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TITLE

The *Aroma-Home* Community Garden Project's Democratic Narratives:
Embodied Memory-Stories of Planting and Cooking

ABSTRACT

Aroma-Home, a community garden project just outside Paris, France, originated in aromatics, flavours, guerrilla gardening and conversations. In 2013, Sarah Harper of Friches Théâtre Urbain joined forces with local inhabitants to reclaim urban public spaces marred by construction and neglect and to heal social and environmental wounds caused by this damage. Creating tiny artistic (agri)cultural eco-oases in brownfields, participants began to alter both the urban landscape and attitudes towards active citizenship as they used a community garden/art-making process to establish an urban agricultural 'commons' of natural and cultural resources equitably shared. Here, the shared resources were the gardeners' edible stories and storied edibles: the collective memories of food growing and preparation, the shared meals, communal gardening and the incipient community activism of the participants. This essay explores how Aroma-Home Community Garden grew a garden rooted in local life by drawing on embodied memory stories of land, horticulture and food — stories shared sometimes in words, sometimes in gardening and cooking activities, and it argues that the garden's efficacy is located in the participants' memories and practices.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Susan Haedicke is Associate Professor (Reader) in the School of Theatre, Performance, and Cultural Policy Studies at University of Warwick. Her research has focused on performances in public spaces and democratic participation. She published *Contemporary Street Arts in Europe: Aesthetics and Politics* in 2013 and several articles and book chapters on street arts and applied theatre over the last decade. Her current research looks at performance and agriculture for a book entitled *Performing Landscapes:*

Farmlands. She also works as a professional dramaturg, currently with Friches Théâtre Urbain to devise a piece on women's contributions to UK agriculture. In 2017, she worked with the Polish street theatre company, Teatr Biuro Podróży, on *The Winter's Tale*, performed in the Coventry Cathedral ruins.

KEYWORDS

commons, community garden, Friches Théâtre Urbain, guerrilla gardening, place-making, storytelling

IMAGE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Friches Théâtre Urbain. Aroma-Home caravan. June 2013. Photo by author.

Figure 2. Friches Théâtre Urbain. Boy with worm at Aroma-Home Community Garden. July 2014. Photo by author.

The *Aroma-Home* Community Garden Project's Democratic Narratives: Embodied Memory-Stories of Planting and Cooking

Susan Haedicke

Aroma-Home originated in aromatics, flavours, conversations and guerrilla gardening. In early spring of 2013, inhabitants of Villetaneuse, France, discovered a small caravan, brightly painted with imaginative fruits, vegetables and flowers, parked alongside one of the town's many urban renewal construction sites. Beside the caravan were two blue deck chairs under a bright blue umbrella, and a gardener was busily planting at the edge of the brownfield site. As curious passers-by approached to ask questions, the gardener invited them into the caravan to smell and taste foods not often found in local gardens and shops. Thus began the partnership between Sarah Harper, Artistic Director of Friches Théâtre Urbain, a street theatre company based in Paris, and many Villetaneuse residents to reclaim public spaces in their town 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 edible plant-based interventions and provocations. This guerrilla gardening soon led to the sowing of a community garden that wove together food-growing, story-telling, place-making and social engagement as it fashioned its own particular identity through conservations and cultural practices around growing, preparing and sharing food among the multi-ethnic participants. The informal horticultural-culinary conversations, inextricably connected to gardening activities, formed the core of Aroma-Home's edible

stories and storied edibles that interwove shared dishes, food-growing memories, recipes, and horticultural skills and that nourished those who prepared and consumed them. The many diverse stories, embodied by the storytellers and the listeners alike began to provide entry points into discussions about immigration, memories of home, treasured edibles from afar, assimilation, urban growth and nature. These discussions, in turn, began to awaken participants' awareness of the town's policies on uses of public space, urban renewal, resource allocation and environmental justice. Benjamin Shepard, in his article linking public space and democratic dialogue, argues that public spaces, such as community gardens, provide experiential sites for airing contrasting beliefs and ideas in both words and actions. He claims that "growing gardens works in tandem with growing social change"[1] and that these communal public spaces sow "seeds of a radical democratic counterpublic."[2]

This essay argues that the community garden/art-making processes of the Aroma-Home project's edible stories and storied edibles altered both the land and the public engaged in the communal project. A bleak construction overflow site was transformed, albeit temporarily, into a mini-urban agricultural "commons" where tasks of planning, planting, maintaining, and harvesting the garden were shared and where each plant had a story connected in some way to the gardener who sowed it. And this garden of storied edibles, in turn, gave participants the space to revive food-related traditions from their

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[1] Benjamin Shepard, "Community Gardens, Convivial Spaces, and the Seeds of a Radical Democratic Counterpublic," in *Democracy, States and the Struggle for Global Justice*, eds. Heather Gautney, Omar Dahbour, Ashley Dawson and Neil Smith. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 280.

[2] Ibid., 273.

lands of origin as they planted crops not affordable or readily available in France. Aroma-Home acted as a commons that helped to acclimate the multi-ethnic participants to their adopted homeland as together they metaphorically and literally put their roots in the soil of France. Manissa M. Maharawal, in her work on activism and urban commons in San Francisco, claims that the "concept of a 'commons' explicitly refers to social practice.... As such, it is dependent on the people and practices of 'commoning' through which it is produced, reproduced, and maintained."[3] This commoning, where natural and cultural resources and tasks are shared as in the Aroma-Home project, creates a space dedicated to a collective good, establishes links between food production and other socio-political and ecological endeavours, and begins to engage disparate neighbours in a communal project drawing on their varied pasts to improve their communal future. The embedded activism in a project such as this validates the importance of the concept of a commons and encourages democratic participation in neighbourhood issues, even if that activism is short-lived. As a reflective participant-observer over the approximately two years of the artist-led project, I was able to engage in many informal conversations with both the artists and community gardeners. Drawing on Claire Nettle's work on community gardens as sites of "collective social action"[4] that provide "potential contributions to understandings of

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[3] Manissa M. Maharawal, "San Francisco's Tech-Led Gentrification: Public Space, Protest, and the Urban Commons," in *City Unsilenced: Urban Resistance and Public Space in the Age of Shrinking Democracy*, eds. Jeffrey Hou and Sabine Knierbein. (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 36-7.

[4] Claire Nettle, *Community Garden as Social Action* (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 1.

activism, community, democracy and culture,"[5] I came to understand how Aroma-Home Community Garden grew a garden rooted in local life by drawing on embodied memory stories of land, horticulture and food— stories shared sometimes in words, sometimes in gardening and cooking activities.

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, Guadaloupe, and Haiti; French citizens of foreign, mostly Algerian, descent; and long-time indigenous French residents. Villetaneuse covers only 2.3 square kilometres, and the population density is high with about 5500 inhabitants per square kilometre. Several train tracks side-by-side divide Villetaneuse's small geographic area, so in early 2013, city officials opened a footbridge over the tracks to link neighbourhoods. This is no ordinary footbridge, but rather an urban landmark resembling a leaf uncurling as it rises over the train tracks. Unfortunately, the bridge's unusual design created a blind spot that soon became an ideal place for muggings and thefts of mobile phones. In addition, the area at one end of the footbridge was a construction site for Gare de Villetaneuse-Université, the final station on a branch of the new tramway T8 (in construction from 2010 to 2014). Commissioned by the municipal council of the commune of Villetaneuse in 2013 to "accompany" the disruption of the on-going construction, Sarah Harper conceived of the Aroma-Home Community Garden project as a way to poeticize some of the town's abandoned and damaged spaces by creating small and unexpected communally-created pockets of food production and wildflowers.

[5] Ibid., 3.

As the project grew into a community garden, it acted as an artistic response to urban blight, mindless vandalism and street crime. And the project actually contributed to the reduction of petty crime around the construction site and offered a tiny agrarian spot for both the inhabitants of Villetaneuse and the construction workers to relax in nature.

AROMA-HOME'S GUERRILLA GARDENING

Aroma-Home revolved, at first, around the caravan, decorated with oversized fruits, vegetables and flowers, that seemed to offer a ludic representation of "nature" in the urban landscape. In addition, the tiny caravan provided a focal point for the place-making of a multi-layered site: a place of encounter where passers-by could take a moment away from the busy world and share ideas, stories and dreams, a place of comfort where they could feel welcome and cozy, a place of experimentation where they could taste and smell unfamiliar foods and try out new thoughts or attitudes, and a place of initiative where they could imagine the remaking of their urban landscape.[6]

In its first couple of months, the artists (Harper was often joined by Pascal Laurent and Camille Frechou) parked the caravan several times a month in random places beside one of the town's many construction sites or other wastelands (Figure 1). They would set out the blue deck chairs, or sometimes a brightly colored folding picnic table and chairs, and would begin to work on the brownfield as a garden: sowing seeds of aromatic herbs and edible flowers amidst the rubble or drawing attention to food crops and wildflowers already

[6] For many colour photographs of Aroma-Home, see Friches Théâtre Urbain's website, http://www.friches.fr/projets/aroma-home and the project's blog, http://aroma-home.hautetfort.com/. The essay will refer to many of these color photographs rather than reproduce them.

growing on the damaged land. The neighbors soon arrived to watch, ask questions, and begin conversations about food: what plants they like to eat, what they would like to grow, what they miss from home, what edible and medicinal plants are growing in the neglected site. After some gardening, Harper would offer a tray of food items not readily available in Villetaneuse: pâtés of dried herbs, marmite, jams with unexpected combinations of fruits and herbs, syrups made from edible flowers and roots, chutneys, pestos, pili-pili, licorice and sea vegetables. Another tray tempted visitors with fragrances: essential oils, aromatic spices, and Armenian paper that burns like incense. And, of course, the tastes and smells were accompanied by unusual herbal teas (basil, sage, or goji berry, for instance) and juices (red hibiscus, ginger or fig).[7] Each taste and smell had a story: what is on the plate or in the glass? where and how did it grow? how did it get to Villetaneuse? how is it prepared? what memories does it arouse? Inside the caravan, many treasures surprised the visitors. The children loved the cuckoo clock that chimed the hour; their mothers relished the smells of the many drying herbs. While some items in the caravan remained the same—familiar and comforting, there were always surprises, at first brought by Harper for the inhabitants, but soon the inhabitants reversed the exchange bringing potted plants of hard-to-find herbs and vegetables to establish a day-long pop-up garden around the caravan. It did not take long for the caravan to develop a following. When it parked in an unexpected location, word rapidly spread, and the neighbors would soon arrive with gardening tools and a tasty dish and the accompanying stories to share.

[7] See the Aroma-Home website for color images of these trays of tastes and scents, http://www.friches.fr/projets/aroma-home.

And the diverse groups that had lived side-by-side, but not really "together" (in the words of one resident),[8] began to cultivate and harvest local stories about food: stories that depended on reliving and reimagining memory stories from the past or faraway places. The caravan's place-making developed what Chris Firth, Damian Maye and David Pearson call the "third space" of community gardens, a space outside the norm where communal activities, connectivity and social cohesion predominate.[9]

The caravan's communal activities began to forge relationships and alongside the encounters with new tastes, smells, seeds and plants, the residents began to voice pent-up frustrations with the slowness of the construction and its apparent disregard for the land. Their discussions explored ways to counter these delays and damaged sites, and soon the Villetaneuse residents joined the artists in guerrilla gardening.[10] Without permission from the city, they began to plant edible flowers and herbs at the edges of worksites, in abandoned lots, or in the cracks in the concrete and to throw "seed bombs" (seeds held together by a ball of dried mud that melts in the rain and releases

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[8] All quotations from residents and statements on signs, panels and labels associated with Aroma-Home used in the essay have been translated from the original French by the author.

[9] Chris Firth, Damian Maye and David Pearson, "Developing 'Community' in Community Gardens," *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability* 16.6 (2011): 558. www.tandfonline.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/13549839.2011.586025?src=recsys (accessed 20 Oct. 2017).

[10] For additional information on guerrilla gardening, see Vladimir Mikadze, "Ephemeral Urban Landscapes of Guerrilla Gardeners: A Phenomenological Approach," *Landscape Research* 40, no. 5 (2015): 519-529 and Matthew Thompson, "Between Boundaries: From Commoning and Guerrilla Gardening to Community Land Trust Development in Liverpool," *Antipode* 47.4 (2015): 1021-1042. http://o-onlinelibrary.wiley.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/doi/10.1111/anti.12154/epdfn (accessed 25 Oct. 2017).

the seeds) over chain-link fences into abandoned lots. Crops seemed to appear overnight in the most unexpected places. In addition, during these early weeks, the artists and residents participated in other guerrilla activities by creating small art-garden interventions: performative "stories" of the land. In one wasteland, the city had placed a large celebratory notice saying "Here, the rail bypass in north Paris will be constructed" with a large drawing of the future station's clean and modern design. Underneath that large placard, the artists and participants placed another large graphic panel: "And here, a remarkable and edible botanical station is found," highlighting the biodiversity of plants already growing in the construction site. In another abandoned lot, they designed a "look what is already growing here" intervention to save herbs and wildflowers growing on the site from the bulldozers. They dug the small plants from the ground where they had been hidden by the tall grasses and replanted them in tall plastic tubes that towered above the grass. They labelled them with the names of the plants and statements like, "look what grows here naturally" or "road works are sprouting." Passers-by often adopted the plants.[11] In addition, small pop-up gardens sprouted in debris-strewn alleys and dead-ends almost as a rebuke to the town's neglect of its natural resources and thus represented a form of citizen activism as neglected land was transformed into urban agricultural pockets that promoted local food production. Michael Hardman and Peter Larkham identify two primary types of land that are taken over by guerrilla gardeners: stalled spaces (abandoned sites that are targeted for future development) or underused spaces (sites not landscaped or carefully

[11] See the Aroma-Home blog for photographs of these two interventions, http://aroma-home.hautetfort.com/.

tended, like areas between the lanes of a divided highway or around a metro station).[12] The Villetaneuse inhabitants guerrilla-gardened in both stalled and underused spaces and thus participated in acts of civil disobedience since they were altering land that did not belong to them. While the aim was to beautify the urban landscape, the interventions were still done without permission and were clearly acts of resistance against both urban renewal projects and urban neglect. Through their actions, they demanded that the construction not destroy the land's natural resources, but rather that it work with nature. For Harper, two metaphors fundamental to the project explain this activism. The first is that the process of urban renewal and the process of plant maturation are parallel in that both are often slow to develop and need care to be taken at the start for the end product to flourish. The second is that environmental biodiversity parallels cultural and social diversity. Just as each plant has a history, multiple medicinal and nutritive uses, and perhaps a migration, so too do the Villetaneuse residents. The Aroma-Home project grows from these metaphors by relying on encounters, sharing, and communal working.

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."[13] The place being made was a "commons" of shared resources and responsibilities.[14] Here, the shared resources were its edible stories and storied

[12] Michael Hardman, Michael and Peter J. Larkham, *Informal Urban Agriculture: the secret lives of guerrilla gardeners* (Cham, Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, and London: Springer, 2014), 38-40.
[13] Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), 101.
[14] For additional information on 'commons', see *ASAP Journal* 1.1, Themed Issue: Art and the Commons (2016); Jeffrey Hou, Julie M. Johnson, and Laura J. Lawson,

edibles: the collective memories of food growing and preparation, the shared meals, community-based guerrilla gardening and the incipient community activism of the participants. While this commons lacked the materiality of a specific location, it created a place of democratic engagement and resistance through communal experiences among the participants certainly, but also in the human partnerships with edible plants as a way to initiate socio-political action that changed the look and the feel of the city. Within a few months of the start of these itinerant gardens, including the mobile garden of potted plants that rapidly grew around the caravan, it became obvious that a more permanent place was needed. While for many residents, relinquishing the anarchic nature of the guerrilla gardening was disappointing and felt as though they were bowing to the civic authorities, they also longed to establish more permanent edible crops.

AROMA-HOME COMMUNITY GARDEN PROJECT

In late spring of that first year, the participants and the artists reluctantly gave up their ephemeral gardens for a more established community garden (or *jardin partagé*: a shared garden rather than individual allotments). While urban farming had been quite common in Paris from at least the seventeenth century, it was pushed out of the city during the Second World War. Only after the formation of the Paris programme Main Verte (Green Hand) in 2003 have

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Greening Cities, Growing Communities: Learning from Seattle's Urban Community Gardens (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009); Elinor Ostrum, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Collective Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); Thompson, "Between Boundaries: From Commoning and Guerrilla Gardening to Community Land Trust Development in Liverpool," *Antipode* 47.4 (2015): 1021-1042. http://o-onlinelibrary.wiley.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/doi/10.1111/anti.12154/epdfn (accessed 25 Oct. 2017).

community gardens grown up in and around Paris.[15] The artists and the Villetaneuse residents received permission from the municipality to use the empty lot on rue de l'Université near the entrance to the footbridge, but they did not completely abandon their experiential activism as they continued to challenge how public space should be used and by whom in their gardening activities. Mary Beth Pudup argues that community gardens or her preferred phrase, "organized garden projects," act as "a response to pronounced and recurring cycles of capitalist restructuring and their tendency to displace people and places through investment processes governing industries and urban space."[16] That certainly seems to be true for Aroma-Home. But Pudup also links this reactive characteristic associated with community gardens to claims of their social benefits for the gardeners and ecological benefits for the land that inevitably lead to assumptions that garden projects such as these can fix social ills. She charges that these projects often act as a salve for city officials: "initiatives organized around self-improvement and moral responsibility stand in for state sponsored social policies and programs premised on collective responses to social risk."[17] And indeed, for the city, the project represented a grassroots form of social services since the community garden not only softened the chaos of the tramway station construction site with its concrete barriers,

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[15] Elena Bulmer, Sara Vila and Julio Cantós Gázquez, "Celebrating Ten Years of 'Shared Gardens' in Paris," Worldwatch Institute Europe: Vision for a Sustainable World (Nov 2013). http://www.worldwatch-europe.org/node/216 (accessed 29 Oct. 2017).

[16] Mary Beth Pudup, "It takes a garden: Cultivating Citizen-Subjects in Organized Garden Projects," *Geoforum* 39. 3 (2008): 1229. https://0-ac-els--cdn-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/S0016718507001005/1-s2.0-S0016718507001005-main.pdf?_tid=cfd361ce-ba56-11e7-89c9-00000aab0f26&acdnat=1509026947_f5fd84458beb0db31c3ff944d535a127 (accessed 26 Oct. 2017).

[17] Ibid., 1229.

chain-link fences, machinery and debris, but also drew people to the area and thus discouraged the footbridge muggings. Once those goals were accomplished and the tramway construction completed, the garden project was no longer high on the city's list of priorities, and any support that had been provided up to that point stopped. For the Villetaneuse residents however, it represented much more: a communal site to jumpstart conversations, shared stories, and encounters with both people and nature, a remembrance site to stimulate memories activated by food, a resistant site to reclaim a damaged public space and make it their own with nature's help, and a creative site that enabled them to imagine a different future based on commoning.

A community garden traditionally describes a place for people to garden together.[18] Doreen Massey, in her work on space and place, counters the concept of place as a location with boundaries and stable identities with the

[18] For more information on community gardens, see Christine Bertschi, "Rooted in the Intercultural Garden. Germany, Migration and Daily Life," (18 May 2016). http://www.eastbook.eu/en/2016/05/18/rooted-in-the-intercultural-garden-germany-migration-and-daily-life/ (accessed 3 Nov. 2017); Neil Harris, Fiona Rowe Minniss and Shawn Somerset, "Refugees Connecting with a New Country Through Community Food Gardening," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 11.9 (2014): 9202-9216. www.mdpi.com?1660-4601/11/9/9202/htm (accessed 3 Nov. 2017); Jeffrey Hou, Julie M. Johnson, and Laura J. Lawson, *Greening Cities, Growing Communities: Learning from Seattle's Urban Community Gardens* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009); Annah MacKenzie, "Beyond Food: Community Gardens as Places of Connection and Empowerment," Project for Public Spaces. https://www.pps.org/blog/beyond-food-community-gardens-as-places-of-connection-and-empowerment/(accessed 3 Nov. 2017); Paul Milbourne, "Everyday (In)justices and Ordinary Environmentalisms: Community Gardening in Disadvantaged Urban Neighbourhoods," *Local Environment* 17, no. 9 (2012): 943-957. http://www.tandfonline.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/13549839.2011.607158 (accessed 3 Nov. 2017); and Matthew Thompson, "Between Boundaries: From Commoning and Guerrilla Gardening to Community Land Trust Development in Liverpool," *Antipode* 47.4 (2015): 1021-1042. http://0-onlinelibrary.wiley.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/doi/10.1111/anti.12154/epdfn (accessed 25 Oct. 2017).

notion of place as a "meeting place" with "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings."[19] In *For Space*, she describes "places not as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time; as spatio-temporal events."[20] Place is not static and bounded, but rather dynamic and borderless. Massey encourages an understanding of space as "a simultaneity of stories-so-far, … [and] places [as] collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space."[21] These ideas are particularly visible in a community garden where the collections of "stories-so-far" establish its character both as a complex and concentrated hub for human activities, everyday practices and civic activism and as a stimulus to questions about uses of public space, urban renewal and sustainability, resource allocation and environmental justice. The place of Aroma-Home that began to take shape in the guerrilla gardening phase flourished in this new community garden setting, this *jardin d'histories* or Garden of Stories as the participants liked to call it, where the spatio-temporal narrative-events formed the core of its character. Although the physical locations of Aroma-Home alternated between the public space of the garden and the private space of the caravan, that public-private divide waned in the garden's storied place, similar to Massey's concept of "event of place."[22] Aroma-Home's spatio-temporal event-ness was fluid as it not only relied both on gardening and face-to-face communication over cups of tea and bites to eat that facilitated community engagement in words and actions, but

[19] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 154.
[20] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington, D.C.: Sage, 2005), 130.
[21] Ibid., 130.
[22] Ibid., 138-42

also travelled through time from the remembered past and embodied present to an imagined future.

The infrastructure of the community garden developed very quickly. By early July, 2013, seven beds had been planted. The youth constructed a watering system from plastic bottles, tubes and bright orange tape, of course with a story of how it functioned and why it was so essential, 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. The place of Aroma-Home Community Garden confronted the mess of the tramway's large building site that presented a narrative of urban progress through huge, durable man-made transport infrastructures with the intimacy of a community garden space that offered a dynamic counter-narrative of people-nature collaboration through collective labour in small-scale, communal food production and biodiversity: a counter-narrative that sharpened the gardeners' awareness of the power of their food-growing acts of resistance. The tiny fruit-and-vegetable-decorated caravan seemed symbolically to illustrate this counter-narrative, its actual size dwarfed by the tramway, but its impact on the community certainly more beneficial, at least at this point in time.

Tim 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. The place is the story and the story is the place: what Ingold calls the "dwelling" of the inhabitants. Similar to Massey's notion of place as a collection of stories-so-far, Ingold's "dwelling perspective" focuses on relationships and encounters of humans and places. Story-telling for Ingold

offers a path into a place and locates the teller and the listener in that place, and the stories "serve to conduct the attention of the performers into the world, deeper and deeper, as one proceeds from outward appearances to an ever more intense poetic involvement. At its most intense, the boundaries between person and place, or between the self and the landscape, dissolve altogether."[23] Aroma-Home, understood through a lens of dwelling, is far-removed from any kind of stable, delimited place and instead offers a local experiential art event in the edible stories, composed on and by both the land and the gardeners. The simultaneity of these multiple stories-so-far forms the core of Aroma-Home's political ecology that interweaves defence of ecosystems and revival of public life. The everyday, seemingly mundane, community gardening practices gain a political clout as the small-scale food production in the ethnically diverse neighbourhood not only opposes the official concept of progress that disregarded the environmental concerns, but also challenges French policies that valorise the assimilation of immigrant populations into the French way of life over the worth of ethnic and religious difference.

In September 2013, the artists and community participants staged the garden site to celebrate their communal achievement with a neighbourhood harvest party.[24] Aroma-Home collaborated with four other varied community projects in the local area to form a larger festival drawing attention to the achievements of the communities. For the Aroma-Home event, the artists and participants created a large black and white graphic mural marking the

[23] Tim Ingold, *Perception of the Environment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 56.
[24] See the Aroma-Home blog for photographs of this harvest party, http://aroma-home.hautetfort.com/.

occasion of the garden with images of the plants and the caravan and with snippets of conversations and shared recipes hand-written on the mural.[25] In addition to the grills provided by the city and the dishes prepared by the gardeners, the artists and participants crafted a *Gouter Étrange* table with tiny tastes of unusual items. Forty bales of hay creating seating for conversations and a play area for the children were placed around the garden, and visitors could wash their hands with soap nuts and water. Participants and cultural professionals attended an art-based presentation by Harper — yet another edible story in and on the garden. Music accompanied the festivities, and the gardeners planted a scarecrow to watch over the event.

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 the dismantling of the garden and tarmacked it over, but offered Harper a significantly smaller hilly piece of land off to the side of the original community garden.

Disappointed but determined, the artists and community gardeners decided to start over. The plantings in the new hilly Aroma-Home community garden began in early spring of 2014 with the arrival of the caravan and the

[25] A photograph of this mural is available of the Aroma-Home website, http://www.friches.fr/projets/aroma-home.

gathering of the neighbours. Again, the garden transformed the damaged site into a haven of cultural diversity and biodiversity and provided a geographic space in which the artists and the residents could reinterpret their conversations into artistic beds of edible crops and their plantings into shared stories of home, migration, memory and hope. Mme Delva planted joumou seeds she brought from Haiti so that she could make the famous joumou [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. Sharing the soup with the communal gardeners represented for her a present-day form of resistance transported to a new place of Haitian settlement. Another woman countered that political resistance narrative with her own more "intimate" form of resistance, as she called it. She lowered her voice to confide that men sometimes roam, but she could make a delicious drink from a "secret" combination of plants in the garden that acts as a powerful aphrodisiac and keeps the men contented at home. Others planted more familiar herbs, like "Julio's parsley" that was accompanied by a story of its significance. Others composed recipes, some of which are on the project's blog.[26] I relished the "sauce chien" or dog sauce, a spicy Creole sauce that got its name from the Chien brand of the special knife used to mince the ingredients. The recipe on the website lists five ingredients although Rose Donzenac admitted that she often adds many more. One participant took responsibility for roselle [a kind of hibiscus native to West Africa] and created a sign to explain: "Roselle is absolutely necessary. In the shops here, it is so

[26] See the Aroma-Home blog, http://aroma-home.hautetfort.com/.

expensive whereas at home, it grew everywhere." Conversations around the Paris prices of food items so ubiquitous in their countries of origin often led to experiments with new recipes. Other participants made political links more blatant in signs posted in the garden beds: "Growing our food is a political act: a peaceful form of resistance." Each intervention developed into longer conversations and shared stories.

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 (Figure 2). 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. Hated each other, always fought, tried to make the other look bad. Not now. 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 push city officials to address the conflicts that frequently arose. In the community garden, the most difficult conflict was across generations as several teen-aged boys saw Aroma-Home as a challenge to their anticipated control of the site around the new tram station and so sought to disrupt and endanger the site. On workdays, they would stand at the edge of the garden to mock and bully the young gardeners working busily in the soil, often aggressively enough to scare the children away. They would harass the artists as well with curses and once with a slap. If food was set out, they would descend on the table and grab it leaving only crumbs for the gardeners. The city quickly responded by assigning a social worker to participate in the weekend artist-led workdays and help defuse hostilities and

aggressions of the youth. Once in a while, if the group were only two or three boys, the social worker and the gardeners could tempt them to try a new taste or even plant a seed. On the other days, no one from the city was there. Often the artists and the community gardeners could work unhindered on week days, but on other days they would spend much of their time trying to talk to the hostile youth. The boys' aggression rarely converted into significant vandalism while the artists led the project. Small labels were stolen, some plants were unearthed, and the benches were 'decorated' with graffiti, but nothing more serious.

The Inauguration, the final artist-led event at Aroma-Home Community Garden, took place on Sunday, September 7, 2014 as over one hundred people came to celebrate their achievements. Neighbours prepared dishes native to their countries of origin, spiced up with vegetables and herbs picked from the garden, and the city again 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, and panels with information about the plants, the soil, and even their sense of ownership and resistance. Three permanent sound installations appeared in the garden as well. One of the colourful sound columns, activated when someone pushed its button, offered several 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. By the end of the day as the

artists packed up the tools, umbrellas and chairs, the community claimed the site as adults relaxed in the garden and children created impromptu performances on the tree-stump stages.

The power of Aroma-Home to affect change by rewriting the official urban renewal narrative 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. The site of Aroma-Home was not a passive place to garden, but a responsive partner in a communal endeavour, and the vital energies of the garden both enriched the participating neighbours' sense of connectedness to place and raised their awareness of the political ecology of Aroma-Home (although probably not in those words) as they intuited that the "act of growing food brought a greater sense of interconnededness with the earth's 'natural' and sometimes 'unnatural' rhythms in an urban environment where these patterns

are often stifled by everyday trappings and conveniences of city life."[27] And, indeed, Aroma-Home's underlying assumption, following in the steps of Tim Ingold, maintained that the cultural practices of humans could not be disentangled from the processes of nonhumans. "Rather, all creatures, human and nonhuman, are fellow passengers in the one world in which they all live, and through their activities continually create the conditions for each other's existence."[28]

From the day of *The Inauguration* in September until the opening of the tram station in December, the community gardeners diligently maintained the garden. Crops were harvested, and the beds were prepared for winter. 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 September and about future plans and possibilities. It seemed that Aroma-Home had been adopted by its neighbours and that their work and the garden's political ecology could model a twenty-first century 'commons' based in its edible stories. But things were not quite so easy. The artists had always taken the lead role in this project, and while the community participants were eager workers willingly maintaining the garden, no one stepped in to take over the leadership role once the artists' commission ended in 2014. Little happened in the garden over the winter, and without clear community leadership, the spring arrived with no new

[27] Kelly Donati, Susan Cleary, and Lucinda Pike, "Bodies, Bugs and Dirt: Sustainability Re-Imagined in Community Gardens," in *Food Security, Nutrition and Sustainability*, eds. Geoffrey Lawrence, Kristen Lyons, and Tabatha Wallington (London and New York: Earthscan, 2010), 218.
[28] Tim Ingold, "Epilogue: Towards a Politics of Dwelling," *Conservation and Society* 3.2 (2005), 503.

initiatives or organizational plans. Tensions had continued to simmer, particularly among the teens who found the community garden a challenge to their ordering of public spaces in the neighbourhood. A generational battle over who would control the area around the newly opened tram station and community garden site escalated as the teens, kept on the edges of the garden the year before, colonised the space. Over the next few months, benches and sound columns were smashed and the beds were damaged. Once the tram station opened, the city no longer provided support of any sort for the community garden so the social worker who had moderated the behaviour of the teens on organized workdays stopped coming to the community garden. And, given the mayor's dismantling of the first garden in 2013, the residents lacked the confidence that the site would remain theirs. Nature has taken over the design now, and the re-wilding of the community garden is beginning to once more transform its identity.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This particular community garden was unable to continue without the leadership provided by the artists in its first two years and the support initially provided by Villetaneuse. I do not believe, however, that the garden's efficacy is located only in a longevity of the physical garden site, but rather its impact resides in the participants' memories and embodied knowledge and practices associated with the creation of the garden. One can only hope that the imagination and dedication it took to transform a brownfield into a flourishing garden has made an impression on the children who worked there so that they can begin to expect home-grown food, not just packaged food from a grocery store. Claire Nettle explains: "Stories, like good compost, can nourish a

community and prepare the soil for future developments."[29] It is in the discursive construction of Aroma-Home Community Garden that its value is preserved. Its edible stories and storied edibles constituted its ephemeral form as a commons and shaped community memories about the site and the communal activities that helped to define ways the community participants saw themselves, their neighbours and their neighbourhood. Looking at the place of Aroma-Home in this way, we are far-removed from a static physical location and instead discover an "event of place"[30] in the remembered stories. I cannot believe that the experience of Aroma-Home does not still live and grow in the memories and bodies of the participants. I experienced the joy of the children as they watched more and more bugs come to inhabit the bug hotel that they had built or found an intricate spider web in the curled leaves, the thrill of each gardener finding more and more large worms, and the satisfaction of mothers teaching their children about growing and cooking vegetables from their homelands. These lived experiences contributed to knowledge-producing through "the cross-pollination of ideas"[31] that the garden nurtured and that cross-pollination, in turn, increased engagement "in political questions about how we live sustainably and how we sustain ourselves by eating and living more ethically."[32] Aroma-Home is now like a seed in hibernation, and when the time

[29] Claire Nettle, *Community Garden as Social Action* (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 25.
[30] Massey, *For Space* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington, D.C.: Sage, 2005), 130.
[31] Kelly Donati, Susan Cleary, and Lucinda Pike, "Bodies, Bugs and Dirt: Sustainability Re-Imagined in Community Gardens," in *Food Security, Nutrition and Sustainability*, eds. Geoffrey Lawrence, Kristen Lyons, and Tabatha Wallington (London and New York: Earthscan, 2010), 218.
[32] Ibid., 218.

is right, it will blossom again. Its existence in 2013 and 2014 becomes one story in the site's on-going "stories-so-far."[33] Almost as confirmation of a continuing, if interrupted, narrative about the land and the people, one long-time neighbourhood resident reminisced: "There was always a garden here. … The path to the pool passed first between two trees. There were apple trees, lots of apple trees, and bushes. Everything was invaded by ivy. I wanted to shape the bushes into animals! Over there, there was a large weeping willow… and the circus came here every year, with camels."

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[33] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington, D.C.: Sage, 2005), 130.

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