

Tending Nature's Classroom  
A Qualitative Examination of Motivations and Values  
of Educational Place-Makers at Troy Gardens

by

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The geography and natural history of childhood begins in family, at home, whether that home is in a remote place or in a city. Many naturalists start their journeys on ditchbanks, in empty lots—in any open space just beyond the backyard fence.

—Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood*

i'm in love with the garden that is down the street and the earth is a warm thing under my feet

—Frazey Ford, *Chinatown*

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## Chapter One

### Introduction: Educational Place-makers in the Urban Garden

We respond to both garden forms and processes—the noun and the verb. We have an affinity for places and processes.

—Kenneth Helphand, *The Meaning of Gardens*

Over a decade ago, veteran environmental psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan proclaimed that “[i]n numerous cities, and especially in inner-city areas, greenery is now part of the neighborhood. The story of community open spaces and community gardens is being told across the country. Unlike so many other environmental topics, this one is frequently a success story. Newspapers often carry articles of local, grass-roots projects that yield tomatoes and neighborhood transformations in areas where many had feared to tread.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout the end of the twentieth century, the spread of urban community gardens described by the Kaplans grew stronger, and “[b]y the turn of the century, nearly every city in the country had some form of a community gardens program....”<sup>2</sup> In major metropolitan cities like New York, Boston, and Los Angeles—as well as smaller cities across the country—community gardens serve as important places for people to gather, grow food, and connect with land.<sup>3</sup>

Another development has been the growth of youth garden education programs in community gardens, schoolyards, and other public urban places.<sup>4</sup> In her children’s book, *Greening the City Streets: The Story of Community Gardens*, Barbara Huff emphasizes

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan, *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 164-65.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gottlieb, *Environmentalism Unbound: Exploring New Pathways for Change* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 247.

<sup>3</sup> Based on a 1996 national survey, the American Community Gardening Association reported a total of **6,020** urban community gardens nationwide. See American Community Gardening Association, *National Community Gardening Survey: 1996* (Philadelphia: American Community Gardening Association, June 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Some examples include *The Food Project* in Boston, *Food From the ‘Hood* in Los Angeles, *Growing Power* in Milwaukee, *The Edible Schoolyard* in Berkeley, and *Friends of Troy Gardens* in Madison.

the emergence of youth involved in urban gardens: “All across the United States, community gardens are changing the way of life for city people. And wherever community gardens grow, across the country or around the block, young people are a vital part of their success.”<sup>5</sup> A variety of programs in different American cities have created outdoor garden classrooms for youth to learn about nature through such activities as growing vegetables, making compost, and raising chickens.

Due to the high value of open land in cities, however, places for outdoor youth education depend on committed advocacy efforts by adults. Adults also play central roles as the designers, managers, and learning coordinators of these outdoor educational environments. These types of jobs are often demanding and usually offer limited monetary compensation. Taking these factors into account, what are the reasons that adults commit land, time, money, and energy to the construction and maintenance of these valuable learning places for young people? This is an important question because without adults who are willing to invest resources toward youth education on the land, these places and programs for youth would not exist.

Beyond the political, economic, and physical power that adults have at their disposal for constructing and maintaining these educational places for children, they play a crucial role as teachers and companions to youth. Prominent thinkers representing such fields as geography and ecology have noted the significant roles that adults play in facilitating connections between young people and the natural world. For example, Rachel Carson famously wrote: “If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder ...

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara A. Huff, *Greening the City Streets: The Story of Community Gardens* (New York: Clarion Books, 1990), 37.

he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.”<sup>6</sup> Writing about the importance of interpreting “the natural environment” for youth, Yi-Fu Tuan asserts that “[c]hildren have to be taught by adult human beings. They show a natural curiosity about the world, but this curiosity is easily repressed when adults fail to nurture it.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite the critical role adults play in facilitating nature education for youth, little research has been done to determine what motivates adults to support this type of education, and what types of lessons they most hope youth will take away from their time on the land. Recognizing that adults are key actors in the procurement and development of places for urban outdoor education, my study examines the motives and values of adults who have played roles in the creation and maintenance of educational gardens for youth. By collecting data from interviews, I worked to achieve an understanding of the significant reasons why adults support such outdoor learning environments and what they hope young people will gain through their participation in education programs at these places. I expect that the study will shed light on this vital process of place-making in a way that is useful to people trying to develop outdoor garden classrooms in urban communities around the world, as well as to researchers who study such places.

### *Making Place*

Imagine a group of adults and children who are turning an open field into an educational garden. Through discussions, the group decides what elements the garden

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<sup>6</sup> Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 45.

<sup>7</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “Children and the Natural Environment,” in Irwin Altman and Joachim F. Wohlwill (eds.), *Children and the Environment* (New York: Plenum Press, 1978), 25.

should include, such as a fence to keep deer and rabbits out, a compost pile for decaying vegetable parts, a flower garden to attract pollinators and to add beauty to the garden, and so forth. The group then begins digging up the sod and importing materials like sticks and metal fences to create the place they have envisioned. By committing mental and physical labor, the group eventually turns an empty, open field into a vibrant, textured garden—a place full of meaning and life.

Geographer M.H. Matthews explains that childhood environments “vary in their scope, complexity and significance.” He claims that these environments “consist not only of *spatial and design attributes*, like objects, length, size, shape, distance and scale, but also of *meanings...*”<sup>8</sup> Robert Sack describes humans as “place-makers who transform the earth.” He explains that “[t]his is our geographic condition, and understanding it sheds light on who we are as moral agents.”<sup>9</sup> Sack notes that our motivation for making place “is that we have conceptions of what we think the world ought to be.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is through both physical and symbolic transformations of space, that place is formed. Furthermore, physical and symbolic transformations of space are guided by our moral opinions about what we believe our environment *ought* to look like. In the case of an educational garden, adults *make place* guided by their own moral opinions about what they feel children should gain from such an educational experience. This study conceives of the adult narrators as *place-makers*, who help to create and maintain educational garden environments—in material and symbolic ways—based on their moral opinions about what these places “ought to be” for youth.

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<sup>8</sup> M.H. Matthews, *Making Sense of Place: Children's Understanding of Large-Scale Environments* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Sack, *A Geographical Guide to the Real and the Good* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 269.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

## Research Site

Troy Gardens is a community-based, urban land project consisting of a five-acre organic farm, a restored tallgrass prairie, woodland corridors, an educational children's garden, and over 300 community garden plots (see Figure 1). At present, there are also plans to construct a co-housing development complex on a five-acre lot located at the southeast corner of the Troy Gardens property. Although Troy Gardens has not always been such an intense locus of activity, it does have a history as a community resource.<sup>11</sup>

For more than twenty years, Troy Gardens has been utilized as a place for community gardening, dog-walking, and bird-watching. In the fall of 1995, however, the status of the community garden plots and other open areas came into jeopardy when the State of Wisconsin put the land on a soon-to-be-sold surplus land list, attracting the attention of housing developers and community residents alike. Facing the potential of losing the open land, a coalition—composed of a local neighborhood governmental organization, concerned neighbors, community gardeners, and a number of interested nonprofit organizations and citizens—formed to defend and secure the open land. In the end, the coalition was successful, and the land was purchased from the State under an arrangement that ensured that the Troy Gardens land would be protected in perpetuity.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Historical information about Troy Gardens is based on information from Marcia Caton Campbell and Danielle A. Salus, "Community and Conservation Land Trusts as Unlikely Partners? The Case of Troy Gardens, Madison, Wisconsin," *Land Use Policy* 20 (2003), 169-180; the video-documentary by Dorrie Brooks, *Ours To Decide* (Shebang Media, 1999); interviews with Troy Gardens participants; official Friends of Troy Gardens literature; and personal observations.

<sup>12</sup> Marcia Caton Campbell and Danielle A. Salus, "Community and Conservation Land Trusts as Unlikely Partners? The Case of Troy Gardens, Madison, Wisconsin," *Land Use Policy* 20 (2003) 171-73. Caton Campbell and Salus note that the 31-acre Troy Gardens site was purchased on December 28, 2001. The site included the original 15-acre parcel which was designated as surplus land by the State in 1995, as well as an adjacent 16-acre parcel placed on the surplus land list in 1996. Caton Campbell and Salus report that when the additional 16-acre parcel was placed on the surplus list, the Troy Gardens Coalition was joined by "[r]epresentatives from the University of Wisconsin-Madison" as well.

After the land was successfully secured, a number of special interest committees were formed to facilitate different projects at Troy Gardens.<sup>13</sup> The Youth Committee was formed in 2001 to develop and facilitate educational opportunities for neighboring youth. The Committee included a mix of garden educators, teachers, University of Wisconsin employees, and other youth advocates. One of the first tasks of the newly formed Youth Committee was to develop a program that would introduce neighborhood youth to the Troy land.<sup>14</sup>

The first youth program was implemented in a somewhat haphazard manner during the summer of 2001. One of the Committee members had access to a modest amount of funding, which was used to hire a part-time youth gardening coordinator. At the beginning of the 2001 growing season, Community Action Coalition—a partner organization and long-time coordinator of community gardens at Troy—donated ten, 20 by 20 foot garden plots to the youth program. A large supply of plant seedlings was donated by a horticultural program at a nearby correctional institution. The youth gardening coordinator established relationships with several neighboring community centers, and the new educational program began. Although the first season was fairly informal, it laid the groundwork for future youth education programs at Troy Gardens.

By the third season, the Youth Committee had developed a more formalized hiring process, and a full-time youth gardening coordinator was brought on board. By that point, the relationship between the Friends of Troy Gardens (FTG) staff and the

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<sup>13</sup> Once the Friends of Troy Gardens (FTG) incorporated to oversee the land and associated activities, these early committees worked under the auspices of FTG.

<sup>14</sup> As a founding (and still active) member of the Youth Committee, I developed this historical account of Troy youth educational programs based on my memories. This account was reviewed and verified by Anthony Hiller, who is also a founding member of the Youth Committee.

community centers was well-established, and the youth garden program had become a more prominent and integral component of the overall Troy Gardens project. In 2004, the youth garden officially moved from the borrowed space in the community gardens to a permanent site, bordering the southeastern corner of the community gardens. The youth program (called the Kids' Gardening Program) facilitates regular educational programming for more than 175 elementary and middle school-aged students from neighborhood community centers and schools. During after-school hours (in the spring and fall) and an eight-week summer program, children take part in a variety of activities such as tending their own garden plots, preparing foods from the garden, hands-on learning with chickens and insects, and harvesting mulberries.

In addition to the Kids' Gardening Program, Troy Gardens is also home to an agricultural and ecological restoration training program for high school-aged youth. The program, called Farm and Field Youth Training, recruits teenagers (primarily from the northside of Madison) to participate in a summer-long internship at Troy Gardens. The training program has operated for four growing seasons; and it offers young people opportunities to work on different components of the Troy Gardens project including the CSA farm and restoration of the natural areas.<sup>15</sup>

During the short existence of the Kids' Gardening Program and the Farm and Field Youth Training program, a variety of adults have helped bolster these nascent programs. Adults have played an essential role in the creation of both learning places and programs for young people at Troy. Adults have also been important facilitators of these learning programs. Given their extended involvement in creating places and

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<sup>15</sup> The Farm and Field program, originally called *Teaching Land*, began during the 2002 growing season.

programs for youth at Troy Gardens, these educational *place-makers* (primarily referred to as narrators throughout the thesis) provide valuable perspectives for this study.

# Troy Gardens



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN MILLER

**Figure 1** An illustration representing current and future land uses at Troy Gardens.

Source: Friends of Troy Gardens

## **Chapter Two**

### **Methodology**

This chapter serves as a review of the research design and methods used for this study. As a novice researcher, I have especially appreciated studies where authors make a concerted effort to be explicit and reflective about their methods and practices. In addition to providing readers with an important vantage point from which to interpret finished research, reflective analyses of research methods can help researchers to evaluate, and improve upon, their own work. Thus, an important purpose of this review is to provide greater “transparency and clarity” regarding my methodological design and research implementation.<sup>16</sup> It is my hope that this reflection on methodology will be useful to other researchers dealing with similar issues and situations.

#### **Positionality**

Researcher positionality is an important methodological issue which has been raised by a number of geographers engaged in qualitative research. In the context of this study, positionality refers to my relationship to the Troy Gardens project, and to its educational place-makers. My relationship to this project and community is one of the most significant methodological issues I have faced. My ties to Troy Gardens preceded this research study, and therefore a necessary component of this research process has been to examine, and think reflexively about, my relationship to the Troy project. In pursuit of “transparency,” it is also important to briefly discuss the nature of my pre-existing relationship with Troy Gardens.

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<sup>16</sup> Jamie Peck, “Fuzzy Old World: A Response to Markusen,” *Regional Studies* 37 (nos. 6&7 August/October 2003), 737.

I grew up in Madison, and had experience working as a naturalist and garden educator at several urban natural areas within the City. Through my work with different educational programs in Madison, I became interested in researching certain aspects of these programs. Thus, I entered graduate school intent to conduct in-depth research in my own community. In many ways, I began this research process from the position of a practitioner looking to learn more about an area that I was deeply involved in and committed to—educational programs located within urban open places.

In addition to exploring my research interests regarding urban natural areas in Madison, I hoped to capitalize on various advantages of conducting “proximity research.” As Jamie Peck points out, research close to home “can be seen as one of the means of achieving case-study immersion and protracted engagement with subjects and issues, while also drawing on local or contextual knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> One of the central reasons that I chose to do research on Troy Gardens was my extended engagement with the project. My ties to the youth education program at Troy Gardens are so intimate, in fact, that I have served as a research subject for another study on youth education at Troy Gardens.<sup>18</sup>

I first became involved with the Troy Gardens project in the fall of 2000. I had returned to Madison after working as a naturalist and garden educator in California and Colorado, and I was eager to get involved in some land stewardship and education projects in Madison. Troy was an exciting project, and it attracted a group of planners from a variety of backgrounds including farmers, community gardeners, ecological

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 737.

<sup>18</sup> I was interviewed as part of a research project being conducted by Samuel Dennis, a Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

restorationists, urban and regional planners, and naturalists. In 2001, I helped to establish the Youth Committee, and have continued my involvement with the Committee through the present day. In addition to my work on the Youth Committee, I also served on the Friends of Troy Gardens (FTG) Board for three years, and was employed in the past by FTG to implement a variety of short-term youth education programs.

My knowledge of the Troy Gardens project and of the youth garden education programs has aided my research in several important ways. For example, my prior knowledge helped me to identify and access key actors, ask informed questions during interviews, and triangulate certain data from interviews. Regarding triangulation, my experience with Troy Gardens helped me to be “well-informed,” which gave me “an independent basis from which to assess the accuracy and validity of at least some of the information offered.”<sup>19</sup>

My close connections to the Troy project also created two significant challenges. Although my background as a garden educator helped me comprehend and interpret narrators’ comments more effectively, I had to be very careful that I was not projecting my own values on the voices of the narrators. This challenge required me to carefully interrogate my analyses and claims about the narrators’ beliefs, hopes, motivations, and so forth. Secondly, I was challenged as a researcher by my moral commitments to educational programs at Troy Gardens. In response, I worked to separate these commitments from my analytic research project, and tried to be aware of any subconscious biases I had towards certain results. The acknowledgement of these

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<sup>19</sup> Erica Schoenberger, “The Corporate Interview as a Research Method in Economic Geography,” *Professional Geographer* 43 (no. 2, 1991), 186.

challenges required me to develop a reflexive approach to this study, and helped me grow as a researcher.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative methodologies are employed “to understand lived experience and to reflect on and interpret the understandings and shared meanings of people’s everyday social worlds and realities.”<sup>20</sup> For this reason, an in-depth, qualitative methodological approach was chosen for this study of adult place-makers’ motives, values, perspectives, reflections, and memories. The primary methodological component of this study was open-ended, in-depth interviews with selected adult members of the Troy Gardens project who have engaged in educational place-making. By interviewing these participants, I gained an understanding of two main areas: 1) what motivates adults to support youth educational programs at Troy Gardens; and 2) what adults most hope youth will gain (or have gained) from these programs and their time on the land.

### ***Narrator Identification and Recruitment***

A total of ten adults associated with Troy Gardens’ youth programs participated in this study. I was interested in gathering the perspectives of adults who have engaged with youth education at Troy Gardens in different ways. Two of the narrators, Megan Cain and Fawn Houck, have official FTG staff positions working with youth at Troy. A third narrator, Sharon Lezberg, is the former and first executive director of FTG. Sharon was a strong supporter of youth education at Troy during her tenure. A fourth narrator, Claire Strader, is the farmer for the FTG “Community Supported Agriculture” Farm. As part of

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<sup>20</sup> Melanie Limb and Claire Dwyer (eds.), *Qualitative Methodologies for Geographers* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2001), 6.

her position, Claire supervises and educates high school-aged farm interns. A fifth narrator, Janelle Johnson, is a volunteer member of the FTG Youth Committee, and represents the Youth Committee on the FTG Board of Directors. A sixth narrator, Anthony Hiller, is a former member of the FTG Youth Committee, as well as the principal architect of *Teaching Land*, a pilot program which preceded the Farm and Field youth program. A seventh narrator, Michael Swerdloff, is a long-time volunteer for the Kids' Gardening Program at Troy. An eighth narrator, Jessica Barman, worked this past growing season as a UW-Madison intern for the Kids' Gardening Program. Two narrators, Bill Harford and Pat Steele, are youth program coordinators at neighboring community centers that have participated in education programs at Troy for several years.

After receiving IRB approval for the study, I contacted narrators by phone and email, and asked if they wished to participate in an interview. I received an overwhelmingly positive reception to my requests for interviews. I speculate that there were two main reasons for the high participation rate of narrators. First, although I was asking narrators to share some personal information, the subject of the interviews was not overly personal or sensitive. Secondly, as someone who has been involved with the Troy project for a number of years, I had prior relationships with most of the participants, and was able to ask them directly if they wished to participate. My prior relationships with these narrators contributed to a good level of trust between us, which also helped me recruit them for interviews.

### ***Data collection***

A methodological appeal of qualitative interviews is that “they allow a wide range of experiences to be documented, voices to be heard, representations to be made and interpretations to be extracted.”<sup>21</sup> This study relied primarily on data collected from in-depth interviews. Narrators were asked to participate in approximately 45 minute-long, audio-taped interviews, although the actual length of each interview varied somewhat. The interviews were then transcribed, yielding approximately 70,000 words.

Based on the type of information that this study wished to collect, I utilized a semi-structured interview format with a mix of open-ended, specific, and clarifying questions. Oral historian Donald Ritchie notes that open-ended questions “allow interviewees to volunteer their own accounts, to speculate on matters, and to have enough time to include all of the material they think relevant to the subject.” He further explains that more specific questions are used “to elicit factual information, often in response to something the interviewee has mentioned while answering an open-ended question.”<sup>22</sup> This mixture of open-ended and specific questioning methods allowed participants to fully share their perspectives, and also allowed me to collect specific information when needed. The questions dealt with several broad areas including: factors that led to narrators’ support of, and involvement with, youth programs at Troy; the aspects of Troy Gardens and its educational programs that narrators viewed as most important; and why narrators viewed the aspects they identified as important.

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Smith, “Doing Qualitative Research: From Interpretation to Action,” in Melanie Limb and Claire Dwyer (eds.), *Qualitative Methodologies for Geographers* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2001), 29.

<sup>22</sup> Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 92.

### ***Notes on Fieldwork***

Acting on the good advice of more experienced researchers, I chose to conduct as many interviews as possible at Troy Gardens. Because narrators were asked questions about their perspectives of—and relationship to—Troy Gardens’ youth programs, it was helpful to conduct the interviews “on site.” Overall this was a good decision for the research project, although there were some minor problems associated with conducting research outside at Troy. Basically, outdoor interviews in this uncontrolled, public open area were easily susceptible to disruptions from animals, other gardeners, and weather conditions. I did figure out ways to negotiate some of the environmental issues. For example, after some early interviews where high winds affected the quality of sound recordings (usually as the narrator was making some essential or profound statement), I found it helpful to check wind speed forecasts prior to setting up interviews.

Researchers have debated how much preparation is necessary prior to entering the field. For my research, I found that early interviews helped me immensely in further refining my research design and questions. It is a careful balance, because one does not want to engage in “empty-headed ‘fishing expeditions’,” yet waiting to enter the field until the research design is completely firmed up can have its limitations as well. I found that it was important to “develop research procedures which do not inhibit learning-by-doing.”<sup>23</sup>

### ***Data Interpretation and Presentation***

Specific analytical techniques employed in data interpretation for this study were *open coding* and *axial coding*. Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin define *open coding* as:

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1992), 245.

“The process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data.”<sup>24</sup> *Axial coding* is defined as: “A set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories.”<sup>25</sup> After the interviews were transcribed, they were analyzed in search of predominant, or *emergent*, themes. Once major themes were identified, the transcribed interviews were color-coded by theme. Coded data from the different interviews was then organized around the emergent themes. This thesis focuses on the five major themes that emerged from the data. These themes provide the foundation for Chapter Three (Gateway Experiences) and the four main sections in Chapter Four (Nearby Urban Nature; Learning on the Land; Learning to Care, Learning to Steward; and Food Comes from the Ground). The main sections of Chapter Four all fit within the overarching theme of Connections.

Chapter Three and the four main sections of Chapter Four each include *Findings* and *Discussion* sections. The purpose of the Findings section is to provide readers with a summary of the results related to each theme. The interview findings contain minimal commentary so that readers can have some degree of access to the interview data; and also so readers may gain a sense of the different narrators’ methods of expression or *voices*.<sup>26</sup> The Discussion sections consider important aspects of the findings and place them in dialogue with related ideas, studies, and observations found within relevant literatures. The dialogues are intended to place the findings in greater intellectual and

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<sup>24</sup> Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 1990), 61.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>26</sup> Please note also that narrators are referred to by their first names in order to convey the conversational tone of the interviews.

socio-cultural contexts, as well as to generate realizations that carry relevance beyond the local implications of the data.

Even with a systematic approach, it was challenging to interpret all of the data accurately. As Smith incisively reminds us, “[w]e are accessing a representation (a vision, an image, an experience) of a text (the world of lived experience) through a text (the interview transcript) that is itself open to interpretation.”<sup>27</sup> There is undoubtedly a labyrinth connecting the “lived experiences” and thoughts of narrators to our eventual interpretation.<sup>28</sup> Some information is likely to be lost. Nevertheless, this is the conduit available to us, and with attentive interviewing, transcribing, and interpreting, useful information will certainly be found. The many layers of interpretation that exist between the real world and research results also influenced my decision to focus on the perspectives, memories, and visions of narrators; and not necessarily on what they *actually* experienced.

Kris Olds accurately describes “research as a complex and messy process infused with personal subjectivities, practical constraints, and opportunities; a process unable to claim the title of ‘objective.’”<sup>29</sup> Recognizing the inherent limitations of the research process and being honest about its subjective nature were significant realizations for me to keep in mind while assembling the data into a presentable form. Taking as a starting

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Smith, “Doing Qualitative Research: From Interpretation to Action,” in Melanie Limb and Claire Dwyer (eds.), *Qualitative Methodologies for Geographers* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2001), 29.

<sup>28</sup> In recognition of the gap between narrators’ thoughts and my subjective interpretations, narrators were provided with an opportunity to review the presentation of their comments in this thesis for accuracy.

<sup>29</sup> Kris Olds, *Globalization and Urban Change: Capital, Culture, and Pacific Rim Mega-Projects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 260.

point that conducting research is a subjective, imperfect process, I put forth earnest effort to present meaningful, useful findings and interpretations to the readers of this text.

### *Significance*

One set of issues that geographers have discussed regarding the relationship between the “researcher” and the “researched” deals with the level and types of contributions researchers can offer subjects of qualitative research projects. Concerning this subject, Linda McDowell concludes “that optimistic notions of bridging the difference between research worker and research subjects are not possible; that we, as scholars, cannot, nor should we aim to, empower our participants. That is a political task for them, or better, one that we might share together.”<sup>30</sup> Although not as optimistic as some geographers’ assertions, McDowell’s view seems to be a more realistic assessment of what role a researcher can expect to play in the world of their subjects.

In pursuit of “sharing the political task,” the researcher can produce findings that are useful to the participants of the study. Thus, rather than attempting to “empower” the subjects, the researcher can attempt to contribute to the process in which the research participants are engaged. In certain contexts, the researcher will ideally produce results that are *useful* to both the research community and the participants of the study. In service to both my “research” community and “researched” community, I hope that my results increase understanding of why adult place-makers value and support educational places within urban natural areas. By examining some of the motives and perspectives of adults at Troy Gardens, this study provides an explanation of this important process in

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<sup>30</sup> Linda McDowell, “Doing Gender: Feminism, Feminists and Research Methods in Human Geography,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 17 (no. 4, 1992), 413.

such a way that the information can be utilized by other researchers, as well as by educational place-makers, to continue developing opportunities for youth to connect to the natural world in cities around the globe.

## Chapter Three

### Gateway Experiences

Even if they don't know 'my' ditch, most people I speak with seem to have a ditch somewhere—or a creek, meadow, woodlot, or marsh—that they hold in similar regard. These are places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down, where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin.

—Robert Michael Pyle,  
*The Thunder Tree*

One of the purposes of this study was to discover what leads adults to construct and support educational gardens for young people. Specifically, what types of motivations or values do these adult place-makers have, which convince them that gardening and farming are important, and furthermore, that committing time and energy to teaching young people about gardening and farming is important? All of the narrators spoke of one or more initiation experiences in gardens, farms, and other open lands that helped cultivate their passion for, or interest in, growing food, and learning about the natural world. These initiation, or *gateway* experiences, as I have termed them, emerged as a critical component of many narrators' development as educational place-makers at Troy Gardens.

### Findings

#### *Childhood Experiences*

Half of the ten narrators pointed to a childhood experience that introduced them to gardening at an early age. For many, this initiation took place in a home garden tended by a parent or other relative. For example, even though Megan Cain described her mom as an “urban-raised person with no connection to gardening or nature,” she has vivid early-childhood memories of a small garden her mother tended at their first house (which the family only occupied for a few years). Megan pointed to these outdoor-

exposure experiences as a young child, such as harvesting mint for tea from the backyard, as a probable influence on her future interest in gardening, which she says arose “all of a sudden” in her later years. Anthony Hiller described braving hordes of mosquitoes in his backyard to pluck ripe tomatoes from the vine while his father watched with binoculars from a third story window to see if Anthony would be able to successfully navigate the wilderness of biting insects. After relating this story Anthony commented, “I think from those kinds of experiences there was a real tangible, physical relationship that I had with the world....” Sharon Lezberg recalled memories of her grandmother, “an old lady from the old country who spoke mostly Yiddish” who lived with her family while Sharon was growing up, and tended “a phenomenal garden” in which she “grew cucumbers and dill.” Sharon also described her father as “an extremely avid gardener.” Although Sharon would help her father in the garden when he needed assistance, at that point she was more motivated by the chance to “get out of doing housework...” than by a personal interest in gardening. Both Anthony and Sharon credit future gateway experiences as more influential in guiding their current interest in gardening.

For other narrators, their early gateway experiences took place in larger natural areas away from home. In Fawn Houck’s early years, her family took “lots of camping trips,” and through her Montessori school, she “also took camping trips and visited nature preserves.” In regard to these early experiences in the outdoors, Fawn commented, “I think that those were formative experiences for me, because ... it instilled in me a sense of comfort and familiarity, and belonging in natural ... places....”

Two narrators grew up in rural farming environments in Wisconsin, and had extended relationships with open, agricultural landscapes. Bill Harford, who “grew up on a dairy farm,” said the following about his childhood home:

I grew up kind of doing chores and, you know, my whole summers would be just wandering the farm and, you know, running into the back forty and playing forts in all the trees and basically just getting completely dirty and filthy everyday and coming back ... I was your typical farm kid growing up and so ... I just love playing outside and just having space and ... being able to let your imagination go crazy....

### *Adulthood Experiences*

A number of narrators also pointed to gateway experiences during their undergraduate years at public universities and private colleges. For two narrators, it was environmentally-focused curriculum that served as a gateway. For example, at Evergreen State College in Washington, Janelle Johnson took part in a “year-long ... interdisciplinary program called Ecological Agriculture.” As part of the program, Janelle worked on Evergreen’s “15-acre organic farm” as an intern. In addition to her series of life science courses, Janelle also “managed the community gardens at Evergreen for two years....”

For other narrators, it was a particular intellectual environment during their undergraduate years that led to new pursuits and discoveries regarding their relationship to land. For example, Claire Strader explained, “in college I was a philosophy and a women’s studies major and so that led me to start thinking a lot about just the really basic things that I needed in my life and kind of taking more responsibility for those things to create them, produce them myself so I learned to knit, and weave, and sew, and ... to grow my own food.” Claire learned how to grow food through participation in farming

apprenticeships where she discovered that she “really loved that work.” She reflected, “it was kind of a mistake that I became a farmer, it wasn’t something that I set out to do but ... my desire ... to look at the really basic bottom things in my life, led me to explore food that way and then I got hooked.”

In addition to Claire, six other narrators pointed to an early professional, volunteer or internship experience that contributed significantly to their current interests. For example, Sharon’s earnest interest in gardening began during her training as a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV). Sharon worked as a PCV with women’s groups in Kenya “to create vegetable gardens ... for household consumption but also to sell at market.” She noted the strong impact this gardening work had on her in that the food being grown was viewed as a bodily necessity, and not simply the product of a hobby. It was after her Peace Corps experience that Sharon “really became interested ... on a personal level in gardening,” and she has gardened regularly ever since. Janelle and Anthony had early professional experiences as environmental educators in Oregon and New Hampshire respectively, which served to reinforce their burgeoning interests in horticulture and the natural world. Fawn remembers her first internship on an organic farm near Milwaukee, Wisconsin as “the hardest work” she had ever done in her life, and at the same time, “the most spiritually gratifying.”

Michael Swerdloff had perhaps the most unusual gateway experience, which he likened to an awakening. Over a decade ago, Michael backpacked alone across the eastern half of the United States. Michael recollected that “there were some days when, gosh, walking through parts of the Midwest, it literally would be a two-hour walk to get to one side of somebody’s farm to the other ... and if somebody has like a one-mile farm,

you really get to see corn or soy for a really long time (laughter) ... and it just had a real impact on me....” Eventually settling in Bloomington, Indiana near a group of gardeners, Michael was initiated into the gardening culture of the Midwest, and he has been an avid gardener ever since.

One narrator pointed to the FTG Youth Gardening program as her entryway into the world of gardening. When Pat Steele started participating in the Troy youth garden program, she had had no prior gardening experiences. Pat originally got involved with Troy Gardens because she simply had a feeling that this type of program would be good for the young people at her Center. Through her participation in the program, however, she developed an interest in gardening. This season, she planted her first garden, which she spoke excitedly about during the interview.

## **Discussion**

In regard to experiences that first sparked their current horticultural interests, many of the Troy Gardens’ narrators described some type of vivid memory relating to plants in a garden, or a natural place they visited as children. This is illustrated by Michael Pollan, in *Second Nature*, an insightful narrative about his venture into the world of backyard gardening. Pollan explains that he “began gardening for the same reasons people usually do,” and one of his reasons was “to recover a place remembered from childhood.”<sup>31</sup> He shares rich memories of exploring his grandfather’s substantial garden as a child. Remembering the magic of harvest moments, Pollan writes: “To lift a bean plant’s hood of heart-shaped leaves and discover a clutch of long, slender pods hanging underneath could make me catch my breath. Cradling the globe of a cantaloupe warmed

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1991), 2.

in the sun, or pulling orange spears straight from his sandy soil—these were the keenest of pleasures....”<sup>32</sup>

Childhood is a remarkable time of life because it is full of new, often highly sensory, experiences. For many of us, those experiences generate memories that promote nostalgia and a desire to recapture visceral moments from childhood in our adult years. Writing about deliberate or accidental memories of childhood experiences, Edith Cobb suggests that “[t]he most striking remembrances of this type describe an acute pleasure in the incoming flux of minutiae—the mosaic of immediate sensory experience of the natural world on the one hand, and on the other a sudden exultation and delighted sense of freedom in the vastness of open spaces, namely, time.”<sup>33</sup> Cobb also suggests that such remembrances are utilized to stimulate creative thinking in our adult minds.

The impact of childhood experiences is also echoed in interviews with four prominent environmental educators conducted by Trudi L. Volk. All respondents described an upbringing which exposed them to outdoor environments, and helped them to develop an “environmental sensitivity.” One educator explained: “My mother loved the mountains and camping and my dad loved the ocean and surfing. My mother’s mother gardened for both flowers and food.... My early memories include camping in the Sierras, surfing up and down the California coast, and hearing stories of wild ‘critters’ from my grandmother.” Another educator shared that she “grew up in the city across the street from a park.” In regard to this nearby urban green space, she reflected: “At a very early age, I appreciated the time spent in the park with my grandfather who

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1993), 87.

would take me on walks to feed the squirrels.”<sup>34</sup> Although these two educators experienced quite different types of natural environments they both took away a feeling of connection and “sensitivity” to the natural world. This is also the case for many of the Troy narrators, who experienced a diversity of gateway experiences in different types of environments, yet all gained a greater connection to the land.

Although research is limited in this area, some researchers have suggested a link between childhood exposure to the natural world and the environmental values of adults. In a geographical study analyzing “The Construction and Experience of Nature” for urban youth in Singapore, Kong *et al* concluded that the small percentage of interviewees “who appreciate contact with nature” were those whose “greater empathy appears to be borne of childhood experiences which few young people in Singapore can now claim....”<sup>35</sup> Kong and her colleagues also concluded that due to young Singaporeans’ lack of exposure to the natural world, they “have little interest in and affinity for nature.”<sup>36</sup>

As shown by the Troy narrators’ stories, childhood events are not the only important type of gateway experience. For most of the narrators, it was experiences later in life that really deepened their interests in growing food and exploring the natural world. Many referred to their childhood experiences as visceral moments that left an indelible imprint, but credited their adulthood gateway experiences as more directly influential. Similar to many of Troy Gardens’ narrators, Brian Donahue—an

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<sup>34</sup> Trudi L. Volk, “Conversations With Environmental Educators,” *The Journal of Environmental Education* 35 (no. 1, Fall 2003), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Lily Kong, Belinda Yuen, Navjot S. Sodhi, and Clive Briffett, “The Construction and Experience of Nature: Perspectives of Urban Youths,” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 90 (no. 1, 1999), 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

environmental historian and environmental educator—describes important childhood experiences exploring the natural world, as well as experiences as a young adult that deepened his connection to agriculture and land. Donahue writes, “I was exposed early to nature, to gardening and birdwatching, by my parents. I was taken on walks in the woods and encouraged to splash in the streams while still a toddler, for which I am grateful.”<sup>37</sup> As an undergraduate student at Brandeis, Donahue was introduced to Green Power Farm, a community farm and youth education project located in Weston, Massachusetts. On his first morning at the farm, Donahue was put to work harvesting carrots from the cold, autumnal ground. He recalls of this experience: “The morning was chill and my fingers were numb, but my skinny idealistic body was warm. Crows were calling over the adjacent woods of bronze oaks and dark green pines in the bright morning light, and within ten minutes I was hooked on farming.”<sup>38</sup>

### *Passing It On*

For Donahue, Pollan, and the environmental educators mentioned earlier, older adults played an important role in their gateway experience narratives. This was also true in respect to the gateway experiences of many Troy narrators. Whether it was a parent, older relative, supervisor, college professor, or seasoned farmer, older adults helped facilitate the narrators’ gateway experiences in one way or another. As pointed out earlier in statements by Yi-Fu Tuan and Rachel Carson, adults play a crucial role in facilitating a young person’s affective and intellectual connections to the natural world.<sup>39</sup>

Trimble eloquently describes this mentoring relationship, writing, “we can take our

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<sup>37</sup> Brian Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms and Forests in a New England Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Carson’s and Tuan’s statements are quoted on pages 2 and 3 of the first chapter.

children with us to the land. We can be there with them as they climb on rocks, play in streams and waves, dig in the rich soil of woods and gardens, putter and learn. Here, on the land, we learn from each other. Here, our children's journey begins."<sup>40</sup>

Echoing the ideas of Carson, Tuan, and Trimble, half of the Troy narrators spoke about the importance of having adults that are regularly involved with young people on the Troy Gardens land. For example, Janelle commented: "I think that [the youth are] making a connection to the land, like I said before, so I think it is very important that they're doing it at Troy Gardens, but I don't think you can separate that from the fact that ... they need, you know, to have staff or a program there that can help them interpret that because you can go to a beautiful place, but if you don't have anything to put that into a context then, you know, that's not really going to be relevant to you, so there's no reason for you to put that into your consciousness." Janelle later remarked that "Troy Gardens shows you" that "if you support your garden program, and you have someone there who is given the time and the opportunity to really maintain the garden that it is worth it, and that it is something that is worth valuing."

Michael was more explicit about the qualities he believed youth educators at Troy Gardens should have. He stated that they should ideally possess "humility and confidence" and have "the energy of somebody who cares and is absolutely ecstatic and is bursting out of them how much they love gardening ...." Bill commented on the general importance of having adults present for youth at Troy. Bill said that "there's always positive adults here and there's always kids having positive experiences so ... it

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<sup>40</sup> Stephen Trimble, "The Scripture of Maps, the Names of Trees," in Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 31.

is a place where they associate with, you know, Vera Court staff and with Friends of Troy Gardens staff and all these kind of positive people around and so, you know, I think that's crucial...."

Half of the narrators spoke about the importance of passing on what they had received from older adults to youth at Troy Gardens. The narrators' own gateway experiences seemed to provide a touchstone from which they drew strength and a sense of purpose. Their experiences also provided them with a motivation for facilitating similar experiences for youth because some of these young people might also make a connection that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. For example, Fawn commented: "I feel blessed in the way that I was brought up and the kinds of experiences I've had, and sought, and found ... I want very much to share those with people, with urban youth that don't automatically have those." Janelle reflected that Troy Gardens "provides an opportunity ... that I had growing up, but I think that a lot of kids don't have, and that's a safe place for them to go and experience nature with caring and knowledgeable staff. And that is so important, and I know that that's what they do have, what we do have, at Troy Gardens, and so I think that's what's most important."

Claire explained that "all of that learning about farming ... definitely contributes to my desire to have that be such a wonderful opening experience ... there is a lot of wonder involved in that ... what that food is, and how it got there, and where it comes from, and I'm interested in conveying that." Claire also had this to say about one of her influential teachers at the University of California-Santa Cruz agricultural education program: "he was really inspiring and really enthusiastic about things that I didn't have much interest in going into it, and so for me it's, I would like to be that kind of person,

the kind of teacher that I had, I would love to be able to be that person for somebody else.”

Some narrators also expressed the importance of Troy Gardens as a place of initiation for young people. As mentioned earlier, Pat Steele was inspired to begin gardening through her relationship with the youth education programs at Troy. Based on her newfound appreciation for gardening, she remarked that “exposing children to the gardening at an early age is important.” Sharon shared a story about how she really valued that Megan was taking kids into the back acreage of Troy Gardens to hunt for mulberries and watch hawks circle overhead. In relation to this story, Sharon reflected, “just that experience of--, that whole thing about those early experiences influence you later on in life, of how you relate to land, how you relate to the natural world, how you relate to the environment.” Similarly, Fawn explained that she “would like for youth to be able to have a place like Troy Gardens ... to have the initial experience that they can take with them, you know, to remember that and connect with other places, and elements of nature, even if it’s just a flowerpot in the windowsill.”

In the quotation at the head of this chapter, Robert Michael Pyle writes evocatively about the High Line Canal in Denver, Colorado as a place of “initiation” where he first connects to the earth in a meaningful way. As evidenced in their stories, many of the narrators in this study also experienced their “initiation” to the natural world in specific *places*, such as backyard gardens, family campgrounds, and neighboring farm fields. Pyle states: “When people connect with nature, it happens *somewhere*. Almost everyone who cares deeply about the outdoors can identify a particular place where contact occurred. This may have been a wilderness, a national park, or a stretch of

unbounded countryside, but more often the place that makes a difference is unspectacular: a vacant lot, a scruffy patch of woods, a weedy field ... or a ditch.”<sup>41</sup>

Many of the narrators clearly value Troy Gardens as a place where young people can undergo their own gateway or “initiation” experience, a place where—as Pyle powerfully puts it—“the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down, where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Michael Pyle, *The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), xv.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

## Chapter Four Connections

I wanted to teach people ... I guess I felt re-connected to nature through farming and gardening after living a very urban life, so I wanted to be a part of helping facilitate that connection for other people, especially in the city, where you can feel very disconnected.

—Megan Cain, FTG Kids' Gardening Coordinator

The predominant theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of connections—in particular, connections made by youth to the natural world. The desire to foster these connections was a primary motivating factor for narrators' support of educational programs at Troy Gardens. In addition, narrators believed connections between young people and the natural world (or land) to be of paramount importance.

Four major themes emerged within the overarching theme of connections: Nearby Urban Nature; Learning on the Land; Learning to Care, Learning to Steward; and Food Comes from the Ground. The first theme, Nearby Urban Nature, focuses on the importance of having an accessible, local natural area where youth are able to connect to the land. The second theme, Learning on the Land, addresses the valuable role that experiential, sensory-based learning can play in connecting youth to nature. The third theme—Learning to Care, Learning to Steward—focuses on the benefits of teaching young people to care for nature near to home, such as the development of broader environmental stewardship values. The final theme, Food Comes from the Ground, addresses the connections narrators' hope young people make to the land by growing and eating food, as well as the valuable lessons they can learn—and self-confidence they can gain—through these activities.

## Nearby Urban Nature<sup>43</sup>

### Findings

Eight narrators commented on the importance of Troy Gardens being in the city, and thus more accessible to urban dwellers. One of the things that narrators value about Troy Gardens is that it serves as a place for young people to connect to the natural world on a regular basis. In respect to this, Sharon articulated what makes Troy Gardens special as compared to many other natural areas. She commented that Troy is:

more continuous ... it might be a smaller subset of people who actually participate but it's longer term so it's not a school group coming for one day, and so by being longer-term and by coming back to the same landscape again and again and again it allows those participants to have a deeper sense of it, and hopefully to have a more ... long-lasting consequence of their involvement, a relationship with that place ... their own little garden plot or with that landscape.

Janelle shared similar thoughts in the following statement: “accessibility, it’s close ... so that they’re able to come frequently ... as opposed to just coming like maybe once in their whole career as a student...”

Reflecting on Troy Gardens’ urban location in regard to the Farm and Field program, Claire commented, “The thing that is the main issue about having an urban farm for me is access ... it would be really hard for these kids to have this job if it was a half an hour outside the city, because they can’t ride their bikes there and they don’t drive, and so it being in the city means that they have that access ... so for me that’s really the defining feature, it’s urban and so there’s access, a lot more people have a lot more access.” Similarly, Bill reflected on how important Troy’s accessibility has been for creating connections between youth at his Center and the Troy Gardens land:

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<sup>43</sup> The title of this theme was inspired by *Nearby Nature*, a term coined by Rachel and Stephen Kaplan.

so in a matter of two or three months ... the garden really caught on like wildfire and I think it caught on with the kids just because, you know, it's so close 'cause then they could, you know, run over here when the center closed that day and find out what their buddy just did ... earlier, as opposed to just some field trip on the other side of town or regular visits to the Children's Museum or something like that, just because it was so close and so accessible it was ... easy for all the kids that come to the Center whether it was Summer and I bringing the kids out, or just coming down here after the Center, exploring on their own.

Other narrators spoke about the value of having an idyllic environment like Troy Gardens within the city limits. Fawn said this about the pastoral feel of Troy Gardens: "Yah ... with a place like this, ... and a lot of people remark on this, it feels like you're in the country, here are the cicadas buzzing in the tree above us, and birds chirping, we've found all kinds of hawks, and I can't tell how many bird species that are spotted out here, and then the deer just are bold, they just stroll right out ... and start munching out on the prairie and stuff ... and the kids, you know, see that 'wow!, there's a deer behind you' kind of thing or, you know, raccoons are all around...." Jessica, who grew up in a rural farming community, said Troy Gardens is "not like a huge family farm where, you know, it goes as far as the eye can see ... but it's still kind of like, oh, people do exist ... that care about these things in the city, so it's really nice, it's peaceful here, for sure."

Several narrators also talked about Troy Gardens as a safe place for youth to connect to the natural world, to have fun, and, sometimes, to seek refuge. Megan reflected on what she hopes Troy Gardens can offer urban youth:

sometimes I go over to Northport when I go do programming there and I just think, man I can't believe this is where these kids live because they're all hanging out in the parking lot, and there's people driving around ... and I know from living in the city ... that you have your guard up a lot, but I feel that in the garden that maybe it can be like a safe place, or a loving place ... nature is kind of healing, so I'd like ... for them to see nature as something that's fun, and to see, and to feel connected to Troy Gardens more as a whole ... maybe they don't

even come to the [Kids'] garden, they come to walk through the land, or they come to pick mulberries ... so more of a destination, a park, or something, someplace to go to....

Jessica expressed similar thoughts about Troy Garden's location: "I think that this is an excellent location for a garden because ... for the most part these kids are only exposed to buildings and roads and malls and stuff like that so I think that, you know, going to a garden means a lot more to them, and I think that they could probably appreciate it more than some kids that live in rural areas ... I think here it's like definitely a special thing ... it's not an apartment building, it's not like some landfill area, it's a beautiful garden that they can go to and have fun at." Bill commented that the Kids Garden "is a calming place where [kids] don't have to worry about, you know, how they're going to perform or, you know, how people are going to judge them doing what they're doing cause, you know, you're not judged at this place ...." Michael summed up the sanctuary-like qualities of the youth garden in the following pronouncement:

it's just a safe place to be a kid, you don't have to be tough, you don't have to be cool, you don't have to be smart, you don't have to be good in basketball, you don't have to be the first 13 year-old that's body is developing and wears a bra, you don't have to dance the best, you don't have to sing the best, you don't have to wear the best clothes, you don't have to be rich, you don't have to be anything but yourself, and ... that is such a small, minute part of 2005 American life for youth today, where there's somewhere where regardless of who, what, or where you are, you can hold your share, and the kids get to do that at the Kids' Garden there at Troy.

### *Embedded in a Human Community*

Another reason that five narrators value the location of Troy Gardens is that it is, in Sharon's words, "embedded in a community." Megan commented, "we spend so much of our lives inside, inside your car, inside your office, inside your house, and thus we don't really interact with each other a lot, so I think gardening in community spaces is

a way to bring people together, especially at Troy Gardens, people of differing backgrounds, together, at least gardening side by side and who knows what can happen if you're gardening side by side, I certainly met people there through that job and just through being at Troy Gardens that I probably never would have met, well certainly, all of those kids ... we never probably would have crossed paths, and a lot of the adults at the garden, people I never would have met.”

A couple narrators spoke about the importance of the youth program as a means to involve adults who may not initially be drawn to Troy Gardens. For example, Sharon remarked, “if you bring the kids into the whole program ... they then in turn would hopefully pull their parents in, and their relatives and their community, and we were having difficulty with this whole issue of bringing in the neighborhood. So I saw the youth programs as the entry point to involve the community....” After Bill shared a story about families of kids at Vera Court Neighborhood Center developing more interest in the Troy CSA, I asked him: “Is that a motivation for you to see things that you view as positive, like getting in touch with this place, spreading into the families?” Bill responded, “I would love it! I would love to see all the families out here gardening ... hopefully people will be gardening out here long after I'm gone ... I don't really have a specific goal in mind ... it's kind of maintain the, you know, just the positivity that's connected with this place.” Bill added that it is empowering to both kids and adults in the neighborhood “to be able to have access ... to a place literally out your backyard, to be able to come and kind of grow those things and to be able to, you know, have the means to eat fresh fruits and vegetables, you know, is wonderful....”

Janelle addressed the importance of Troy Gardens being a meeting place for young people to socialize with each other. She remarked that it was a good place for kids to connect “with other kids, especially if they live nearby, it’s, you know, a natural meeting place....” She felt that it serves as a place to get to know other kids and do “things with them that they probably wouldn’t do anywhere else, so, you know, giving them new opportunities to have new experiences with other kids in their neighborhood or in their community or ... kids that go to their school. So, it’s ... just a social way for them to have positive experiences....”

Megan and Claire both expressed that an important motivating factor for their personal involvement with Troy was its urban location and close proximity to people. Megan commented: “it sounded like the perfect job because I wanted the gardening and farming but something with education, and I am attracted to urban gardening more than living on a farm out in the middle of nowhere.” Similarly, Claire reflected: “I had lived out in the country doing farming and ... I felt really isolated and it was beautiful but I ... really like being in this small city where there’s a lot more people and a lot more access to things for me, other than the farm.”

## **Discussion**

Sharon remarked that Troy Gardens offers youth “more continuous” and “longer-term” involvement than some other public open lands. She hoped that these factors would allow participants to have “a more ... long-lasting ... consequence of their involvement” and “a relationship with that place.” Based on geographical research with urban children in Singapore, Lily Kong states: “The types of places I recommend would be those everyday places which can be bound integrally to the lives of the community

rather than specialist nature reserves for scientists and ‘experts’....”<sup>44</sup> Kong also cites the importance of providing opportunities for children to have “contact and interaction with nature” in order for them to develop “care and love for nature.” She notes that these opportunities “need not come in the form of grand nature reserves and dramatic natural settings—the neighborhood park and the school ecogarden are as important, if not more so, when adequately harnessed.”<sup>45</sup> Place-makers at Troy Gardens understand the important role a neighborhood garden and farm can play in providing opportunities for youth to have “contact and interaction with nature.” This is precisely why they work to support youth education at Troy Gardens.

Narrators value the accessibility of Troy Gardens, and view its proximity as an important factor in facilitating connections between urban youth and land. But how does a small slice of open land in the city, like Troy Gardens, compensate for the lack of extent that is offered by “grand nature reserves and dramatic natural settings?” Certainly, a major draw of larger natural areas, such as national parks, is that when people enter them, they feel completely immersed in nature. Rural areas can also offer this sense of immersion as evidenced by Michael’s gateway experience amidst the farms of the Midwest, and Jessica’s description of a “huge family farm where ... it goes as far as the eye can see....” So, how does a small piece of land facilitate these types of connections? Drawing on environmental preference research, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan suggest that in regard to *extent*, “the sense that there might be more to explore than is immediately

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<sup>44</sup> Lily Kong, “Nature’s Dangers, Nature’s Pleasures: Urban Children and the Natural World,” in Sarah L. Holloway and Gill Valentine (eds.) *Children’s Geographies* (London: Routledge, 2000), 269.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

evident” is “[m]ore important than size.”<sup>46</sup> This idea is illustrated in Bill’s explanation of how kids at his Center see Troy “as a really wild place ... with deer and rabbits and all these really scary, you know, animals.... we’re seeing black bear on one [camping] trip and a deer at the garden and it’s the same, it’s all the same level of intensity....” Bill suggested that to the kids, Troy Gardens is “exotic and ... kind of scary ... like it has got the boundaries with the trees, you know, they’ve all been to ... the other side of the trees in all areas, but I’ll bet you nobody would walk there alone, you know, like they think ... this vast ... open land back there, you know, or the deer are all waiting at the tree line to pounce them or something. So I think it’s kind of whatever each kid wants it to be is what it is, and it kind of delivers on that promise, you know.”

Beyond the mysteries of the entire Troy Gardens property, the considerably smaller Kids’ Garden also offers a surprisingly extensive world to explore. Once inside the arched gateway of the Garden, children can completely immerse themselves in a rich tapestry of vines, stalks, compost, chickens, and worms. The Kaplans explain that gardening enhances “the sense of extent” because it “provides various means of connectedness.”<sup>47</sup>

One “means of connectedness” cited by the Kaplans is that “many gardeners feel a relationship to a force or system that is larger than they are and that is not under human control.”<sup>48</sup> This sense of connection was also acknowledged by Troy place-makers. For example, Michael remarked “you can’t control a garden. You can do all the right things, if it doesn’t rain and your water supply doesn’t work, everything dies, or on the flipside,

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<sup>46</sup> Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan, *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 191.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

if it does rain everyday, you're screwed!... and I think it's great ... for all of us!, but I mean we're talking about kids, I think it's great for them to get involved in something that they can't control, they can't overpower, they can't manipulate, that there's a balance of effort, commitment, and just something bigger.” The idea of connecting to something bigger than ourselves is also powerfully illustrated by Fawn:

I feel such a sense of wonder and appreciation and sometimes, you know, literal awe because the natural world is doing things to us that are often times unpleasant to us, for us, and huge powerful hailstorms, and, yeah, too hot, too cold, too wet, you name it, and ... we cannot do anything about it, you know? And that really puts humans in our place. So, not to say that kids ... should experience feeling dwarfed, but, yes, the awe of natural forces, because the built environment and the society we live in ... there are messages beaming at us ... that would lead us to believe that humans are on top of things, and that all of our creations, technological creations and social constructions are the be all and end all, and I would like to point out that, that ain't so, there is something greater....

A second “means” of connection offered by the Kaplans is that “[s]ome may experience in gardening a historical connection, a tie to former times and generations past.”<sup>49</sup> Educating young people about the historical relationship between people and land was another type of connection that several narrators expressed as important. For example, Michael commented: “Connecting with the earth, connecting with your history, whether it's a White person that their culture come from Europe, a Black person, from Africa, Latino from Latin America, or a Hmong person from Southeast Asia, it doesn't really matter where you come from, all of us, all of us, for thousands of years were gardeners. I mean whether you call it farming, gardening, growing, or foraging, we've been doing this a long time. And ... it gives kids an opportunity to connect to our history in a way that a book, a video, or somebody standing in front of a class can't, or a computer can't....” The emphasis that Troy place-makers put on these historical

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

relationships is also evidenced by such creations as the Heirloom Demonstration Garden. Spearheaded by a Troy Board member, the Heirloom Garden serves as an interactive, living museum of heirloom plants that have been passed down from gardener to gardener across land, sea, and time.

Brian Donahue, when reflecting on his exposure to land as a child, writes, “however much I learned to love the face of the land, I did not identify with any culture that was bred in the body of the land. And indeed, very little remained to identify with.”<sup>50</sup> It is partly this realization that provides an impetus for Donahue to dedicate years of his life to reviving a sustainable agrarian culture within his community.

Donahue’s Land’s Sake project involves both working the land in responsible ways, and educating young people about an important historical relationship between people and land. Donahue writes, “We must rebuild functioning communities with closer ties to the land not just in nostalgic fantasy, not just in token preservation, but in substantial daily practice.”<sup>51</sup>

Donahue finds that an agricultural project “embedded in community” is the best way to involve people and educate them about an important past cultural tradition. In regard to youth education programs specifically, Donahue remarks that “[k]nowing that their children are involved with the land in this way rubs off on parents, too.”<sup>52</sup> As noted earlier, some narrators expressed a hope that the youth program will help increase overall neighborhood involvement, especially from parents and other adults. Under this vision, Troy Gardens becomes a working and learning community of young and old: using the

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<sup>50</sup> Brian Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms and Forests in a New England Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

land, protecting the land, and recapturing an ancient relationship between humans and the earth.

Nabhan and Trimble express a sincere concern “about how few children now grow up incorporating plants, animals, and places into their sense of *home*.”<sup>53</sup> As connoted by the Friends of Troy Gardens logo, Troy is conceived of as a *home* for all who come there.<sup>54</sup> For the Troy place-makers, it is a place for youth to incorporate into their “sense of home,” a place where youth can connect to the natural world on a regular basis, and a place where young people can learn about, and participate in, working landscapes guided by a respect for nature. William Cronon writes, “when I think of the times I myself have come closest to experiencing what I might call the sacred in nature, I often find myself remembering wild places much closer to home.... What I celebrate about such places is not *just* their wildness ... what I celebrate even more is that they remind us of the wildness in our own backyards, of the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it.”<sup>55</sup> Many seasoned naturalists stress the importance of going regularly to observe the natural world in the same place, sometimes referred to as a “secret”, “sit”, or “magic” spot.<sup>56</sup> This is thought to be one of the most effective ways to increase one’s awareness and knowledge of the natural world. In fact, going regularly is generally considered more important than *where* your spot is located. So whether one’s magic spot is located deep within an old-growth forest or in an urban backyard, it is the

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<sup>53</sup> Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xiii.

<sup>54</sup> The official FTG logo reads: Harvest · Harmony · Home.

<sup>55</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 86.

<sup>56</sup> For more on this concept see Jon Young, *Seeing Through Native Eyes: Understanding the Language of Nature* (OWLlink Media, 1996).

regular practice of nature observation which gives one the ability to see “the nature that is all around us.”

It is the accessibility of Troy Gardens that narrators truly value. It is this accessibility which allows young people to come there regularly and have the opportunity to connect to the land as they develop an awareness of the natural world. Furthermore, it is Troy’s urban location which allows for the possibility of a diverse neighborhood of people to connect to the land as a community. In its fullest potential Troy Gardens fulfills, in Robert Coles words, “the ardent desire of a city youth for a place, a space, that will connect her to land, to the air, to the sky, and to the world it holds—all of which, she senses in her bones, rather than thinks in her head, will give her, yes, back to herself.”<sup>57</sup>

## **Learning on the Land**

### **Findings**

Several narrators focused on the importance of affective and sensory-based learning for youth at Troy Gardens. As one of the primary teachers on the land, Megan had much to say about her affective pedagogical values. She expressed, for example, that “it doesn’t really matter if the kids know that you can look at the back of the seed packet, and know how many days until germination or harvest—we talk about those things—but those things come later ... I am trying to awaken an interest, and a connection in gardening and nature and then all of the specifics come later.” Megan

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Coles, “Introduction,” in Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xxiv.

shared a story about running into a third grade boy from the program during the off-season and how she was surprised by his enthusiasm for the gardening program. She reflected: “there has to be some kind of emotional deeper connection that’s beyond the facts and all the method of gardening, that it’s something deeper, that he—I don’t know—I guess that was awakened in him or that was tapped into by the garden ... that’s how you get to them kind of—is by their hearts ... not their minds necessarily.”

Regarding these affective connections to land, Megan remarked that “the emotional connection is how you foster an ownership and a ... reason why they come to the garden; it’s an important part of their lives hopefully....”

Sharon and Pat expressed the importance of sensory exploration. Sharon reflected on times when she has watched kids excitedly discovering a melon “under a big watermelon vine ... or eating tomatoes off the vine” and explains that “it’s a perfect learning activity where it’s hand-on, it’s active, kids are very engaged in a kinesthetic sense as well as all the other senses, that there’s visual components and taste components and smell components and you’re verbalizing ... you’re using every bit of your learning apparatus when you’re in the garden....” Highlighting what she thinks is special about the garden environment in contrast to indoor educational environments at the Center, Pat said, “Gardening is something that kids can learn outside ... I mean, we can talk about it [at the Center], but it’s not the same as getting your hands dirty, digging the dirt and discover little creatures, planting the seed, water the plants, taking care of the garden, picking them and taking them home. I think the hand-on experience is important, they learn by touching, smelling, tasting and seeing.”

One issue that Megan has faced is getting kids to push past their comfort zones regarding dirt. Megan mentioned that “sometimes kids come in the beginning and they don’t want to sit down in the grass because they might get dirty, and they have their new shoes on, so don’t want to step in the garden.” Megan recalled a story involving a group of girls who broke through their inhibitions, explaining that “in the beginning they kind of all came, and they were all dressed up and they had their nice shoes on, and then all of a sudden they’re taking off their shoes, and they’re all throwing their shoes in a pile, and then we went to the compost pile to fill up wheelbarrows to bring it, and dump it on the beds and they’re climbing all over the pile and their getting these huge compost rocks ... and they just kept saying: ‘we’re such hard workers!’” When I asked Megan why it was important for her that kids feel comfortable getting dirty, she responded, “I guess it’s only one way of looking at childhood but I kind of feel like that it’s what your supposed to do, you’re a kid....”

Some narrators felt quite strongly that simply getting kids outside on the land takes precedence over any specific learning benchmark or programmatic goal. For example, Sharon said the “[m]ost important is just getting outside into that kind of environment which is, I wouldn’t call it wild, I would call it natural, I’d call it humanly-managed, but an environment that is not a building, or a home, or the street, and *just having them experience being outdoors in a natural setting*, and all the good things that happen when you’re out there, learning to listen, learning to observe, learning to be peaceful, learning to be out in that back stretch and to feel comfortable, learning to look

for wildlife, all of that. So ... that would be the most important ... just getting them out there.”<sup>58</sup>

When I asked Michael why it is important that kids learn to connect to the earth, he responded, “just the actual reality that all of our subsistence ... comes from the earth, and it doesn’t matter to me if you were eating fruits, or vegetables, or grains, or beans, or you’re eating a cow ... it doesn’t matter what it is, your water comes through here, everything comes through here, it all gets filtered through the earth and our atmosphere ... I think very few kids have a connection to the earth in any shape....” Regarding the types of connection he values most, Michael went on to say:

even more than just to intellectually look at: ‘wow, when my momma buys carrots at Copps, somebody grew it,’ I mean even more than that, I mean the actual dirt that gets in their sandals, I mean the actual dirt that gets in their fingers, I mean the actual, literal, physical connection to the earth, the actual reality of it, almost that simple, and that basic, and that ... base, that base a connection.... The actual getting dirty, and playing with things that will go in the earth ... and come from the earth.

Janelle stated that it is important that kids get exposed to “nature” and “gardening,” as well as such things as “compost,” “dirt,” and “chickens.” When I asked her why, she responded, “Cause we live on earth, and ... that’s where we get our food, and it’s what we depend on, so we need to know how ... the earth sustains us, I mean, it’s very basic knowledge....”

Five narrators highlighted the importance of giving youth a reprieve from the indoor classroom environments where they spend most of their days. Megan commented, “I realize ... how important the garden could be to education because it is so ... structured, their daily school lives where ... a lot of it is geared towards only a certain

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<sup>58</sup> Emphasis added.

way of learning, where in the garden there's a possibility that someone who is not good at taking tests and sitting in their desk can come to the garden and be successful, and be a gardener!" Megan added, "I see, especially when the kids come during after school, that I try to be very aware of that, that they've been sitting in a ... school desk all day and that they need to have their energy, so I try to think of more active things...."

Fawn made note of the "school system that they're channeled into, where they are forced to do things that they don't see value in. And that right there is a severe disrespect to their intelligence and to their spirit, like don't they have a good sense of what is good, bad, right, wrong, and if not, that's what they should be discussing, not the next, you know, homework assignment, and so talking about the real things is what some part of that is, what I hope will enter into the [Farm and Field] program, what is really, really important, which we do talk about—human's relationship to the natural world...."

Jessica commented that program participants have "been raised in a classroom, you know, they know how sports teams operate ... they're familiar with all of that, but I think that the garden is something unfamiliar which ... draws them to it I think, it's cause it's different. It's a different environment." Pat drew the following contrast between indoor Center activities and outdoor garden activities: "learning ... outside is more relaxing and more fun to kids because it's like playtime to them, when we do a program inside it's more like classroom and school, to them maybe not as much fun. I think kids learn better when they're in the [garden] environment ... it gives them freedom to move around."

Some narrators specifically emphasized the importance of learning about the natural world through time spent on the land. Sharon pointed out that when "you get kids outside and have them learning using all of their senses and especially that

kinesthetic sense they're learning not only about how food grows and where food comes from, they're learning about all sorts of environmental processes, they're seeing insects and they're seeing the tomato horn worms and the butterflies and caterpillars and ... everything out there and they're hearing the birds and they're following hawks and ... seeing the mulberries and the prairie....”

Megan explained how the garden is the first step in connecting to the natural processes occurring on the Troy Gardens land, stating:

We don't just stay in the garden, we go around the whole Troy Gardens site, we walk through the woods, just walk around the land, and notice the hawk that always flies around, and found a snake in the garden, and look for worms, and so I feel like the garden is kind of the small area, or the way to initially connect them to the land, and then we kind of work outwards from there. But the plants, their little plot, their 4x4 plot is the first introduction, is the first, maybe layer, and then we work out to the other areas of the garden, and then throughout the land ... to kind of move, and look at how nature functions not just in the garden but throughout the whole land.

Megan elaborated on ways she would like kids to get “in touch with nature,” saying, “I guess just the seasons of the garden and things that we can plant at different times and just watching the landscape change when they first come, you know, the trees aren't leafed out and everything's more brown, and then it's the middle of the summer everything's really lush and through us being near the community gardens I think that it's even more apparent that we kind of watch the community gardens grow, and I don't know, I guess a sense of time, and ... how nature is cyclical, and if they come to the garden enough and there are kids that have come year to year that they can kind of see it, maybe seeing the world in a different way according to nature instead of ... according to the calendar, the month, that it's more according to the natural seasons.” Anthony similarly stressed the importance of connection through direct engagement “with the

cycles of the earth ... be it through gardening, or just ... through watching leaves come and go....”

I asked Megan if facilitating a connection between kids and the natural world was a motivating factor in her choice to do this fairly challenging work. In affirmation, she responded, “I feel like a lot of the things ... that are wrong in our society are the result of people not being connected to nature and the natural environment, not seeing the natural environment as part of us, that it’s just this thing to conquer and to pave over and it has nothing to do with us ... the more and more people feel connected to nature, I think the better off we’ll be.”

## **Discussion**

### *Affective, Sensory Connections*

Yi-Fu Tuan defines “topophilia” as “a neologism, useful in that it can be defined broadly to include all of the human being’s affective ties with the material environment.”<sup>59</sup> It is apparent that certain narrators hope that youth are forming “affective ties with the material environment” of Troy Gardens. Troy place-makers are much less concerned with passing on factual knowledge than they are with simply providing kids with opportunities to have regular, physical contact with land through such activities as gardening and hunting for mulberries.

As evidenced by narrators’ comments, there is a belief that “affective ties” to place are developed through physical, sensory-based contact with the “material environment.” Rachel Carson, an influential thinker among environmental educators,

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<sup>59</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1974), 93.

explains that “[e]xploring nature with your child is largely a matter of becoming receptive to what lies all around you. It is learning again to use your eyes, ears, nostrils and finger tips, opening up the disused channels of sensory impression.”<sup>60</sup> In addition, Carson asserts her “sincere” belief “that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.”<sup>61</sup> Carson further articulates her affective-based pedagogy, explaining that “[o]nce the emotions have been aroused—a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love—then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning. It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate.”<sup>62</sup>

In Carson’s call for sensory-based nature exploration, she refers to “*disused* channels of sensory impression.”<sup>63</sup> The idea of sensory atrophy is articulated by David Abram, who explains that for most of our human existence we developed complex and rich relationships with the natural world through our senses.<sup>64</sup> In modern times, however, we live in a more human-centric world, and therefore have lost much of our sensual connection to the natural world. Abram explains that our very *humanness* is dependent on sensory interaction and engagement with the non-human world. For the

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<sup>60</sup> Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 52.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>63</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>64</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

Troy place-makers, the strong desire to help connect kids to land seems to be, at least partially, in reaction to the idea that humans are out of touch with nature.

### *The Impetus of Disconnection*

While reflecting on her motivations for wanting to teach youth at Troy Gardens Megan expressed that she had “felt re-connected to nature through farming and gardening after living a very urban life,” and therefore “wanted to be a part of helping facilitate that connection for other people, especially in the city, where you can feel very disconnected.” As discussed earlier, a common thread that runs through many of the narrators’ responses is a desire to get young people connected to land and to the natural world. Also discussed earlier, narrators view Troy Gardens as the place that will hopefully provide that connection for youth. What has not been discussed yet, however, are ideas regarding *disconnection* from nature and land, which appear both in narrators’ responses and in environmental education and environmentalist literature.

Joan Anderson opens her children’s book, *Earth Keepers*, with the following question: “How many of us today truly feel part of the land on which we live? How connected are we to nature, to trees and plants, rivers and streams, dark rich soil, and to all creatures big and small?” Anderson then states that “[i]n these times, when many of us live in crowded cities or bustling suburbs, it is easy to feel isolated from the land.”<sup>65</sup> There is certainly evidence to suggest that many urban youth are “isolated from the land.” As part of an extensive research project involving interviews with “nearly three thousand children and parents across the country,” Richard Louv recorded the comments of a fourth-grade boy in San Diego who said, “I like to play indoors better, ‘cause that’s

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<sup>65</sup> Joan Anderson, *Earth Keepers* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 2.

where all the electrical outlets are.”<sup>66</sup> Based on his observations, Louv says that “[o]ur society is teaching young people to avoid direct experience in nature.”<sup>67</sup>

Presenting a counterpart to Louv’s assessment, Michael expressed that one of the most important things that a place such as Troy Gardens should offer kids is an opportunity to separate themselves from pop-culture. Michael emphasized the difference between “connecting with pop-culture versus connecting with the earth.” He clarified that they don’t “have to be separate, but they tend to be separate.” Commenting on life in modern times, Nabhan and Trimble astutely observe that “[m]any young people, both in the United States and in less affluent countries, have no time to familiarize themselves with the names of the few plants and animals that remain in their immediate surroundings, because they are busy absorbing other taxonomies they believe more critical to their daily survival.”<sup>68</sup> Non-human species are not often considered relevant in the human-centric urban environment.

When people do look beyond the urban human realm, it is all too often in reaction to some impending ecological crisis. Louv laments that in the present day “kids are aware of the global threats to the environment—but their physical contact, their intimacy with nature, is fading.”<sup>69</sup> Perhaps this is why so many of the narrators privileged simple, sensory contact with the earth over common environmentalist learning goals such as recycling activities, awareness of pollution, and so forth. Exhibiting a similar

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<sup>66</sup> Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill: 2005), 10.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xv.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005), 1.

pedagogical preference several decades ago, Alice Skelsey and Gloria Huckaby observe that “[w]hole classrooms of children have been galvanized to fight pollution—an admirable cause—but not nearly enough time has been allotted to finding and appreciating the beautiful.”<sup>70</sup> For Louv, the narrators, and others who feel connected to the natural world, there appears to be an especially acute concern about the next generation being out of touch with the natural world. A sense of urgency accompanies these concerns, perhaps from fear that if nothing is done, youth will become more out of touch with nature than ever before.

Contrasting the knowledge of today’s youth with that of past generations, one narrator commented that “up until ... probably ... 50, 75 years ago, it was very basic knowledge” that we “get our food” from the earth, and that the “earth sustains us ... I mean to think of incorporating it into, you know, a curriculum at a school district would be insane because everyone would just know that....” Environmentalists in present times often contrast current levels of disconnectedness between youth and land with a better—if not golden—past, when young people were more connected to, and knowledgeable about, different aspects of the natural world. For example, in a recent article, Molly Baker, Co-director of the Outdoor Education program at Colgate University, invites readers to “venture back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the glory days of nature study....” Baker’s article, which focuses on “promoting reconnection to the land” through adventure education, begins with a brief narrative designed to illustrate the American alienation from land that followed the “glory days of nature study.” Baker claims that

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<sup>70</sup> Alice Skelsey and Gloria Huckaby, *Growing Up Green: Parents & Children Gardening Together* (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1973), 13.

“[d]uring the past century, our collective environmental literacy has declined dramatically.”<sup>71</sup> In his article, “The Rise and Fall of Natural History,” Robert Michael Pyle draws a similar contrast between past and present times. He describes a “time when botany walks were de rigeur [*sic*] and butterfly nets wouldn’t rate a second look on a campus where half the students today have cell phone implants and the other half wouldn’t know a Douglas fir from a dogwood.”<sup>72</sup>

While it is true that there was more institutional and popular support for natural history in the early period of the twentieth century, prominent educators of the time also expressed concern about children’s lack of connection to, and knowledge about, the natural world. Like environmentalists and educators of today, they had some valid reasons for concern. For example, educators were much disturbed by the results of G. Stanley Hall’s 1880 study of “the awareness of nature and country life that two hundred children brought to the first grade from middle-class homes in Boston.”<sup>73</sup> Hall’s study revealed, among other things, that 75.5 percent of the children were ignorant of the seasons, 48 percent were not aware that meat comes from animals, 92.5 percent lacked knowledge of how wheat was grown, 87 percent could not identify an oak or a pine tree, and 63 percent knew nothing about planting a seed.<sup>74</sup>

Like the Troy narrators and other present-day educators, the actions of nature-study advocates at the turn of the century were influenced, at least in some part, by a

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<sup>71</sup> Molly Baker, “Landfullness in Adventure-Based Programming: Promoting Reconnection to the Land,” *Journal of Experiential Education* 27 (no. 3, 2005), 268. Baker draws from Robert Michael Pyle, “The Rise and Fall of Natural History,” *Orion* 20 (no. 4, Autumn 2001), 16-23.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Michael Pyle, “The Rise and Fall of Natural History,” *Orion* 20 (no. 4, Autumn 2001), 18.

<sup>73</sup> Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 77.

<sup>74</sup> G. Stanley Hall, “The Contents of Children’s Minds,” in G. Stanley Hall *et al.*, *Aspects of Child Life and Education* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1907), 14-17. The examples listed above provide only a small sample of the concepts of which high percentages of urban children were ignorant.

feeling that urban youth were disconnected from nature. Writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, Liberty Hyde Bailey observed “[o]f late years there has been a rapidly growing feeling that we must live closer to nature and make our nature-sentiment vital; and we must of course begin with the child.”<sup>75</sup> Bailey’s ideas—expressed approximately 100 years ago—sound oddly relevant today.

Regardless of parallel concerns from our past, however, contemporary anxieties about the lack of connection between urban youth and nature are growing. We live in an increasingly urban world, and with technological developments that fuel more types of indoor entertainment as well as parental worries about kids going outside, there appears to be a sense that young people are becoming increasingly disconnected from the land. In reference to the global shift from rural to urban environments, biologist Jules Pretty and anthropologist Peggy Barlett claim that “by 2010 there will be more than 3 billion people dwelling just in urban settlements.” In response to this impending reality Pretty and Barlett claim that “there is an imperative to provide opportunities for more connection with nature.”<sup>76</sup>

As evident with the Troy place-makers, the perceived state of disconnection becomes a powerful motivation to take action by supporting a local educational garden program. One can easily sense from the comments of the narrators and others that gardening can truly make a difference in our world. For example, the popular children’s book author Sharon Lovejoy writes, “What I wanted most was a garden where grown-ups would include their children, because gardening together is one way to get back in touch

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<sup>75</sup> Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Nature-Study Idea*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909), 28.

<sup>76</sup> Jules Pretty and Peggy F. Barlett, “Concluding Remarks: Nature and Health in the Urban Environment,” Peggy F. Barlett (ed.) *Urban Place: Reconnecting with the Natural World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 300.

with the earth and one another.”<sup>77</sup> In regard to the restorative qualities of gardening, community gardening-advocate Mary Lee Coe boldly asserts that “[o]ne gardening season can end the feeling of human isolation that the Existentialists labeled ‘alienation,’ the feeling that pervades our urban areas and manifests itself in increased crime rates and defense budgets.”<sup>78</sup>

As discussed earlier, if young people can get back in touch with nature through gardening, they need a safe, reliable place where that can happen. In order to redevelop their “disused sensory channels” and develop a concern for nature, they need a place where they can experience the natural world in direct, physical ways. For the narrators, the potential for connection between youth and land serves as a powerful motivation to support an educational garden. Some narrators seem to feel almost a moral obligation to the earth and urban youth to make a place where young people can connect with nature.

As will be revealed in the next section, a significant hope for some narrators is that exposure and affective connections to the Troy Gardens land will enkindle in young people a “care and love for nature.”<sup>79</sup> Many of the narrators would agree with Trimble when he asserts that to develop “what the philosopher and ecologist Aldo Leopold called the ‘land ethic,’ regard for the wilderness often comes last. First comes a child’s involvement with vacant lots, ditch creatures, and the leaves of ‘weed trees’— discovering what environmental psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan call ‘nearby nature.’ Such comparatively mundane experiences lay the foundation for what can

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<sup>77</sup> Sharon Lovejoy, *Roots, Shoots, Buckets & Boots: Gardening Together with Children* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1999). Lovejoy’s comments are found on page 2 of the “Preface.”

<sup>78</sup> Mary Lee Coe, *Growing with Community Gardening* (Taftsville: The Countryman Press, 1978), 7.

<sup>79</sup> Lily Kong, “Nature’s Dangers, Nature’s Pleasures: Urban Children and the Natural World,” Sarah L. Holloway and Gill Valentine (eds.) *Children’s Geographies* (London: Routledge, 2000), 267.

develop into Edith Cobb's ideal, 'a living ecological relationship between ... a person and a place'—topophilia, rootedness, placeness, knowing where home is."<sup>80</sup>

## **Learning to Care, Learning to Steward**

### **Findings**

Another connection to land that narrators emphasized was teaching young people how to care for plants and other garden organisms. Jessica commented, "when you're working in a garden you realize, you know, that there is ... life and it's not just, you know, a bunch of dirt and green things, like you notice that things are living and you start to have this better connection for living things and then I think that you can respect more living things...." Further, she explained that "we tell kids not to step on the beds and, you know, this isn't good for the plant and, you know, you treat the plants almost like they are people, 'cause they are like living things and I think that that can branch out to the way that they treat other people and just the environment in general, so hopefully they can take that experience with them throughout life...."

Janelle similarly expressed the importance of teaching kids "how to take care of something that's living...." She suggested that parents "get pets for their kids ... so they can learn that sense of responsibility and learn how to take care of something 'cause by taking care of something else, you learn how to take care of yourself ... because you see the needs of that pet, or that plant, or that little plot of land and I think you can make the

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<sup>80</sup> Stephen Trimble, "The Scripture of Maps, the Names of Trees," in Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 25-26.

connection there to your own self....” Janelle also explains that learning about certain places increases the likelihood a person will care for, and protect, those places:

the more you know about something, the less you can, you know, very casually write it off, or say that it’s not important, or simply not even think about it. So ... if you know about a forest, or you know about a garden, or you know about the prairie, I mean you know about it because someone told you about it, and you had special experiences there that you remember. You’re going to hold that place as being important and if it’s important to you, then you’re going to do what you can to protect it, and if you don’t know about it, or it’s not important to you, than ... you’re not going ... to have the same ... motivation to do your part to protect it.

In regard to teaching young people to care for their environment, Megan spoke about the importance of cultivating a sense of ownership. She commented, “I think that connection needs to be there for them to care about the garden ... if they choose to go there in their free time that means they value it. And it’s something that’s stuck in their hearts, or their heads ... somehow it sticks with them, and when they’re deciding what they want to do on their free afternoon, the garden comes up as the place where they want to go to.”

Some narrators spoke about the significance of connecting young people to land as a step towards addressing major environmental problems. In regard to the consequences of youth creating closer relationships with the earth through garden education, Anthony remarked that “on a very fundamental level, I think it’s super important because ... if we destroy [the Earth], we destroy ourselves, you know like, that’s the irony of the way that we’ve chosen to develop our world ... we have this thought that it’s limitless or something.... Like we can have a healthier world, we can at least have healthier humans by treating the world better, by having less pollution, by being able to provide clean, healthy food to people, like we have that ability, and I guess I feel like if we were to start doing that ... I think the world would undergo a pretty

radical transformation....” Fawn commented that “we’re in an ecological crisis that we’re inventing ... and if people have a connection, a sense of connection to the natural environment and a sense of the general under-appreciation for the relationships between humans and their natural environment and how we interact ... then, that can start a more intelligent way of living on this planet.” Fawn also emphasized the importance of providing youth with “a deeper, greater understanding that we are stewards of this earth.”

Sharon stressed cultivating an “environmental awareness and an appreciation and an ethic of human interaction with the environment.” She stated that she didn’t “think that’s something that you cultivate in a classroom without any direct experience to draw from, and ... when you read or talk to any great environmental activist or historian or anyone whose an advocate for either environmental preservation or conservation or environmental education, a lot of that is stemming ... from experiences in nature....” Citing a local example of how an “environmental awareness” can help guide responsible environmental decision-making in the adult years, Sharon told a story about the FTG Board making a difficult decision about whether or not to chop down the exotic mulberry trees on the land. She commented that the Board was composed “of people who have a whole wide array of environmental ethics and values and were willing to debate this and consider pros and cons, and then from there create a whole set of ... guiding principles with regard to the land and the development of the land....” Based on this experience, Sharon observed that “for people to have that ability to discourse on it at that level, they’ve ... had to have some experiences along the way that helped them to develop that ethic, and that care for the land that enabled them to engage in a discussion of what’s right ... but if a kid’s never been out ... in a wild place, and never grown their own food

and never experienced nature in that way, they're not going to be able to make decisions, and to engage those kind of conversations.”

## **Discussion**

### *Learning to Care*

Some narrators value the idea that teaching kids to care for non-human life contributes to their own human development and ability to care for themselves and other humans. There is also a sense from certain narrators that teaching kids to care for land is perhaps most important for the sake of the land itself. Aldo Leopold wrote “[t]hat land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.”<sup>81</sup> As illustrated in Leopold’s words, love and respect for land are guided by moral values. Based on their moral beliefs, the Troy place-makers express notions about how young people *ought* to relate to small-scale places such as the Troy Kids’ Garden as well as large-scale places like the Earth itself. There is a belief among some Troy place-makers that learning to care for a broccoli plant or a small garden plot enables young people to develop a lasting “land ethic” or an ability to care for the Earth as a whole.<sup>82</sup> Two studies involving young people in Singapore and the United States have supported this belief, suggesting that through “contact and interaction with nature” a greater “care for nature can be nurtured,” and that an “emotional connection” or “attachment to a local natural resource can influence environmentally responsible behavior....”<sup>83</sup> In a keynote address to the American Horticultural Society Children’s

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<sup>81</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), xix.

<sup>82</sup> The term “land ethic” was coined by Aldo Leopold to describe a more respectful and caring relationship with land as opposed to viewing land merely as a resource for human exploitation.

<sup>83</sup> See respectively Lily Kong, “Nature’s Dangers, Nature’s Pleasures: Urban Children and the Natural World,” in Sarah L. Holloway and Gill Valentine (eds.) *Children’s Geography* (London: Routledge, 2000)

Gardening Symposium, environmentalist psychologist Louise Chawla similarly suggested that “[e]nvironmental sensitivity, or an empathetic connection with the natural world, correlates strongly with responsible environmental behavior....”<sup>84</sup> Facilitating an “empathetic connection with the natural world” through hands-on exposure is a vital aspect of various narrators’ goals.

For certain place-makers, Troy Gardens ideally serves as the small-scale place where youth can develop not only a connection to, but also an “environmental commitment” for, land on a larger scale. David Sobel, co-director of the Center for Environmental Education at Antioch New England Graduate School, supports this notion, writing that “[a]uthentic environmental commitment emerges out of firsthand experiences with real places on a small, manageable scale.”<sup>85</sup> A contemporary concern of various environmentalists and educators, however, is that youth are trading “firsthand experiences with real places” in their neighborhoods for virtual experiences with far-away places via modern media. Lowell Monke, a former computer educator and current teacher-educator, writes that the computer “is so compelling that it lures children away from the kind of activities through which they have always most effectively discovered themselves and their place in the world.... If they have no opportunities to dig in the soil, discover the spiders, bugs, birds, and plants that populate even the smallest unpaved playgrounds, they will be less likely to explore, appreciate, and protect nature as

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and Jerry J. Vaske and Katherine C. Kobrin, “Place Attachment and Environmentally Responsible Behavior,” *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 32 (no.4, Summer 2001), 16-21.

<sup>84</sup> Louise Chawla, “Gardening as an Initiation Into Environmental Action,” *American Horticulturalist* (July 1994), 6. See also Louise Chawla, “Children’s Concern for the Natural Environment,” *Children’s Environments Quarterly*, 5 (no. 3, Fall 1998), 13-20.

<sup>85</sup> David Sobel, *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education* (Great Barrington: The Orion Society, 1996), 32.

adults.”<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Flannery *et al* express that “[a]s children turn to technology and the entertainment industry, they are becoming less in contact with the physical world thus losing their great capabilities to respond heroically to challenges or threats to the environment. There needs to be more opportunities for students to engage in an awareness and appreciation of our natural world.”<sup>87</sup> Certainly, the recognition that urban youth living in modern times need tangible places and “opportunities” to interact physically with the natural world is an essential motivation for Troy place-makers to do the work they do. And some narrators earnestly hope that by providing youth with a place where they can come and experience nature on a regular basis, these young people will develop a caring relationship for land.

Perhaps recognizing the efficacy of electronic media, environmental educators and others have also utilized mass media to educate youth and adults about natural history.<sup>88</sup> A quick browse of the Internet these days reveals a great deal of educational content designed for children in the areas of garden education, natural history, and life sciences.<sup>89</sup> Despite this focus, some environmental educators express concern that children are not experiencing the natural world in pedagogically appropriate ways. In addition to the concern that youth are trading direct contact with nearby natural areas for

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<sup>86</sup> Lowell Monke, “Charlotte’s Webpage: Why Children Shouldn’t Have the World at Their Fingertips,” *Orion*, 24 (no. 5, September/October 2005), 26-27.

<sup>87</sup> Diana Flannery, Mary Portis, Alicia Eller, and Mark Stemen, “Outdoor School: Creating A Passion for the Environment,” *Californian Journal of Health Promotion*, 1 (no. 1, 2003), 10.

<sup>88</sup> For examples of studies on natural history television programming over the past several decades see: Rosanne W. Fortner and Michele Wiggington, “Natural History Programming on Television: A Comparison of Markets,” *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 21 (no.1, Fall 1989), 15-18; Charles N. Weis and Douglas M. Knudson, “Naturalists and the Mass Media: Reaching Beyond the Parks,” *The Journal of Environmental Education* 11 (no.4, Summer 1980), 41-44.

<sup>89</sup> For examples of nature-related educational websites see: Center for Environmental Education Online, <http://www.ceeonline.org>; Kidsgardening, <http://kidsgardening.com>; Tree of Life, <http://tolweb.org/tree/>; and PBS American Field Guide, <http://www.pbs.org/americanfieldguide//teachers/index.html>.

virtual experiences, educators worry about the type of nature-related information that young people are exposed to through electronic media. Echoing Louv's sentiments about children's fading "intimacy with nature" and their concurrent awareness of "global threats to the environment," Sobel notes that "[c]hildren are disconnected from the world outside their doors and connected with endangered animals and ecosystems around the globe through electronic media."<sup>90</sup> In regard to this phenomenon, Sobel states that children should "have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it and feel comfortable in it, before being asked to heal its wounds."<sup>91</sup>

### *Learning to Steward*

As noted earlier, place-makers value Troy Gardens as a small-scale place where youth can "bond with the natural world." They also recognize that major environmental problems exist in the world, and some hope that by facilitating a connection between young people and the natural world that properly affected youth will eventually work to "heal its wounds." Drawing attention to the severity of our modern ecological predicament, Robin Moore observes that children "live in an era when, for the first time in history, the healthy future of the biosphere has become a serious political issue—given the awesome powers for its destruction now possessed by adult humans."<sup>92</sup>

Perhaps in response to ongoing environmental problems, and the potential for further ecological destruction, several narrators perceive their work as one small way to

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<sup>90</sup> David Sobel, *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education* (Great Barrington: The Orion Society, 1996), 3. Roger Hart emphasizes this sentiment as well in "Children as the Makers of a New Geography," (Children's Environments Research Group, City University of New York, 1995). Available at [http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cerg/documents/children\\_as\\_makers\\_of\\_new\\_geography.pdf](http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cerg/documents/children_as_makers_of_new_geography.pdf).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>92</sup> Robin C. Moore, *Childhood's Domain: Play and Place in Child Development* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 6. Moore is also a proponent of youth gardening, see Robin C. Moore, "Children Gardening: First Steps towards a Sustainable Future," *Children's Environments* 12 (no. 2, June 1995), 66-83. Available on the Internet from <http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/>

turn the tide. For example, Megan remarked, “I would like my life to be focusing on helping bring about positive change in the world and that can be done through many different ways but right now I choose to do it through gardening and nature, connecting kids to it, because the kids are the future as people say (laughter).” Drawing attention to possible political ramifications of their work, Jessica said, “I think being in a garden draws attention to certain issues like the environment or, like you know, politics even ... I mean we work with kids that are pretty young that don’t really know a lot about politics but they could probably take that experience that they’ve had in the garden someday and maybe ... use that as one of their experiences that, you know, changed them or to think this way or that way or, you know, fight for environmental policy....” In light of complex ecological problems in the world, Janelle emphasized the importance of developing pedagogically appropriate ways to inform and inspire children without overwhelming them. She stressed that youth need to be taught about caring for the earth in the context of the complicated, modern world in which we all live. If young people are presented with an overly idealized vision of environmental stewardship, they will likely experience frustration because “they’re not going to be able to understand how they can preserve the earth, and, you know, live out their daily lives.”

The hope for some Troy narrators is that through appropriate pedagogy and exposure, youth who learn to care for their gardens will eventually develop environmental stewardship values that transcend the local garden environment. Promoting environmental stewardship is a central goal within the broader field of environmental education. A joint report from The North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) and The National Environmental Education &

Training Foundation (NEETF) states that “environmental education focuses on building a base of environmental knowledge and skill to be applied to environmental stewardship....”<sup>93</sup> Similarly, in *The National Gardening Association Guide to Kids’ Gardening*, one of the central reasons given for why youth should garden is *environmental stewardship*. The *Guide’s* authors, Lynn Ocone and Eve Pranis, elaborate that “as the stewards of the planet, [we all] must be aware of our role in the environment and to begin to seek long-term solutions to environmental problems. Through gardening, children actively learn about interdependent plant and animal needs, about complex natural cycles and webs, and about their own roles as responsible caretakers. These experiences lay the groundwork for making responsible environmental choices as adults.”<sup>94</sup>

Ocone and Pranis deliver a strong message that the right kinds of experiences in childhood (i.e., gardening) predict an ability to make “responsible environmental choices” in adulthood. Moore reinforces this notion, writing that “[t]he uniquely human skills of tool making, problem solving and decision making are learned competences. In order to develop in the right ethical direction, they must be rooted in childhood opportunities for fully experiencing the Earth and for understanding the influence of humankind upon it.”<sup>95</sup> This was also Sharon’s central point when she referenced the mulberry debate among FTG board members. She emphasized that in order to develop

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<sup>93</sup> NAAEE and NEETF, *Using Environment-Based Education to Advance Learning Skills and Character Development* (Washington, D.C.: The North American Association for Environmental Education and The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation, October 2001), 3.

<sup>94</sup> Lynn Ocone and Eve Pranis, *The National Gardening Association Guide to Kids’ Gardening: A Complete Guide for Teachers, Parents and Youth Leaders* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), viii.

<sup>95</sup> Robin C. Moore, *Childhood’s Domain: Play and Place in Child Development* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 23.

an “ethic of human interaction with the environment,” and a corresponding ability to engage in moral discourse about land management, a person requires experiences in nature.

Academic researchers, such as Roger Hart and Louise Chawla, draw attention to the essential role adults play in guiding formative childhood experiences in nature.

Chawla notes that “[w]hen environmental activists and educators have reflected on the sources of their commitment, they repeatedly identify role models who showed them that the natural world deserves attention, respect, and care: a parent, grandparent, teacher, or friendly neighbor.”<sup>96</sup> Roger Hart similarly suggests that “contact with nature alone is not all that is required for a child to spontaneously develop understanding of and a caring relationship to the natural world. The role of adults is crucial.”<sup>97</sup> Hart’s and Chawla’s observations correspond with earlier remarks made by narrators regarding the important role adults played in facilitating their own connections to the natural world.<sup>98</sup>

Narrators envision Troy Gardens as an intergenerational community where learning to care for, and live responsibly on, the earth is one of the lessons that is passed on to young people. Fawn remarked that her “personal mission is to be part of an educational and land-based sustainable community in which ... adults and youth, people of all ages are learning together how to live well with the earth, live well with ourselves and live well with each other.” Through this type of vision, adults provide examples of

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<sup>96</sup> Louise Chawla, “Gardening as an Initiation into Environmental Action,” *American Horticulturalist* (July 1994), 7. For research that addresses the influential role of parents and teachers, see Thomas Tanner, “Significant Life Experiences: A New Research Area in Environmental Education,” *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 11 (no.4, Summer 1980), 20-24.

<sup>97</sup> Roger Hart, “Fostering Earth Stewardship,” *American Horticulturalist* (July 1994), 5. Roger Hart is Director of the Children’s Environments Research Group at the City University of New York. Hart also conducted important early geographical research with children. See, for example, Roger Hart, *Children’s Experience of Place* (New York: Irvington, 1979).

<sup>98</sup> See Chapter Three, “Gateway Experiences.”

land stewardship to youth, which serve as models of healthy human relations with land. Troy Gardens, like Donahue's Land's Sake project, is an attempt to illustrate how land can be preserved for sustainable productive engagement and educational purposes, which are informed by an inherent respect for the land.<sup>99</sup>

As Cronon points out, "Most of our most serious environmental problems start right here, at home, and if we are to solve those problems, we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as about *not* using it."<sup>100</sup> Troy narrators understand that an "ethic" that informs lasting environmental stewardship involves interacting with the Troy Gardens land in a way that is productive and respectful at the same time; and as illustrated in the next section, home-grown food is one of the most potent symbols of that type of interaction. Many Troy place-makers would likely concur with Leopold's analysis that "[w]e abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."<sup>101</sup>

## **Food Comes from the Ground**

### **Findings**

Narrators considered food to be one of the primary vehicles for connecting children to the land. More than half of the narrators emphasized the goal of teaching kids where their food comes from and how it is grown. Janelle expressed how crucial it is for

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<sup>99</sup> See Brian Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms and Forests in a New England Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>100</sup> William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 85.

<sup>101</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), xviii-xix.

kids “to learn about where their food comes from, because ... we’re so separated from where our food comes from....” Anthony elaborated on this, noting that it is a “very dominant view that food looks ... like it just comes kind of from nowhere, when you just buy it in the grocery store.... like it just kind of magically appeared, and hence ... because the thing that’s sustaining your life, isn’t really of the world, it’s of magic or something, so I think learning that it’s grown, that it takes hard work, that it needs certain things, like it needs water, it needs the right kind of soil, it needs to grow next to things that help it ... it needs pollinators, you know ... like just the very physical-ness of it I think draws us into the world....” Explaining why it is important that kids know where their food comes from, Megan said, “it seems that the more you know about something, hopefully the more willing you are to try it, and I mean it’s not just this piece of broccoli on a plate, maybe it brings back, ‘Oh, I know what the broccoli plant looks like, and oh, remember we had a broccoli plant in my garden’ ... so it has this whole history, and this whole story about it—all these vegetables that aren’t just a vegetable.”

Sharon commented that she doesn’t care if youth participants “walk away knowing how to garden” but she does want them to gain “a different relationship with food when they can pull a carrot out of the ground, or when they know that it comes from the ground rather than comes from the supermarket.” When asked why this was important, she responded:

Well, because we’re so distant from [food], and it’s so critical to our lives ... it’s hard to respect something that you don’t know ... and how can you care for and respect your food and your body in that sense, unless you understand it and I come from a culture where food is really, really important and there’s all sorts of cultural components that go around food, not necessarily around farming but around the preparation of food and the consumption of food and ... it’s a big part of who a person is ... food becomes a part of your whole, ah, network of life relations, and ... I think it’s just dissipating in American culture, that food is no

longer so central ... but if you're growing the food and you see the connection ... you know the kind of labor it takes ... there's a new appreciation of the flavors you're eating, you know the process that it takes to change a product from the garden into a product that you want to eat, such as tomato versus salsa ... it takes on a psychological value that's different when you yourself are involved in doing it, so it's a respect issue, and I think it's not just a respect for the land and the food, it's respect for your body because then it goes into your body.

Sharon remarked that it is "heartbreaking to talk to kids who really don't know where their food is coming from, and then it's very heart-rendering to be with a kid in a garden when they have that moment of 'Eureka!, I see food growing on the vine and now I get it.'" Sharon described how she especially enjoys digging up potatoes "with kids because it's a gold mine ... their eyes light up, and they're so excited and they're looking at the different colors and they're grubbing in the dirt, trying to get all of 'em, and that's something they'll carry with them forever, that elation of that discovery."

Seven narrators spoke about the significance of exposing youth to healthy eating in the garden. Megan stressed the concept of growing food in order for kids to be invested in eating the food. She reflected, "I think that having that whole process where they are involved in the growing really makes a difference ... I mean, I'm just not plopping it down on their plate and saying: try this carrot! This carrot that they grew, that they pulled out of the ground, that they washed off and maybe that they cut up. Then of course, how could you not want to try something that you grew in your garden?" Megan stated that one of her goals was to have kids "eat vegetables, and realize that vegetables can be good-tasting." Similarly, Claire said one of her goals for youth at the farm is for them to be "courageous enough to taste some of the fresh food that we have here ... being able to get people to taste things they hadn't tasted before, you know, one student this year hates tomatoes, hates them, never wanted to taste them, and she tasted

the cherry tomatoes and said: ‘oh, wow, these are really good, I actually like these’ ... and that’s great, so I love ... for them to taste something that is fresh and not canned and not frozen....”

Bill saw the garden as a place where kids could learn about healthy foods that may not be prevalent in their daily lives. He remarked, “I can’t speak for all kids but I know a lot of our kids [at the Vera Court Neighborhood Center] don’t really eat well ... whether it’s ... horrible, crappy food or whether they’re just not getting fed ... that much and so, you know, the hope is that they’ll grow up and just ... know what types of foods are healthy and then when there’s ... options available for them, you know, whether it’s a free community garden plot or ... whether making a million bucks and just wanting to garden anyway and ... to have the experience just so they’ll be able to make really smart ... food choices....” Michael remarked, “They have the intellectual knowledge ... I don’t think we have to teach them anything ... they just have to feel it.” He went on to say that “the nutritional ‘training’ that they get” in the garden “is to pull the ... carrot out of the earth, to plant the carrot, to eat the carrot while it’s still pretty dirty, so they can feel it while it’s alive....”

Five narrators contrasted the healthy kinds of foods young people can eat in the garden with processed foods found at places such as fast-food restaurants and school cafeterias. Claire commented, “it can be kind of scary ... if they’re used to eating McDonalds or something that they get in their school cafeteria ... I love that [at Troy Gardens] they can be exposed to those fresh foods a lot earlier than I ever was ‘cause it does open up a much wider range of choices that are a lot more healthy and nutritious for them.” Claire also remarked that it is “really important” for youth to make the realization

that they are “growing food, people are going to eat this food, it’s organic, these are our quality standards, these are why we have high quality standards, so that they become better consumers of that food ... when they’re feeding themselves....” Jessica commented, “I hope we raise like some little protesters, honestly (laughter) that will try to, you know, rid the schools of ... the bad, like un-nutritious food that they’re serving and ... obviously kids like fresh food and ... I hope it changes some things around here and the way food is being served.”

Bill discussed the potential of Troy Gardens as a place to provide access to good, inexpensive food for both the youth and their families. Bill said “almost every kid who comes out here [from the Vera Court Neighborhood Center] has free or reduced school lunch which means, you know, there’s not a ton of disposable income ... for food, and so, you know, what kind of food is coming into these people’s homes? Well, a lot of it is food pantry food ... it’s all canned goods and preserved goods, and things like that ... so to be able to have access ... to a place literally out your backyard, to be able to come and ... grow those things and to be able to ... have the means to eat fresh fruits and vegetables, you know, is wonderful....” Fawn explained that “one of the aims of the program is that kids should come away from this with a greater ability, that they can know how to grow food and ... so then to contribute to greater food security for themselves, their families and communities.”

### *Growing Confidence*

Half of the narrators also highlighted the confidence that young people develop from growing food in the garden. Jessica remarked that “kids can definitely gain self-confidence from the garden ... when they can see that ... they can actually grow

something and it's not like magically put there by someone else, I think that's important...." Bill reflected, "I think it's a place where they can succeed. You know, it's great for the self-esteem ... they're coming out here and growing really large tomatoes or, you know, they have their own plot and they can come out here and watch it grow ... it's very self-gratifying ... it's a story that they can tell that they did great ... that they accomplished something ... that their family is proud of and that the kids are amazed that they could grow something that big, and so just that achievement, I think that's really important."

Four narrators emphasized the boost of self-confidence and "sense of accomplishment" youth gain from being able to provide food for their families as well. For example, Pat said that some of the Northport Community Center children are "proud of their garden and can't wait until it's time to harvest. They know what their moms like to cook—collard greens, hot peppers, broccoli, and tomatoes are just some of their favorites." Sharon spoke about the pride adults feel when they serve food that they have grown. She remarked that that was something she wants "the kids to experience, and also the ability to contribute to their household, and having your own individual plot allows you to do that...." She noted that "kids are harvesting tomatoes and eggplant, and cabbage, and collards and they're taking it home, and so they're contributing to their home family life, and they feel a sense of this accomplishment and this sense of pride in what they're doing."

## **Discussion**

Once again, Troy place-makers are motivated by a perceived disconnection between youth and the natural world. In this case, they find the prevalent lack of

knowledge about where food comes from and how it is grown disturbing. These concerns represent broader global issues regarding industrial food production and consumption that have troubled environmentalists, ecologists, farmers, and others for some time. On this subject, William Cronon writes, “If we wish to understand the ecological consequences of our own lives—if we wish to take political and moral responsibility for those consequences—we must reconstruct the linkages between the commodities of our economy and the resources of our ecosystem.”<sup>102</sup> In respect to food commodities, Jules Pretty notes that “[o]ur daily consumption of food fundamentally affects the landscapes, communities and environments from which it originates.”<sup>103</sup> Pretty elaborates on this concept, stating that “[i]n the pursuit of improved agricultural productivity, we have ... allowed ourselves to become disconnected from nature....”<sup>104</sup>

Like Pretty and Cronon, Troy narrators understand that environmental responsibility is informed by an understanding of the often obscured connections between consumption and production. One benefit of teaching youth about where food comes from is that it can encourage them to take more “political and moral responsibility” in regard to their own consumption habits. In other words, the better youth understand the physical impacts that the production and transportation of various foods have on different landscapes, the more responsible they are likely to be in their consumption of those commodities. Cultivating this type of consumer and ecological awareness may be part of certain narrators’ long-term pedagogical goals, but what Troy

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<sup>102</sup> William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), xvii.

<sup>103</sup> Jules Pretty, *Agri-Culture: Reconnecting People, Land and Nature* (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 2002), xii.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, xiv.

place-makers seem to value most is that youth learn to see food as *more* than a commodity or a resource.

In this sense, narrators hope that through growing food, young people will forge a personal and respectful relationship with the food that sustains them. Anthony, for example, expressed that learning how food grows is “important because it creates a connection to the physical world.... it draws you in to the fact that the world is a living organism, and it’s an organism that sustains our lives....” As young people develop an understanding that food comes from living plants, it gives them a different appreciation for the food that they consume. Megan hopes that by teaching young people the history of a vegetable it ceases to be “just a vegetable.” The broccoli floret becomes more than a commodity when it is linked to the plant that bore it; the rain, soil, air, and sun that fed it; and the children and adults who nurtured it from seed to bloom.

Supporting this notion, one conclusion that came out of an ethnographic study “of the impact of an agricultural education garden-based curriculum on the students and teachers of an elementary school in the Midwest” was that “gardening changes the status of food for all involved. When one gardens, food can no longer be viewed as a mere commodity for consumption....”<sup>105</sup> In an article appearing in a local *Guide to Cooking Farm-Fresh Seasonal Produce*, Sharon Lezberg reinforces this idea, writing that “food is and always has been more than commodity; it is connected to personal well-being, to relationships with family and friends, to the vitality and persistence of community and

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<sup>105</sup> Laurie Thorp and Christine Townsend, “Agricultural Education in an Elementary School: An Ethnographic Study of a School Garden,” from the 28<sup>th</sup> Annual National Agricultural Education Research Conference (December 2001), 347 and 357. Retrieved [Fall 2005] from <http://aaaeonline.ifas.ufl.edu/NAERC/2001/naerc/thorp.pdf>

culture, and to the care of and respect for the land.”<sup>106</sup> From this perspective, growing and eating food becomes a way to personally connect to both human and non-human communities in culturally and ecologically important ways.

Pretty claims that “[h]umans have been farming for some 600 generations, and for most of that time the production and consumption of food has been intimately connected to cultural and social systems.”<sup>107</sup> Many narrators seem to envision Troy Gardens as a local place where adults and young people can gather together and celebrate food. Perhaps drawing from examples of small-scale agricultural communities throughout history, Troy place-makers try to create a place for people to connect with the land and each other through growing and eating food. At Troy Gardens, the production and consumption of food are made special by annual community events such as the “Savor the Summer” and “Harvest” festivals. These events also include hands-on activities such as cider-pressing, which tend to generate excitement about food among the young and old.<sup>108</sup>

In an article on “Urban Connections to Locally Grown Produce,” Susan Andreatta observes that “[a]s food production and consumption become more consciously entwined, urban populations become more closely linked to natural environments and the local economy, reducing the distance from field to plate.”<sup>109</sup> By teaching young people

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<sup>106</sup> Sharon Lezberg, “A Case of Apples and Oranges: What’s So Special About Eating Locally?,” in Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition, *From Asparagus to Zucchini: A Guide to Cooking Farm-Fresh Seasonal Produce*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Madison: Jones Books, 2004), 7.

<sup>107</sup> Jules Pretty, *Agri-Culture: Reconnecting People, Land and Nature* (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 2002), xii.

<sup>108</sup> For an enthusiastic endorsement of old-fashioned cider pressing at community gatherings see Brian Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms and Forests in a New England Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 193-95.

<sup>109</sup> Susan L. Andreatta, “Urban Connections to Locally Grown Produce,” in Peggy F. Barlett (ed.) *Urban Place: Reconnecting with the Natural World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 117.

how to grow their own food, narrators introduce them to perhaps the most intimate type of “local” food system. In this highly intimate version of localized food, the youth participants—as well as the community gardeners that share the land with them—take on the dual role of producer and consumer. With respect to this dual role, Aldo Leopold famously wrote: “There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace. To avoid the first danger, one should plant a garden, preferably where there is no grocer to confuse the issue.”<sup>110</sup>

As Leopold’s words connote, a consumer who is also a producer is intimately connected to the knowledge that their vitality depends on the living earth. When presented in the proper way, growing and eating food in the garden is perhaps one of the most tangible ways for youth to connect to nature. It allows them to personally and physically witness the life-giving energy that flows from the Sun to a plant to one’s own body. Narrators hope to capitalize on these types of garden learning opportunities to change the way that youth commonly experience food. In the garden context, the cultural interpretation of food ideally moves beyond that of a resource or commodity—it becomes a symbol of life itself.

In regard to young people’s roles as consumers in the garden, narrators spoke of the importance of youth eating fresh, healthy food right off the vine or right from the ground. As Michael said, he wants children to “eat the carrot while it’s still pretty dirty, so they can feel it while it’s alive....” Robert Gottlieb, a Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy at Occidental College, notes that “[t]he significance of school

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<sup>110</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 6.

gardens and community gardens ... resides as much in the area of reexperiencing food (and providing a sense of community) as in identifying an alternative food source.”<sup>111</sup> That seems to be a good assessment of narrators’ goals in this area; they want youth to “re-experience” food in the garden. Narrators also know that it is novel for many young people to eat food right out of the garden, and they use this to their advantage to convince youth to try new things (as evidenced by Claire’s story of the student who discovered that she actually liked cherry tomatoes). Further, narrators believe that kids are more likely to try foods that they have helped grow. Through these experiential methods, Troy place-makers encourage youth to view and experience food in new ways.

Narrators also view the experiences they provide for youth in contrast to the dominant world of processed fast-food. Gottlieb notes that “[t]he fast-food culture not only establishes a disconnect between food grown and food consumed but it also changes the way people experience food.”<sup>112</sup> It makes sense that processed food—with no visible connection to the land and the life that it once held—is seen as no more than a commodity. By experiencing food first-hand on the land, narrators hope that youth will be able to see, in Bill’s words, “beyond the french fry.”

Fast-food and other highly-processed foods are emblematic of the American industrial agriculture system.<sup>113</sup> The industrial agriculture system in America has drawn heated criticism from various proponents of more humane, ecologically conscious, and

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<sup>111</sup> Robert Gottlieb, *Environmentalism Unbound: Exploring New Pathways for Change* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 269.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 268-9.

<sup>113</sup> Geographers, among others, have pointed to negative influences of industrial capitalism in regard to consumptive relations with the material earth. For example, see Allan Pred, “The Nature of Denaturalized Consumption and Everyday Life,” in Bruce Braun and Noel Castree (eds.) *Remaking Reality* (London: Routledge, 1998).

sustainable agricultural systems. Wendell Berry—one of the most outspoken critics of industrial agriculture—argues that this food production system “grows out of the worst of human history and the worst of human nature.”<sup>114</sup> Perhaps the distaste that some citizens have towards industrial agriculture has fueled the growth of various alternative food systems and networks across the country. Fawn, for example, said, “I look around at the society that we live in: who around us grows our own food? How deeply are we dependent and upon whom and what—these horrific corporations that have nothing of our interests or those of the planet, you know, at heart. And that’s where we need to change things ... make the links more direct.”

Allen *et al* observe that “[p]eople are working to construct new initiatives and civic organizations that challenge the existing food system and seek to build alternatives, in many places.... They affirm a shared political agenda: to create food systems that are environmentally sustainable, economically viable, and socially just.”<sup>115</sup> The larger Troy Gardens community certainly seems to share some of the goals that Allen *et al* describe. For example, the FTG brochure asks readers to “envision a world where people live and learn together in sustainable communities and where all people have the tools to grow food and steward the environment.” This idealistic sentiment speaks to Bill’s and Fawn’s hope that Troy Gardens will serve as a place where youth have access to healthy, inexpensive food. Bill emphasized providing a nearby *place* where kids can easily partake of “fresh fruits and vegetables.” In contrast, Fawn focused on the importance of

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<sup>114</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 229.

<sup>115</sup> Patricia Allen, Margaret FitzSimmons, Michael Goodman, and Keith Warner, “Shifting Plates in the Agrifood Landscape: The Tectonics of Alternative Agrifood Initiatives in California,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 19 (2003), 61.

providing youth with *skills and knowledge* of “how to grow food,” so that they can “contribute to greater food security for themselves, their families and communities.”<sup>116</sup>

Narrators also valued the self-confidence youth gain from learning how to grow food and bringing vegetables home to their families. Some narrators personally identified with the feelings of pride associated with growing food. This is illustrated in a story Megan told about bringing her parents to show them the Kids’ Garden. At the Garden they ran into a program participant giving his mother, brother, and neighbor a tour as well. Megan remarked, “it was so cool that ... we were both showing our parents around the Kids’ Garden because ... for both of us it was something that we valued and were proud of, and so we were both showing the people that we cared about....”

The link between growing food and self-esteem is widely recognized by garden educators. For example, Lynn Ocone and Eve Pranis write that “[n]urturing plants from seed to harvest inevitably leads to increased feelings of confidence, self-esteem and pride. One need only see the beaming face of a child who has harvested her first carrot to appreciate the value of this experience.”<sup>117</sup> Narrators clearly value—and are also motivated by—the excitement youth exhibit when harvesting the “fruits of their labor.” Fawn, for example, spoke enthusiastically about youth participants “putting their sweat and muscle into the soil ... and then ... being able to taste the fruits of their labors, they’re taking home tomatoes and cucumbers ... and melons, and they’re loving it....”

What is it about growing food that contributes to increased self-confidence? Charles Lewis, a horticulturalist who studies relationships between people and plants,

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<sup>116</sup> Emphases added to Bill’s and Fawn’s comments.

<sup>117</sup> Lynn Ocone and Eve Pranis, *The National Gardening Association Guide to Kids’ Gardening: A Complete Guide for Teachers, Parents and Youth Leaders* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), viii.

writes that “[t]he investment of time, physical labor, acumen, and personal aspirations are rewarded when a plant blooms or bears fruit, bringing almost parental feelings of pride. The gardener gains a sense of accomplishment, self-esteem, and control over his surroundings.”<sup>118</sup> Ocone and Pranis similarly claim that through gardening a “child becomes empowered and motivated by the realization that hard work and patience produce concrete, satisfying results.”<sup>119</sup> So, perhaps for many young people, growing food gives them a way to achieve a sense of stability and empowerment in a social world so often out of their control.

At the same time that the garden teaches youth the essential lesson that there are forces beyond their control, it gives them a place to produce something tangible and valued. Thus, young people cultivate direct and meaningful connections to the plants and people in their lives through the ancient act of growing food. For the narrators, the educational garden provides a place where youth can grow *confidence* as well as kohlrabi and carrots.

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<sup>118</sup> Charles A. Lewis, “Gardening as Healing Process,” in Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester, Jr. (eds.), *The Meaning of Gardens* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 247.

<sup>119</sup> Lynn Ocone and Eve Pranis, *The National Gardening Association Guide to Kids’ Gardening: A Complete Guide for Teachers, Parents and Youth Leaders* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), viii.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion: Place-based Educators in the Urban Garden

In practice, place-based education . . . emphasizes creative exploration and the joyful realization of the ties that connect a person with nature and culture in her place. It does so out of the realization that love—love of nature, love of one’s neighbors and community—is a prime motivating factor in personal transformation, and the transformation of culture.

—Laurie Lane-Zucker,  
*Place-Based Education*

In this study, I set out to discover what motivates adults to support educational garden environments in cities, and also what they most hope youth will gain from their time spent in these environments. Based on the findings, I argue that central motivations and values of Troy place-makers are informed by key features of “place-based” education. Place-based education utilizes experiential learning methods to help a person connect “with nature and culture in her place.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, for the Troy Gardens’ narrators, place-based education is a pedagogy that utilizes experiential methods to connect youth to “nature and culture” primarily through growing food on the land.

Troy narrators, therefore, are more than simply environmental or garden educators; they are place-based educators. This is a small, yet important distinction because place-based education describes a distinctive approach, which is sometimes utilized, but not so intentionally defined by such kindred fields as garden, environmental, and nature education. This conclusion will address the ways that the narrators’ goals align with the central features of place-based education—the use of experiential methods to connect youth to nature and human communities where they live.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Laurie Lane-Zucker, “Foreword,” in David Sobel, *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* (Great Barrington: The Orion Society, 2004), ii.

<sup>121</sup> It should be noted that these general conclusions are based on a broad analysis of the narrators’ comments (data) taken in sum. It is understood that narrators view these issues in slightly different ways, and express their viewpoints in different ways as well. Thus, this summary analysis is not intended to deny

Place-based education emphasizes sensory-based, affective, experiential learning methods over deductive, fact-based approaches. Clifford Knapp and Janet Woodhouse explain that “place-based educators believe that education should prepare people to live and work to sustain the cultural and ecological integrity of the places they inhabit.”<sup>122</sup> In line with this, narrators hope to “sustain the cultural and ecological integrity” of Troy Gardens by connecting youth to the land using experiential learning methods.

Troy place-makers strongly emphasized the importance of experiential, sensory-based learning experiences such as “eating tomatoes off the vine” and “getting your hands dirty.” Sharon’s comments aptly illustrate the perceived value of such methods: “it’s a perfect learning activity where it’s hand-on, it’s active, kids are very engaged in a kinesthetic sense as well as all the other senses ... and you’re verbalizing ... you’re using every bit of your learning apparatus when you’re in the garden....” The sentiment was perhaps most boldly asserted by Michael who (while speaking about the importance of pulling carrots right from the soil) said “I don’t think we have to ‘teach’ them anything ... they just have to *feel* it.”<sup>123</sup>

Through these experiential methods some narrators hope that youth will form “affective ties with the material environment” of Troy Gardens.<sup>124</sup> Megan, for example, emphasized her priority: to nurture an “emotional connection” to the garden through participants’ “hearts” and “not their minds necessarily.” The notion of emotional

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each individual narrator their own voice, but rather to make some general observations based on the totality of information received from the interviews.

<sup>122</sup> Janice L. Woodhouse and Clifford E. Knapp, “Place-Based Curriculum and Instruction: Outdoor and Environmental Education Approaches,” *ERIC Digest* (Charleston: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 2000, December), 4. (ED448012) Retrieved [11/18/05] from [www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov)

<sup>123</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>124</sup> This is a central feature of the geographic concept, “topophilia,” in Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1974), 93.

attachment to the youth garden could be described as a *sense of place*, which Gillian Rose identifies as “the phrase used by many geographers when they want to emphasize that places are significant because they are the focus of personal feelings.”<sup>125</sup>

These place-based, experiential education methods and values are buoyed by, and should be understood in the context of, a larger socio-historical trend in environmental and garden education. Beyond Troy Gardens, experiential methods are part of a larger pedagogical phenomenon in educational gardens across the United States. In a summary of school gardens of the present day, Laura Lawson reports they “are intended to teach human connectedness to the environment and natural systems.” She notes that “quite often the lessons are subtle and rely on personal enlightenment through the process of working in the garden—digging in the soil, witnessing worms, seeing detritus become rich soil, watching plants grow, and marveling at the production of fruit and flower.”<sup>126</sup>

The roots of this pedagogical approach in the U.S can be traced back to the early years of the twentieth century. It might surprise some Troy place-makers to know that their pedagogical goals closely mirror those voiced a century ago. Janet Woodhouse and Clifford Knapp explain that although place-based education has appeared “only recently in the education literature,” the concept has been promoted “for more than 100 years” by progressive educators such as John Dewey. Dewey is credited for having “advocated an

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<sup>125</sup> Gillian Rose, “Place and Identity: A Sense of Place,” in Doreen Massey and Pat Jess (eds.), *A Place in the World?* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1995), 88.

<sup>126</sup> Laura J. Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 290.

experiential approach to student learning in the local environment.”<sup>127</sup> An elder contemporary of Dewey’s and a strong voice for affective, experiential learning, Liberty Hyde Bailey wrote, “usage has determined a definite office for the name nature-study: it designates the movement originating in the common schools to open the pupil’s mind by direct observation to a knowledge and love of the common things and experiences in the child’s life and environment.”<sup>128</sup>

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, however, these pedagogical goals lost currency. Christine Damrow explains that during this time “[e]lementary science forsook cultivating a bond of sympathy between nature and child and, indeed, derided nature study as overly sentimental. With a premium placed on teaching factual knowledge, elementary science often failed to impart wisdom or to guide the child to love the natural world.”<sup>129</sup>

With the emergence of environmentalism, experiential nature and garden education slowly regained relevance for American educators. Noting the influence of Rachel Carson’s *The Sense of Wonder* on “nature and gardening education in the last decades of the twentieth century,” Damrow explains that “it offered eloquent support to adults wishing to recapture for children the idealism, romanticism, and relevance of the children’s garden.”<sup>130</sup> Summarizing the revived interest in educational gardening that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, Lawson writes, “As was true of garden promotion in

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<sup>127</sup> Janice L. Woodhouse and Clifford E. Knapp, “Place-Based Curriculum and Instruction: Outdoor and Environmental Education Approaches,” *ERIC Digest* (Charleston: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 2000, December), 2. (ED448012) Retrieved [11/18/05] from [www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov)

<sup>128</sup> Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Nature-Study Idea*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909), 4.

<sup>129</sup> Christine B. Damrow, “*Every Child in a Garden*”: *Radishes, Avocado Pits, and the Education of American Children in the Twentieth Century* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005), 268-69.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

earlier eras, children were considered an important group to reach with gardening opportunities. A commonly voiced concern was that children were disconnected from natural systems—they were growing up thinking tomatoes came from a can, not from the earth. Whether in a neighborhood garden or a school garden, children were encouraged by educators, activists, and others to get their hands dirty and learn firsthand about ecology.”<sup>131</sup>

Even though place-based youth garden programs—like the one at Troy Gardens—seem to be gaining momentum in the present era, they still generally exist on the margins of hegemonic educational systems in the United States. Knapp and Woodhouse note that “[s]ome critics of place-based education believe that the primary goal of schooling should be to prepare students to work and function in a highly technological and consumer-oriented society.”<sup>132</sup> Despite their growing appeal, educational gardens are generally not considered a place for academic pursuits. A strong indication of this is that place-based, educational garden activities are often relegated to after-school hours.<sup>133</sup>

Recognizing this dynamic, it makes sense that some narrators see their work in contrast to certain facets of the public school environment. A number of narrators, for example, emphasized the importance of giving youth an opportunity for creative, hands-on exploration in the garden after a day spent sitting at a desk. As opposed to the highly-

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<sup>131</sup> Laura J. Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 234.

<sup>132</sup> Janice L. Woodhouse and Clifford E. Knapp, “Place-Based Curriculum and Instruction: Outdoor and Environmental Education Approaches,” *ERIC Digest* (Charleston: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 2000, December), 4. (ED448012) Retrieved [11/18/05] from [www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov)

<sup>133</sup> There are some notable exceptions to this trend such as the *Edible Schoolyard*, which is firmly integrated into the grounds and curriculum of a Berkeley middle school.

structured, indoor school environment, narrators see Troy Gardens as a living, breathing place where young people can physically connect with nature.

A second major feature of place-based education is that it emphasizes a connection to nature in place. As Robert Michael Pyle says, “When people connect with nature, it happens *somewhere*.”<sup>134</sup> Consistent with place-based education, narrators support educational garden programs at Troy Gardens because they hope that Troy will serve as a physical and symbolic place where youth connect to nature. Furthermore, the close proximity of Troy Gardens to neighborhood residents allows young people, in Sharon’s words, to develop “a more ... long-lasting ... consequence of their involvement” and “a relationship with that place.” The feeling among narrators that an urban educational garden can be a powerful place for youth to develop a personal relationship with nature informs their motivations and values.

Supporting this notion, Lawson writes that “[t]he garden has been envisioned as a place where nature can teach all her lessons. The specific lessons hoped for have often been linked to the social concerns of the time.”<sup>135</sup> Lawson’s observation about how “social concerns of the time” influence the lessons of the garden raises an important issue. Similar to how place is *made* by material and symbolic transformations of the material earth, the “nature” that narrators hope youth will connect to—and care about—is, to some degree, a culturally constructed concept. As Cronon reminds us, “from a

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<sup>134</sup> Robert Michael Pyle, *The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), xv.

<sup>135</sup> Laura J. Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 290.

human cultural point of view,” both “an inner city community garden” and “deep wilderness” are “human *symbol[s]* of nature.”<sup>136</sup>

As we consider the ideas about “nature” that narrators present to youth, it is helpful to briefly discuss the implications of Cronon’s statement. The cultural, or social, construction of nature has become an increasingly significant intellectual issue for various cultural geographers in recent decades. Sounding the call in her 1989 article “The Matter of Nature,” Margaret FitzSimmons argues that the “question of the social production of nature has deep roots and a necessary place in any reconstructed human geography.”<sup>137</sup> In the discussion of social nature some geographers, such as Noel Castree and Bruce Braun, go so far as to claim that “nature is *always* something made” by humans both “materially and semiotically.”<sup>138</sup> Although this claim is put forth to dispel problematic and deeply-rooted ideas promoting a dichotomy between nature and culture, by denying nature’s place as an autonomous agent, this argument generates a new set of problems pertaining to how we relate to the natural world.

For the Troy place-makers, this viewpoint challenges the role of nature as a teacher that is independent of social constructions. An important component of the

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<sup>136</sup> William Cronon, “Saving the Land We Love: Land Conservation and American Values,” Keynote Address for the Land Trust Alliance Rally, Madison, WI (October 17, 2005), 2. Retrieved [11/20/05] from [http://history.wisc.edu/cronon/LTA\\_Plenary.htm](http://history.wisc.edu/cronon/LTA_Plenary.htm) Cronon has produced a number of important scholarly works examining ideas about nature, and the human presence in nature throughout history. See for example, William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996). See also Raymond Williams’ seminal article regarding human conceptions of nature, “Ideas of Nature,” in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (Verso: London, 1980).

<sup>137</sup> Margaret FitzSimmons, “The Matter of Nature,” *Antipode* 21 (no. 2, 1989), 106.

<sup>138</sup> Noel Castree and Bruce Braun, “The Construction of Nature and the Nature of Construction,” in Bruce Braun and Noel Castree (eds.) *Remaking Reality* (London: Routledge, 1998), 5. Emphasis added. Castree and Braun credit Donna Haraway’s insightful ideas on this matter which appear in “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Treichler (eds.) *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

narrators' vision is that when young people touch the dirt, smell the pungent odor of a tomato vine, or hold a wiggling worm in their palm, they have a real—and deeply personal connection—with the natural world. This type of connection to nature appears to be informed not by a dichotomous relationship between romanticized nature and the urban human, but rather by a realization that humans are part of the natural world. Narrators draw strength from a reverent and respectful relationship towards land. Viewing nature as nothing more than a social construct has the potential to be just as harmful to our relationship with the natural world as viewing humans as separate from nature has been.

David Demeritt states that “[i]f nature is an autonomous agent, then it cannot be a cultural production, and vice versa.” In search of a middle ground, Demeritt seeks to create a productive dialogue between the fields of cultural geography and environmental history, which according to him, view nature as either autonomous or culturally produced, respectively. Demeritt argues, therefore, that “[e]nvironmental historians and cultural geographers will not be able to reconcile their differences until they find a new language able to describe nature as both a real actor in human history *and* as a socially constructed object of these histories.”<sup>139</sup> Demeritt finds one solution in the metaphors of Bruno Latour, which he says “break down the great modern divide separating nature (things-themselves) from culture (humans-in-themselves).” These metaphors, Demeritt argues, “make it possible” for cultural geographers “to follow environmental historians in

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<sup>139</sup> David Demeritt, “The Nature of Metaphors in Cultural Geography and Environmental History,” *Progress in Human Geography* 18 (no. 2, June 1994), 179.

talking about the agency of nature without appealing to a transcendent nature beyond culture....<sup>140</sup>

Although Demeritt views this as a progressive moral direction for a common intellectual project shared by cultural geographers and environmental historians, I argue (based on my research findings) that denying the possibility of transcendent nature may result in a zero-sum game. Humans simply cannot prove if nature is transcendent or not, and thus to deny that nature has any transcendent qualities extinguishes a potent motivation for narrators hoping to connect youth to nature (and to a culture that feels a *sense of wonder* in relation to the natural world).

Narrators seem to derive strength and motivation from the concept of nature (which for most narrators seems to include humans) as something greater, unknowable, and transcendent. For example, Fawn referred to the “sense of wonder and appreciation and sometimes ... literal awe” she has for “the natural world.” Michael remarked that “you can’t control a garden” and that “it’s great” for youth to be “involved in something that they can’t control, they can’t overpower, they can’t manipulate ... just something bigger.”

The Kaplans observe that “many gardeners feel a relationship to a force or system that is larger than they are and that is not under human control.”<sup>141</sup> We cannot know for certain whether nature is a *divine* force or simply material earth, so either position is ultimately based on faith.<sup>142</sup> We do know that nature, which we are very much a part of,

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 180. For more on Latour’s metaphors, see Bruno Latour (trans. by Catherine Porter), *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>141</sup> Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan, *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 191.

<sup>142</sup> This idea developed out of a conversation with William Cronon.

is larger than us, and out of our control. From the narrators' point of view, that realization is a good thing for young people to consider and respect.

It is this type of humility and connection to nature that Aldo Leopold hoped would nurture a "land ethic" in people's hearts and within community. By using experiential methods to facilitate a connection to nature at Troy Gardens, narrators expect that youth will develop a caring relationship with the land (and place). Narrators also expressed a wish that this link to nearby nature will lead to a closer connection with, and a desire to protect, land beyond the borders of Troy Gardens.<sup>143</sup>

The third major feature of place-based education is that it fosters a connection to one's human community. In the case of Troy Gardens, narrators hope that the land will provide youth and adults with a place to connect to, and be mentored by, an intergenerational human community that both uses and respects the land. This sentiment was well-expressed by Fawn when she described her desire "to be part of an educational and land-based sustainable community in which ... adults and youth, people of all ages are learning together how to live well with the earth ... and live well with each other."

For many narrators, this vision is informed by profound experiences they had earlier in their lives connecting to land in the company of elders. Troy place-makers draw strength from their own gateway experiences and are motivated to pass on those types of experiences to a younger generation. For example, Janelle reflected that Troy Gardens "provides an opportunity ... that I had growing up, but I think that a lot of kids

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<sup>143</sup> In geographical language, this process could be described as "jumping scales." The notion of "jumping scales" was first introduced to me by Samuel Dennis at a FTG Youth Committee meeting. For more on this idea, see Stuart Aitken, "Public Participation, Technological Discourses and the Scale of GIS," in W. Craig, T. Harris, and D. Weiner (eds.), *Community Participation and Geographic Information Systems* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 357-366.

don't have, and that's a safe place for them to go and experience nature with caring and knowledgeable staff.”

Narrators view working landscapes such as Troy Gardens, which are “embedded in community,” as good places to teach youth about sustainable relationships between people and land. For Troy place-makers, growing and eating food in a community setting is a powerful way to connect a young person to both “nature and culture in her place.”<sup>144</sup> Many narrators would support Cronon's belief that “[t]he working landscape is the land we harvest to sustain our human lives, and ... one of the most urgent tasks of environmentalism and conservation is to reclaim an ethical and aesthetic vision of what I would call the *honorable harvest* as a symbol of the human good.”<sup>145</sup>

Troy place-makers also hope that, over time, more and more young people and adults in the neighborhood will view Troy Gardens as *home*. Yi-Fu Tuan writes that “in the broadest sense,” geography “is about how human beings have created ‘homes’ or ‘worlds’ out of nature.”<sup>146</sup> From this place-making perspective, “[b]y transforming the Earth into home we create places at a myriad of different levels.... Home is an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness.”<sup>147</sup> Rootedness is an apt metaphor for describing the way that gardeners can feel connected to the land. For Troy place-makers, the ultimate goal is to foster a *sense of place*, through which youth feel rooted in the land, and rooted in community. Tuan remarks

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<sup>144</sup> Laurie Lane-Zucker, “Foreword,” in David Sobel, *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* (Great Barrington: The Orion Society, 2004), ii.

<sup>145</sup> William Cronon, “Saving the Land We Love: Land Conservation and American Values,” Keynote Address for the Land Trust Alliance Rally, Madison, WI (October 17, 2005), 5. Retrieved [11/20/05] from <http://history.wisc.edu/cronon/LTA>

<sup>146</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Morality and Imagination* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), vii.

<sup>147</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 24. Cresswell's statements are in dialogue with Yi-Fu Tuan's ideas about making place and home.

that “[m]aking a home for ourselves on earth, in harmony with each other and with other living things, is what life is about.”<sup>148</sup> This is what the narrators envision for Troy Gardens—a place that is home to an intergenerational, diverse human community that works, learns from, and celebrates the land together.

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<sup>148</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “A Sense of Place,” in Gretchen Holstein Schoff and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Two Essays on a Sense of Place* (Madison: The Wisconsin Humanities Committee, 1989), 1.

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