

BY CLASSIFICATION OR DISSENSUS?

WITH THE BOTANICAL HERITAGE OF QUEENS

A public anthropology: In 2003/4, I was a kind of public anthropologist while working for the Department of Cultural Research at the Queens Botanical Garden (QBG) - whose (2008) mission is to be an "urban oasis where people, plants and cultures are celebrated through inspiring gardens, innovative educational programs and demonstrations of environmental stewardship." QBG is a New York City municipal organization based in Queensborough - the most ethnically diverse county in North America. Research was ethnobotanical, urban and ethnographic. One focus (funded by NY Community Trust) was new S.E. Asian immigrants festivals - *Ramadan/Lebaran* (Indonesian), Tết (Vietnam), *Songkran* (Thailand) and the *Kadayawan sa Davao* (Philippines). The other focus - a participatory research/popular education program (retroactively funded by a J.M. Kaplan grant) followed proposed ethics protocols acknowledging how botanical heritage helps Queens' communities to 'create home away from home' and the Garden's debt to these communities.

Independent analysis: In 2010, I learned that since the Garden completed its 'new environmentally sustainable building re-design it made sharp declines in its' public programs and access. I am concerned that shedding the links to the wider public perpetuates the "negative heritage" of the urban, post-industrial landscapes by deracinating and disorienting the memory and intangible heritage of botanists. The science of classification which justifies and makes legible the conservation of disembodied landscapes needs to be rethought through vital materialist philosophies and the political ecology of things. I explore then how botanical heritage can be operated from virtual memory to confederate new ecological publics in response to modern "ills".

KEY CLASSIFICATION

The Garden reflects botanical heritage through the Linnean binomial taxonomy - used since the 17th century to hierarchize and partition our senses of the forms of plant and animal life. But classification is also problematized in association with: a) the wickets of social evolutionist theories - where linear progress is heralded in such spectacles as the World's Fair's "world of tomorrow"; b) symbolic theories that mediate cognition and tense the latent structure of society (Levi-Strauss 1967); c) imperial sciences that encompass other vernacular ways of knowing (Lounsbury 2005; R. Groves 1996); and d) the modernist colonial heritage which sets thinkers apart from workers (Quijano 2002; Groszstagel 2005). In the latter sense especially, classification schemes are among the western materialist practices which are viewed with incredulity or, at best, disdain (Blancero 2005; Zawiak 2002; Lyden 1979). Dismissed as the post-modern sensibilities the modern sciences being left at ease with the fallout of modern placements and the asymmetric ordering of the modes of life and things. It is also a subjective sense associated with the "negative heritage" of being the incommensurate part of no part.

ANTINOMIES/TELEOLOGIES

Nature and culture are classified apart. The antinomy between them - as obstructive civilization and 'pristine nature' or 'wilderness' - was historically resolved by an original landscaped model (Lowenthal 2005, 81-3) to preserve spaces of 'harmony' against the ills of modernity. This heritage discourse along with contemporary sustainable cities initiatives preserve a linear logic of progress by re-arranging the assemblages of nature, culture and place. The wild-domesticated teleology of plant science which extends through the new forms of modern agricultural industry, biotech and the chemotaxonomic models weakens the somatopolitics of nature, culture and place. However, this is since industrial and post-industrial forms already replace morphological 'memory', causing the way we know the past to be disoriented, deracinated and disoriented (Stegler 1998-2009). Yet both heritage and innovation may be needed to remediate "negative heritage" for subjects in post-industrial landscapes. Queens is one such landscape hosting vitally power plants where fragile immigrant communities have formed from formerly divided and displaced ones.

THEORETICAL DEPARTURES

I depart from the original landscaped model (as sited) and the heritage as 'archive of function' view. I do this by bringing political ecologists (Eliasson and Greenberg 2002) notion of a "constructed nature" (second nature) into dialogue with Lisa Briggs's (2009) idea of a "heritage assemblage" - wherein heritage in parts is rethought in terms of its ethical salience. "Second nature" is a basic critical concept that allows us to examine how ethical matters like health are gendered and racialized through the "complex relations between nature and society", correlate second nature with intangible heritage, in that both are contingencies upon the way temporal things can be a "witness for the present" (Dove 1994; Stegler 1998-2009). The ethical potential with botanicals lies with their fluid capacity to be operated as either heritage or innovation, the basis of discovery and subjective recovery.

REPRESENTATIONAL DOMAINS

In an archival heritage and environmentalism. The past two decades of imperial politics valorized the technologies for "greening" the urban scope. As a neoliberal business-class discourse trickling down "green innovation" encompasses cultural heritage before it represses it. Environmental authority in this matter is a technical, getting development apart from neighborhood gardens or social action against "toxics or low-vintage power plants (Alinsky, Jessica, "Electricity in Queens: Mapping a Shift in Borough's Power," *The Queens Tribune*, 10-12-11). The Garden's discursive practices are implicated in this way too.

b) **Ex situ cultural heritage and liberal multiculturalism.** Liberal multiculturalism renders the consumption of diversity and the "ethnic style of life" apolitical, or without the ethics of actual subjects (Appadurai 1996). Tourism of the exotic botanicals in Queens for instance classifies consumers apart from producers as an "ethnic class" (Park 1997). Ethnic identification too often conceals the societal legacies of classification (Mullings 2005) - ongoing residential segregation (Gregory 1998) and the "harmful of US racism" with Native Americans (Harrison 1999). Yet, post-9/11, markers of "race" shifted from African-American and Native American sociocultural identities to Muslim religious identities, with the majority in NYC residing in Queens. This made Queens neighborhoods seem to be one of the only places to be racially unmarked by religious heritage. Yet, in my research with Filipino and Indonesian transnational communities, connections to Islam brought divisions and made the possession of religion reflect negatively on belonging, in one civic meeting in Queens, it was even said that the Thai temple land's "religious principles" were "in Queens" but "not of it" (Songkran 1998, 12). As a municipal and cultural authority, the Garden represents one of the few public places where dialogue relating to class, belonging, race, ethnicity and religion can happen. But it rarely does.

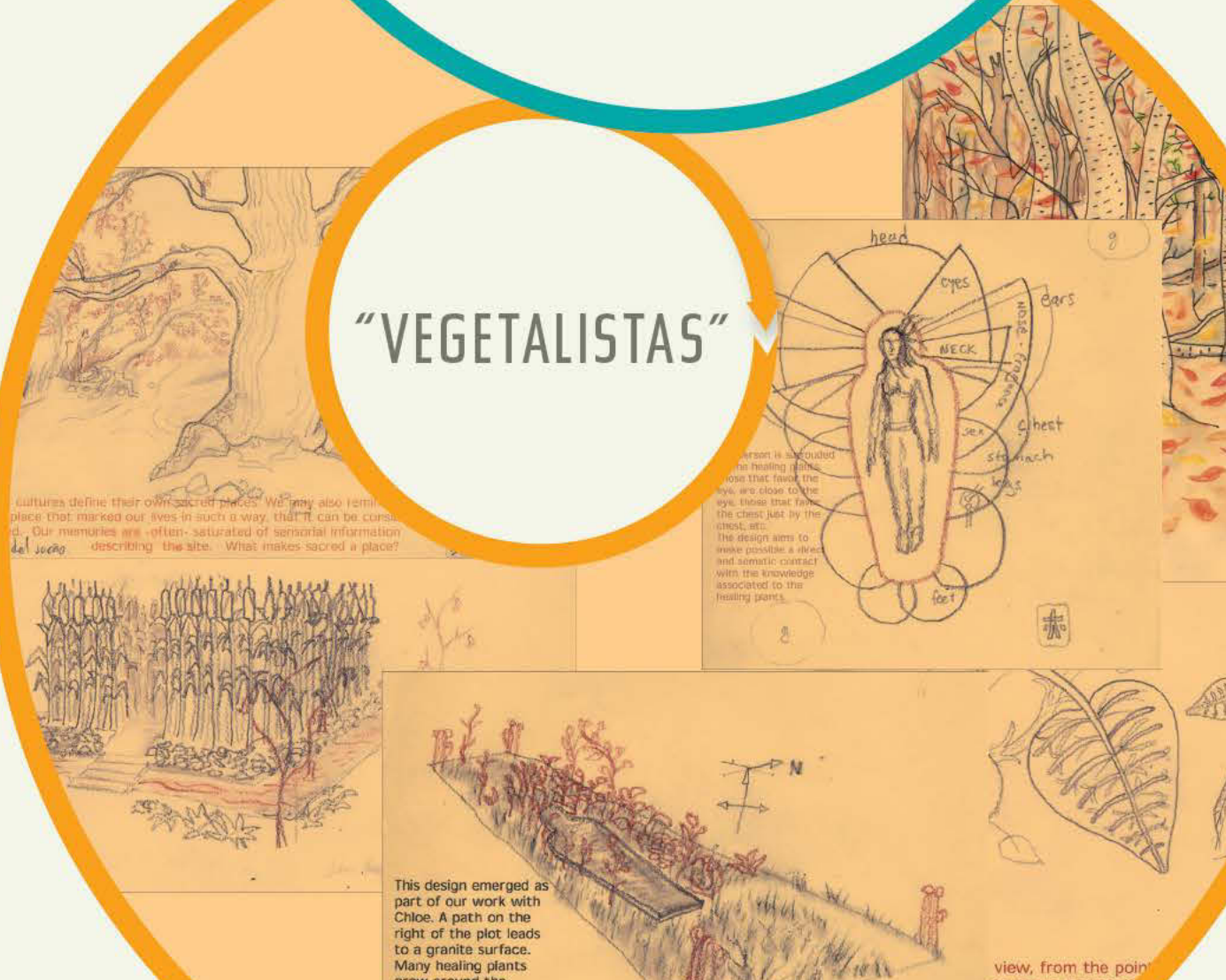
c) **Religious vernaculars.** The annual spring that Songkran (New Year) is held at a wat (temple) in the Enclaves neighborhood of Queens. Theravada Buddhism, velle notions of personhood (Asian Society and Boonima 2003) and healing are conveyed in the plants consumed, displayed and worn. Monks dressed in robes (dyed yellow with turmeric root) spray the lay community with water to signal purification. The purification echoes again in attendants bathing the statues of the Buddha and Kuan Yin with bowls of orchid water as well as in an arrangement of genera plants to act as air filters. Phung mai (gamine garlands) are given to signify dam (or merit for good deeds done). Both cuisine and botanicals trace to an original landscape apart from the urban ground through purgative (pest-repelling), citrus (estranging) and cleansing, fragrant (deodorizing) and earthy (stabilizing) vital aromas and flavors. The harmony of this olfactory and gustatory score - is subjective to Thai. But the registers of sense perception can still be universally embodied.

d) **Disensus.** Ongoing requirements for a "harmonious" resolve from modern ills of pollution, racialization, divisions, and displacements in Queens is documented by Roger Sanket who writes of a female-led "quality of life" politics that Queens residents waged against non-Queens residents in "permanent government" (2000). My own participatory research popular education group sought to identify this quality of life politics through cultural and ecological nuance. We did so however as a public whose contestation forms as an evolutionary response to past harms (Bennett 2010). One group member, Jose Miguel Tajer, called the public we were forming, "vegetalistas" - those who follow the way of plants." With various participants (Malayesian, Punjabi, Chilean, Dominican, Haitian, European-American, Wampanoag, and Jewish) the group relied upon vernaculars to "link and connect", transculturally, their senses of harms and cures.

RESEARCH/ACTORS

With the imperial science of classification, municipal authorities like the Garden encompass conventionality and mechanistically, the ex situ heritage of immigrant communities in Queens, indeed, the "harvest" of the intangible heritage of immigrants artificially qualifies it institutionally, as conservers of antiquity against harmful modernization (Queens Botanical Garden 1998). Further, in 2002, the Garden extended its authority in this regard by citing the sustainable water practices of non-Queens communities in its sustainable building re-design. It did not however designate these cultural practices as prototypes of innovation (with biomes and biologies). Treating the practices as a prior art of the Garden's own innovative works of preservation, the "culture" of origin was rendered a "past" i.e. a common heritage, yet this move belies the fact that Queens is a post industrial landscape hosting mostly "negative heritage" which is spatially distributed along racial, ethnic and class lines. For instance, its "new vintage power plants give electricity to the rest of Manhattan (with higher income) while concentrating the most dense pollution in Queens; the irony is that with the heightened xenophobia and avoidance of religion post 9/11, Queens is viewed as "safe" for racialized others.

"Both my mother and grandmother had cancer. When Wampanoags were displaced from their ancestral lands in Massachusetts it caused great stress on our tribal people, physically, emotionally and psychically. Now there are mostly place-names left to record the land where we used to live. As a descendant of that place, of that history, and that lineage I carry those experiences in my genetic code."
- Elizabeth Stops at Prety-Plains, Wampanoag Tribal Member, "Urban Indian"



The politics of the vegetalistas are more than the homogenizing identity politics mostly associated with racial, ethnic or gender disensus. Their transcultural, transpecies subjectivity was rancid then through the senses of aromatics which have racial, ethnic or class origins but it gained solidity in the grip of botanicals. With fluid varied and yet potentially resistant morphologies, botanicals are a response-able material with which to symbolically and ritually confront and even remediate social and ecological harms of the landscape. But botanical qualities are never just given as an archive of function: derived from form. This was made clear by one member of the group - Jamaica, Queens resident Elizabeth Stops. Her original biogeographic home is with the Mashpee-Wampanoag tribe on Cape Cod. For Wampanoag (an Algonquian-speaking tribe that inhabited the entire Atlantic seaboard prior to European settlement), botanical heritage emerges out of the critical response to the traumatic history of genocide and lost land. The trauma from this is genealogical says Stops - it is "enacted in her cells" - as an embodiment of "negative heritage".

Paradoxically then, the prior displacement of Wampanoag occurred after the Mashpee-Wampanoag's long denied recognition as a tribe by the Federal government (cf. Clifford 1997) permitted additional divisions and disenfranchisement of certain Wampanoag, from tribal lands. To occur. Being one of those most recently disenfranchised, Stops became an "urban indian" - which the National Institutes of Health recognize as an "invisible tribe" - without the traditional care, lineage, when her own health issues arose Stops did not have access to her own "original landscapes" or tribal health care. Instead, she had to rely upon botanical heritage she could access from Queens (polluted though it is). She embraced others who have faced similar adversity as her teachers. Hence, her political practice with the heritage was a Jamaican "root doctor", Dr. Ignatius Foster. Her second was a Native American wickahoon (holly fern), Archie Lanna Deer. The third was the "ceremony" itself - dried traditional medicinal plants native to the Atlantic seaboard: e.g. elder, juniper and sweet grass, along with others, placed upon the hot stones and steamed in the moist steamers heated on land located on Long Island. Later, plants or their derivatives like pyrogenol became the fourth healers.

The Way Stops brought diverse botanical heritages into her contemporary struggle for cancer inspired the vegetalistas was and into reflected in the group's interests and designs for a healing garden (see "vegetalistas" images drawn by member Jose Miguel Tajer).

OPERATIONS

In "The Science of the Concrete" (1977) Levi-Strauss distinguishes between the orders of classification in science, myth, ritual, and art. Each approach structure and events from different directions (Labour 1996; Giddens 1979). During Songkran, participants crystallize the meaning of their experience through the senses of plants available in their environments and through their own vernacular, situated and intangible heritage. This action bears a family resemblance to the practices of the mythmaker ritual interaction with plants (see also Soven 2002). On the other hand, vegetalistas' transcultural vernaculars permitted a perception of how the 'harms' of a poor social, psychic and physical ecology are shared more widely (outside one's particular sociocultural identity). The forming of a new subjectivity with botanicals emerged as they became agents making the healing or sensorial affects of botanicals, i.e. crystallizing the human and non-human relation into a new project. Like artists' beginning with nothing (yet enunciated), they discover a more ecologically and culturally salient affective order within fall-outs (of events) to redress harm and containing discursive practices (classification/structure). Unfortunately, my group's garden was never taken up by the Garden. This is likely because the transcultural vernacular operators emerged as a part from the discourses of in situ environmentalism or ex situ liberal multiculturalism that the "permanent government" in Queens hosted up. But also poses that it is because the vegetalistas' projects subvert the archivalization of memory and the function of the landscape model of heritage - declassifying (making less exclusive) the way we expect to know and grapple with modernity and modern ills through heritage, ontological practices.

For political ecologists/vital materialist Jane Bennett (2010) even when not volunteered, any celebration of responses to harms' occludes an epistemology of trauma and non-human actions (like botanicals) in a new "parliament of things" (referencing Latour 1996). This new public/parliament can establish the senses of ecological relation as a foundation for ethical formations. The ecological ethics of this could be, as bubble Stengers' (2010) notes, the way that herbicides (and herbicides) address the "presence of ongoing indicators of past destruction" (16). Naturalists, like vegetalistas, rely on properties of botanicals to cultivate politically aesthetic responses, (responsibility) to socio-ecological blow out or harms forged in past paradigms. This is why I argue that the Garden - as a municipal organization charged with reflecting the botanical heritage in Queens - review how its own scientific heritage overwrites the innovative potential of botanicals within transcultural publics cultivating sustainable bodies and places of practice that are also perceptually salient.

CREDITS

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