he was not simply “a fly on the wall.”

He handed me a revised piece, which I promised to give him email comments on by Friday. We set a date for him to email me new writing (July 7) and to meet again (July 9, 4pm).