

Entering Cosmopolis: Crossingover, Hybridity, Conciliation and the Intercultural City Ecosystem

By JULIAN AGYEMAN

FORETHOUGHT

Before I answer the question: “How is nature critical to a twenty-first century urban ethic?” I first need to ask the more fundamental question: “What is nature and how is it constructed by people in our increasingly different and diverse urban communities?” Cities of difference are places where we are “in the presence of otherness,” as Sennett puts it—namely, our increasingly different, diverse, and culturally heterogeneous urban areas.¹ Difference is, in my opinion, a more expansive and useful concept than diversity, which has become virtually synonymous, in the United States at least, with race/ethnicity and/or gender. Sandercock points out that “Difference . . . takes many forms. It acknowledges that population groups, differentiated by criteria of age, gender, class, dis/ability, ethnicity, sexual preference, culture and religion, have different claims on the city for a full life and, in particular, on the built environment.”²

In my view, culture is predicated on difference and on otherness, and is a complex, dynamic, and embodied set of realities in which people re/create identities, meanings, and values. Overlaying this is the reality of hybrid or multiple cultural and group affiliations. In this sense, no one person can be reduced to one single or fixed cultural or other form of identity, and all, as Sandercock says, “have different claims on the city” and a Right to the City, including its nature(s).

NATURE(S), SPACE/PLACE AND “THE LOCAL”

Four vignettes—which look at differing perceptions of the issues of nature(s), space/place, and “the local”—illustrate the relational, messy, and contested concept of “what is urban nature.”

First, in the early 1980s, the parks department of the city of Bristol in southwest England was persuaded by the local wildlife trust to develop wildflower meadows in city parks, which like most parks were dominated by hard-wearing, close-mown, multipurpose ryegrass. The parks department obliged, applying an appropriate management regimen and, within a few seasons, had beautiful native wildflower swards replete with a rich fauna towering above the ryegrass. The wildlife trust and most of the public liked it, except for the local Asian and African Caribbean population, who refused to go near the long grass. Why was this? It was because of a residual fear of snakes in long grass. An environmentally and ecologically beneficial management regime had negative effects on the cultural diversity of the park. This dilemma is supported by Low, Taplin, and Scheld’s point that: “In this new century, we are facing a different kind of threat to public space—not one of disuse, but of patterns of design and management that exclude some people and reduce social and cultural diversity.”³

There are many ways of looking at this issue. One is to say what if a member of the local wildlife trust or the park’s management team was Asian or African Ca-

ribbean? Would alarm bells have been raised? Another way is to say that there is only one venomous snake in the United Kingdom, the Adder (*Vipera berus*), and its venom is rarely life threatening (but this misses the point that snakes are deeply imbued with mythological traits). Another way is to say that perhaps there is no “answer”, but that someone should have thought to ask the right questions.

Second, in the mid- to late 1980s, I was working as an environmental education adviser, first in a south, then in a north London borough. While some of the schools in these boroughs wanted advice on creating “nature gardens” using native species, which they had been told by ecologists were “better” for wildlife, others wanted advice on creating what I called “multicultural” or “world” gardens in which teachers and parents were intentional in selecting plant species from the diverse countries of origin of pupils in the school. The London Borough of Southwark developed Chumleigh Multicultural Garden in Burgess Park and the London Borough of Lewisham produced a guide on plants for a multicultural garden.⁴ These gardens were in effect autotopographies: cultural and community inscriptions on the cityscape that offered a statement of presence, of recognition, that both humans and nature(s) in cities are becoming increasingly different, diverse, and cosmopolitan, and are welcome.

BOG

WHEN: Saturday, October 27, 2012
12pm to 3pm

WHERE: Vermont Park Neighbourhood
Garden located behind Ecole L'Harmonie
in Waterloo, 158 Bridgeport E, Waterloo

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Event details visit us at
www.multiculturalgardenskw.org

MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY GARDENS
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Third, in a challenge to the clarion call from alternative food movement (AFM) advocates to “buy and grow local,” Filipino immigrants in San Diego, California, see their food as local food. They cook it at home and eat it in local restaurants.⁵ This demonstration of “translocalism,” which is also in evidence when they cultivate their fruit and vegetable gardens in city neighborhoods, ruptures the dominant, geographic notion of “local food” and highlights the need for greater reflexivity within the AFM. Similarly, Mares

and Peña use two predominantly Latino/a urban community garden projects—the now-defunct South Central Farm (SCF) in Los Angeles and Puget Sound Urban Farmers (now the Seattle Urban Farm Company)—to analyze how food and farming can connect growers to local and extra-local landscapes, creating an “autotopography” that links their life experiences to a deep sense of place.⁶ In effect, they are writing their cultural stories on the land- or cityscape. This is a type of cultural place-making through the growth and celebration of culturally appropriate foods. Mares and Peña report that:

One gardener at the SCF, a thirty year old Zapotec woman, described her involvement at the farm in the following way: “I planted this garden because it is a little space like home. I grow the same plants that I had back in my garden in Oaxaca. We can eat like we ate at home and this makes us feel like ourselves. It allows us to keep a part of who we are after coming to the United States.”⁷

Fourth, Lanfer and Taylor write about Latino/a immigrants in Boston, Massachusetts, who transform public spaces into familiar landscapes found in their home countries. One group has adopted Herter Park on the Charles River in Boston’s Allston-Brighton neighborhood because it reminds them of the riverbanks and the willow trees they left behind in Guatemala. Lanfer and Taylor quote one Guatemalan American as saying:

I think one of the reasons that that place . . . is so popular with us, Latinos, is because of the willows. Willows in Guatemala are very common. They grow beside rivers. People like Herter Park because it looks like home.⁸

This construction of nature, typical of immigrant groups, can be characterized as nature as refuge.

These vignettes are important because they problematize the dominant, often expert-imposed monolithic notion of nature, as opposed to a more negotiated and constructed notion of natures. They illustrate two ends of a continuum containing many different constructions of nature and the related concept of “the local.”

TRADITIONAL ECOLOGY, FIXED AND NATIVE

One construction—let’s call it “traditional ecology,” which has its roots in the Enlightenment and in Transcendentalism—sees dualism: nature as separate from humans. It offers a prescriptive, scientific/eco-

logical focus on nature as what should be there and nature as fixed/native.

This construction is typical of most of the ecological, conservation, and environmental stewardship literature and is enacted faithfully and vigorously through the ecological management plans of nature-based organizations. Indeed Zimmer reminds us that “One of the tenets of conservation management holds that alien species are ecologically harmful.”⁹ Having been involved in the 1980s in the London Wildlife Trust, where “syccie bashing” (eradication of non-native sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*) was a standard volunteer task that was carried out unquestioningly, and having heard of practices in Snowdonia National Park in Wales, where “rhodo-bashing” was used to manage *Rhododendron ponticum* planted by the Victorians, I began to question both the pervasiveness and wisdom of the native-alien binary, and the use of a brutal, anthropomorphic language among conservationists in their ecological management work. I then realized that this language was not simply related to eradication and removal of non-natives or alien species, but to “othering”—questioning the very presence of such species in places where someone (a.k.a., a conservationist) decided they were not meant to be.

Consider the following language from the United Kingdom: “sometimes they are disliked simply because they are ‘foreign’ and therefore out of place in native plant communities”;¹⁰ or, “They are . . . alien imports, plainly lacking the cultural credentials of the native broadleaf . . . like other immigrants these fir trees all look the same to the affronted native eye.”¹¹ Or, more disturbingly still:

Dislike of alien species is indeed similar to racial discrimination—wanting to preserve the culture and genetic integrity of one’s own stock (a natural human failing). Alien species are welcome in strictly defined areas (gardens) but must not be allowed to pollute the native culture (the wider countryside).¹²

One British journalist, however, took us to new heights in disseminating such ideas. In the Sunday edition of the well-respected, left-leaning newspaper *The Independent*, he wrote a highly provocative article called “The Barbarians in Britain’s Backyards” in which he attempted to popularize the native-versus-alien species dichotomy in conservation by appealing bluntly to peoples’ xenophobia. His choice of archaic and pejorative phrases is wide ranging and unguarded. One can only assume that his sources (conserva-

tionists and ecologists?) fed him their own prejudices, which he then adapted into an aggressive and emotional populism. He talks of “encroaching foreigners” “running riot,” “ferocious, fast growing foreign plants,” “the villainous and the benign,” “acceptable aliens,” “staggering penetration,” “ruthlessly ousting the natives,” “pink and green Japanese terror,” and plants that “brutalise the native flora.” This undisguised xenophobia, including sexual metaphor (“staggering penetration”), is an indication of the depth of feeling (and fear) that “pollution” by “the alien” raises.¹³



However, this xenophobia is well documented by Doughty, who, like Fenton, takes the argument to its logical conclusion by noting the popular comparison in the nineteenth century United States between alien plants or animals and human immigrants. He discusses the feelings of Americans to the immigration of the English house sparrow into the United States in the nineteenth century and wryly observes that, according to Berrey’s *American Thesaurus of Slang*, “Irishmen were also nicknamed sparrows because they were so numerous and prolific.” From this viewpoint,

Sparrows and immigrants had “low morals”, reproduced at amazing rates, and appeared to be plotting and conspiring to exploit the United States at the expense of native-born Americans. In contrast, native birds were clean, tidy and hardworking who preferred country living and fulfilled the “yeoman myth.”¹⁴

NEW ECOLOGIES, FLUX, AND CROSSINGOVER

Another construction, which Castree and others call the “new ecology,” has its origins in biology and in cultural and environmental geography.¹⁵ It recognizes that increasing difference and diversity in our cities means both different and diverse constructions

of nature and different natures. It doesn't see nature-human dualism but "nature-society hybrids" and nature as what is there: nature as fluid/cosmopolitan. Zimmerer argues that:

The fullness of conservation, particularly the emphasis on flux (rather than fixity) and crossingover (rather than cordoning off), can contribute toward an enlarged and enhanced engagement with the politics of the environment. I would hope that, in the future, purely scientific or simply preset prerogatives will be thought of as unhelpful in guiding resource management, nature protection, and environmental restoration.¹⁶

Schlaepfer, Sax, and Olden predict "the proportion of non-native species that are viewed as benign or even desirable will slowly increase over time as their potential contributions to society and to achieving conservation objectives become well recognized and realized."¹⁷ Building on this Del Tredici, talking about so-called urban "wasteland" notes:

Learning how to manage spontaneous urban vegetation to increase its ecological and social values may be a more sustainable strategy than attempting to restore historical ecosystems that flourished before the city existed.¹⁸

More recently, Davis and eighteen other leading international ecologists published a Comment in the highly influential journal *Nature* arguing that "Increasingly, the practical value of the native-versus-alien species dichotomy in conservation is declining, and even becoming counterproductive. Yet many conservationists still consider the distinction a core guiding principle."¹⁹

Similarly, Lugo argues that "the eradication of species is not as simple as assigning evil qualities to exotic species and benevolent qualities to natives." He continues by saying that:

Responsible ecological stewardship requires an open mind to all species and the roles they play. It is a mistake to judge a species by its origin (exotic or native). We no longer live in a pristine world, if such a world ever existed. We are moving towards a landscape where human influence will be pervasive. All species have a role to play.²⁰

Elsewhere Barker adds that:

In Britain we often qualify the term "wildlife", whatever we understand by it, by distinguishing "native wildlife" from "alien wildlife". I

would contend that this particular distinction in Britain is not only indefensible to an ecologist but also lies at the root of an unhelpful nature conservation mythology which encourages activity without any thought about why that activity is taking place.²¹

This approach is gaining ground scientifically through the related concept of "conciliation biology" that looks anew at the schism in attitudes toward native/non-native organisms arguing for a conciliatory approach that will become all the more pressing as climate change takes hold and reconfigures local ecologies:

A conciliatory approach to managing systems [is] where novel organisms cannot or should not be eradicated. Conciliatory strategies incorporate benefits of nonnatives to address many practical needs including slowing rates of resistance evolution, promoting evolution of indigenous biological control, cultivating replacement services and novel functions, and managing native–nonnative coevolution.²²

ENTERING COSMOPOLIS

I would argue, extending Zimmerer's points about fluidity and crossingover, that the corollary of the new ecology in terms of human society is the emerging concept of interculturalism. Tully, like Amin, argues that our societies are intercultural because of the cross-cultural overlap, interaction, and negotiation—the "politics of recognition"—that occur out of necessity in the formation of our society.²³ This is what Amin calls the "negotiation of difference within local micropublics of everyday interaction." An acknowledgment of this dynamic cultural nature of society—both the "politics of recognition" and "negotiation of difference"—is the basis of interculturalism.

Consider Bloomfield and Bianchini's paean to this emerging concept:

The interculturalism approach goes beyond opportunities and respect for existing cultural differences, to the pluralist transformation of public space, civic culture and institutions. So it does not recognise cultural boundaries as fixed but as in a state of flux and remaking. An interculturalist approach aims to facilitate dialogue, exchange and reciprocal understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds. Cities need to develop policies which prioritise funding for projects where different

cultures intersect, “contaminate” each other and hybridize. . . . In other words, city governments should promote cross-fertilisation across all cultural boundaries, between “majority” and “minorities”, “dominant” and “sub” cultures, localities, classes, faiths, disciplines and genres, as the source of cultural, social, political and economic innovation.²⁴



Both Zimmerer and Bloomfield and Bianchini decry fixity in favor of flux; they talk of “crossingover/intersection/contamination/hybridity/cross-fertilization” rather than “cordons/boundaries,” and they look to “enhanced engagement/pluralism/dialogue transformation.” When their ideas are linked to Tully and Amin’s highly democratic concepts of the “politics of recognition” and “negotiation of difference,” one can envision we are entering cosmopolis using a new, unifying framework for looking at fluidity, nature-society hybrids, and crossover.

This new framework offers us a fresh set of lenses to look at cities as linked social and natural systems where society and nature are not only materially but discursively co-produced. Moreover, social media means that urban cultures are increasingly hybrid, cross-fertilized, and cosmopolitan. This means greater difference, not only in human but also in ecologi-

cal terms. Viewed in this way, the urban area becomes a socionatural system comprising a wide range of life forms, cultures, and possibilities: it becomes an intercultural city ecosystem.

THE INTERCULTURAL CITY ECOSYSTEM

So if nature is quite literally in the eye of the beholder, how is it critical to a twenty-first century urban ethic where we live in cities of difference—in effect, intercultural city ecosystems? Every culture has a relation to nature in general, and urban nature specifically. Some want the solitude it can offer, some want the socialization; some want recreation, some want relaxation; some want reflection, some want refuge.

Furthermore, what is the role of municipal planners, parks managers, urban and landscape designers, and others in catering to difference and diversity, to recognition and negotiation, to the intercultural city ecosystem/new ecology, while still respecting the traditional ecology? Can they help us think about, design, and manage what I call “culturally inclusive spaces”—spaces of encounter with different people/natures?²⁵ Can such spaces be designed and constructed to have meaning and authenticity to the multiple publics that inhabit intercultural city ecosystems? There is a solid case to be made that the training and recruitment of such professionals should more fully reflect the make-up of our cities of difference. This would help speed the production, quality, and maintenance of culturally inclusive spaces, and, critically, the embedding and ultimately the mainstreaming of culturally inclusive practice within those professions.

Similarly, the implications of this “new ecology” for ecological and environmental stewardship organizations are profound in at least three key ways.

First, as I’ve indicated above, the vast majority of these organizations are deeply anchored in traditional ecological thought and management practices and are reluctant to change this. While the provocative language may have changed since the 1980s and 1990s, the practices have substantively not.

Second, by 2042 the population of U.S. metropolitan areas will be predominantly made up of people of color, with immigrants forming a large portion of that population. The current leaders of ecological and environmental stewardship organizations will have retired, so who/where are the new leaders who can tell the story of this “new ecology”? A posting by Whybrow in the Land Trust Alliance’s newsletter described a 2010 leadership retreat developed as an

ongoing collaboration between the Center for Diversity and the Environment, based in Portland, Oregon, and the Center for Whole Communities in Vermont. The meeting, for diverse conservation leaders under thirty-five, was a memorable event where, “for most of them, this [was] the first time they [had] been in a group of conservationists where people of color [were] the majority.”²⁶ Are any of the major conservation organizations looking to these new leaders?

Third, how should conservation organizations in the U.S. and elsewhere respond to the demographic and cultural shifts that are unfolding and will gain pace? What strategies for the inclusion of a more diverse membership base should be developed now that this is not only a moral question, but one of organizational effectiveness and even survival? What will some of these organizational Annual General Meetings look like? I hope they look like America.

So, let’s start from a position of humility. We are entering cosmopolis and no one has a roadmap nor all the answers in how to do this, so let’s begin the journey by making sure we’re asking the right questions.

First and foremost, do we want to live in cities where we tolerate the tedium and misery of cities of indifference? Or do we want to live in intercultural city ecosystems where we recognize, understand, and engage with difference, diversity, and cultural heterogeneity in creative and productive ways, changing ecological management practices in the direction of “new ecology” thinking?

Second, let’s recognize that the much discussed Right to the City is not just about rights to enter and shape physical spaces and places, but it is also about how to see, understand and socially construct the intercultural city ecosystem. Finally, how do we—whether in our municipalities or in our ecological and environmental stewardship organizations—recognize and embed the new ecology while still respecting the needs of those whose construction is that of a traditional ecology?

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NOTES

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