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LINDA – Fieldnotes – Saturday, January 19, 2008

Subject: Meeting with Catherine

Location: Udon West restaurant, on St. Mark's Place (8th Street between 2nd and 3rd Aves)

Time: 2:20 – 4:07pm

[An overview of how the various garden groups fit together, from the perspective of the Trust for Public Land. TPL is a national organization, with New York as one project. Based on the website, <http://www.tpl.org/>, urban conservation is only a small part of their work.]

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I met Catherine at the NYC Community Gardens Coalition meeting on Thursday night. She said she was a community organizer with the Trust for Public Land. I asked for a meeting and she gave me her phone number. We set up a meeting for today.

I arrived at our meeting place, near the Starbucks at Union Square, 5 minutes early. I waited until 2pm to call Catherine, who was still in Williamsburg. She said she was "really, really late" and said it would take about 20 minutes to get there. I told her I would go into a store since it was cold outside, and to call me when she arrived.

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She called in about 15 minutes from our meeting place and I told her I'd be there in 5 minutes. When I arrived she was listening to a wiry, twitchy man talking animatedly. I wasn't sure if it was her because I thought her skin was darker toned than it was. She was wearing a fur-lined hat and a black coat. She is about 5'2", a little chubbier than me, with close-cropped dark curls. Later I also saw she was wearing a black fleece over an orange t-shirt and blue jeans. [I was wearing similar clothing, a thin black jacket over a green shirt and blue jeans.] The man she was speaking with was caramel colored, about 5'6", and insistent that what he told her she should "pass it on." As we walked away she said she would, pointing at me.

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She asked me where I wanted to go. I told her I didn't know the neighborhood too well. I asked her if she had eaten yet, and she said she hadn't, she was starving. She suggested going to 8th Street for udon. I told her that sounded great. As we walked south she asked me where I lived. I told her up by Columbia. She asked if I moved to New York, and I said only a year ago. I said that this was why when she asked me about which train I got off, I hesitated, since I don't know the best way to get around yet. She asked me if I was in the journalism school and I told her Teachers College.

I started talking about our project and something I said, perhaps the idea of education in Harlem and community gardens as part of that, got her talking. [This would be the pattern throughout our time together.] She said that she just came from a meeting looking to build relationships between schools and gardens, and said she would have invited me to it. It was a bunch of teachers in Brooklyn, brainstorming how they were going to do this. She said that teachers can come up with the curriculum, something that they [TPL?] cannot. This takes a lot of work, from young, idealistic teachers. I started talking about

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community and the gardens.] She says there are 800 gardens across the boroughs. They fall under “different hats,” with five main categories:

1. Green Thumb, which is a federally funded program. This is why they have the freedom to do what they do. A lot of people think they are part of the parks department, and I say I did too. She tells me, in a confiding tone, wrinkling her nose and leaning toward me, “the parks department doesn’t really like them.”
2. Trust for Public Land has 70 gardens
3. New York Restoration, which is Bette Midler’s organization
4. NYCHA, the Housing Authority
5. Department of Transportation, like traffic triangles. I give her a confused look and she tells me that some of these traffic triangles became community gardens.

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There are also some private land trusts. I say that maybe that’s one of the gardens I visited, that is owned through a land trust but wasn’t on their list. She asks if it’s (something like) R.J. Land Trust and I say I don’t know. I’m not sure if they mentioned the name and I didn’t remember it, or if they did not mention it at all.

She tells me that each of these organizations have different ways of servicing the gardens. Green Thumb has extensive resources, they can offer their services to everybody. TPL gives resources to some gardens, and they do “extensive work on functional gardens.” For example, they have installed water systems in some gardens, that cost \$20,000. They also put in wrought-iron fences around some gardens, which can cost \$12-20,000. She says that they are “not a resource organization,” although some people think of them that way, they are a “land acquisition organization.”

She says, “but these are grassroots organizations.” The members are “not educated,” they can be “transient.”

I ask about the issue of “borough control” mentioned by Erica. She says that Bronx and Brooklyn went ahead and assumed that they would be left out if lumped in with Manhattan. Queens only has 5 gardens so they got “lumped in” with Brooklyn.

The properties are owned by TPL, and managed by 3 boards. They are represented by gardeners from around the borough. I say, this is what you were talking about in the meeting. She says that there’s a sustainability problem, because there are 3 offices, 3 EDs [for each of these boroughs]. Instead there could be one program with 3 people. They could have 1 ED, 1 person doing finances, so there could be different skills. “They don’t know how to run a nonprofit.” I say it depends on the ED, she repeats, it depends on the ED, it depends on the board, it depends on how goal-oriented they are.

She says, “Brooklyn is a mess.” Next she says it’s because they have the most talent, activists and community people. She says there’s a lot of black and Latino people who care about health (and other issues I can’t remember). The “young white activists” are focused on greening. They spend a lot of time talking about definitions. They have an “intense communication problem.”

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Manhattan doesn't have so much of a "racial divide," with white activists vs. black and brown community people. Not so much in Harlem, because they "know of each other," even if they don't know each other. There's "more solidity of purpose" in Manhattan. They have parties and holiday celebrations. Community gardens are one of the "few outlets" people have. I interrupt her to ask, for gathering, and she continues, that are "safe." She talks about retired or older people who live in the projects, can't or don't want to move, don't have a lot of community, don't have a lot of places to go. They wake up and go to the garden, and spend the whole day there. She says that the Manhattan people are not so political. Manhattan people are "renters," "focused on food," and Brooklyn people are "owners," maybe more concerned about increasing their property values and quality of life. She tells me this is just her opinion. She wonders if they are different social classes, and I say owning property. She talks about people in Brooklyn as worried about housing, about people getting pushed out. There's a different level of politicization. [?? Sense of resignation in Harlem? Or because a lot of people she talks to are in projects, they don't feel as threatened?]

I ask, so the goal is to politicize people in Manhattan? She says yes. She says Manhattan is stuck on trying to create self-sustaining groups. Brooklyn has internal conflict, but they have a lot of "energy" and the ideas come from them. In Manhattan, the ED directs the group. She calls them up and tells them, this is what we need to do. Manhattan needs programming and organization. Brooklyn has organizational issues. They [who unclear] need to be more accountable to funders, able to run themselves well [this is the Manhattan group]. Manhattan doesn't have the "energy" to be "self-sustaining." The "management of gardens" is not their thing; "our paradigm" is to acquire land.

She explains about New York restoration, "they have a whole cadre of people who go out and maintain" their gardens. The idea is that "poor people deserve nice spaces too." Their approach is "legitimate," but different. In contrast, TPL asks people what they want.

NYCCGC, in contrast, "their focus has been legislature, and having a solid community garden voice, but—" At the same time I ask what is a community garden voice. She tells me that they have some common concerns, and it helps to speak with a unified voice. TPL gardens get tickets, e.g. for weeds that are too high. Green Thumb gardens don't get ticketed, because they straddle Parks. TPL wants to "shift the responsibility" to the gardeners.

So it's "divisive," between the various garden factions. She tells me she feels that at the meeting Erica got put in a position to defend herself, and ended up saying our garden doesn't care about your gardens. We talk a bit about how hostile and confrontational the NYCCGC people seemed with the Land Trust people. I say that's not the way to get people to help you out. She says they [NYCCGC] want us [TPL] to help them out [on their terms]. I say, they want your full support. "They're never gonna get it," she tells me.

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She talks again about "building the organization." The land trust is working with 6 other gardens, and it turns out the Linnette C. Williamson garden is one of them. She talks

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about the tension between having scarce resources for already-affiliated gardens, and the benefits of adding more gardens to increase numbers.

She talks about greening groups and how they are very focused, they have specific agendas.

People only what is happening on their block and they have a lot of misinformation. And they pass on that misinformation, I say. She talks about misinformation about Green Thumb. Green Thumb has all these resources they give out, for free, she tells me, eyes wide, hands open. I say, like soil, and plants, and workshops. She says they give out lumber so you can build beds. But people think, "who are these white people" coming into the neighborhood? They think they're a "force from the outside." Green Thumb has some guidelines, such as being open 10 hours a week, and putting up a sign. [Her tone is that these requirements are no big deal.] She says something to the effect that gardens need these guidelines to gain "legitimacy." Gardens need to be accountable. [Gardeners as "ungrateful" for GT's help, and that some of this help is vital to survival.]

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Green Guerillas, on the other hand, people "fall down and worship them." They've accomplished some good things. At first they were also seen as "white activists." Gardening groups asked the GGs to "focus on one area." So they went to Bed-Stuy and have been working with them. They're also considering working in West Harlem. Green Guerillas says to people, "We'll get in the trenches and do what you want to do." I say, so they're not coming in and saying, here's what we want to do. She tells me, "They have relationships. They have *human* relationships. They are *not* an organization."

I ask her how she fits in to the picture. The first year with TPL, Catherine, who is "new," focused on six gardens. She tells me about El Puente, a Hispanic organization that has been around for 35 years. I tell her I've heard of it. She tells me their mission is to work with youth in Bed-Stuy and Williamsburg. They have a school for social justice, and I tell her that's what I've heard of, as she continues, environmental education. They've been around along time, she says. They have an "incredible commitment to the community." There's a garden near Bushwick. The leader [of El Puente] reached out to be members [of the garden]. One of the things she is working on is that the gardeners want a meeting space. The gardens develop organically, when they get a tree they put it in, there's a gazebo there. El Puente wants a space too. I say, like a community center.

She tells me that she works with groups to develop their mission, to get more members, to develop bylaws, "creating a pathway to be a group." She talks about gardens in East and West Harlem. One needs members, programming, and something I can't rean in my notes [designation?]. One of these gardens just got approved for a path. So she works with 2 gardens in each borough. Others call in, with conflict resolution problems. She recalls 2 gardens that called in for her help.

She went to the ED, asked for gardens that were "struggling." She spent a lot of time figuring out the greening organizations, what they do. In my notes I have, Programming enhances gardens. She started talking about the "levels" TPL wants to get gardens to:

1. "all our gardens to be functioning." That is, "meeting regularly, having bylaws, and having a structure that works for the group."
2. the next level is developing the garden, "programmatic," "serving the community," "blurring that line between community and the garden."

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I say, so the gardens want you to help them develop programming before they are functioning. She tells me, "It all happens at the same time." She says, "This last year is finding out who has follow-through" and who can work with us. Again she mentions "accountability" and forming "solid groups."

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She talks again about schools and say gardens have very "informal" relationships with schools. They are "organic relationships." She talks about a Brooklyn garden. They were holding an event, and needed restrooms. There's a Catholic school across the street. So she went to the priest and asked. He said, we don't use that garden, we don't go there. We don't have a relationship. She said to me, well here's the chance. She reported that she said to him, "I'm a community organizer, I can make things happen." He gave her the name of somebody in the school. She tells me she contacted that person 5 times, through email and phone, and never heard back. On the other hand when you ask the seniors who work at the garden, they say, oh yeah, a school came by the other day. Which school? Oh no, not this school [not the Catholic school], the one down the road. In one case a parent walked by during a garden clean-up and told the school. Some teachers took their kids there. She wants to figure out "how to legitimize" these relationships. [bureaucratization, "evidence" of effectiveness]

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She says, "Everybody's so focused on giving people tools," but where are the tools for community organizing? Do people think they're just going to be able to [be a group]? In one case where people were not working well together, she organized a potluck. Everybody brought food from their culture. In another case, a garden in West Harlem had ginkgo trees. People from the Asian community came to harvest the seeds. So why not have a cross-cultural exchange? The Asians gather the seeds for medicinal purposes. She did a workshop with the community gardeners, bringing the seeds and talking about how they could use the nuts. She wanted the workshop to happen "between the communities," expressing with frustration that it didn't. I asked if she wanted the gardeners to organize something. She said "one of the groups" should have done it. [Maybe one of the many greening groups that try to help?]

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I asked her if she had worked with the Five Star garden, Classy Parker's garden. She said no, the garden was under construction. I was quite surprised and said I had been there in August. She asked, late August? The implication was that the construction began after I was there. She said that they got a grant to redo the garden. Apparently the wood in the beds was rotting and they redesigned the garden while they were at it.

[Throughout our lunch I took notes, after asking her if it was ok. Once in a while she glanced at what I was writing. At times, when she was discussing sensitive material, I stopped taking notes. Several times, when discussing divisiveness or the class explanation for differences between Brooklyn and Manhattan, she said, "this is just between you and me." At that point I said to her that everything was confidential, and

that my focus was on Harlem. At several points I also told her, partly to allow her to eat, that what she was saying reflected some of my own observations with the Harlem groups, e.g. the white activist vs. community people communication problems.]

As we finish up our lunch we get to talking about teaching again. I ask her where she taught, and she said Queens. She talked about asking her kids how to say something in Spanish, and she'd get lots of different versions between Ecuadorian, Columbian, and Puerto Rican students. We talk a bit about the incredible diversity within "Spanish." I ask her if she speaks Spanish, and she says she studied Latin, but she can get by, talk to parents.

At her school, teachers were mostly Italian and Greek, second generation, from Long Island and some other area of Queens, waiting for their transfers out to Long Island. So they didn't have that investment in the community. She thinks that the first generation would be more understanding of the kids learning English, it'd take them awhile to answer a question like, "How are you?" She talks about how some parents trust that the schools will take care of their children's education, and how that is culturally different.

She is an immigrant as well, from the Caribbean. I ask her how old she was when she came, and she said 13. [or maybe 12?] I open my eyes wide, and say she's right between. [I can't remember the term they use for Koreans, 1.5 generation.] I tell her I have a friend who came when she was 12. She says people are surprised that she has no accent. She says she often gets, "You speak English so well!"

She says that it was not until college that she got to see American families, she went home with people and saw, "Oh, so that's how you talk to your parents!" I ask her how come she didn't see that in high school, and she explains that she went to a predominantly Jewish school. So the school was heavily influenced by Jewish tradition. She said, I guess I learned about upper class Jews, which she contrasted against mainstream Americans. She is from an upper middle class urban family, or as urban as you get in Trinidad.

She asks me about my background and I tell her my parents are from Taiwan and I was born here, and it's really different from my husband who came when he was three and his parents don't speak English, don't read and write English. She says it's totally different, Trinidadians who were born here [in the US] and her, they think totally differently.

I put down a ten dollar bill for the check. She puts down a twenty and takes my ten. The total, without tip, is \$15.44. She asks if I need change, if that's ok. I say yes. We make out way outside, slowly, after splitting the check and fetching our coats. The restaurant people say goodbye energetically. [Maybe happy that we're finally leaving? The place has been mostly empty for most of our conversation but is starting to fill up.] She watches as I examine, then take, the receipt for our check.

Outside I thank her and she says if I want to talk more to call her. I tell her that we're not focusing so much on community gardens anymore and want to move into families, and

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she says, if I need contacts with families. She says she's going to start up with the Harlem gardeners, and corrects my misperception that she doesn't have gardens in central Harlem. [Why am I not accepting her help?] I tell her I'll call her in a few months when the garden stuff starts up again. Maybe I'll have contacts with families by then. [Why am I being combative?] We say goodbye and she heads east. I check the time, and it's just past 4pm.

[I didn't ask her about her next goals.]