At a minimum, [the resolution of environmental problems] requires a more public philosophy, as the American pragmatist philosophy John Dewey envisioned, though one more focused on making the kind of arguments that resonate with the moral intuitions that most people carry around with them on an everyday basis.

—Andrew Light

A year after his call for a more public environmental philosophy, Andrew Light authored an account of urban ecological citizenship. The account wove together many of the threads of environmental pragmatism; deliberation sensitive to place would start from the assumption of value pluralism and work toward a shared sense of community commitments. Light himself would find support for his hypotheses in his public philosophical work within the city of New York, uncovering the roots of urban ecological citizenship in the activities of community gardeners in the lower East Side. In his “Elegy for a Garden,” Light recounts working alongside neighbors to protect Esperanza Garden from developers sanctioned by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to bulldoze the site for “dubious low-income housing gains.” Four generations of local residents in the predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood rallied around the garden to protect the small patch of green space they had caringly cultivated. To Light, it wasn’t just green space and vegetables that had sprouted in the corner lot, but the seeds of a civic culture.

Since Light’s initial call, researchers have corroborated the philosopher’s hypothesized connections between environmental action and civic engagement. Urban agriculture is so often upheld for its potential for supporting civic engagement that a vibrant discourse has developed under the banner of “civic agriculture.” Scholars of stewardship have likewise noted the connection between environmental work and democratic capacity. Ecological citizenship explicitly informed two 2010 empirical studies, with researchers in Philadelphia and in Athens, Ohio, reporting, respectively, that “participation in... environmental civic associations cultivates... effective citizenship,” and that “gardeners adhere to ecological values and behavior changes willingly based on a sense of virtue toward their communities’ greater good.” More recent scholarship has continued to refine the political theory informing these civic practices, locating clear connections between urban ecological citizenship or civic agriculture and deep democratic theory. Others call for the reconceptualization of ecological citizenship and related concepts so that the environmental justice dimensions of empirical and practical work are more thoroughly centered.

In the spirit of public philosophy, I offer insights from community-engaged research with the urban agriculture community in and around Lansing, Michigan. My hope is to share sentiments from stakeholders who have crafted virtues for being good ecological citizens in a deeply democratic setting. These sentiments point the way to an urban ecological citizenship through which the community and the environment are open to democratic reconstruction and for which identity is a key nutrient in nourishing just and inclusive ecosystems.
GROWING COMMUNITIES

Beginning in 2016, my collaborators and I engaged stakeholders to Lansing’s urban agriculture community to prepare for a “Resilience Workshop” that was held in late 2019. Drawing on Light’s theory of urban ecological citizenship as inspiration, we interviewed farmers, community gardeners, and representatives from organizations that support urban growing, asking about their vision for the city’s food system and how they work to bring that vision to fruition. Interviews set the stage for more robust engagement with the communities of refugee farmers that were especially active in the community gardening network, and the efforts built toward the workshop where farmers, gardeners, professionals, and policymakers came together to deliberate over plans and practices that would strengthen the system. What interested me as a philosopher on the team was how these stakeholders conceptualized governance, which is a key ingredient in the achievement of resilience but also a key ingredient in whether we would judge that resilience desirable. In short, how did these individuals participate in the governance of their community, and to what extent did they think of this participation as an exercise of citizenship?

Citizenship [requires] genuine engagement that [generates] mutual and sympathetic understanding. This is the sort of understanding that emerges from “working with” communities rather than offering technocratic solutions.

What we discovered was that there were distinct types of urban agricultural stakeholders, some of whom had a thinner conception of citizenship that required compliance with clear and transparent policies, and some of whom had a thicker conception of citizenship that mandated robust dialogue and the collective articulation of shared norms. Those with the thinner conception operated according to a pretty standard picture of representative democracy; elected officials were entrusted with establishing a safe and environmentally sustainable landscape for consumers to go about their day-to-day lives, provided that the state supported educational initiatives so that producers and consumers could make rational decisions. Certainly, this is a model of citizenship, though I focus here on those with the thicker conception, since their participation is both resonant and dissonant with Light’s model in interesting ways.

The thicker conception of citizenship has developed in urban agricultural communities in a context that has historically struggled to ensure inclusion and promote diversity. These challenges are salient to non-profit organizations working in the field, with an interview participant reporting:

I think the local food movement in general has struggled with the question of how we represent everybody. And I was a part of organizing an event in Lansing around food access, and it’s the same people who show up. It’s the people who are either employed to work in this field or who have some very vocal voice in food. [It] doesn’t necessarily get those who are most affected by food access. Because a lot of those people are lower income, lower resource and don’t have the time to devote to being a part of these conversations.

Another participant shared their efforts to “build coalitions with organizations that represent different needs,” recalling the specific challenges of including new American farmers and eaters who strive to grow food as they did before immigrating here.

Coalition building required the sort of value pluralism that Light shows to be at the core of urban ecological citizenship—good ecological citizens avoided purity tests that would exclude from the coalition those for whom environmental values are lower on their list of priorities. The connection to democratic politics was made explicit by one participant who recognized that their particular environmental values were only some of the many competing values at stake in the city’s urban planning, and that “that’s okay, you know, that’s part of living in a diverse democracy, that not everyone is going to be in your corner.” Another resisted the whole idea of defining core values for urban agriculture, explaining that there are “different priorities and values in terms of what’s seen as most important or most needed by different communities. Might look different in different places.” Though urban agriculture will look different in different places, no one suggested that agricultural practices ought to pollute the environment, and many worked creatively as stewards of important ecological processes—the protection of pollinators, the cycling of nutrients. These values, though, would be made concrete in particular places with particular cultures and landscapes.

Equally impressive was participants’ recognition that citizenship required genuine engagement that generated mutual and sympathetic understanding. This is the sort of understanding that emerges from “working with” communities rather than offering technocratic solutions, and that feminist pragmatist
Instead, many farmers and growers advocated for detailed guidelines for what they should and shouldn’t do, plus audits of existing city codes to anticipate where urban agriculture might conflict with alternative land uses. Equally important would be the visibility that such formal policymaking would lend to their activities, which participants believed would celebrate the contributions that urban agriculture was making to the city. To most at the resilience workshop, part of being a grower is to participate in the democratic place-making that sustained the city in general and its farms and gardens in particular. Quite clearly, working the land had helped to foster a sense of urban ecological citizenship.

ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Public philosophy must do more than apply normative theory to real-world contexts; it should be reflexive about its own theories, circling back when recalcitrant experiences problematize one’s starting assumptions. With that in mind, I want to close by attending to an oft-overlooked limb of Light’s account—that urban ecological citizenship offers an alternative to, and is largely incompatible with, identity or special interest politics. Roughly, Light is concerned that the emphasis on standpoint characteristics of identity politics is detrimental to the cultivation of community necessary to ameliorate environmental problems that extend beyond neighborhood boundaries.

Growers generally did share the sense that farmers and gardening required a standpoint that was hard to acquire without developing the subjectivity of someone who works the land, and they firmly believed that sound democratic decision-making sought out this expertise when crafting policies. Given that the quotidian practices of farming generated a particular subjectivity, growers generally expected to have a seat at the table in crafting city plans and ordinances. When criticizing the city’s backyard chicken policy, a community gardener lamented “Did you ask a farmer? Did you ask a person that’s really good with aviaries and knows how many is legit? I don’t think any of that happened. I think it was a couple of people that went, ‘Five chickens. That’s it.’” Frequently, farmers and gardeners riled against ordinances that banned buffer strips and pollinator habitat, which code enforcers saw merely as unmowed and “unsightly” lawns. Those outside of the urban farming community, participants moaned, simply didn’t understand.

There is a resemblance here to what Light calls a “nondemocratic hierarchy of ‘closeness,’” where citizens enter the agora as advocates for special interests that only those with specific

Critical to sympathetic understanding is creating spaces for dialogue and exchange, and a common refrain from urban gardeners was the importance of the garden as a space for learning across difference and building community.

To most at the resilience workshop, part of being a grower is to participate in the democratic place-making... Quite clearly, working the land had helped to foster a sense of urban ecological citizenship.

In 2019, the storied Allen Neighborhood Center offered its space for a more intentional deliberation, bringing together farmers, gardeners, and support organizations with city councilpersons and other policymakers. Modeled on the resilience workshops more common in Europe, the deliberation invited participants to co-construct a shared vision for urban agriculture in Lansing and to develop strategies to achieve that vision and ensure its resilience. The conversations echoed a fascinating insight expressed occasionally in the interviews that fed into the planning for the workshop: it is not enough for those involved in the food system to have good will toward one another, and absolutely critical that any informal norms and expectations be codified in city planning documents, ordinances, and legislation. This emphasis marked a contrast between the aforementioned subscribers to the thinner conception of citizenship and the thicker conception of citizenship. To those operating with the thinner conception—who often included city officials themselves—farmers and growers would be best served by the quite vague standards in the state’s Right to Farm Act that mostly exempt agricultural practice from liability. Viewed as run-of-the-mill producers, growers were expected to relish such blanket protections.

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experiences are expected to appreciate. On closer inspection, however, growers appeared adroit at reconciling their personal values with those of the fuller community. When asked how their values have changed as a result of working in urban agriculture, several participants chronicled the transition from sustainability zealot to urban ecological citizen. Initially drawn to food systems work by concern for the environment, many learned to balance environmental values against other social values held by their communities.

**Resilience workshops are ordinarily conceived as opportunities to build community capacity to adapt and transform, but they should also be embraced as much-needed spaces to be and become better ecological citizens.**

Moderating their own special interests did not amount to abandoning those interests when they came into conflict with others’ interests. Instead, environmental values were pursued in context-sensitive ways that considered the values of other neighborhood residents. This entailed a spirit of experimentalism where farmers and gardeners were always seeking out opportunities to learn more. Reflecting on a fault line between urban farmers and policymakers, one grower called for “more actual research”:

A lot of these [new food safety policies] are really common sense, and people actually should not be applying unsafe water to leafy greens that are going to be eaten fresh.... But does it really need to be 120 days between when we get lay manure on the ground outside in a biologically active place?

A newer garden leader prided her community garden for its appetite for new knowledge, noting that “we have a handful of fairly knowledgeable gardeners, but we don’t have anyone really expert. So we all have a hungering desire to learn more.” Note that this experimentalism is not constrained to an investigation of “the facts”—what really emerged in conversation was the openness to experimenting with different values, with different ways of enacting various visions and learning to make them compatible. This may be the most salient expression of ecological citizenship, which understood democracy as a dramatic rehearsal of diverse perspectives striving for cohabitation of mutual flourishing.

Where participants were more likely to grant a privileged position was with regard to matters of food access and insecurity. As the passages earlier indicate, the predominantly white urban agricultural community did look to non-white voices to think through the structural barriers to procuring healthy and affordable food. Yet this recognition is perfectly consistent with their own democratic ideals—that decisions ought to be made with the best knowledge at hand, and that those whose subjectivities are shaped by enduring structural injustices have both the standpoints and experiences to lead in those decisions. Even those who did maintain a close connection to the natural world appreciated the need to build diverse coalitions in order to enact the policy changes that would support urban agriculture in the city. This required delegating decisions to different scales of governance—an idea that resilience scholars would recognize as polycentric governance. This would allow neighborhoods to develop local food systems that responded to the particular problems they faced, all while working within more flexible guidelines that coordinated the regional food system. It also required farmers and gardeners to be citizens of multiple and nested governments, cultivating norms for their gardens or neighborhoods while also negotiating statutes with city officials and state representatives. Resilience workshops are ordinarily conceived as opportunities to build community capacity to adapt and transform, but they should also be embraced as much-needed spaces to be and become better ecological citizens.

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NOTES


10. Ibid.


