

Kelsey Donk

April 27, 2012

Reflecting on Spirituality, Community, and Sustainability

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, Leslie Marmon Silko describes a kitchen garden in Bath, England that is surrounded by high limestone walls and filled with raised garden beds of vegetables and herbs from all over the world, stone paths that "crisscross the big enclosure," and a round stone pool in the center (Silko 239). I often think of this passage when I work in the community garden at Trybal Revival in Kalamazoo, although the gardens there are quite different. The Trybal Revival garden is fenced in with chicken wire and wooden posts and has a large arched wooden door in place of tall limestone, the paths that wind through the vegetable beds are freshly covered with wood chips and recycled cardboard instead of fine stones, and a large wooden pergola arch stands tall in place of a stone pool. However, when I see the community garden's clearly defined vegetable beds and clean lines, the meaning I've drawn from my experiences in the garden evoke feelings similar to those Indigo has in *Gardens in the Dunes*. My experiences gardening with Trybal Revival have helped further my understanding of how community, sustainability, and spirituality are interlinked in the study of gardens and our course material.

At Trybal Revival community gardens, the layout and function of the gardens reflect the organization's vision that the gardens should "provide a space on the East side of Kalamazoo ... where people can meet each other, work together on shared goals through shared responsibility, and improve their knowledge and skills regarding local fresh foods, sustainable practices, and community development" (Trybal Revival). The garden coordinators, Dale and Tomme, have created two gardens, a community garden and a permaculture garden, for public use in the Eastside neighborhood of Kalamazoo. In the community garden, raised beds provide space for neighbors to do their own organic gardening while circular beds around the pergola supply communal gardening space.

The permaculture garden across from the community garden is just beginning to take shape. In the future, Dale and Tomme envision clusters of deciduous nut trees, an edible forest of fruit trees and berry bushes, groupings of community garden beds, and a large gathering space in the permaculture garden. So far, the garden has a strong compost system and a recently built community tool shed from which neighbors can borrow gardening supplies for free.

The structures of the community garden and permaculture garden allow the space to interact with gardeners in distinct ways. While the community garden has clean lines and defined paths, the permaculture garden is filled with organic shapes. In a way, the visual features of the permaculture garden reflect Trybal Revival's goal that the plants will eventually take care of themselves and each other. When I first arrived at Trybal Revival, I was drawn to the permaculture garden for its natural shapes and indigenous plants. It seemed wilder than the community garden. In it, I thought I would grow closer to nature. However, Michael Pollan reminds us, "A 'wild' garden is not intrinsically healthier, or even more preferable to nature, than a well tended parterre. Whether a garden is ecologically sound or not depends solely on the gardener's methods; his aesthetics has nothing to do with it" (Pollan 245). Both the community garden and permaculture garden are completely organic, but allow gardeners to work in different ways. In fact, the community garden allows a space for meaningful conversation and community building, while the permaculture garden is a quiet and personal space. Despite their differing aesthetics, as Pollan writes, the gardens are equally natural and equally available to gardeners.

Kelsey Donk
Structured Reflection #2
27 April 2012

The permaculture garden is a very important space for our gardening group. We are especially lucky to have the opportunity to plant in our own community garden bed, the first of its kind in the permaculture garden. We helped dig grass for the circular bed and add compost in the soil. This week, I created a small mulch “keyhole” for us to enter our garden and I built a small stone fence around the bed. As community gardeners, we will harvest our own herbs and vegetables and increase our involvement in the gardens. Through our garden plot, we hope to maintain a relationship with Trybal Revival even after “A Seat in the Garden” finishes. In our plot, among herbs and vegetables, we hope to plant a border of sunflowers in a mix of aesthetics and utility. When we first suggested this to Dale, she was very surprised. Although the community garden plots are generally used for utilitarian purposes, sunflowers remind me of Indigo’s garden at Sister Salt’s camp in *Gardens in the Dunes*. Just as Indigo planted a border of gladiolus around her vegetables, we will plant a border of sunflowers to remind us of the different functions gardens can have.

As a service-learning gardening volunteer, I assist Trybal Revival not only in gardening, but also in exploring the Eastside community. Thus far, as Dale and Tomme arrange the community garden for the coming spring season, my gardening group and I have helped make preparations so the other community gardeners can start gardening as soon as May begins. On our first day in the garden, we worked with Dale and Tomme to lay the cardboard foundations and mulch to create garden paths. We’ve also turned soil in the beds and in front of the garden and pulled weeds. On a rainy day, we worked inside Dale and Tomme’s house on preparing seed starts for Trybal Revival to give to community gardeners. In the next few weeks, we’ll be planting trees and shrubs in the permaculture garden and working on our own community plot.

While Trybal Revival is so welcoming and warm in the people they accept for their gardens, some visitors might find it hard to understand why the garden is composed of individual plots with individual owners instead of all communal plots for everyone to share. To some, this may seem like a way to divide the community, but the individual plots also create a sense of ownership among the people who garden there. Community gardeners thus feel encouraged to visit their plots--and their neighbors--often because they feel responsible for the plants growing there. On a recent visit, Dale expressed her desire to establish a long vegetable bed outside the garden walls to encourage passers by to take food from that garden, but to respect ownership of the plots inside. This type of respect is what Dale and Tommy hope to establish within the Trybal Revival gardens.

The practices Dale and Tommy have made their standard in the Trybal Revival gardens--like welcoming, sharing, and learning--create a warm atmosphere that fosters community. I was struck by a story Tomme told our group that illustrates how seriously he and Dale take their philosophy. He told us that last year, Trybal Revival had a bit of a problem with people coming around at night, digging plants up, and taking them home. “That was a positive thing, because at least they were interesting in gardening,” Tomme said in response, “but it was also a bummer because if they’d come during the day, they could have had the plants for free anyway and maybe learned something too.” Anyone from the neighborhood is welcome to garden if they ask Dale or Tommy for a plot of land before they begin. While Dale and Tomme do not encourage stealing, they had no hard feelings about the stolen plants. They only hope that through Trybal Revival, community members will learn to enjoy plants, gardening, healthy food, and each other.

Dale and Tomme often say that they too are still learning the basics of gardening. Because they practice trial-and-error problem solving in their gardens, volunteer gardeners like those from our group feel comfortable suggesting

possible solutions to problems that may arise. For instance, as we were laying mulch along the community garden paths, we discovered a new system for laying the cardboard before putting the mulch down. Dale and Tomme were eager to help us in the system we'd established, after watching us try to function on our own. By allowing us freedom to explore the garden, Dale and Tomme displayed their respect for our group and our gardening process.

As a student gardening volunteer, I fit into the community dynamic at Trybal Revival in a complex way that will change and grow as spring progresses and the community gardeners reestablish their regular presence in the garden. Dale and Tomme invited our group to complete our hours during an open house and volunteer day last Saturday. At 9:00am when I arrived, there were more people on the permaculture garden lot than I had seen in my previous visits. During the open house, I helped children make plant starts for their own gardens. The children selected egg cartons filled with dirt and compost and planted watermelon, squash, cucumber, carrot, and pea seeds. The children in the gardening area welcomed me eagerly, while the adults were less inclined to start conversation, perhaps because to them I was more obviously an outsider. However, as the day went on, the other gardeners began to accept my help with their plants and were eager to converse with me. I believe the larger gardening process with community members in the community garden will work the same way. It often takes time to get to know people and feel comfortable around them, so it will take time for the other gardeners to accept a group of five college students taking up a plot in their community garden.

Throughout my work at Trybal Revival, I have continued to see the parallels the gardens hold to our course materials. While the raised beds in the community garden bear visual resemblance to the simple beds in the kitchen garden, the gardens at Trybal Revival also hold spiritual and emotional meaning like the gardens in *Gardens in the Dunes*. Throughout the part of the novel that discusses the gardens in Bath, Aunt Bronwyn serves as a guide who helps Indigo and Hattie connect the visual pleasure they get from the garden to their historic and religious roots. Her connections to the living beings on the earth and her deep spiritual faith represent an alternative gardening philosophy in *Gardens in the Dunes*. In her garden, she tries to help Hattie and Indigo understand the teachings of a theorist who believes, "plants have souls and human beings exist only to be consumed by plants and be transformed into glorious new plant life" (Silko 240). Quite similarly, Dale and Tomme direct our gardening group through the garden and help us find meaning in plants we might have otherwise dismissed as simply visually pleasing. In my previous gardening experiences, I have never been able to find religion inside flower beds, but Dale and Tomme encourage us to think about our spirituality as we garden at Trybal Revival.

In the Trybal Revival gardens, through Dale and Tomme's encouragement, our gardening group is also able to further understand the spiritual connections one might have to the plants and processes in a garden. While several of our readings in class relate to religion, I had never had a personally religious interaction with a garden before visiting Trybal Revival. As we sat in wooden chairs in Dale and Tomme's yard on our first visit, Tomme told us that he gardens mostly because of the spiritual interactions he has with nature. Trybal Revival began as a circle-singing group before it evolved into a garden. Tomme says that circle singing "brings out our intuitive nature and makes vocalizing amazingly accessible" (Trybal Revival). The Trybal Revival Circle Singers often sing under the pergola in the community garden and hope to use the gathering space in the permaculture garden for circle singing as well. To me, this tradition calls up memories of Creation stories and Aunt Bronwyn's pagan religious tendencies in *Gardens in the Dunes*. For instance, in

Kelsey Donk
Structured Reflection #2
27 April 2012

Selu, musical imagery is used to describe the motion of the corn. “Through corn’s natural ways of growing and being, the spirit sings of strength, respect, balance, harmony. Of adaptability, cooperation, unity in diversity. Songs of survival” (Awiakta 9). In circle singing, the musicians make religious connections with each other and the earth inside the walls of a food bearing, sustainable garden. Tomme told me that he worships in the garden because it is the only place he feels like he can make natural and spiritual connections with the earth. Although Dale, Tomme, and the circle singers may not know the *Selu* creation story, their circle singing in the garden and their mission reflects the natural “song” of corn described in the story.

Like Aunt Bronwyn and Grandma Fleet in *Garden in the Dunes*, the Trybal Revival coordinators constantly search for ways to make their gardens reflect historical gardening methods. For this reason, Dale and Tomme have spent countless hours researching ways to make their gardens sustainable. In fact, sustainability is one of the driving forces behind their newest and very different garden: beehives. Dale has recently developed an interest in exploring beekeeping as a way to help their gardens take care of themselves. Two brightly painted bee keeping hives now sit in the yard that separates the permaculture garden and the community garden. Each hive is composed of three stacked wooden boxes. When the nearly six thousand bees are shipped to Dale, they will make the boxes their home and be allowed to fly in and around their hive. Dale hopes that the bees will serve to help pollination in the two other gardens and that her bees will help reestablish a strong bee population in the area. As the bees pollinate the gardens, the plants will be fertilized and reproduce, hopefully without human intervention. The new garden of bees will go between the permaculture garden and community garden and make them both more sustainable and productive. This idea sparks memories of Indigo, Sister Salt, and Grandma Fleet in *Gardens in the Dunes*. As they plant and harvest their gardens, they always leave some plants behind so that their seeds will replant themselves for the following year. In the Trybal Revival community gardens, our gardening group is able to see this philosophy come to life.

Although the gardens at Trybal Revival are in many ways different from many of the gardens we’ve studied in “A Seat in the Garden,” the details and symbolism found in both the cleanly divided raised beds of the community garden, the organic shapes of the permaculture garden, and even the buzzing bees of the new bee hives evoke similar feelings to the themes of community, spirituality, and sustainability found in our readings. Somehow, with the meaning I’ve drawn from our relationships with Dale and Tomme, the chicken wire and wooden post fence, wood chip and cardboard paths, and wooden pergola are reminiscent of a formal cloister garden in nineteenth century Bath, England.

Works Cited

- Awiakta, Marilon. *Selu: Seeking the Corn Mother’s Wisdom*. Colden, Co.: Fukrum, 1993.
- Pollan, Michael. *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education*. New York: Grove Press, 1991.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Gardens in the Dunes*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1999.