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Scaffolding transitions of possibility: the food walk as embodied method in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

Resilient food infrastructures responsive to instability and change often form at the urban edge of food systems. As such, they could take heed of knowledge practices that occur at the urban edge. This paper conceptualizes learning as a co-productive activity that can be scaffolded by space, and examines how it applies to the re-imagination of food systems. By considering walking as a method in the design of desired foodscapes, this paper addresses how “time niches” foster embodied knowledges of care and haptic connection. The two cases that illustrate this – a set of walking workshops with Singapore-based participants and a visualising workshop with visiting conference participants – consider how so-called lay and expert knowledges may come together in knowledge co-production in future-making practices. The paper explores how civic and decolonial practices occur in the sustainability transition of food.

KEYWORDS

Knowledge co-production; futures; food; walking; decolonial methods

Background: food space as urban edge in Singapore

A lively public sphere requires shared communicative skills, an understanding of dialogical possibility, empathetic connection, and time. Food holds cultural and spatial memory. Its tastes and flavours re-establish emotional and neural connections with a space, a rhythm, a time – as when someone reminisces about a particular store selling the best Hakka *yong tau foo* (酿豆腐)¹ in Singapore’s People’s Park Complex. In the years of nation-building in Singapore, as functional spaces were constructed to shape a new citizen identity, redevelopment policies involved the “displace[ment], destr[u]ction, replace[ment]” (Koolhaas and Mau 1995, 1035 cited in Tajudeen 2007) of people’s sources of everyday dignity – values, music and radio, spaces, and collective identities and freedoms. In these times, the flavor of a specific dish was, for many, the only living artefact to hold on to.

This paper reaches beyond the study of food as experienced by the eater, towards the study of food as landscape-in-transformation: the governance of life and land. I reach towards the way foods, and the infrastructures needed to make food, are dreamt up,

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desired, and produced. As such, the paper approaches a transforming food system in Singapore through Tajudeen's (2007) historical analysis of the cultural reconstitution of everyday spaces in Singapore; in his terms, of the "displace[ment], reinvent[ion] and sell[ing]" of cultural space (9). The urban edge in megalopolitan realms offers critical insight into how food practices change, subvert, and contest land use (Parham 2015a, 2015b).

Within dense Asian cities that modernised quickly, urban space holds compounded exclusionary effects on different bodies. As Harms (2016) notes, transposing Hall, Hirsch, and Li (2011) original argument about "exclusion's double edge" to the Asian city: "[while] [o]riginally developed to explain agrarian land conflicts in Southeast Asia, these insights also characterize Asian cities, where all uses of space, even those intended to promote inclusion, are constrained by urban spatial density." (46) Space use in Singapore, too, involves densely-encoded meanings that arise each time land access is considered. I use the term "urban edge" to refer to spaces where forms of inclusion-exclusion become perceptible.

In the last decade, a string of cities in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East have begun transformations of this sort: increasingly piggybacking on an inclination in urban planning and policy to invest in infrastructure as a form of resilience to urban ecological issues (Rizzo 2019). These approaches have been heavily critiqued for their emphasis on "solutioning," that is, creating technological responses that ignore the unevenness and complexity with which urban problems impact subsets of the population, such as in urban flooding in Jakarta (Padawangi and Douglass 2015). To add nuance to these approaches, a critical scepticism that welcomes nature back into urban life and scholarly study is sorely needed (Rademacher 2015, 144 cited in Harms 2016).

Given the decisions to be made around urban food systems, I put forward a proposal for our methodological approaches to do two things. First, that they engage the diverse bodies that use urban edges of in-/exclusion, and hold space for the "polyvalent" (Harms 2016) perspectives concentrated around them to become perceptible. Second, that (socio)material transformation converses with institutional discourse. As Freidburg (2001) shows in her study of market gardens in an African urban periphery, it is the erosion of specific sets of place-based relations that dissolves gardens from the landscape. Studies of urban edges that employ place-based methodologies and emphasise the co-existence of polyvalent perspectives, do much to weave embodied knowledge directly into the work of practitioners and designers.

Pinpointing the urban edge of in/ex-clusion through food

In Singapore, food has enabled the ongoing exchange and negotiation of identity; as service, livelihood, and survival. It is integral to play, the subject of heated debates, a living demonstration of desire and care, and a storied archive in art and everyday life (Tan 2013; Tarulevicz 2013; Low 2016). Just as Tarulevicz views the cultural history of food as a path towards unpacking cultural history *through* food, I argue that moments in which food is sourced, made, eaten, shared, purchased and prepared for others or oneself, offers a way to understand larger societal preoccupations.

Food is also an intense archive of "a 'humanity' that *is* memory" (Colebrook 2018, 509): of attachment and creation despite spatial transformation and commodification. The

globalisation of food in Singapore is often noted to be two-way: of the import of foreign foods to Singapore and the spread of Singapore's multi-ethnic and hybrid food to other parts of the world (Kong 2016). Singapore's foodie culture is also celebrated in its business of tourism, embraced by the state and state-owned enterprises; as Kong notes, "a former Minister for Trade and Industry even remarked at the amount of time Singaporeans spend eating and constantly thinking about food, declaring this fixation with food to be 'an inseparable part of our culture'" (Kong 2016).

I trace this fixation with consuming, consumption, and the already-next meal, to what it hides. Foodie culture hides a spatiality of loss. Seeking this spatiality has brought me to the urban edges of Singapore where knowledge about food is produced – and eventually to see these spaces as parts of a cultural foodscape of the urban possible. I see foodscapes as a bricolage of small places and spaces, that evolve through time as a continuously emergent product of processes that shape how food, producers, eaters, and sellers come together (Blake 2018). Blake's formulation understands diverse, minor foodways as being made possible within inherently uneven and unjust foodscapes that are inordinately produced to serve powerful or dominant groups. As her study of Chinese food in Hong Kong shows, this inherent unevenness arises from the ways foodscapes are often produced as symbol and material by urban governance of the time to "generate group formation ... in order to suit the purposes of the regime in charge" (Blake 2018, 1048). Processes occurring within foodscapes intersect with sociopolitical processes of justice, struggle, and emancipation, and the actions of actors within foodscapes may be directed not only towards commerce, eating, identity and image, or specific biological or nutritional aims as Parham (2012) notes, but also towards increasing voice and participation in co-producing more inclusive food systems. Within sustainability transitions and participatory systems, food systems are a site where the visceral, material, social, and symbolic exist as co-constitutive parts of emerging structures (Rut, Davies and Ng 2020; Rut and Davies 2018).

The political ecology of foodscapes in an age of ecological breakdown

The study of urban foodscapes includes an emphasis on place (e.g. Parham 2012, 2015b), and has garnered attention amongst geographers asking how a "political ecology of the body" (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008 cited in Goodman 2016), shapes food procurement practices and politics. Goodman (2016) presses scholarship to go beyond "the eater/food interface and the variable a/effects this has on bodies" (263), to give equal attention to the practical struggles that come with increasing austerity and food injustice. He points to the need for scholarship to not only take seriously the "eaters" most active and conscious of food's agency, but also other people who work, live, and eat within other parts of the food system: "such as those who labour over, stack, prepare and sell our food" (Goodman 2016, 261).

This is also a matter of how something is known. prioritising discourse around feelings, emotions, and affect, a political ecology of the body centralises, indeed reifies a specific cultural notion of the human body. This precludes the possibility for other perspectives to exist. Rākete (2017) describes the Maori notion of people as "a function of the land, of the

whenua" in which "[w]e are not beings who are of the land but the land itself in the act of being. We are a function of the ecology, we are ecology foremost" (no page number).

How food studies is done, then, has implications for how it discusses scale: the scale of the structural – of the global industrialised agri-food and consumption sectors, of local-scale food systems, of institutionally-configured processes (Blake 2018) – and the scale of attention and responsibility: of which affective narratives and practices by which bodies, is worth attending to (Goodman). Thinking with these proposals, this paper probes further: it proposes that the in-between scale most directly affects *how* foodscapes are produced: that how different bodies come to see or co-produce a way of knowing a foodscape, has material and symbolic effects. This paper shows that it is possible to hold the relational perspective of vital materialism while methodologically attending to how place-based knowledge co-production arises. Specifically, it illustrates how this may occur when groups of usual and "unusual" suspects – the people who are typically considered "expert" and others who are not, but have skillsets that speak to other knowledges needing to be recognised – cross specific boundaries together, generating place-based, ground-up understandings of how food matters.

While I focus on Singapore in this paper, I suggest that this frame extends to other cities grappling with the need for resilient food networks as production yield volatility grows. As Diehl, Sia, and Chandra (2019) argue of Singapore, even the highest bidder may lose privileged access to food sources once social, political and environmental circumstances change (56). I take seriously how ideas of urban form, spatial perception and the imaginative horizon of possibility are affected by the locations, backgrounds, and positions that individuals speak from, and its impact on how each person can be heard (Peake et al. 2018; Pratt 2018; Leaf 2011). I join conversations around the particular and the universal, and decolonial methodologies that argue for a focus on *how* and *whom* (Wynter (2003); Mignolo and Walsh 2018). The urbanist methodologies I seek are human/e ones that understand transcendence as an act of inter-active trust, forged between knowledge producers that each see a particular set of horizons and limits, at once material and institutional.

In this paper I sketch out a place in the field of urbanism for spaces that scaffold – that support and let grow – pathways toward resilient, collectively-sighted socio-technical futures. Drawing on psychologist Lev Vygotsky's work on the zone of proximal development (1978), scaffolding, or guided learning, is a term used to refer to processes that aid a person in reaching novel learning often involving the aid of a more experienced peer (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976; Berk and Winsler 1995). It has spatio-temporal dimensions as a process that occurs *through* time, and *takes place* in space. In Singapore, scaffolding has a spatial and infrastructural dimension to it, emerging before planned urban development. Art critic Lee Weng Choy (2001) has noted how built space and language cohere in the way Singapore is continually sited in the eternal present – its skyline is positioned to be of global relevance, while construction scaffolding continually reappears, markers of ceaseless redevelopment. Lee's observation of the city's persistent ahistoricity – as "Singapore, a society of the spectacle *par excellence*" (25) – remains highly astute today. In exchange for the practical illusion of becoming a self-made nation, space in Singapore loses its ability to support a society's ingenious growth.

In contrast to the sociospatial engineering that has displaced, reinvented, and sold during relative climate and economic stability, scaffolding spaces that *let grow* may offer

footholds to reorient our daily life, in a time of collective global disorientation. It is only in space in the particular that our “inner eyes,” as Wynter (2003) puts it, of classification and linear thinking can undergo a practice of transformation, and through *doing something* in that space, that we can evolve “[a] theory so other it is practice” … in continuous movement, contention, relation, and formation” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 19).

Spaces, I argue, are repositories for emotional memories, assisting in recall, in imagination and extrapolation, in curiosity – even from the razed grounds of reconstructed space and hollowed time. Extending urban political ecology’s investigative, radical imaginations of urbanization (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015), to “reconstitute the possible” within critical urban studies (Pinder 2015), I ask if future food imaginaries can be made through collective study with unusual suspects, and if so, what spaces and times foster them?

Dislocated bodies: people and foodscapes in the deterritorialisation of Singapore

Edible urban spaces in Singapore are more than merely natural tropical lushness, or monument to technocratic achievement. To analyse them this way would be to doubly obscure resident practices which are already invisibilised. Goh (2015) demonstrates the depth to which state imaginaries reach into society, which is replicated in the image citizens – and residents – hold of the state. Paying attention to everyday life in a country versed in folding civic narratives into its history, as Goh has argued, means to be aware of the spatial ways in which civic participation tilts towards the “knowledge that serves power,” away from “form[s] of knowing which refuse to acknowledge power” (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 10).

Much as with land deterritorialisations in Southeast Asia, deterritorialisation in Singapore has involved the eradication of subsistence food production, physically, culturally, and in the national narrative. Formerly self-sufficient communities which drew on subsistence farms and shared food production practices up till the 1970s (Chou 2015) were cut into nuclear family units, and communal spaces were replaced by private and public space. The first economic minister phased out farming and farmers, observing that agriculture had no role in the economy of a modern nation (Chou 2015). Simultaneously, as language education was formalised in school and the use of dialects was discouraged (Chua 1997), *kampung* (village) life’s spatial practices and temporal cycles were rendered non-sensical and untranslatable.

The production of the urban in Singapore, as elsewhere, is thus coupled with the production of knowledge about a specific spatio-temporal map of the urban. These urban foodscapes, produced within a specific place and political economy, are implicated in the land deterritorialisations rampant in Southeast Asia, financed by capital managed by urban centres increasingly beyond the West (Schoenberger, Hall, and Vandergeest 2017). As land regimes deterritorialise smallholders in the global South, scholarship needs to move from disparate foci on urban agriculture or rural food sovereignty movements, to, as Tornaghi and Van Dyck (2015) suggest, strengthen the visibility of pathways to resilient foodscapes supported by socio-technical systems, through collaborative knowledge-making.

Time niches for urban food-growing

If we accept that foodscapes are made of urban edges and rural spaces (Parham 2015b), then producing a sustainable foodshed – a “geographical area from which a population derives its food supply” sustainably (Peters et al. 2009, 2) – rests on the integration of cycles of energy circulation within urban and rural food producing, distributing, and renewing systems.

This task is much more than operational. (Re)producing arable land requires us to shift our attention beyond industro-productionist temporality, the machinery of supply chains, or the rhythms of global commodity consumption. Instead, food systems – including people, lands, operational and regulatory systems working-in-tandem – need to transition towards working within temporalities of care. Drawing on permacultural understandings of temporal immersion and “time niches,” Puig de la Bellacasa suggests the import of practicing “care time,” as, caring becomes better when done *again*, as relations are intensified and strengthened. These are also the methods we need to notice how the politics of producing a food system can change: how we can re-orient – haptically and culturally – within the socio-technical system that supports our food system.

This paper returns to Puig de la Bellacasa’s notion of a “time niche” to clarify the political ecological relations that might intensify during intentional food walks. I have argued elsewhere that edible urban spaces are “active moments” in the city that shock, surprise, or introduce people to different relations – both human and more-than-human (Ng 2020). I now wish to show *how* spaces scaffold learning and care time .

Walking as future-making methodology

The walk as a political and haptic act

The walk is an activity associated with sense, touch, and perception. I will refer to these as hapticity: where the temperature, moisture, texture, tactile quality, density and weight, and sharpness of matter – one’s body, other bodies – is experienced. Hapticity has been studied as a method of learning from interviewees and as an object of research (Pierce and Lawhon 2015), but it is also a gate to elusive things of greater interest – “what you don’t know you are looking for” (Solnit 2000, 11) – in social and healthful non-productive time. This includes haptic connection beyond the self: as individual bodies’ proprioceptive senses expand to be “part of [a] hybrid network” (Bennett 2017, 5).

Walks thus have the potential to invigorate and re-orient relationships between humans and non-humans, creating conditions to get out of one’s mind – to undo the “instrumentalization, degradation and evacuation of more-than-human agency” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2015, 701). Amidst the lushness of scent and sight, a garden scaffolds a dialogue for humans to bodily enter a different temporality and hapticity.

The task of building more inclusive food systems thus needs both capacity for dialogue, and also the dense temporalities of care that come through haptic connection between more-than-human bodies. Plant-soil-person connections may begin to mend socio-ecological separation at the “engagement interface” (Doberneck, Miller, and Schweitzer 2012), where “the dynamic interplay of internal and external forces of change leads to emergence” (79).

Methodology

I employ a mixed methodology of surveys, sketches, interviews, and ethnography, across two case studies. These help me to consider multiple perspectives within a food walk.

One layer of analysis responds to the “collaborative associations” that can occur with more-than-human agents to “frame … shared questions and concerns or recraft existing empirical methods” (van Dooren, Kirksey and Münster 2016, 11). A second layer engages with examining the affects, ideas, and recalibrations that are co-produced in these moments of the walk. Third, to focus on these walks as particular acts of future-making that expand what Appadurai (2004, 2013) calls the “ethics of possibility,” attention is given to the “ethnographic moment” of coeval interpretation (Ohm 2013), where events and interpretations are witnessed as they occur at particular and ephemeral moments in time. Vineeta Sinha (2018), in her methodological musings on being an ethnographer located always in her fieldsite, writes of the “intensification and augmentation of fieldwork moments” (268) that she lives within, in which it becomes impossible for conversations to not veer towards “the future” in the (ethnographic) present of fieldwork moments” (274). Research may be ongoing, but the object of research – if it is to bear witness to, and throw its lot in with an ethics of possibility – is not to capture an ethnographic present, but to evolve a methodology for collective study *with* the ethnographic moment.

Shared time and care time matters to coeval relation. Harney and Moten (2013) work on collective study sits within critical race studies, entangled with an embodied history of refusal and disavowal of continuing under conditions of slavery, subjugation, and the elevation of one group over others. Collective study refuses the idea that it is possible to judge some concerns as being of universal priority over others. Collective study as emancipatory praxis offers insight into how lay and seemingly-expert groups can be brought together in ways that also, “stay with the trouble” of multi-species encounters (Haraway 2016).

Case study 1 considers how participants visually engage, and describe, their experience of visiting edible gardens, in a set of walking workshops. This research passed the internal departmental ethics review board in the Department of Psychology, National University of Singapore, and data collection was completed between February to April 2017. With case study 2, I reflect inwardly on my own experience as the facilitator of a workshop held in September 2017.

The gardens

As spaces to scaffold learning experiences, the gardens serve as a backdrop where the visceral (e.g. sensations of heat and humidity, coolness and wind) sits with the emotional (e.g. sensations of displacement, distance, or connection). Gardens were selected based on their location, land use type, garden layout, and regulatory conditions (see Table 1 for more details), which I perceived through my work with a local organising network. All gardens selected were community gardens under the National Parks Board’s “Community in Bloom” programme.

This case study will focus on just two of the five gardens; I outline the rest in brief (see Table 1). Edible growing in public is officially possible only through the National Parks Board’s “Community in Bloom” Community Gardens programme. Although edible plants

Table 1. Garden characteristics.

Garden, focus, and location on the island	Topics that arose	Themes-in-context
Clementi Avenue 4: allotment and park connector, railway (West)	1: orderliness	Value of gardens – for aesthetic, production, social, or other benefits?
Joo Chiat Haig Road: square garden plots in a single line next to a linear park, public residences (East)	2: leasing of plots, access, improving garden management	Input and resources (time, cost, effort) of setting up a garden, garden management, garden allocation programme
Aljunied Crescent: placemaking, residential and elderly daycare centre (Southeast)	3: fencing of gardens, exclusion and property	Garden in relation to regulatory authority, sharing of common space, organisation and structure of surrounding spaces
Khatib: composting, HDB public housing, rooftop gardens (North)	4: elements, cycle, sun, gardeners' decision-making, resource sharing, different techniques	Links between social ecology, "ecological community" and energy sharing, distribution and cycling
National University of Singapore: workplace gardening (West)	5: Institutional regulation, growing in institutional spaces	University infrastructure partnerships, rooftop gardens

occasionally appear on public roadside verges, roadside verges are not legally viable for use by residents as there is no direct process to acquiring them for edible planting; plants grown without administrative permission on verges are routinely removed or cut down. Multiple agencies or bodies hold administrative oversight of different land parcels: for waterworks, landholding, green space and trees, public housing, and at times, tourism. Roadside verges that do persist often continue to do so under the aegis of a supportive grassroots leader, or Member of Parliament.

Clementi gardens, which served as a site of the first and second case study, was made of edible growing plots that originally sprawled around a north-bound railway connecting Singapore to Malaysia. This land belonged to a Malaysian railway company, KTM Berhad, until 2011, when the station was decommissioned. In 2015, the Urban Redevelopment Authority invited design submissions for the Rail Corridor to be converted into accessible and public space, and planned development began to inch its way down the tracks.

A second set of gardens, in Khatib, sat on rooftops – still a relatively new typology in 2017. These gardens were constructed on the roof of a multi-storey carpark of a public housing estate. During our visit, we were guided by one of the first gardeners, a self-taught gardener/farmer who was on the path to food self-sufficiency.

Methods

With the first workshop, 11 interviews were conducted out of 76 participants who signed up for the walks and who gave informed consent. Participants were asked to make sketches before and after visiting the garden, and sketches were collected after the walk ended. A separate process of informed consent for the interview was done prior to each interview. The number of spontaneous interactions during the walks were not tracked. In total, contact time included 10 hours of interaction with 76 participants (2-hour sessions, five sessions).

The second set of workshops was designed without the intention to be brought into formal research. I write about it here with an ethnographer's eye to inflect my description

of the first, which was explicitly designed with empirical qualitative methods common in evaluation outcome research. Addressing both case studies, I wish to examine how a workshop's convenor may witness and participate with a partial point of view, and bear witness to facets that illuminate viewpoints and responses. Since no official informed consent process was used, no informant names or identifiers are used, and I follow the method of ethnography to theorise scholarship's role in knowledge production.

Case study 1: walking workshops as scaffolding spaces

Background to the walks

In 2015, several collaborators and I formed an initiative, *Foodscape Collective*, which began holding walks to home and community gardens. The aim was to bring people together, to show that common topics could be established with strangers, and to bring people out of their homes and private spaces into a low-commitment, public space.

In order to understand what participants on these walks gained, I conducted a study in early 2017 to evaluate the outcomes from such walks, following a model of public health programme evaluation I was familiar with. I hoped to understand how ecological knowing and identity might consolidate despite the diffused, dispersed opportunities they have to form in urban, often alienating living conditions. The scope of this paper permits only a discussion of hapticity and space, but see Ng (2020) for a discussion of motivations, learning gains, and ecological identity.

Treatment of data

Fieldnotes and sketches made during the research were read alongside extracts of the interview transcripts to address the primary question: how do haptic connections in space enable new learnings at the engagement interface? While a thematic analysis was conducted as part of the initial evaluation study, I do not present it here in full – readers may refer to the supplemental materials for a methodology and participants' sketches of gardens. The sketches were read cognizant of Kevin Lynch's (1960) work on mental mapping but eschews a strictly Lynchian approach in order to focus on other ways of reading space. In this paper, I instead seek to contextualise participants' responses, extracted from that thematic analysis, alongside my observations of the walking workshops as a haptic and temporal niche, and an engagement interface.

The process of the walk

Each walk lasted two hours. The duration was based off garden walks that had been conducted by Foodscape Collective, which was always set at 2 hours – people left or stayed as they could. Participants registered via an online form: either in response to a publicity poster distributed through a university mailing list comprising students, staff and faculty, advertising a "walking workshop," or on Facebook via the Foodscape Collective's network. Table 2 reflects the process of each walk. I took fieldnotes where I could, during and after each session, which I reviewed through the course of the weeks

Table 2. Process of each walking workshop.

Session Flow

- Participants asked to draw perceptions of urban nature in advance of workshop
- Meet, brief self-introductions
- Facilitator assesses participants' comfort levels
- Walk, talk to garden/ers
- We gather
- Participants are asked to sketch new images or add to their current images
- Brief discussion
- Explain research

Table 3. Fieldnote observations.

Looking back over the four weeks, my impressions of topics had its own momentum – for myself at least, as the only person connecting across the sessions. . . In the first session we had students considering these questions [about edible gardens] without personal experience or context as a lens. In the second session, we had individuals who had waited for a community garden for a long time, so our conversations took a turn towards how we might have garden spaces that more people could share. Questions of land, effort, time taken to improve the soil in Singapore, and provide space for everyone came in. In the third session, these concerns – and the need for soil rehabilitation – came to the fore. The topics were common space, soil and fences. In the 4th session, the cycle of holistic plant life and biodiversity entered as [the gardener] had introduced composting, and also walked people through the way the garden was set up, his garden's bee hotel and bees in other plots. Looking at plots also led to considerations about how the spaces were spread out and shared.

Each garden we visited had acted as a prime and stimulus for thought and processing. These gardens prompted responses either in agreement of, or in contrast to. The sprawl of the Clementi gardens on the slope prompted thinking about orderliness. Students' questions about productivity (for coursework assignments) prompted a consideration of health and social uses of the garden. The allotments prompted questions about the possibility of sharing space.

(see for example, [Table 3](#)). This self-selection process meant we received applications from a group of people more inclined to health, wellness, and/or with an educational background not representative of the larger population.

Individual interviews with participants who agreed to be interviewed ($N = 11$) after the walk focused on two questions: "What brought you to the workshop?" and "What did you get out of it?"

Observational data

As I found, the garden as a foodspace gave people concrete examples to think through abstract concepts of sustainable, healthy food production, civic space, and the governance of public and green space (see Supplemental Material [Figure 1–2](#)). Inspecting the sketches, some visual elements stand out: where some people recall orderly architectural lines, others recall the density of relations, plants, and terrain (see Supplemental Material). Coupled with the walk as a haptic time niche for seeing and tasting chillies and limes (see Supplemental [Table 3](#); Attentive Intimacy, Interviewee 2), participants could visualise the contextual needs and fruits of the garden through dialogue and their senses. As a participant-walker mentioned,

Before [the workshop], I had just thought about design and people's use. But now I will also consider the organisation, how to implement planning, how to interact with residents, ask about their opinions about the planning, provide feedback, make some amendments . . . (Interviewee 6)



Figure 1. Orderly plots on the rooftop garden.

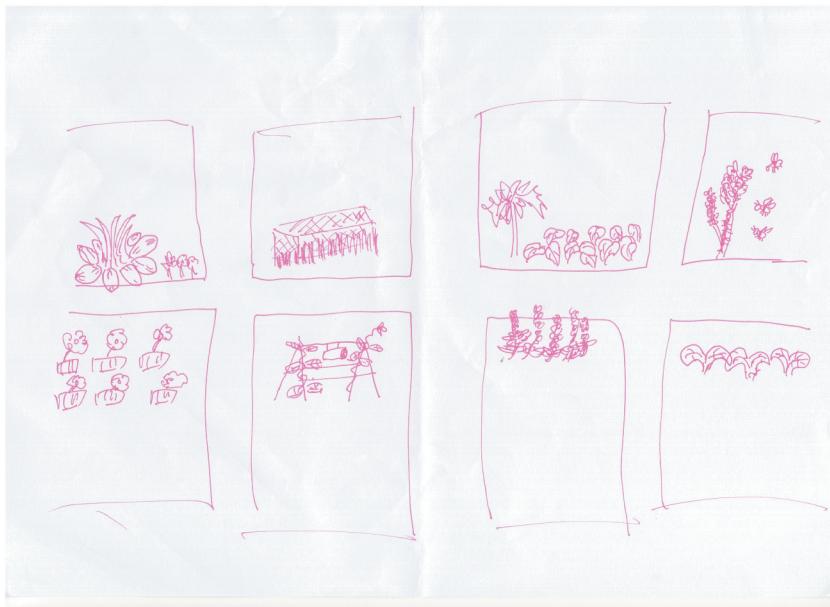


Figure 2. Participant's sketch of the rooftop garden.

The concreteness of being in space, walking physically through them and thinking visually about them with participants, allowed close observation of spatial imagery. The pattern of order in Singapore more closely resembles the rooftop garden ([Figure 1](#)). This visual pattern clearly stood out to participants, as their post-walk sketches illustrated (see [Figure 2](#) and Supplemental Material for examples).

This spatial imagery is a visual imprint of civility, cleanliness, civic order, and good citizenship. In Lefebvrian terms, such imagery enters the spatial practice of the planner, student or apprentice, and constrains representational spaces by binding people's imaginations. As another, female, interviewee's words suggest,

this spatial practice and imagery is viral and quick to inhibit behavior even for people new to Singapore:

the other day, across the road—people cross here—there's a pavement. And there's a green space with some trees, and for the first time (I've been here about 8–9 months), about 10 days ago. I saw two people sitting on the grass, under a tree. I've *never* seen that before. So, even though there's grass, there's trees, people will walk on the pavement, not interact with the green. They won't walk on the grass. I don't know whether it's not allowed—I didn't see any signs not to walk on the grass. But I don't know whether it's something people have just assumed—because you see those signs everywhere, or you think "this is Singapore of course I should not walk on the grass" you know, where you have these assumptions of order or of rules, having to follow them. So I went to Bedok Reservoir and I saw beautiful trees there, and I wanted to climb them, but I didn't because at the back of my mind, I thought 'I'm sure it's not allowed to climb a tree here' so I didn't, whereas if I were in India, I would have, because there aren't so many rules. (Interviewee 8)

Other spatial imageries, however, did emerge (e.g. [Figures 3, 4 and 5](#)). Against the backdrop of inattention to foodspaces, time niches can cultivate attention to (re)productive labour. Many walkers were motivated to join the walk for the experience and to learn something new, motivated by a sense of misalignments in their present state of urban living. They longed for connection and community, the experience of trust (see Supplemental [Figures 3](#); Enchantment and connection), and talked about things that daunted or veered from their efforts to move towards their longing (see Supplemental [Figures 3](#); Ecological misalignments).



Figure 3. Participant's sketch of Clementi gardens.



Figure 4. Participant's sketch of Clementi gardens.

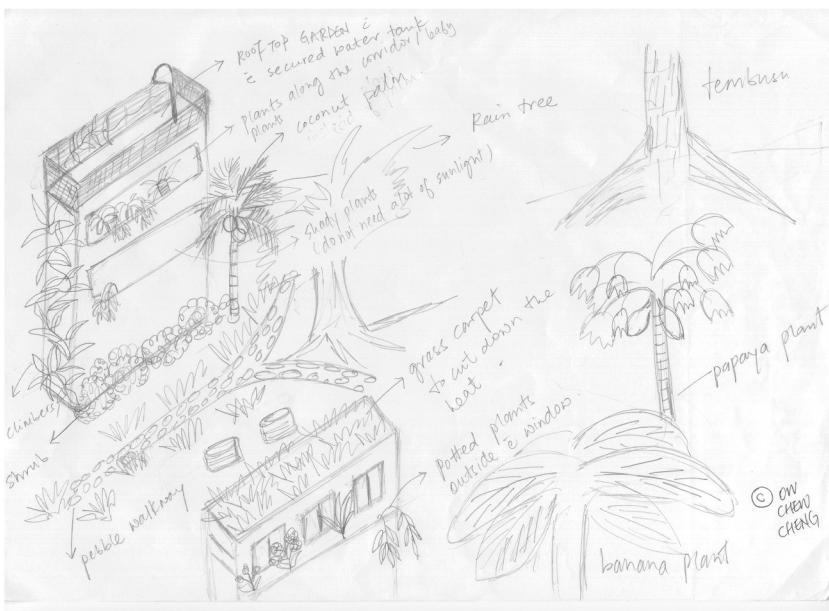


Figure 5. Participant's sketch of Khatib gardens.

As walkers return to the scene of a memory-dense space, memory markers refresh opinions and identities that intervening years of work have isolated (see Supplemental Figures 3; Governance of and access to space, Interviewee 2). Other walkers pointed out how being outside creates connection and concern for the non-human world, and how in contrast, “[w]hen you sit in your office, you see it less and less it concerns you less and less, you don’t feel like you should do something about it” (Supplemental Figures 3; Attentive Intimacy, Interviewee 8).

Case study 2: (Over-)producing the engagement interface, visualising foodways with scholars

After the five workshops ended in April 2017, an opportunity came to present a workshop at the *International Visual Methods Conference 5 (IVMC5)* conference, held that year in Singapore. I proposed this walking workshop with a slant: to consider how the methodology would work with a combination of participants of different types of expertise. Self-conscious that this was an academic conference, I over-prepared. This section deals with what constitutes scaffolding space for collective study, where power relations, knowledge capital, time, and habituated attachments are thought to count for more.

Process

This workshop was attended by 15 conference attendees across professions and disciplines. It involved a 1.5-hour walk in the Clementi gardens, (Figures 6), followed by a break, and a 1.5-hour session to visualise these gardens as part of broader foodways. Participants were to work towards creating an imagined map of future foodways, alongside four invited resource persons working in biowaste conversion, food waste consumer perspectives research, environmental education, and a sensor-irrigated urban farm in a local public university. Maps of the elevation and built infrastructure, including community gardens



Figure 6. Participants visiting the Clementi garden.

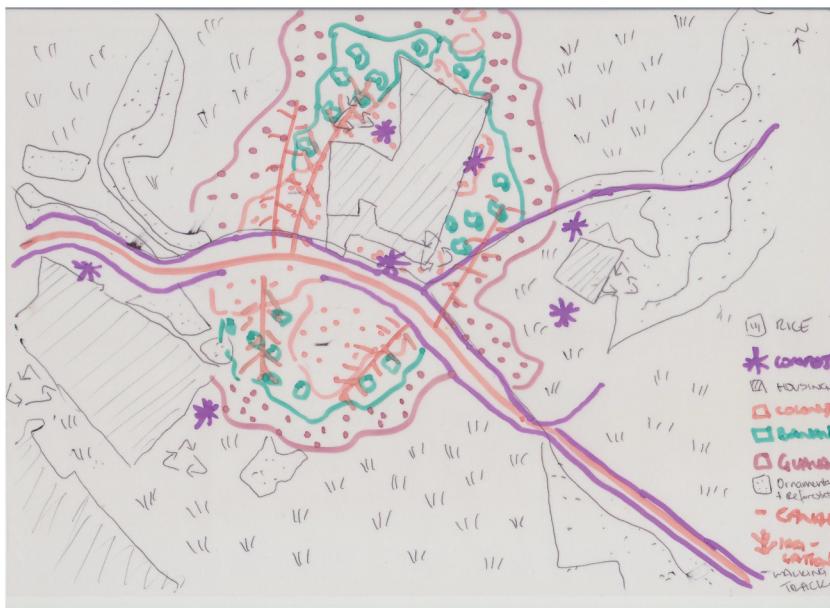


Figure 7. Map drawn by two early career scholars during part two.



Figure 8. Early career researchers and resource person making an imagined garden.

and cycling paths in the area, were prepared. Figures 7 and 8 show images from the second session. As I did not set out with the intention of using the workshop as material for research, I do not include details or direct quotes from participants.

“Productive” time and knowledge products

Observations

The walk and workshop fulfilled its aims of a research visit, social time, and mode of intimate knowing, but it did not initially seem “productive” to me. It missed a transition point between Parts One and Two of the workshop: a collective discussion about the new sketches participants had made. This was postponed to after the tea break – from which some returned, but not all. Subsequent interaction with the resource persons made for a cosy Part Two – rather different from the workshopping I had in mind! As a participant observed to me, it took time for ideas to settle; the temporality of the workshop was better suited to diffused information acquisition. Participants re-purposed the session into one for networking and information-sharing: choosing to stay in the realm of prospecting, reviewing resources, interacting with the resource persons, and learning to identify the edible and inedible plants that a resource person had brought along. Smelling, tasting, chatting, curiosity and excitement, mistake-making, and exchange – are all forms of learning at the engagement interface.

Discussion: moving beyond probabilistic imaginations

The workshop defied the probable acts I had planned. Indeed, time was just one of the reasons participants actively resisted the “asks” of Part Two. The task of reimagining the food system, and of the amount of actual knowledge deemed necessary before an imagined food system could be proposed also seemed a challenge. A participant observed that the act of imagining departed from the usual analytic approach common in academic disciplines. The youngest, “early career” scholars, researchers and resource persons eventually set their hands to utilising the resources to attempt something.

Resistance to the structure of the workshop also provokes questions about what the ideal conditions for collective study can be. Were participants wary of departing from social codes of scholarship? Or were they resisting the directive nature of the space set up for “imagining futures”? Just as ordinary people prospecting for better futures explore the edges of possibility, while technocrats chart out the map of future probabilities, the participants in this workshop defied my map of probable encounters and steered their own course of the possible. Taking matters into their own hands, the participants had a much more productive session for themselves – truly creating new signs and selves – and not for the workshop.

Engagement interfaces that bring people of differently-recognised levels of expertise together in one time niche, are underpracticed and undervalued. Writing about myself in order to examine this engagement interface brings moments of minor embarrassment and humour. My ability to re-read, and re-write text makes me extra circumspect about the possibility of their misinterpretation, whereas spontaneous conversation occurs with a world also moving, also forgetting.

Yet, long-term embodied pedagogy that embraces the shared attention time of different knowledges, rather than single-authored perfection, might do many things to expand the “ethics of possibility”: ease the pressure of being asked to perform the role of the researcher, and give space to all to explore our multiple roles as experts of some things and beginners at others.

Discussion

I began by asking how transitions towards sustainable food systems might be scaffolded, by focusing on how knowledge emerges at the urban edges of foodscapes. A collective study at such edges has led me to focus on (i) haptic connection; ii) care time; iii) and spatial imagery that speaks to the ethics of possibility, rather than probability: the expansion of possibilities without the distraction of pre-determined future time.

While this study does not permit a deeper engagement with participant socio-demographic factors, gender, age, income, profession and educational background shape the dynamics at play in any engagement interface. What is deemed permissible in urban public space is associated with persons' senses of safety in public, which at the minimum involves legal status, appearance and dressing, and ethnic, racial or gendered meanings that different bodies hold to others. These factors and their relationship to the everyday uses of green edible space deserve more thorough investigation in future work.

Walking for futures, food, and possibilities

The notion of the future as a thing to be "made" undergirds environmental futures visioning approaches (Davies 2014; Davies, Doyle, and Pape 2012). The valuable product of such sessions are not models so much as the formation of real relationships of humility and unknowing, to prospect the future together. And yet, focus tends to be on what is produced, rather than the immersive quality of interactions in these time niches. This paper adds to a growing repertoire of methods that strengthen the status of unusual suspects as experts in their own right, such as design charrettes in codesign and scenario-planning, by reflecting on time niches in place-based methodologies (also see Bolleter and Hooper 2021; Howard and Somerville 2014).

"Future-making" as Appadurai (2013) defines it is an emancipatory practice cutting across social strata. In these walks and workshops, I find engagement interfaces of haptic connection, sensation and attention that give rise to *moments of knowing* – as sudden understandings generate symbolic meanings not in the service of power, as Lefebvre [1974] 1991 would put it. This is already occurring outside of workshop settings, as everyday life bears witness to co-occurring socio-technical transitions, in pandemic, disaster, and aftermath temporalities. Recognising this as a form of social learning, defined by Castán Broto et al. (2014) to involve the collapsing of silos, leads us to see that systems of disparate social actors are beginning to notice new sets of reference points and symbolic worlds. As we have seen with the case studies, engagement interfaces can provide opportunities for haptic connection within time niches. While visioning workshops seek to create a novel cognitive space by asking participants to adopt a positive solutions-focused approach in imagining (Davies, Doyle, and Pape 2012), the surprises of collective work may reveal themselves not in productivist imaginings, but in non-/re-productive immersing *with other beings*. Emphasis can be placed on how immersion, not production – working in the "generative" space of systems change before extending into synthesis or decision-making – is prioritised in "open" or "participatory" methods.

Future research: toward regional food assemblages

Alternative storied timelines for the future are blooming. Many of these emphasise building long-term collective intelligence through relational capacities and networks (e.g. IPES-Food 2021). Food is becoming a choice-point for decision-makers: it presents constraints that tie urbanization to specific, material principles aligned with the continuing sustainability of human life (Parham 2015a). We may also say that food, as an intense archive of visceral humanity, makes what is most elusive to rhetoric – particular bodies' emotions, fears, needs for safety – directly accessible for coeval perception, and re-imagination.

Spaces for the collective study of resilient socio-technical systems rebalance our ethics, moving our scholarly and productive time away from the appeals of techno-scientific probability (Appadurai 2013). Because not all uncertainties are the same, or reducible to risk (Fearnley 2018), embodied understandings that arise from place are instrumental in differentiating between actual risk (to bodies that bear different degrees of risk) and calculated levels of uncertainty (which bear assumptions of universality). An urban food pedagogy that cultivates spaces and skills to engage these issues would smoothen the transition from one socio-technical system to another, as part of systemic transformation.

Conclusion: scaffolding adventurous pedagogies of food

"Adventurous food futures," as Michael Carolan (2015) notes, are "not about making the world a better place as much as making a place for better worlds – a messy politics that is more interested in what Deleuze (1995, 169) calls 'collective creation' than representation" (150). Carolan continues, "it would be more productive, in the sense of adding to the world rather than subtracting from it, *if conditions were created that invite collaboration, co-experimentation, and a coming-together that radically alters how we think and do*" (150, my emphasis).

Singapore's self-conscious status as a foodie city is continually renewed as *uniquely Singapore*. Yet, much of its food is sourced beyond national borders. A global food system-in-transition offers exceptional moments of rupture, to create material and institutional structures for better foodscapes, where an *ethics of possibility* (Appadurai 2004, 2013) seeds itself in collective study.

Note

1. A fragrant soup served with stewed soybean, stuffed ingredients, and fine handmade egg noodles with sweet and spicy sauce.

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