

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Tuesday, August 14, 2007

Subject: Meeting with Tom Goodridge

Location: My office

Time: 4:15-6:10

Tom and I spent the first hour on his writing. I am pushing him to do more and deeper analysis.

Next he gave me a flyer for the Harlem garden tour. We then talked for almost an hour about the gardeners, his place in Harlem, and my hopes for getting involved with some of these gardens.

One of the most interesting distinctions that got clarified is the huge difference between “production” and “wild” gardens. We had talked about this before, but this time he emphasized how sometimes he feels embarrassed that his garden is not a production garden. Talking about what this means for people in Harlem helped him to understand “categories of analysis” for his own work, and helped me to understand that his “wild space” was quite strange for people who came by. They would have difficulty understanding why he did not grow vegetables.

It seems that another distinction is ornamental gardens. I’m not sure if he used this term but he seemed to allude to two other gardens as not quite production and not at all wild. He described Loretta’s garden as a “magnificent space” and alluded to Classy Parker’s garden as beautiful without being productive.

*This points to the pragmatic first responses of people walking by the gardens: vegetables are useful, flowers are not. This contextualizes the descriptions of gardens as oases (e.g. on the flyer), as beautiful spaces for gathering, etc.*

When Tom gave me the flyer, he let me know that his was the first garden on the tour. The teacher he worked with also will be there. Hadja Worley organized the fair. His is the Wilson Garden at 122<sup>nd</sup> St (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> avenues) third on the list. He mentioned that Hadja is political, and would be happy to speak with me about the role of gardens in health, community building, crime prevention, neighborhood collaboration, etc. He mentioned that Hadja is looking forward to meeting with me. *I’m glad that Tom has done the work of introducing me, and I hope this relationship is productive.*

The Five Star Garden, second on the tour, is “a major producer.”

I’m not sure which garden is Loretta’s, but he talked rapturously of her as having “a beautiful soul, a folk soul.” He said she doesn’t have her teeth anymore, but she is still a force in the garden (my words, not his). He said she is always giving people peaches, sharing the earth with people. He said that she gave him brilliant advice on his Green Man performance, suggesting that a movie should be made about him as Green Man, not

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just Green Man, but how he came to be Green Man. He says that he has done his puppet shows for children in her garden.

[I'm not sure how much I wrote up last time, but Tom told me that Green Man shows up in medieval art.]

Sonya Broughton has the Mt. Morris garden (this might be Garden 8, at West 122<sup>nd</sup> near 8<sup>th</sup> Ave). I asked if Mt. Morris is packaging itself as historic Harlem, and he caught my meaning, saying that gentrification is not white gentrification. He said that Maya Angelou has a place there. He also said that the area also includes some "wild places," that Sonya lives in a place that they are trying to "take it back." I asked from whom, and he replied, "from the city." He mentioned that the intercoms never worked, so he shouts up 8 floors to reach her. He says "the halls don't smell so good," and "wild things" probably happen there, but there is a strong community as well.

*Tom has learned the coded language that I have heard from people living and working in Harlem, refusing to name or talking gingerly around violence, strong bonds, community organizing, and so on.*

I asked what kind of support Hadja is looking for, and he mentioned something about talking with Bill Perkins (I had to look him up on google to find out he is a city councilmember running for NY State Senate).

I mentioned reading something about white people complaining about BBQs in the park and drumming, and Tom lit up. He participates in the drum circle at Mt. Morris Park, and rich white people living in an "elegant" building just build across the street complained. The drum circle split up; some still play on the edge of the park, to let the white people know they're still there, and others have moved to the interior of the park. Tom is sad that the group split, but he is also excited to dance on "Snake Mountain," a large granite rock in the park. I ask if this is near the hospital (I think I walked by this park). He says that I should just sit at the edge of this park, I could write a whole ethnography on this park. He says that people open up when they dance, and said something about the snake spirit entering them.

Tom also talked about his background when I mentioned that it will be fun for me to see how the other gardeners see him, as loving, compassionate, committed to the community. He said that his mother had had an affair with one of the Tuskegee Airmen. In an aside he tells me that none of the Airmen ever got killed. His mother got pregnant. When he found out, he talked with her about the difficulty of remaining a couple, and they broke up and she got an abortion. Tom says that later, his home always seemed to attract black children. When the Airmen were awarded the Congressional Medal in California, he sent a photo of his mother to be displayed. (Both of his parents have since died.) If any of the Airmen remembered her and was interested in getting to know his son, he'd love to be in touch.

I then asked him how he found out this story. Once he was sitting with his parents. They both suffered from emphysema, so he spent 10 years taking care of them. His father was Jewish but raised by WASP parents, and he is gay. He said to his mom, you're the only one who doesn't have any secrets. She replied, I do have a secret, I got an abortion. His father's jaw dropped. I joked that they were old enough to talk about things like that without worrying about what others thought. He said his parents are free spirits. Then he added that his mom told his dad that it was before she met him.

He talked wistfully about his brother. He hoped that he would grow closer to his brother after his parents' death, but this has not been the case. His brother needed a lot more structure than his parents provided. Tom was his parents' son.

Tom mentioned that his father, because of his WASP parents, had a little money, and had a summer house in Connecticut. His parents didn't worry about he and his brother playing in the wilderness. I asked where he grew up, and he said New York City until he was 5, and then to the suburbs in Connecticut. I asked if there was any wildness in the suburbs and he said no, it was suburban.

We then talked about my hopes and worries for the fieldwork. I told him I haven't found my passion yet, and I think people know this. People ask if I am staying in Harlem, and I have to say it depends on whether I can get a job. I mention that I haven't been able to get into any of the informal networks we talked about yet, and that my style requires this personal connection.

We also talked about his perceptions of how Harlem people see him. He says that because African Americans are associated with wildness, with disorder, that it was strange for people to see a white man who wanted wildness. He mentioned Lisa Delpit's work, and how it really woke him up to grapple with her idea that "We don't need you to teach our children how to be Black, we need you to teach them to succeed in a white man's world." He mentioned his great respect for the African American culture.

I interrupted him when he mentioned Ebonics to give him my take. (I wish I had continued by asking him if he thought people thought he was not doing his job by advocating for wildness.) I told him that this had happened in Oakland, and what was lost in the national debate was that learning Ebonics was for the teachers, not the students, to help teachers understand their students better, to see it as a real language and treat their communities with more respect, etc. He mentioned how he learned to listen for the verb "to be," which "we don't have," and that conveys more information (than Standard English).

Tom knows the gardeners in the first five gardens, but not the others. I tell him the others are the ones in our area, and say that I think that if I really get into one of the other gardens, then Varenne will be ok with it.

Tom says that I should bring people, that gardeners want a range of people and support for their gardens. He mentions his (former) garden, that teachers want people in the

community to help. I ask him if the gardens are led by one person as the organizing focal point. He says that yes, gardeners know they are heavily identified with their gardens. He confirms that he used to be that point person. I say that this problem affects all kinds of community organizing, that even when you train someone else to continue the work it changes, a lot rests on that one charismatic person who can get people together or has a real passion for it.

*Tom seems very much connected to people in Harlem, as the weird white guy. I hope that he does introduce me as someone who is worth knowing, which will pave the way for me to develop my own relationships with people.*