

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Thursday, October 18, 2007

Subject: Interview with Haja Worly, first encounter with Kitchen Table  
 Location: Wilson Garden, 122<sup>nd</sup> St between Frederick Douglass and Powell  
 Time: 11:40-1:40

I met today with Haja Worly, who is a community gardener and “guardian” in the area around 122<sup>nd</sup> Street between Frederick Douglass and Powell. When I arrived ten minutes late I called his phone number and spoke with his wife, Cindy Worly, to let her know that I had arrived but forgotten the address. She told me Haja had just stepped out, so I waited outside for him thinking he had gone to the store or something. Instead he came out of the front door of his place at 216 W. 122<sup>nd</sup> St.

[I had to do very little prompting in this “interview.” Mostly I asked clarification questions once Haja started. At the end, I dropped my tape recorder, and it turned off as some interesting stuff came up. I managed to turn it back on eventually.]

On the way to Haja’s house I noted an empty lot at the southeast corner of 122<sup>nd</sup> and Douglass, overgrown with weeds and fenced in. Willie Morgan’s vegetable garden on the north side of 122<sup>nd</sup> was chained and locked. A couple buildings down, a few Hispanic looking men were working on a gutted 3-story building. On the south side of the street there was another fenced area that looked somewhat cultivated, with shrubby and herby plants. There was a staircase leading downwards, I suppose to another lot or backyard on 121<sup>st</sup>.

Haja was wearing faded blue jeans, hiking/athletic type boots/sneakers, and a white printed t-shirt under a green windbreaker. He wore sunglasses with gold wire frames and a baseball cap.

Haja led me to the garden. On the steps of his house he picked up some circulars, I think from a grocery store, wrapped in plastic, bending down with difficulty. I did not see what he did with them (I think took them into the garden, perhaps recycled them when I wasn’t looking?). He walked slowly across the street, telling me to “Watch yourself” as a car approached.

At the gate he slowly unlocked the padlock and withdrew the chain from the door. I held the gate open as he relocked the padlock around the ends of the chain. He took the gate from me and swung it all the way open. He motioned for me to step inside first, and I did, walking towards a benches. “All the way back,” he told me, and I kept walking. I passed a set of tables with about 6 green chairs around it, and turned back when he stopped there. I took a seat and he did as well.

He said something that performed as opening, and I took the cue to explain what I wanted to do, briefly explaining the project on comprehensive education in Harlem. I told him I wanted to find out more about the gardens, my current interests being political education,

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what the gardens mean to the community, and whatever I would learn from talking with him. He started telling me how his wife started the garden, and I interrupted to ask if he minded if I took notes. He said no, and I asked if I could also tape record. He said it was ok. [He seemed eager to talk and I did not press the consent forms until after the interview.]

He began again, telling me that the garden was named after **Joseph P. Wilson, an “elder in the community,”** who was also Cindy’s landlord at the time. Wilson was from Guyana and was interested in botany and horticulture. The garden started with peach trees and rose of Sharon. His wife started the garden when she lived at 210 W. 122<sup>nd</sup> Street. She began by clearing debris, she had “got the idea of cleaning and planning a garden.”

At some point a young white woman came in with a baby in a stroller. She was slim, wearing brown corduroy pants and a gray t-shirt, with a short, trendy haircut. Haja excused himself, saying something like, “People are coming in.” She said, “Oh you guys are having a meeting?” hinted that she would leave. Haja told her to come in, indicating that we would move. He looked at me, seeming to check if I was ok with moving. I was, and I picked up my things, keeping the tape recorder on. We moved just a few feet away, to the back of the garden, to two dirty white plastic chairs. Haja asked if that was ok as I set my bag on the chair and sat down. The chairs were set at an angle to one another.

We began again. His wife, he told me, learned about the Community Board and about Operation Green Thumb [a city agency supporting community gardens that is now called Green Thumb]. She worked the garden with the help of people in the neighborhood. Haja explained that at the time the garden extended beyond its current boundaries, encompassing the next two lots where two buildings now sit. He mentioned the **City Volunteer Corps**, which paid stipends mostly to youth including high school dropouts to get them back on track with education. I asked if there was an education component like the GED and he confirmed this. Later he said that the CVC is now Americorps. The CVC helped to design the garden. He pointed out some tires set in the ground, saying that marked the peace symbol they built.

The garden “didn’t start out as gardening,” he said (and repeated later), “but **cleaning up and helping to secure the neighborhood.**” He talked about drugs, prostitution in the 80s and early 90s. At first they “didn’t get as much support from the neighborhood that we [would’ve] liked.” He told me, “I came along in 1987 and met my wife,” after she had started the garden. She was teaching at Malcolm King College, where he “was a late blooming student.” [I smiled at this; was she his teacher?] Cindy taught adult education.

He mentioned projects and organizations he had been involved with: Model Cities Program in Jersey City, Black United Front in Brooklyn, Reclamation Project in which they reclaimed and restored abandoned buildings. So the community garden “piqued” his interest.

Around 1985 or 1990 “we were able to get another site,” gesturing toward the end of the block, and named it after **George W. Brown**, “who was a fixture of the community.” He was the president of the PAL at the time. I interrupted to ask what was PAL, the Police Athletic League, and he mentioned that it was on 123<sup>rd</sup> at the time. Mr. Brown passed away, “so we named the garden after him.”

He reiterated, “Like I said, we always had young people to help us.” I asked if the Brown garden is where Willie Morgan’s garden is now. He added that houses are also on top of where the garden used to stand.

He talked about the work put into building the garden initially. They had to clear out “carcasses,” he told me, elaborating when I asked, of dogs, cats, and rodents, in addition to debris. He mentioned the CVCs, again, now AmeriCorps, saying, “if it hadn’t been for them,” we wouldn’t have been able to do as much as we did as quickly as we did.

“My wife is a teacher at the Department of Education,” he said, explaining that they came up with a program called **The Young Rangers**. They would run the program for a few weeks in the summer, July to August, and had 15-25 or more children from the neighborhood. They took them on field trips, tried to teach them “about the environment,” took them to the library “to study and look up things, about the environment,” played games. It was “kind of like a day camp,” in 1992, 1993, something like that. [At some point I had asked about dates, and later in the interview he tried to provide dates]

He mentioned that they ran on donations from organizations. The Bronx Botanical Garden gave plants and trees. Operation Green Thumb had a nursery at the time. They had dogwood trees, Russian olive trees, spruce trees, pine trees, all kinds of evergreen trees, junipers, rose of Sharon, apple and plum trees. The trees were small at the time. Gesturing at his chest while still seated, he said the tallest thing was tomato plants. He explained that the garden used to be very sunny before the two buildings were built. Many of the current trees, which are mulberry trees, were planted as the garden grew more shaded. “We decided to let it become more of a nature preserve,” since it was no longer sunny enough for vegetables.

“On the other end” they planted lots of vegetables. Kohlrabi, string beans, squash, radishes, etc. “We had a pretty good yield.” I asked what they did with the vegetables, and he said used them or gave them away. His wife also canned them.

“At the time I was also in the ministry,” serving as minister for a church whose name began with Christ Cathedral Church, on 126<sup>th</sup> street. Later he moved to Trinity AME. “Everything was an extension of what we were doing here,” he said, listing some efforts:

- food distribution programs, pantry every Wednesday
- flea market, where the Magic Johnson Theater is now, 124<sup>th</sup> and 125<sup>th</sup> streets
  - o sold secondhand items, clothing, and the money went back into the upkeep of the flea market
- intergenerational festival

- 3 days of activities, gospel choir, dancers and singers, fun
- “we would concentrate on the youth and the elders”
- motto: “party with a purpose”
  - block parties also a community cleanup
- back to school programs

“Didn’t want to be exclusive”

“Stuff I learned in the 60s and 70s”: Black Panther Party, community development, taking care of your community

- concerts: Pete Seeger
- put on a play with the help of students at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts: “Common Ground,” about community gardens [when I look it up it’s common green/common ground]
  - [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the\\_drama\\_review/v046/46.3rosenthal06.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_drama_review/v046/46.3rosenthal06.pdf)
    - performed play in the garden, at NYU, in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, and also Riverside Park in the Bronx when the park was just being developed
    - **Jan Cohen-Cruz** [article above says they met in the 70s when she taught in New Jersey’s Trenton State Prison, where he was an inmate]
    - Urban ensemble, mostly NYU students
    - Tisch has an **Office of Community Connections**, work with different organizations in the community, like settlement houses and halfway houses [are there still settlement houses?]
    - Photography, drama, music
    - Jan came up with this idea to do something with community gardens, to tell the story of community gardens
    - Sabrina Peck, “she did all the gathering of the information,” [did he make a reference to me here, something like ‘like what you’re doing’?], “pulled together young people”
- The Point in the Bronx, an organization that provides youth with programs
  - Hunts Point
    - Served young and old, 8 years old to maybe 60 or 70
- Plaza Cultural also did a presentation, standing room only
- Book that Jan Cohen-Cruz did an article in a collection of different plays
- Cornell Cooperative extension, Garden Mosaic, which Tom was involved in
  - Gather information, do interviews with elders in the community
- Garden on 121<sup>st</sup> Street, “Five Star,” Classy Parker
  - When I react, he notices, and I tell him I met her on the Garden Tour
  - Working in schools doing “**cook shop**” ??
  - Recently a Daily News article on canning
  - She did a canning demo at the recent FarmAid concert
- Ripple in the pond, more about the larger community

- Haja worked with Community Board 10 for 8 years, chair of Parks and Rec for 5 years
  - o I just learned a lot about zoning and rezoning
  - o Columbia expansion
  - o Rezoning of 125<sup>th</sup> street was a hot topic as well
- **Wanted to dig ourselves into the community and make an investment in the community**
- My wife works for adult basic education for the Department of Education
  - o Worked in homeless shelters
  - o They formed a musical group, Urban Griot, formed with people from the shelter
- everything we did, we tried to include/add some value to what we were doing
- My wife worked for a group called **the Doers**
  - o Biblical reference to James something 22: “doers of the word,” not just hearers
  - o You pray *and*, not just [pray]
- We’ve been living here, my wife since ’85, me since 1978
  - o We moved together in 1987, to 210 W. 122<sup>nd</sup> Street
  - o 1992 moved from this block, moved to 120<sup>th</sup> st
  - o Landlord looking to sell, he wanted them out to raise the rent
  - o Moved back here and we moved to 216 W. 122<sup>nd</sup> st
  - o Bill Moore, landlord, former policeman [sold them their current place]
  - o We’d been looking for condos, co-ops
  - o He [Moore] let us know he was looking to sell [at right place]
  - o Able to dig up funding, able to put down down payment
- 1986 also began the “**great struggle**” around community gardens
  - o Mayor Giuliani turning vacant lots over to developers
  - o “At first we did not know where to go,” then found people in Lower East Side organizing around gardens
    - Earth celebrations, Felicia,
    - Each year pageants at summer solstice, winter solstice, in May
    - Visit all the gardens in the LES
    - Mask puppets
- New York City Community Gardens Coalition came out of that
  - o Demonstration at City Hall Park, political leaders’ office, steps of City Hall
  - o Find out about City Council meetings and the hearings they’d have on community gardens
  - o “We did a lot of organizing”
  - o Haja served as first president of the NYCCGC

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- Later on Françoise Cashman [?], “she was an elder in her 80s,” a “real firebrand in terms of the gardens”
- Organization originally called New York City Coalition for the Preservation of the Gardens
- Organization was on the wane for a while, she [Françoise] really helped get it on its feet
- Terry ? president later
- Set up the bulldozer hotline, a phone tree
- Guilani destroyed Lower East Side, Harlem gardens, including part of these gardens [the two buildings]
  - They would have been destroyed, the whole thing, if we had not been proactive
  - Builders wanted to use the current garden as a staging area, to keep equipment for the two lots now buildings
  - They put up a retaining wall
  - Desmond Emmanuel was the developer, a **black developer**

At 40 minutes into the interview, he told me, “I’ll be right back.” By then two other moms and their kids had filtered in. I took the opportunity to note the sounds and sights who had passed through or around the garden:

- 2 cats: orange and dark striped tabbies
- Mom’s group and kids, babies calling and crying, adults talking, harmonica
- Birds calling
- Trucks going by
- Airplane

I had forgotten that this garden has vicious mosquitoes, and wore sandals and cropped pants instead of regular pants, socks, and sneakers. Throughout the interview I scratched at various mosquito bites.

Haja came back in a few minutes

- currently about 600-650 community gardens in existence
- there were 700 before Guilani’s administration
- every garden is unique, some more **ornamental**, Willie [Morgan], he plants vegetables
- trying to hold on, to make sure gardens are preserved
- Attorney general had a restraining order against Guilani administration, against destroying gardens, Elliott Spitzer at the time
- Civil action against the city
- As a result, many gardens like ours, Parks and Rec, HPD, schools
  - I add Land Trust, he corrects me: Trust for Public Land
- also New York Restoration Project
  - web search reveals that this is an organization founded by Bette Midler, interested in the "conservancy of forgotten places," particularly in New York City's underserved communities: <http://www.nyrp.org/about/>

[Teachable Moments]

- Bronx Crotona Park, water filtration system build from the park
- Also Yankee Stadium carved out of parkland
- “if they can take parkland like that they can take community gardens”

Haja is currently on the legislation committee on the NYCCGC

- they’ve had meetings up in Albany with the governor’s office, and the AG’s office
- they found out about the New York State Office of Community Gardens, which was part of the Department of Agriculture and Markets
- trying to get that office up and running
- right now city office [only—Green Thumb]
- Green Thumb doesn’t do a lot of **advocating**
- We need agencies that can advocate, protect us, can reinforce this agreement with the city
- Agreement is over in 2010
- Got some response from the state
  
- advisory committee to oversee, so gardens have direct input into Green Thumb
  - o pass a lot of things down from the top [don’t have seat at the table]
  - o something about Grow Together?
  - o College in Bronx?
  - o Some activities include Harvest Fest, “but we don’t really have meetings”
  
- The Coalition did a forum about gardens in Brooklyn
  - o How to go about saving the gardens
  - o Next steps
  
- I called gardeners “**guardians**” as well, serving and protecting our community
  
- it was a lot of stuff involved [in organizing gardens]
  - o if you put a dollar value for all the efforts
    - preserving their neighborhoods
    - lessening the need for policing
      - become the eyes and ears for the community
  - o we become part of the fabric of the city
  
- Mayor now thinking about planting a million new trees
  - o “greener Gotham”
  - o In essence we’re all on the same page
- we sorely need trees, to balance all this concrete and asphalt
  
- Just Food
- Cornell Cooperative Extension
- Sustainable communities
- **Food justice**, green movement

- I feel we should be involved in the level of city government, for future development and planning of the city of NY
- National movement as well
  - o American CG association: <http://www.communitygarden.org/>
  - o Big event in Boston about a month ago
  - o Forums in NYC
- forums internationally
- might seem like a little community grassroots movement but it's wide [why this move? To assert power?]
- Bernadette Cozart, the "greening of Harlem"
  - o "loose cannon" as far as they are concerned [they?]
  - o Urban apothecary in the village, something like Meadow Suite
    - Developed a Harlem Harvest product line, his wife and the Doers made jams, relishes, "radical squash," to sell at this store
- a lot of things come from the soil
- we got a lot of ideas
- Bernadette wanted a 5 block radius for a little village of artists, craftspeople, ironworkers, vineyards, little farm
  - o Like the Pennsylvania Dutch
  - o Could be a tourist attraction, people coming from different parts of the world [didn't happen?]
- Kitchen Table, my wife wants to offer the use of the first floor
- We hope to have something called the **Harmony Institute**
  - o Environment
  - o Community development
  - o Life enhancement
    - Help people to develop and grow
- Halloween part for the kids in the garden
- Visitors to their bed and breakfast
  - o Some people who come from Germany
    - Tour book publishers, writers
  - o people from Clark University, Cornell
  - o Zimbabwe, "doing a whole thing on gardens"
    - I ask if I can get in touch with this guy
    - Haja tells me to call him tomorrow, around 12 or 1
- Gardens: New York Cares: they come every month in spring, summer, fall, and help clean up and maintain gardens
- Cat-catching programs, Yvette sets traps, neuter spay and release cats
  - o Some put up for adoption

- I ask about Raymond Figueroa, who Tom had mentioned
  - o Haja says Ray Figueroa used to be with TRUCE
  - o Part of the Harlem's Children Zone
  - o Raymond, he was the ? urban farmer, really gung ho
  - o Garden at 111<sup>th</sup> and St. Nicholas, Haddy Carthy garden, haven't been there in awhile
  - o I tell him Tom told me it's gone
  - o St. Thomas school, they wanted to build condos
  
- I mention the Coles and the Harlem Urban Gardeners
  - o Haja says, I can put you in touch with Aresh ??, who is involved with HUG
  - o Something about Mr. Cole
  - o Alex Brown, he was up at 153<sup>rd</sup>
  - o Lori Harris
  
- I ask about coalition meetings
  - o One coming up on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Monday, at 232 E. 11<sup>th</sup> St., 6pm
  - o I ask for cross streets, he thinks 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> aves
  - o I ask for suite or floor, he thinks and comes up with, "up steps, first bell, first floor"
  
- Black Panther Party, street academies, freedom schools
  - o He says that education was so bad in the city
  
- a lot of nationalists from the 60s are now educators
  - o I've just observed the effect it had on the kids [garden?]
  - o Cherry tree, [kids] like they were in the south
  - o Climbing the tree and getting cherries
  - o Being able to hold their own
  
- friend in Arizona, who does sculptures: the gate and one against the fence
  - o works in metal and stone
  - o get a big piece of stone, the kids got involved, "amazing" how their attention, 2-3 hrs, chipping at the stone
  - o [when he wasn't there] they would be looking for him, 'When is Steve coming back?'
  
- they took kids on Pete Seeger's sloop, called the Clearwater after the festival
  - o tours up and down the Hudson
  - o kids learned to pull up the sails, use the tiller
  
- Past Little Rangers are now young adults
  - o One woman who is 21, 22 is getting married and wants to use the garden for the reception
  - o She reminisces about the activities they did with pleasure

- every opportunity you have to put something in there [kids' minds]
- [when you don't] I think that's an affront
  
- Like Hillary Clinton said, it takes a village, old African proverb
- Most cultures, elders they guide the path of the youth
- My parents would be called blue collar
- [had professionals and craftspeople around him]
- We lost that
- Saw Oprah last night, with Bill Cosby saying some harsh truths about lack of parenting
- Many of us have dropped the ball
- Friend is a Brooklyn educator
- Council of Elders

I drop the tape recorder, we keep talking

Later I turn it back on

- I say that older generation like to say younger generation is apathetic
- Also talk about crack, heroin, how larger forces make it difficult to say "bad parenting"
- He mentions FBI, COINTELPRO, and how they were able to break apart the Black Panthers but not young people with guns
- With desegregation a lot of working people moved out to suburbs and outer boroughs, not the same as when he grew up
- I thank him and bring out consent forms
  - o He takes the time to look carefully at consent forms
- we move towards the young moms, the Kitchen Table Collective

3 young women with strollers, babies and toddlers

2 babies in strollers, 1 toddler with accompanying stroller, 1 small child

2 white women, 1 light-skinned black woman, all slim, all wearing jeans and shoes that look moderately priced, i.e. "changing Harlem"

Alex, white, white toddler

Tiffany, light-skinned black, 1 baby, one small child

??, white, nanny to a white baby

Moms were packing up to leave when Haja and I finished. Two babies strapped into strollers. I introduced myself and asked if I could attend their meetings. They confirmed that they do home-schooling, that I probably met Terry who was not there today. Alex started talking to Haja after she offered to give me her phone number. She was saying that they hoped he didn't mind that they tried to explain to their kids who he was. The nanny said something like, "Father of the garden." Tiffany gave me Alex's phone number

as Alex talked with Haja. Amongst the small talk were jokes that these mosquitoes were mutants that had survived the spraying for West Nile virus.

I told Tiffany that I had come at 10am last week. Tiffany said that Terry probably told me that, because they used to meet early. But their meetings have been getting later and later. Alex wanted to give me her phone number, and I told her Tiffany already gave it to me. Alex explained that they were looking for a space for the winter, that Haja was offering his first floor. She told Haja and me that TRUCE was offering them their basement, which was not as safe as the garden. The basement did not have a kitchen, but it had room to play with balls, which the children needed especially in the wintertime. Someone, either Tiffany or Alex explained that the garden was the only place they could let their kids run around, because in other spaces they had to tell them “you can’t go past here,” “that’s not safe,” etc.

Haja asked if anybody needed to use the bathroom. The nanny went. Her baby started crying. I asked if that was his mom that went, and someone answered that that was his nanny. Tiffany asked Alex if she should unstrap him Alex said no. They tried to distract him with books and songs. Alex brought one out of a bag hanging on her stroller. When those didn’t work, Alex instructed Tiffany to unstrap him. He stopped crying immediately.

The baby had snot hanging out of his nose, so Tiffany went to the shed to get a tissue. Her baby started crying, and Alex said she could take the baby Tiffany was holding. Alex also handed Tiffany’s baby a book. Tiffany called that she was getting a tissue, not realizing that her baby was crying. As she came out of the shed she noted that the baby wiped his nose on her shirt. She handed him off to Alex to attend to her baby.

Tiffany’s older child tried to take a book from his sister, which got her crying again. Alex and Tiffany scolded him and told him not to do that. Tiffany tried to offer him a different book and he swatted it out of her hand. Tiffany grabbed him and told him not to do that. He said he wanted the book his sister had. Tiffany and Alex told him he had to wait until she was finished. Alex added that he knows that his sister finishes books quickly and throws them on the ground, he should wait. He said he wanted another book. Tiffany told him to “use your words” to ask Alex. Alex told him that she doesn’t know that swatting the book from his mom’s hand means he wants another book. He asked Alex for a book and she grew animated and exclaimed in a high-pitched voice that she did. “To look at, not to keep,” reminded Tiffany. Alex got him another book, “to look at.”

The nanny’s baby started getting upset again, but the nanny came back at that moment, explaining that she had known he would cry and that she heard him starting to cry right as she left.

As we left the garden Alex announced that this was the baby and stroller parade.

[This conversation with Haja really transformed my ideas about community gardens. Instead of looking at community gardens, he pushed me to look at community building, with gardens as one way to connect with people and to have a semi-public site for events. I'd also love to do a life history with Haja, with all his organizing experience. I hope that he does introduce me to others, starting with Cindy.]

[Of the Kitchen Table Collective, I should not be surprised that a home-schooling group is mostly or at least half white women, and visually the "new Harlem," including black moms that would fit in very well in any neighborhood, including Teachers College—middle-class, deferential.]