

Becoming Garden

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This paper is composed of a series of moments that evolved from an inquiry with our community garden plot. This inquiry involved children's, educators', and families' experimentations and processes of "coming to know" the garden. We attempt to grapple with the messiness of a "garden" and the assemblages and binaries that exist within it. We experiment with sitting in our garden as a space not yet defined. Through this process, we found that a community garden is open to a plurality of possibilities. This entangled process of coming to know speaks to the imaginary and involves layers of touching, hearing, seeing, drawing, talking, writing, and storying our garden.

Key words: garden inquiry; common worlds; becoming; experimentation; community

we encounter this piece of land? How do we meet these resilient plants, which have somehow survived, regardless of their lack of water? How can we become *with* this place? Fikile Nxumalo (2016) troubles the history behind the aesthetics and practices of Eurocentric gardens. She says, "These imaginaries and gardening practices come



Figure 1. Garden plot.

We, Kelsey and Aideen, are educators who work in a child care centre situated within a university campus on the west coast of British Columbia, offering full-day care to children aged 3 to 5. The university is situated on the traditional territory of the WSÁNEĆ (Saanich), Lkwungen (Songhees), and Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples of the Coast Salish Nation. We have recently acquired a plot, or small square of land, at the campus community garden. It was already late spring when we heard we would be given a space after patiently waiting for some time. We eagerly arrived to see the new plot, which was to be an extension of our classroom—a space that was public and connected with a larger community. It was lush with dandelions, lambs' ear, overgrown brassica, and various grasses. Children walked through it, trying to disappear in the thickness of the plant life commonly known as weeds (see Figure 1). Touching the lambs' ear, marvelling at how soft the leaves were, we had to carefully think about what was growing there already. What had grown here before? Troubled by the constant binary of good/bad, we grappled with questions: How do

together to help shape what belongs, lives, and grows inside certain gardens, and what becomes classified as a weed or an "invasive pest" (p. 140). We tried to navigate how we were going to respond to the plants that were already growing in our plot in a way that disrupted seeing them as only weeds. Or, as one child said, "Bad, baaaad, bad plants. They take all the water from the plants."

This "messy" garden, which was not pruned or by any means contained, was alive: It was already *growing*. The plants that were growing were not ones often wanted or desired in colonial-style gardens (Nxumalo, 2016). In a way, the garden lacked an order to the plants. We were mystified at times where the garden began, as Figure 2 shows. The garden lacked a clear division

between the grass and the edge of the plot. Nxumalo (2016) troubles the colonial history surrounding a community garden plot, questioning, “How do the vibrancies of place restoried through multispecies relations sit alongside the borderlines of the garden? What might we learn by paying attention to not only colonial framing enacted by lines, but also to leaks, cracks, and ruptures in these lines?” (p. 143).

We began to plant seeds for various vegetables and fruits, but not many grew. At times we wondered: Is this space a garden? What does a garden consist of? One child drew the elements she imagined to be critical in the garden (see Figure 3). Her drawings of rain, sunshine, bugs, her own hand, the soil, plants provoked us to think about how we were entangled *with* this garden. Being with this garden as it was, in all its messiness, provided an opening—a pause—a space for something else to become. We were tempted to cultivate a garden that was fertile in production of fruits and vegetables; however, we met resistance in this initiative. The children were imagining where the seeds went and asking why they didn’t grow into “big plants that reached the sky.” Instead, they grappled with the plants that were there. What is possible in this space between? How do we think with the other possibilities of gardens? It was within this messy place that the opening for possibilities from the children emerged. In a way, the undefined

element of the garden lent itself to a plurality of possibilities. We had to pause and listen. It was these entanglements of binaries, unknown plants, and a new space that led our inquiry of how to “become garden” (Haraway, 2003).



Figure 2. Pathways—spaces in between our garden / the neighbour’s / planted grass. Photo by Keegan, age 4.



Figure 3. Drawing of garden entanglements sunshine–raindrops–hand–ladybugs–seeds–rain–sunflower–worms–rainbow.

Imaginative Possibilities

In this process of coming to know our garden, and as our questions about what a garden is continued to grow, we thought about what we did not know. How were we imagining the garden to be? As we worked with this idea, the children also developed their own theories for what happened in the garden. We wanted to think with Maxine Greene’s (1995) ideas about the possibility of what else could be:

To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or “common-sensible” and to carve out new orders in experience. Doing so, a person may become freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be and what is not yet. And the same person may, at the same time, remain in touch with what presumably is. (p. 19)

We have wondered, *how* do we respond? Children’s imaginative ideas are often dismissed by educators, researchers, and other adults. Rather than responding with curiosity about the origin of their ideas, children’s theories are often romanticized as cute. However, we wanted to think about what these ideas could become. What kinds of dialogue could they generate? Troubling the perception that the garden had to become classified as *only*

a plot that produced a bounty of vegetables and fruits, we hoped to invite multiple perspectives and ideas around its becoming. What could the seeds that did not germinate (in this plot) also set into motion? The towering sunflower that peers over the rest of our garden plot certainly evokes a flurry of conversation, but we also wonder about how we respond to the dandelions that grow with it. Mysterious seeds from last year's brassica that self-seeded or the seeds from our apples we shared at snack that we planted in hopes of growing an apple tree—these moments have become entangled in our relationship with the community garden.

Marshmallow Seeds

We decided to start some seeds indoors as we waited for the fluctuating spring weather to steady. After debating about what type of seed to plant, we decided to start a mixture of edible seeds because we felt there was a strong interest in growing plants we could also taste. We invited families to share with us seeds from their previous harvest. With an assortment of seeds, soil, pots, and multiple hands we gathered around an outdoor table. Opening each packet with curiosity and interest, we closely examined the shape, texture, and colour of the seeds. Holding a pea seed between their fingers, one child exclaimed with confidence, "A marshmallow seed!" How can we see the children's theories about the pea seeds, shrivelled and square in their shape, as possible marshmallow seeds? With their declaration that they will "grow a marshmallow forest," how do we acknowledge these seeds as something other than the pea seeds they (presumably) are? How do we take seriously children's theories for imaginative possibilities? Instead, could it be a provocation to think about "What if?" and "What else?" What other possibilities exist within this assemblage of plants-seeds-soil-rain-sun-hands-worms-birds that we do not know? We danced between spaces of our own understanding, of tangible experiences of our own gardening histories and the imaginative stories the children told. Ted Aoki (1993, in Aoki, Pinar, & Irwin, 2012) draws on this space in between knowing and not knowing.

Possibly, just possibly, there might be a new language in the making—growing in the middle—a language with a grammar in which a noun is not always a noun, in which conjoining words like **between** and **and** are no mere joining words, a new language that might allow a transformative resonance of the words **paradigms, practices,** and **possibilities.** (p. 214)

Thinking with Aoki, we continued to question how we could respond to the becoming-garden in a way that recognized the complexities involved.

Traveling Seeds

There have been a few moments where we have been puzzled at where the seeds we planted have gone. Stories have been told by the children of a mysterious bear with pink fur that sneaks around the centre and garden at night eating all the ripe strawberries. Other possibilities—the bunnies made off with them, a lack of water, the wind blew them away, the birds took them—have been among our theories of why they didn't grow. But perhaps they did grow, just not in *this* garden. Perhaps they travelled somewhere else. We often discovered fragments of the plants that grew, such as the beans in Figure 4, showing evidence that this garden is shared. Or perhaps some of our surprise plants could be attributed to one child's statement: "Do you know how some trees grow? The birds eat the berries and then the trees grow from the birds' poop." Multiple layers exist within our garden. Various seeds left over from last year have made an appearance, and there have been surprises of potatoes, chard, squash, and a growing amount of tomato plants.

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How does the *way* we speak about soil-seeds-plants-birds and so on change the way we interact with the world? Robin Wall Kimmerer (2015) weaves an Indigenous way of knowing plants with her experience as a botanist. She reminds us of the importance of language and the power that it holds.

Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion—until we teach them not to. We quickly retrain them and make them forget. When we tell them that the tree is not a **who**, but an **it**, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. (p. 57)



Figure 4. Beans—shrivelled–half-picked–picked–gone–not picked. Photo by Keegan, age 4.

Similarly, in our inquiry one child stated, “I’m going to read to the seeds so they grow” as she tended to the newly planted seeds. This gesture imagines other ways of tending to seeds that complicate the expected assemblage of water–sunshine–soil. How can we think with Kimmerer’s (2003) thoughts on language as we grapple with the life in our garden? How can we respond to gestures such as reading to the seeds so that we acknowledge what their stories and language set in motion? Could the way we tell stories and speak about the life of these plants disrupt the colonial histories embedded within unwanted plants and Euro-centered gardening practices?



Figure 5. Drawing of the carrots growing with the worms’ help.

Storying Garden(s)

Elements in the garden are not static; they hold incredible agency. One afternoon, a group of children and educators sat beside the garden plot drawing the changes we noticed and thinking about the life in the soil. One child drew worm tunnels (Figure 5) and explained that they “help the carrots grow” and “be the plant’s friend.” As these conversations occurred, soil from the garden beds travelled to the paper. Soil blowing around the paper invited our fingers to spread it (Figure 6), leading us to discover the ability to mark. Discovering this led us to be intrigued by how we could draw with the other plants growing in the plot. Rubbing the pungent yellow dandelion petals and green kale leaves left vibrant streaks of colour on the paper and our fingers. This reminded us of how Donna Haraway (2015) draws on Jim Clifford, stating, “we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections” (p. 160). With Haraway (2015), we continue to question what could be possible within this assemblage.

Soil from the garden often follows us throughout the day, stuck in the crevices of our boots and under our fingernails. How do we get to know the soil? How can we get to know the soil through touch? As we rub it between our fingers, looking closely at its composition, we notice tiny, broken-down fragments, or “remains” and intricacies of the “web of living organisms” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014). We notice differences in the soil from different locations in the forest

and the community garden. What is soil and how does (s) he live? In terms of taking care of soil in this colonized place, what does soil do (or not do) in regards to worlding new possibilities with seeds, water, manure, worms, and so many others—including our human selves? Encounters among children, educators, worms, beetles, seeds, soil, shoes, wind, families, bunnies, deer ... all intra-act (Barad, 2007) with each other. This garden assemblage is always becoming. It is these relations that connect us in multiple ways.

Conclusion

Is this a garden? Kimmerer (2003) encourages us to think about the importance of relationships:

The revelation of suddenly seeing what I was blind to only moments before is a sublime experience for me. I can revisit those moments and still feel a surge of expansion. The boundaries between my world and the world of another being get pushed back with sudden clarity, an experience both humbling and joyful ... Look in a certain way and a whole new world can be revealed. (pp. 9–10)

With Kimmerer (2003), we continue an ongoing dialogue about the “tangled tapestry threads” of our ongoing relations with the garden. We continue to (re)story our relationship with this place and grapple with how to respond with a becoming-garden. Beyond conventional ways of thinking exists children’s innovative concepts and perceptions that thread unlimited possibilities of garden(s).



Figure 6. Soil and pastel rubbing.

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