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Aroma-Home's Edible Stories:
An Urban Community Garden Performs

Aroma-Home, an artist-initiated community garden project originated in aromatics, flavours, conversations and gardening. In 2013, Sarah Harper of Friches Théâtre Urbain joined forces with local inhabitants of Villetaneuse in France to reclaim urban public spaces marred by construction and neglect and to start healing the social and environmental wounds caused by this damage. Creating tiny artistic (agri)cultural eco-oases in brownfields, the artists and participants began to alter the urban landscape with whimsical plant-based interventions and provocations. This guerrilla gardening soon led to the sowing of a community garden that wove together food-growing, story-telling, and place-making and fashioned its particular identity through cultural practices around growing, preparing and sharing food of the multi-ethnic participants. The horticultural-culinary conversations became inextricably connected to gardening activities: *edible stories* involving food memories, recipes, horticultural skills and spatial narratives that nourished those who prepared and consumed them. This 'From the Field' paper looks at how the community garden/art-making processes of the *Aroma-Home* project transformed a bleak construction site into a mini-urban agricultural 'commons' where imagining, planting, maintaining, and harvesting the garden and its *edible stories* were shared. The empirical evidence presented in this paper is gleaned from participant-observation of *Aroma-Home* and informal conversations with the artists and community participants during many visits made to Villetaneuse during the artist-led phase of the project.

Aroma-Home is located in Villetaneuse, one of the communes in the northern 'banlieues' of Paris. Its diverse inhabitants include recent arrivals from Mali, Ethiopia,

Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti; French citizens of foreign, mostly Algerian, descent; and long-time indigenous French residents. Several train tracks side-by-side divide Villetaneuse's small geographic area, only 2.3 square kilometres, so in early 2013, city officials opened a footbridge over the tracks to link neighbourhoods. Not an ordinary footbridge, but rather an urban landmark resembling a leaf uncurling, its unusual design created a blind spot that soon became an ideal place to rob pedestrians. In addition, the area was marred by the construction of the new tramway T8 (2010-14) with its last stop near the footbridge. Commissioned by the city in 2013 to 'accompany' the disruption of the on-going construction, Harper conceived of the *Aroma-Home* project as a way to poeticize damaged places by creating small communally-created pockets of unexpected natural beauty.

Aroma-Home revolved around a caravan, brightly painted with imaginative fruits, vegetables and flowers, a ludic metonymy for 'nature' in the urban landscape (see Friches Théâtre Urbain's website for colour photographs, <http://www.friches.fr/projets/aroma-home> and <http://aroma-home.hautetfort.com/>). In its first couple of months, the artists parked the caravan in random places beside one of the town's many construction sites. Harper and her partners, Camille Frechou and Pascal Laurent, would set out blue deck chairs and a bright blue umbrella and begin to work on the wasteland as a garden: sowing seeds of aromatic herbs and edible flowers amidst the rubble or drawing attention to food crops and wildflowers already growing on the damaged land. The neighbours soon arrived to watch, ask questions, and begin conversations about food: what plants they eat, what they would like to grow, what they miss *from home*, what edible and medicinal plants are growing in the neglected site. Harper invited the neighbourhood residents into the tiny caravan to taste and smell unfamiliar titbits: exotic herbal teas, pâtés of dried herbs, jams, syrups made from roses, hibiscus, ginger or mint, medicinal herbal remedies, chutneys, pestos, pili-pili, and aromatic oils. Each taste had a story: what is on the plate? where and how did it grow? how did it get to Villetaneuse? It did not take long for the caravan to develop a following. As residents returned to talk and taste, they would bring potted plants to set around the caravan creating a day-long pop-up garden.

Figs. 1, 2 and 3: The Aroma-Home caravan as Sarah Harper welcomes the neighbours with tastes and smells to experience, June 2014. Photograph by Susan Haedicke.



Soon they started guerrilla gardening (See Tracey, 2007; Reynolds, 2008; Hou, 2010; McCay, 2011; Hardman, et. Al., 2014; Adams, et.al., 2015; Mikadze, 2015; Thompson, 2015 on guerrilla gardening) by planting at the edges of worksites and throwing 'seed bombs' (seeds held together by a ball of dried mud that explodes on impact and releases the seeds) over chain-link fences into abandoned lots. Edible

flowers and herbs seemed to appear overnight in the most unexpected places. And the diverse groups that made up the neighbourhood began to share, cultivate and harvest local stories around growing and preparing food as recipes and foods cooked in their homes were exchanged. The horticultural-culinary conversations became inextricably connected to gardening activities: *edible stories* involving food memories, recipes, and horticultural skills that nourished those who prepared and consumed them. During these early weeks, the artists and residents created small art-garden interventions: performative ‘stories’ of the land (See Sedgwick, 2003; Glass, et.al, 2015 on performativity). In front of one wasteland, they designed a graphic panel highlighting the biodiversity of plants growing in the construction site and placed it under the official panel announcing the road works. In an abandoned lot, they designed a ‘look what is already growing here’ provocation to save herbs and wildflowers growing on the site from bulldozers by transplanting the small plants into containers placed on totems on edges of the site for passers-by to adopt. Tiny pop-up gardens sprouted behind fences, in neglected urban corners or in the cracks in the concrete.

Since the project was itinerant for its first couple of months in 2013, it might have seemed *place-less*, but as Tim Ingold points out, itinerancy or what he calls ‘wayfaring... is neither placeless nor place-bound but *place-making*’ (Ingold, 2007, p.101). The *place* being *made* was a ‘commons’ of shared resources and responsibilities (See Ostrum, 1990; Hou, et.al, 2009; Thompson, 2015; ASAP, 2016 on commons). Here, the shared resources were its edible stories: the collective memories, imaginings and guerrilla gardening of the participants. While this commons lacked the materiality of a specific location, it created a site through communal experiences among the participants certainly, but also in the human partnerships with plants. This collective collaboration exemplifies ‘nature’ as described by the editors of *Nature Performed* Szerszynski, et. al., 2003, p. 4): a ‘co-performance of different, interacting and evolving individuals, species and processes—including human beings.... a process open to improvisation, creativity and emergence, embracing the human and the non-human’ (Szerszynski, et. al., 2003, p. 3-4).

In late spring that first year, the participants and the artists reluctantly relinquished their poetic ephemeral gardens for a more established community garden in the empty lot near the entrance to the footbridge to soften the chaos of the tramway construction site with its concrete barriers, chain-link fences, machinery and debris and to reclaim a damaged public space making it their own with nature's help. By early July, seven beds had been planted. The youth created a watering system from plastic bottles, tubes and bright orange tape, and the residents set up a watering rotation so that the little plants did not die. Over the summer, the participants relished the space to grow crops 'from home' that were difficult to find in Villetaneuse or impossible to grow in window pots, and in September they celebrated their community garden achievement with a harvest party featuring tables full of favourite foods, bales of hay creating conversation spots, music and murals artistically documenting *Aroma-Home*.

A 'community garden' traditionally describes a place for people to garden together, sometimes in separate allotments, sometimes communally. Often the garden is sited in empty spaces neglected or abandoned by the city or private landlords (See Crouch, 2003; Holland, 2004; Pudup, 2008; Hou, et.al., 2009; Milbourne, 2009; Milbourne, 2012; Pitt, 2017). A community garden is more than a geographic location and an activity however. Rather, it embodies what Doreen Massey characterizes as an 'event of place' (Massey, 2005, p. 138-142): a place in motion, its vibrant parts constantly interacting. She claims that space is dynamic and borderless: 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far, ... [and] places are collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space' (Massey, 2005, p.130). *Aroma-Home's* edible 'stories-so-far' that began to take shape in the guerrilla gardening flourished in this new setting and revised the focus on the garden's *event-ness* from human activities to collaborations between humans and more-than-humans. This community garden confronted the mess of the tramway's large building site that presented a narrative of progress through durable man-made constructions with an intimate community garden space that offered a dynamic counter-narrative of biodiversity and collective labour in small-scale, communal food production that challenged the notion of passive matter (Latour, 2004; Ingold, 2000; Bennett, 2010; Pitt, 2017). *Aroma-Home* imagined *place* as coeval spatial narratives

co-created by the flora and fauna, including humans: a commons that created a *locational site* for shared experiences and a *narrative site* for shared edible stories. Ingold links narrative and place by regarding story-telling as a way to enter into a place, to experience it from *within*, rather than as a way to represent or depict it. Here, 'the boundaries between person and place, or between the self and the landscape, dissolve altogether' (Ingold, 2000, p.56). The place *is* the story and the story *is* the place. Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' focuses on these relationships and encounters of humans, nonhumans and places, and he claims that humans cannot step out of the environment to observe it disinterestedly or to represent objectively since 'the world we inhabit does not confront us, it surrounds us' (Ingold, 2000, p.168). *Aroma-Home*, understood through a lens of *dwelling*, is far-removed from any kind of stable, delimited place and instead presents an 'event of place' (Massey, 2005, p.138-42) in the stories, composed on and by the land through a collaboration between humans and the garden's inhabitants and consumed by the human and more-than-human participants. The simultaneity of these multiple stories form part of *Aroma-Home's* political ecology, a hybrid of concept and action, that interweaves defence of ecosystems and revival of public life.

Aroma-Home's community garden was not only an aesthetically pleasing, food-producing spot amidst the chaos of construction, it was also quite successful in bringing together diverse populations of the neighbourhood. But it would be a mistake to think political power dynamics and opposing voices did not cast a shadow over the garden. Soon after the harvest party, some city residents with an opposing spatial narrative for the site lobbied to have *Aroma-Home* replaced by an asphalt football pitch. In early winter, the mayor authorised its dismantling and tarmacked it over, but offered Harper a smaller hilly piece of land off to the side of the original community garden. The plantings in the new hilly *Aroma-Home* community garden began in early spring, 2014, with the arrival of the caravan and the gathering of the neighbours. Again, the garden transformed the damaged site into a haven of cultural and bio-diversity and provided a geographic space in which the artists and the residents could reinterpret their conversations into artistic beds of edible crops.

Fig. 4 and 5: Preparing Aroma-Home Community Garden, July 2014. Photographs by Susan Haedicke.



Mme Delva planted jomou seeds she brought from Haiti so that she could make the famous jomou [pumpkin] soup. She explained that the former slaves made the delicious soup but they were not allowed to eat it, so now it is a symbol of Haitian independence. Another participant took responsibility for ‘roselle’ and created a sign to explain: ‘Roselle [a kind of hibiscus native to West Africa] is absolutely necessary. In the shops here, it is so expensive whereas at home, it grew everywhere’. Others made those political links more blatant in signs posted in the garden beds: ‘Growing our food is a political act: a peaceful form of resistance’ (my translations).

Over the summer, participants of all ages walked paths into the hillside and built raised beds and benches. On one of the workdays I spent there, about thirty people dropped in, some to chat or taste something new, some to work in the garden, some just to watch. The young people were avid workers, building and painting new benches (and then guarding them until the varnish dried) or creating new beds by preparing the soil and planting seeds. They built a *desire plot*, a space where each participant could plant whatever he or she desired. Two five-year old girls planted about one hundred pea shoots under the fruit trees, and a young boy found an enormous worm seemingly wrapping itself loosely around the roots of a plant. He explained to me how worms and plants helped each other, and then he pointed to another boy working on the bench and confided, ‘Like my friend. We hated each other, always fought, tried to make the other look bad. Now we don’t. Much better’. The garden seemed to respond almost playfully to human presence

and intervention. What had seemed a barren wasteland just a few short months before now displayed itself as a space teeming with life. Worms, invisible in the construction site, emerged to help the garden grow; birds dropped seeds from other gardens; and bees pollinated plants. The children delighted in the spiders weaving intricate webs and hiding in folds of leaves, so they built a 'bug hotel' for all the insects that came to visit. And more insects came.

The more the garden grew, the more the neighbours gardened; the more they gardened, the more the garden grew often surprising the gardeners with unusual crops that no one had planted or crops that refused to stay in their raised beds. The community gardeners called them 'revolutionaries', and, true to their name, these plants overthrew the planned order of tidy raised beds. As the participants were quick to observe, the diversity of plants, chosen and planted by the multi-ethnic gardeners, often flourished side-by-side, but sometimes a plant refused to share a garden space and thus migrated, vanquished its neighbours, or died. The local gardeners recognised that this garden story metaphorically paralleled their own stories in their multicultural neighbourhoods full of contrasting traditions, sounds, and smells. It gave them the courage to challenge oft-repeated political platitudes about cohesive communities of diverse inhabitants and to demand that city officials address the conflicts that frequently arose. In the community garden, the most obvious conflict was across generations as several teen boys saw *Aroma-Home* as a challenge to their anticipated control of the site around the new tram station. The city quickly responded by assigning a social worker to participate in the garden workdays and help defuse hostilities and aggressions of the youth who could then, sometimes, be tempted to try a new taste or even plant a seed (See DeLind, 2003; Pudup, 2008; Guthman, 2008; Milbourne, 2012; Hayes-Conroy, et.al., 2013; and Ginn, 2014 for analyses of various conflicts and divisions in community gardening).

The Inauguration, the final artist-led event, took place on Sunday, 7 September 2014 as over one hundred people came to celebrate their own community garden. Neighbours prepared dishes native to their countries of origin, spiced up with vegetables and herbs picked from the garden, and the city provided grills placed outside the garden. For *The Inauguration*, Harper and the gardeners completed the communally-created artwork in the garden: benches, stumps that

became stages for impromptu performances, panels with information, and three permanent sound installations. One of the colourful sound columns, activated when someone pushed its button, offered compositions of conversations and stories shared by the local inhabitants when they visited the garden or sipped tea in the caravan. The other two sound columns, activated by movement, played augmented ambient sounds recorded (and imagined) in the garden. People walking by would start these soundscapes, but so would birds or blowing leaves. It was almost as if the garden had found its voice, and it seemed to 'issue a call' to the local inhabitants. By the end of the day as the artists packed up the tools, umbrellas and potted plants around the caravan, the community claimed the site as mothers relaxed in the garden and children created impromptu performances on the tree-stump stages.

The power of *Aroma-Home* to affect change occurred over and over as a construction site transformed into an inviting edible garden and eco-community hub. It could be seen in the mothers who began to compost because the garden needed food just as they did, and they wanted it to flourish on what they ate. It could be seen in the neighbours who brought seedlings sown in paper cups to plant in the garden and share the plant's life story, an edible story of food preparation, emotional connection, sociality and belonging. It could be seen in the children's bug hotel. It could even be seen in the teenage boys who came to make snide remarks or intimidate the artists or other young people who wanted to work there, but were slowly, reluctantly, but irresistibly drawn in to taste something unfamiliar, help carry the wood for benches, or plant a seedling. And it could be seen in the plants that sprouted seemingly on their own or that 'redesigned' the garden beds.

On the 20th of December 2014, the neighbourhood participants invited the artists back to *Aroma-Home* to celebrate the opening of the tramway T8 with festivities around food and edible stories about the community garden since the Inauguration in September and about future plans and possibilities. *Aroma-Home* is now the work of the neighbourhood gardeners and hopefully its political ecology can model a twenty-first century 'commons' based in its edible stories, but even with all the positives, tensions still simmer, particularly among the teens who find the community garden a challenge to their ordering of public spaces in the neighbourhood. As the presence of the artists has decreased, acts of vandalism have

increased, and a generational battle over who controls the area around the newly opened tram station and community garden site — a battle that opposes the dominance of conventional authority — is just beginning. I will not continue to work on *Aroma-Home*; however, I am reworking the notion of the ‘commons’ as ‘edible stories’ described in this ‘From the Field’ paper to apply to another practical project: a verbatim performance on the needs, possibilities, challenges, and contributions of women in UK agriculture. Here, the ‘commons’ encompasses comparable life stories with common experiences that lead to collective socio-political and/or environmental action.

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