(At)tendance: Exploring a Practice of Presence and Duration through Urban Food Communities and Theater

by

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**Introduction: The Stretch**

I did not stumble upon the word “(at)tendence” but rather stretched it into existence. I was looking for a term that would allow me to articulate what I saw as the intersection between theater and urban farming. I sensed that there was a palpable thread between the two fields that I could not quite identify or name. Despite the fact that I could recognize a connection, it soon became clear to me that where I saw a link, others saw a gap. I became aware of this discrepancy as friends and professors met my attempts to simultaneously explore both worlds with surprise. While my approach in this paper aims at proposing a new methodological framework to connect theater and urban farming, it is true that there are multiple examples of performances and spaces that simultaneously engage these worlds such as The Renegade Company’s *Animal Farm to Table*, Paul Fleischman’s *Seedfolks*, and the proposed rooftop theater and farm at New York City’s Gowanus Arts Building. Still, I needed to find a term that could help me articulate what I saw as the intersections between theater and urban farming as it played out in theater performance and practices of gathering and caring; (at)tendence bridges the gap between these two fields of exploration.

At the beginning of this project, I went to a talkback with the Judaica Project at Wesleyan University during which research assistant Agnieszka Mendel used the word “attendance.” I do not remember what Mendel meant by “attending to” or in what context she used the term, but attendance resonated with me. As I sat with the term, trying to identify what drew me to it, I began to see its potential to connect theater and urban farming: in theater, individuals may attend a singular event—a performance, a workshop, a rendering, and so forth—so attendance is defined by a
singular event; in the world of agriculture, attendance refers to a sense of tending to something—farming and food production requires a repetitive practice of care. It was interesting to note that both of these forms of attendance build community: attending a performance creates a singular shared experience and urban farming builds a communal experience through durational tending and sharing food. Engaging with the meanings of attendance satisfied my need to find a common ground for the fields of performance and farming. The task that remained was to understand how (at)tendance could serve as a methodological framework through which the projects of theater and urban farming could be understood and read together and sustain one another.

The history of the word *attend* begins in the 12th century with the Old French *atendre* meaning “to expect, wait for, pay attention.”1 More than just directioning attention, this *atendre* introduces a relationship to time in its implicit anticipation of the next moment. The Latin *attendere* emerges in the early 14th century to express, “to give heed to.”2 While its meaning recalls the “paying of attention” evoked by *atendre*, the Latin word introduces another important aspect into this discussion: the notion of stretching. In its incorporation of stretching, the Latin definition builds and expands on the Old French sense of anticipation, or the “not yet here.”3 *Attendere* accrues meaning through an examination of its roots: ad (to) + tendere (stretch).4 Such meaning can also be traced to its Proto-Indo-European root *ten*, which also

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2 Ibid.
means “to stretch.” The third definition of the word *attendance* that I would like to briefly introduce here is one that originates in the mid-14th century, “to take care of.”

In this paper, I work with (at)tendance as a term that blends the temporal play implied by the original meaning of anticipation in Old French with the action of stretching introduced by its Latin version and the notion of caretaking that the term accrued by the mid-14th century. I chose to use the parentheses to visually distinguish my use of the word from any of its individual definitions. As my incorporation of parentheses marks a visible distinction on the page, emphasizing the Latin origin sparks a visual exploration of the work of (at)tendance—we can imagine a stretch across fields of study and across the singular and repetitive temporalities of farming and theater respectively. This visualization is important because farming and theater exist in collective, observable, physical processes. Embracing a meaning of (at)tendance that stretches—across space and time—encourages interdisciplinarity and symbiosis—we can pull at the tendrils that connect us with our surroundings and discover the ever-multiplying threads that tie us to the world and one another. It is in this connective stretch that my research and this paper live—(at)tendance pulls apart our relationships with temporality, locality, and care and lingers there.

My tensile use of (at)tendance is crucial to the forms of presence I explore in my research—I use this extension to simultaneously emphasize singular events and durational practices, practices that require a commitment to time. Farmers and performers are constantly tending and rehearsing, cultivating and fostering growth. In both practices, there is a focus on singular moments—pulling a weed and listening to a scene partner—but also a prolonged focus over a longer period of time—the

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5 Ibid.
growing season or the rehearsal process. On farms and in studios, these practitioners make a commitment to time. By stretching the term attendance into (at)tendance, I attempt to uncover different ways of being in and expanding the worlds of theater and farming—and, perhaps, the wider worlds that such practices influence. I am specifically interested in extending the heightened awareness practitioners have of place, time, and one another to attendees, in finding ways of requiring a similar sort of (at)tendance from “audiences.”

I use the term (at)tendance as a way of exploring and interrogating the relationships that theater and urban farming foster between practitioners and their environments and as a way of proposing possible relational futures. Throughout this research I have asked myself: how exactly do we engage a type of presence in (at)tendance that stretches to connect doer and observer? What is required to encourage “audiences” to participate in this temporal/locational practice? How can one invite people into an active relationship with the time and place of a project? My intention with this project is to define the ways that urban farming and theater bring people together in durational and sustainable ways and to discover how we can dwell in these spaces that ask us to be with and care for—the ways in which the stretch of presence forces a paradigm shift regarding how we inhabit spaces and relationships.

Over the summer, I conducted field research in two of New York City’s food communities—Harlem Grown and Swale—which I use as case studies for spaces that

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6 “Attend (v.).”

7 I should note that I write the word audience in quotations because this research aims at blurring the usual boundaries between doer and observer. (At)tendance treats the event of the performance as a doing, having in J.L. Austin’s terms, a performative force beyond its initial moment of liveness.
encourage (at)tendance through their educational programs and harvesting practices.\textsuperscript{8} I will also discuss 1950s/60s Happenings and creative placemaking as artistic projects that foster (at)tendance by eliciting play with temporality, inviting “audience” participation, and developing a practice of communal care. Throughout this paper, I pull from queer theory, avant-garde artistic practices, and environmental studies as well as use the theories and practices of José Muñoz, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jill Sigman, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, among others to show the relational nature of (at)tendance and that it illuminates the connective tissues between urban farming and theater. This paper jumps between the works of various individuals at irregular intervals as I chase the stretchy and relational threads that lead me from one to another and back again.

\textsuperscript{8} In general, I will use the term “urban farms” to refer to Harlem Grown and Swale because it more obviously calls to mind the work of growing food than does the broader term “urban food communities.” Here, and in Part Two, however, I move toward the broader term, “food communities.” I make this move because each site,
Part One: (At)tending Time and Place

I want to begin with the meal. The meal is a practice of sharing food, space, and stories, of gathering and spending time with one another. In an article on the importance and tradition of sharing meals, Rebecca Rupp, a freelance writer who holds a Ph.D. in cell biology, describes the nutritional and social benefits of shared family meals, and the traditions of banquets and dinner parties. She writes, “Shared food promotes friendship, fellowship, and communication, and functions as social glue.”

Meals function as social events in and between cultures. Sharing is key in food and theater, it establishes communion and serves as an invitation into a space or a relationship with another person or object. This “social glue” cultivated by sharing a meal seeps into other practices of sharing like sharing space, holding space.

This interest in shared meals reminds me of Frank O’Hara’s poem, “Having a Coke with You.” This poem is a love letter from O’Hara to dancer Vincent Warren and is also a celebration of the quotidian. O’Hara writes, “Having a Coke with you / is better than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne / [...] partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt.”

He takes more pleasure in everyday moments and eccentricities, like sharing a Coke with a loved one and affinities for yoghurt, than in transcontinental adventures. Despite this grounding in the present moment, O’Hara also plays with other temporalities by juxtaposing the here-and-now of sharing a Coke with historical works of art such as the Polish Rider and drawings of “Leonardo or Michelangelo that used to wow

Harlem Grown and Swale, identifies somewhat differently. I will take the time in Part Two to properly explain this distinction.

O’Hara also proposes a trip to the Frick to see the *Polish Rider* with his Coke-drinking partner, which brings the future into play with the already evoked past and present. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz analyzes O’Hara’s poem:

> This poem tells us of a quotidian act, having a Coke with somebody, that signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality. The quotidian act of sharing a Coke, consuming a common commodity with a beloved with whom one shares secret smiles, trumps fantastic moments in the history of art. Though the poem is clearly about the present, it is a present that is now squarely in the past and in its queer relationality promises a future.

O’Hara’s poem explores the stretching of temporality between past, present, and future, through acts of communion such as sharing a drink with a loved one. This “lifeworld of queer relationality,” or what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “being singular plural,” allows for an exploration of multiple temporalities and a recognition of the existence and necessity of sociality: “That which exists, whatever this might be, coexists because it exists. The co-implication of existing [*l’exister*] is the sharing of the world.” The acknowledgement of a singular existence, one, is a recognition of being one in relation to many, with and among others—a singular plurality that predicates being (us) and time (past, present, and future). Being requires us to be with others, to share a meal, a Coke, a space with a loved one or a stranger. The being that I see O’Hara and Muñoz’s texts proposing together is one that builds a future that promises queers, or queers of color, a place to live and share, in which to belong and

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11 O’Hara.
not be restricted by white supremacy, heteronormativity, or heteronuclear family logics.

Likewise, choreographer Jill Sigman’s Hut Project points us in the direction of communion and relational invitations. The Hut Project involved building structures from repurposed materials: “Each hut acts as a catalyst for local activities such as performance, video, collaboration, and community dialogue. The huts are containers—places where the concepts of dwelling, structure, and art object meet.”¹⁴ Much like the preparing and sharing of a meal, the building of and subsequent spacemaking in a dwelling cultivates a way of containing ephemeral moments and glimmers of relationality in the practice of (at)tendance. It invites and welcomes in. Here I am drawing from Muñoz’s concept of ephemera in *Ephemera as Evidence* as that which lingers past the material. Muñoz proposes ephemera, or the “innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere,” as “a mode of proofing and producing arguments often worked by minoritarian culture and criticism makers.”¹⁵ This methodological framework proposes a way to live in the “process of relating the continuity of social formations within a work of art.”¹⁶ Like ephemera, Sigman’s huts transform materiality and offer a reimagining of the social, of interaction and experience.

The huts are impermanent structures whose construction anticipates their imminent community, stretches want into the future, and sows the seeds of

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¹⁶ Ibid. [emphasis original]
connectivity and social conviviality. The magic lies not just in their presence or in the objects inside the huts, but in what the building of and ensuing dwelling in the huts do and cultivate. Here I use the word magic because of Sigman’s use of the huts as catalysts for connecting people with space, objects, and one another. Her work to create community by way of creating space reenvisions our relationships and approaches to performance spaces and gathering. Sigman’s practice of gathering and reconnecting reminds me of the way healer Dori Midnight conjures relationships with the tools of her craft. Midnight says, “There are these expectations that the magic is in the object—which it is in a way—but then it also could be in any object, and the magic itself is not an object at all.” It is interesting to note that the tools are not of core importance for Midnight; for her, the object is not what defines the practice of magic. When Midnight uses a broom, a pot, sticks, rocks and feathers, the magic is born out of her relationship with objects, the ritualized practices performed with them. Magic then becomes a way for Midnight to mark intentionality and relationality. Like Midnight’s tools, the magic of Sigman’s huts does not stem from their materiality or existence alone, but from the communal activities they promote. The architectural structures or objects themselves do not perform the work, but the collaboration, cohabitation, and singular plurality that they invite perform the work of invitation, relation, and (at)tendance.

In her work, Sigman focuses on process over product. When I asked her if focusing on process meant that her work never ended, she smiled and said something to the effect of yes; I took that to mean that though exhibits and performances may

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18 Ibid.
end, the tendrils of process and the threads of connection remain. Like Muñoz’s ephemera, these tendrils “remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things.”19 There is no product left over to carry or hold after Sigman’s huts are deconstructed, no tangible proof of their existence, but their traces and the tendrils of process—the relationships between people and to place—linger.

In order to think more about the act of stretching time between past, present, and future as a key element of (at)tendance, I want to introduce the concept of topocosms. The term topocosm was coined by Theodore H. Gaster to mean “the world order of a particular place.”20 From Gaster’s initial use, topocosms found their way into the deep ecology movement, which values all living beings and uses this recognition of inherent value to inform environmental policies.21 Deep ecology views all beings as a part of a community of interconnected organisms and environments. Dolores LaChapelle, a leader in the deep ecology movement, wrote an essay called “Ritual is Essential,” that I find relates to Sigman’s notion of lingering space/time relationships and which is connected to my use of the term (at)tendance. In the essay, LaChapelle defines the term topocosm as

the entire complex of any given locality conceived as a living organism—not just the human community but the total community—the plants, animals and soils of the place. The topocosm is not only the actual and present living community but also that continuous entity of which the present community is but the current manifestation.22

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22 LaChapelle.
Like the Hut Project, the historical ecology of a place engaged by the term topocosms anticipates the imminent community, inviting a perpetual awareness of and continual re-engagement with this future communion. I attempt to evoke this long-term commitment to change and temporality with my use of the term (at)tendance: it both heightens the ephemerality of the performative moment and brings awareness to the durational longevity of its actions.

LaChapelle touches on another aspect of (at)tendance—place-grounding—in her description of an annual ritual that is practiced in Siena, Italy. Siena’s Palio, the annual horse race, takes place in the summer. Workmen bring yellow earth and spread it around city’s central square. This annual ritual links the city with its “origins in the earth of its place.”23 Quoting Heidegger, LaChapelle continues: “‘Dwelling is not primarily inhabiting but taking care of and creating that space within which something comes into its own and flourishes.’ It takes both time and ritual for real dwelling.”24 Dwelling, or in my case, (at)tendance, is crucial for being. (At)tendance, as I see it, seeks to root us in the “earth of [our] place,” to ground us in the nexus between place, time, and community care. Through thinking about urban farming and theater as topocosms—worlds in which the current and continuous communities are observed—we can examine the ecologies both projects cultivate to achieve this ritualistic, temporal community care.

How do we build topocosms in cities where the human community is placed above plant, animal, and soil communities? Like the Palio in Siena, farming and theater, and more specifically, urban farming, Happenings, and creative placemaking,

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
have their own way of bringing great awareness of the earth, dirt, and community into intensely urban and isolating environments such as New York City. As Jill Sigman said in an interview with dance critic Siobhan Burke, “Ritual is what helps people feel their connection to a site, to each other, to the natural world. It’s like the glue that we need to live sustainably and remember that feeling of respect for the environment.” At the heart of (at)tendance lies the desire to cultivate this social glue, to stretch time and relational presence, to explore how we can care for one another across difference. Practicing (at)tendance is a sort of ritual of repetitive, durational care and coming together.

My research tries to uncover a creative deep ecology that cultivates new and meaningful relationships with one another and with the places in which we dwell. As a theater practice, this might look like integrating audience members into the development, placemaking, and performance of a theatrical piece. As a farming practice, this might look like acknowledging the erasure of Indigenous histories from United States land and caring for urban farm spaces as commons or land that belongs to a community rather than an individual. In observing urban community farms and theatrical projects as places of (at)tendance, I began to unravel the threads and more deeply grasp the importance of reconnecting with the earth and one another.

I want to pause here to acknowledge the indebtedness of this work to decolonial and Indigenous understandings of sovereignty. In reenvisioning a settler relationship to the land and one another it is crucial to look to Indigenous understandings of sovereignty. I acknowledge that a thorniness emerges when using the words “Indigenous” and “sovereignty” together, since “sovereignty” has a long

25 Siobhan Burke, “Soon the Earth will be in the Square: Jill Sigman with Siobhan
colonial history that recalls the oppression of Indigenous peoples by non-natives.

Decolonial understandings of sovereignty, however, attempt to repatriate Indigenous land and life, returning sovereignty to Indigenous peoples. Unlike settler sovereignty, which views land and natural resources as exploitable commodities and implies an owner-property binary, Indigenous sovereignty relates to land and place, maintaining a much more fluid and interdependent relationship. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write, “Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place—indeed how we/they came to be a place. Our/their relationships to land comprise our/their epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies.”

Indigenous identity and experience are inextricable from land and place. In *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Glen Sean Coulthard, a member of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, describes Indigenous anti-colonial and anti-capitalist theories and practices as,

>a struggle primarily inspired by and oriented around the question of land—a struggle not only for land in the material sense, but also deeply informed by what the land as system of reciprocal relations and obligations can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms—and less around our emergent status as “rightless proletarians.”

Coulthard articulates here a land ethic derived from the Indigenous understanding of sovereignty and that is sustained by “a system of reciprocal relations and obligations” rather than by the exploitative entitlement of settler sovereignty. For Coulthard, land

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is not private property but rather an Indigenous-led commons that invites relationality and symbiosis, a connection with the natural world and one another.

Because colonialism sets up a hierarchical dynamic of dominance and exploitation between human and non-human beings, between Indigenous peoples and non-native settlers, (at)tendance can only pursue intersectionality and interconnectivity between people and land/place as it incorporates and articulates an understanding of sovereignty from a decolonial standpoint. Histories of capitalism, ownership, and colonialism have pulled and continue to pull people apart. Identifying existing spaces that invite (at)tendance and cultivating practices of (at)tendance are necessary to begin the process of reducing growing cleavages between people. Through (at)tendance, I advocate for a move toward a being-in-the-world that approximates to a sustainable deep ecology. Urban farming and theater evoke such an ecology by cultivating interdependent relationships between humans, non-humans, and their environments. Through (at)tendance, I hope to emphasize the importance of urban farming and theater and encourage readers to protect existing spaces and programs that support collective notions of being with and taking care of our environment and communities.
Part Two: (At)tending Urban Food Communities

What does it mean to stretch our relationships with temporality, locality, and care to practice (at)tendance at an urban farm? Over the summer of 2017, I conducted research at two food communities in New York City. I chose these two organizations because their focus on accessibility and the ways in which they serve the communities encourage (at)tendance. I call them food, rather than farming, communities because they characterize themselves differently: one of them is an urban farm, while the other is an urban floating food forest. I spent two and a half months in New York City interning at Harlem Grown and visiting Swale. During that time, I conducted a few interviews with employees/volunteers.

Harlem Grown is a non-profit organization that operates around ten urban farms throughout Harlem. At their main location on 134th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard, they not only cultivate fruit and vegetable plants, but also have a hydroponic greenhouse and egg-laying hens. Harlem Grown’s mission is to “inspire youth to lead healthy and ambitious lives through mentorship and hands-on education in urban farming, sustainability, and nutrition.” Thus, their mission is centered on youth education and participation; whenever a child walks onto the farm, employees and interns drop what they are doing and engage with them. Harlem Grown pursues their mission by hosting farm tours for school and camp groups, running their own camp program, giving out free produce from the farm to the community, and holding community workdays every Saturday, where anyone is welcome to come and help out around the farm.

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Harlem Grown fosters an interactive learning environment that encourages long-term engagement. In an interview, Farm Manager Ciara Sidell explained the social impact of Harlem Grown: “We see kids come for one-off tours with their camp or with their school for just an hour-long education tour and then they show up again. They show up on Saturdays with their family because of that one-hour experience.”

While it welcomes one-time visitors, what LaChapelle calls a present community, Harlem Grown strives for a more topocosmic, continuous community entity to which children and community members return again and again.

One way Harlem Grown ensures that children participate on the farm is through their harvesting practice. Coming from a more production-based agricultural background—I worked on a small organic farm for a summer after high school—I initially approached harvesting at Harlem Grown with a more production-focused mindset. I was always eager to harvest immediately when fruits or vegetables were ripe. Working at Harlem Grown, however, I had to train myself out of that habit, because we often did not harvest on time: “[The kids are] the ones that do the harvest. I almost never harvest without kids on site. I think it’s so important for them to have the opportunity to harvest the fruits and vegetables.”

Thinking about my frustration with this seemingly failing production practice—one where birds peck holes through many of the best collard leaves and a few cucumbers grow past the point of being edible—I came to realize that the compulsion to harvest the produce as soon as it is ripe unproductively situates the farming practice in production rather than process. As such, farming becomes solely about food, about end products, and not about the

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29 First, when we spoke, Sidell was the Farm Manager, but she was recently promoted to the Agricultural Director at Harlem Grown. Second, Ciara Sidell, “Interview with Harlem Grown's Farm Manager,” Interview by author, July 26, 2017.
process of stretching time, growing, and learning. In our interview, Sidell said that Harlem Grown is a production-oriented farm in one sense, in that their goal is “to produce as much food as possible, to give as much food as possible to as many people as possible,” but that they are not production-oriented in another sense, because they are “youth-focused, education-focused, community-focused.” Harlem Grown skillfully walks this line between production and process, aiming to simultaneously feed, teach, and connect many individuals.

While it is important to produce as much food as possible to share with the community, Harlem Grown’s commitment to youth education and participation makes the children’s participation in every step of the cyclical process from composting to harvesting to composting crucial. Handing a child a perfectly ripe tomato to eat does not teach them more about the process of growing food than picking a tomato at the grocery store does. Unless the children do the harvesting, the fruit is removed from its context, stripped of its existence in space, time, and relational social existence. In my interview with Harlem Grown’s founder Tony Hillery, he made a funny but salient comment that justifies the urban farm’s practice of frequently postponing the harvest. Hillery had a conversation with a child who thought that tomatoes grew at the grocery store because the ones they sold were misted with water and still on the vine. At first, he was amused, but after polling a few other children, he realized that the ones who did not think tomatoes grew at the store did not know where they came from. By removing food as product from the

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30 Sidell.
31 Sidell.
center of the urban farming practice and prioritizing process instead, Harlem Grown is able to emphasize the educational core of their mission.

Swale is a volunteer-run floating food forest in New York City. They are floating/planted on a barge because there is an ordinance in New York that prohibits foraging in public parks. According to the New York City Parks Department’s “Rules and Regulations Section 1, Article 4, Prohibited Uses,”

No person shall cut, remove, or destroy any trees under the jurisdiction of the Department without permission of the Commissioner. […] For purposes of this subparagraph, ‘destroy’ shall include, but not be limited to, kill, carve, prune, or inflict other physical damage to the tree. No person shall deface, write upon, sever, mutilate, kill or remove from the ground any plants, flowers, shrubs or other vegetation under the jurisdiction of the Department without permission of the Commissioner.33

Since foraging/harvesting requires cutting, and sometimes pulling plants from the ground (removal), it is prohibited by this ordinance. Swale, however, found a loophole—common laws of New York City waterways—and planted a public park on the East River.

I heard about Swale through a program called EcoPracticum, an ecological justice program that offers workshops and month-long programming. Though unable to participate in the program, I identified Swale as a place I wanted to visit and learn more about. Over the summer, I visited Swale at Pier 9 in Brooklyn and in Concrete Plant Park in the Bronx—the barge travels along the East River throughout the summer. As I mentioned, Swale is identified as a public food forest and not an urban farm. A sign they have on board reads,

Swale is a floating food forest we grow edible medicinal and pollinator plants for you to harvest and eat for free. Swale is a public art initiative that envisions what public parks could look like in NYC. We offer free public programs, school tours, private events.

At Swale, the plants are integrated into an edible landscape that is planted directly into the soil—there are no raised beds or pots. The barge is covered mostly with soil and plants with the exception of a stone pathway, a shed, and water tanks. Food forestry suggests a very specific planting practice involving seven specific planting layers: the overstory tree layer, the understory tree layer, the shrub layer, the herbaceous layer, the root or rhizosphere layer, the ground cover layer, and the vine layer. It is this almost sculptural planting practice that distinguishes Swale from other urban farms.

Swale began as a project by artist Mary Mattingly and was designed to explore permaculture and social sculpture. The idea of social sculpture is attributed to German artist Joseph Beuys, known for his statement that “everybody is an artist.” Social sculpture attempts to shape and restructure society or the environment—to make structure and the distances between people and their environments malleable. In his manifesto, “I am Searching For Field Character” (1973), Beuys writes:

Only on condition of a radical widening of definition will it be possible for art and activities related to art to provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system to build a SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART.

Swale pursues this way of building an integrated social organism, re-shaping society, and stretching the definitions of art and artist, grower and consumer. Their mission is to “strengthen stewardship of public waterways and land, while working to shift

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36 Rojas.
policies that will increase the presence of edible perennial landscapes.”\(^{37}\) The barge functions as a social organism that requires the care of the community to continue its existence.

Despite Swale’s more public policy-focused mission, it uses similar methods and processes as Harlem Grown to pursue their mission; Swale also hosts school and camp groups and workshops on board. Like Harlem Grown’s community work days, Swale has open hours during the summer, Friday through Sunday from 1-6pm, during which anyone can walk on board and help weed, compost, and harvest or just relax. The produce is free and so are the workshops they host; I had the opportunity to go to an Indian pickling workshop over the summer. In my interview with its public programming coordinator and permaculture overseer, Marisa Prefer, I learned that Swale also hosted a group called Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice this past summer. Youth Ministries runs its own programming onboard Swale, treating the barge as a “built-in social space. An organism to learn from.”\(^{38}\) The barge acts as a social organism and a work of art, the two are not mutually exclusive. Swale attempts to restructure society and the ways we interact with our surroundings and one another. On their website it says, “Following the insights of Elinor Ostrom, Swale relies on the principle that commons can be sustainably managed where people know each other, trust each other, and work together in caring for a place.”\(^{39}\) Like Harlem Grown, Swale aims at balancing food production and education; they cultivate a commons, growing food with and for a community.

\(^{38}\) Marisa Prefer, “Interview with Swale’s Public Programming Coordinator,” Interview by author, August 01, 2017.
\(^{39}\) “About,” Swale.
In addition to incorporating children into the durational process of care that is growing/cultivating, the educational tours at both food communities ground the work in the earth of its place. The tours connect the work to its environment, which is an important component of (at)tendance. During education tours at Harlem Grown, children are encouraged to think and discuss the abundance of fast food vendors and pharmacies, as well as the lack of healthy food vendors on the walk from the subway stop. At Swale, children are encouraged to acknowledge their own presence on the brackish East River in a food forest flanking a metropolis. As they develop a heightened awareness of place, tour groups learn about cultivation and interact with the urban farm or floating food forest and with one another. It is such emphasis on care, process-driven harvest practices, and connection with place at Harlem Grown and Swale that fosters a state of (at)tendance.

Despite employing successful methods of pursuing their missions, I want to conclude this section by acknowledging a major challenge that these organizations face. Sidell, Hillery, and Prefer expressed the difficulty of gathering quantitative data on their program’s impact on their communities. Of course, they collect data regarding how much food they produce, how much they compost, and so forth, but the real community impact measurement that Sidell and Hillery mention—and which recalls Muñoz’s ephemera—is much harder to quantify. The way Harlem Grown gages the effects of their work is explicitly subjective: through “the eyes of the faces of the children.”40 What the children say and how excited they are to be at the farm are the best indicators of Harlem Grown’s success. This evidence of success is ephemeral, it follows “traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things” in the faces

40 Hillery.
of children rather than “solid” scholarship or qualitative data that is perhaps more recognized by official bodies.
Interlude: The Weed in Ruins

The liminal ecologies both Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Dori Midnight engage are significant to the consideration of edible plants growing in sites of disturbed ecologies such as is the case in cities. Tsing is an anthropologist writing about fungi and capitalism and Midnight is an herbalist, healer, and artist—that is, the work of these individuals lives in the space between urban farming, art, and community-based healing practices. Their writings and work are particularly relevant to the points I discuss in Parts Two and Three.

In her book, The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins, Tsing investigates the matsutake mushroom. While it is the world’s most valuable mushroom, the matsutake is also a weed that grows only in human-disturbed forests. Scientists have tried to cultivate matsutake in labs, but have been unsuccessful. Matsutake needs the capitalist ruins—the logged forests, the disturbed ecologies—to grow. Its survival and reliance on capitalist ruins leads me to wonder: what else survives in these logged forests? what survives in other ruined ecologies? in cities? The existence of, and market for, matsutake lives in this liminal space between capitalist ruin and commodity chains, weed and valuable.

Exploring these ruined landscapes, Tsing takes up conditions of “precarity, that is, life without the promise of stability.” Precarity can mean instability, unequal life chances, and job insecurity, however, Tsing proposes precarity as “the condition of our time.” Precarity, a vulnerability to indeterminacy and instability, though not a choice, is a way to acknowledge commonality, especially for people whose lives are

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made more precarious by economic and food insecurities. Precarity is frightening but “also makes life possible” because changing with circumstance is survival. In thinking through and teetering in precarity, Tsing breaks from determinacy and the singular current of capitalist time—the steady rhythm of progress. Because Tsing acknowledges precarity as the current condition, she is able to pay closer attention to different temporalities and narratives. Tsing writes about a mushroom that nurtures trees and helps forests to grow in ruin, and guides us to “patchy landscapes, multiple temporalities, and shifting assemblages of humans and non-humans: the very stuff of collaborative survival,” and the very stuff of (at)tendance.

Tsing also discusses contamination and how we are changed by our interactions. She writes, “We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge.” Contamination, for Tsing, marks survival—staying alive through collaboration—and transformation—all of the changes that come from interactions with others, human and non-human. In a practice of (at)tendance, contamination invites us to discover relationships and possibilities for “new directions” or temporalities that emerge from lingering in our encounters. Contamination forces us to acknowledge the transformative relationships between the projects of theater or urban farming and their environments—the projects cannot exist without acknowledging, respecting, and affecting (and being affected by) the place of their happening. Contamination also invites us to relationally imagine urban farming and theater as “mutual worlds.” This mutual and relational existence hearkens back to

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42 Ibid., 20.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
Jean Luc Nancy’s theory about singular plurality. Nancy’s concept of a relational being helps me recall an inherent intersection between urban farming and theater. Linking the worlds of urban farming and theater with (at)tendance reveals a thread of “world-making” possibilities, it enables an examination of the wider worlds—the ecological and social environments—within which theater and urban farming occur.

Dori Midnight also takes up relationality and liminal existence in her work as a healer and artist. Describing her practice, Midnight says she undoes relationships to objects that are informed by materialist culture and capitalism. In an interview with freelance writer Gina Badger, Midnight discusses a work called Mongrels, which included a field botany tour that followed a map of the presence and location of a weed, mugwort. Midnight describes mugwort as the kind of plant that will grow anywhere, though it does not like to grow where it is intentionally planted or desired. While mugwort is not as valuable as matsutake, it too finds a home in disturbed and liminal sites. As an edible weed, mugwort straddles the desirable/undesirable, useful/useless boundary. Because Mongrels focused on a weed, it challenged this boundary and proposed a new way of relating to mugwort and other weeds/undesirable growths. Through Midnight’s practice with objects, she [gets] to reclaim [her] relationship to whatever it is that [she’s] doing, or to whatever it is that [she’s] holding. That’s part of what makes it a craft, which involves an intimate relationship and a long practice, and time and presence, creating something out of a relationship between heart and hands and thing. This practice of rediscovering and reinventing relationships with objects and weeds becomes a form of (at)tendance that Tsing and Midnight take up in their work.

45 Ibid., 27.
47 Ibid.
Objects here are not private possessions, but they are animate objects that inform and shape a practice and an individual. Tsing and Midnight reimagine ways of being with that reject relationships prescribed by capitalism. Two key tenets of (at)tendance, relationality and time—specifically temporalities outside of the present, linear, or what Muñoz calls “straight” time—find a home in the work of Tsing and Midnight.⁴⁸

The ways in which both individuals consider edible weeds make us interrogate what are the living beings—plants, animals, people—that can endure/thrive in the ruins created by the capitalist system. This question engages the concept of (at)tendance because it also asks what kinds of ecological and social communities can be built in cities/places created by environmental destruction. As I will discuss in the following section, New York City is another site of ruins that supports unique ecological and social communities precisely because of its ruins.

⁴⁸ Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 22.
Part Three: (At)tending Performance

What kind of theatrical performance lives in the manmade ruins, in the cities we have built? What kind of performance invites (and successfully achieves) (at)tendance? If the application of the term helps us grasp the impact that the urban farming practices of Harlem Grown and Swale have on their communities and explain the paradoxical vitality of weeds such as matsutake and mugwort in seemingly-dead environments, then the methodological framework of (at)tendance can also be used to understand how the performative structure and intent of Happenings and creative placemaking projects thrive in and enliven decaying city environments. The projects of Happenings and creative placemaking inform (at)tendance through their play with temporality, dedication to place, and invitation to communion.

Happenings are mixed-media performance events that do away with foundational classical dramatic elements such as plot, characters, and blocking. They strive to fully integrate art into life. Happenings are largely unrepeatable and improvisational in nature. Allan Kaprow, considered by many to be the founder of the Happenings, traces the genealogy of Happenings in the book Assemblage, Environments & Happenings, writing that Happenings developed from a desire to escape the “restrictions imposed by ‘pure’ painting” and its unbroken surfaces and geometric fields. The new movement turned toward a blending of mediums and away from “pure” painting or any single artistic form. Works of Assemblage and Environment, precursors of Happenings, included combinations of anything from paint to textiles to garbage to living/dying organic material, and everything in between. Happenings evolved from Environments: “Fundamentally, Environments
Assemblages and Environments emphasize the senses, while Happenings focus more pointedly on the elements of “time (compared with space), sound (compared with tangible objects), and the physical presence of people (compared with the physical surroundings).” Actually, Kaprow considers Happenings similar to theater because of their connection with specific times and places. Like the urban food communities discussed in Part Two, the Happenings studied by Kaprow contextualize their duration and material presence with a specific time and place. Such attention to time and location, as well as the manner in which Happenings highlight extension, help me to comprehend (at)tendance as a methodological framework able to support a theatrical project that depends on an intimate relationship with time and place.

Happenings play with temporality through their ephemeral yet continuous existences. In spite of their intentional irreproducibility, the end of a Happening does not signify the end of the work or the process it engages. The tendrils of process and interpersonal connections it provokes between participants remain. The tendrils of process can be found in one project that Kaprow describes in Assemblage: an Environment cultivated by environmental sculptor Clarence Schmidt. By the time the book was published, Schmidt had already worked for over thirty years on the creation of this Environment on a mountaintop near Woodstock, New York. His process in the

50 Ibid., 184.
51 Ibid.
creation of this Environment involved carving entire rooms into cliff-faces and filling them with lights, fake plants, tires, and many other objects. Kaprow writes,

Schmidt’s work, inviolate itself, contains useful lessons that may be applied differently by others. This kind of transforming and extending art can be made to be continued indefinitely by many artists, either according to a pre-fixed plan or on an individual basis, long after an initiator has stopped or died.\textsuperscript{53}

Though Kaprow describes Happenings as singular and ephemeral events, his analysis of Schmidt’s work speaks of the value of works that expand time. The extension of art into a continuous transformation of being stretches, pulls apart, and lingers in our relationships with the world and one another.

The audience’s active engagement in Happenings also supports the application of (at)tendance as a methodological framework for their analysis. Unlike Western realist theater, Happenings require that we blur the line between actor and spectator. Kaprow believed that a Happening “places a much greater responsibility on visitors than they have had before. The ‘success’ of a work depends on them as well as on the artist.”\textsuperscript{54} In distinguishing Happenings from “the usual theatrical works,” he cites their “context, the place of conception and enactment,” the commingling of audiences, and the lack of “separation of audience and play.”\textsuperscript{55} I find that Happenings’ need for active participation and emphasis on “context” approximates them to (at)tendance in the urban farming processes I describe in this paper. It is the added entanglement of the audience in play, the very undoing of the active-passive relationship between artists and audiences in Western realist theater, that situates Happenings within (at)tendance.

\textsuperscript{53} Kaprow, 171-2.
\textsuperscript{54} Allan Kaprow, \textit{Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life}, Edited by Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 12.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 17.
I turn to the conversation between Happenings and the food communities of Part Two to illuminate the thread that links seemingly different fields—performance and farming. I draw from Kaprow’s discussion of habitats to evidence the relationship between Happenings and the farming practices of organizations such as Harlem Grown and Swale. I quote Kaprow at length here because his definition of habitats recalls many of the aspects of (at)tendance that I discuss earlier. For example,

The place where anything grows up (a certain kind of art in this case), that is, its ‘habitat,’ gives to it not only a space, a set of relationships to the various things around it, and a range of values, but an overall atmosphere as well, which penetrates it and whoever experiences it. Habitats have always had this effect, but it is especially important now, when our advanced art approaches a fragile but marvelous life, one that maintains itself by a mere thread, melting the surroundings, the artist, the work, and everyone who comes to it into an elusive, changeable configuration.56 [emphasis added]

Kaprow’s description of a relational sense of place that implies an interdependent contamination intersects with my definition of (at)tendance as it applies to both performance and urban farming practices. Happenings redefine relationships with place and people in a way that is similar to the food communities at Harlem Grown and Swale. The habitats created by Happenings cast a renewed relational network that lingers long after a given event itself has ended. The “changeable configuration” Kaprow describes above highlights the ways in which human beings are changed by their relationships to time, place, and one another. Happenings invite people to partake wholly in the real nature of the art and (one hopes) life. Thus a Happening is rough and sudden and often feels ‘dirty.’ Dirt, we might begin to realize, is also organic and fertile, and everything, including the visitors, can grow a little in such circumstances.57

Participants are contaminated and connected by their shared “dirtiness;” Kaprow’s use of language directly ties Happenings to urban farming: both are subject to organic

56 Ibid., 18.
processes and invite growth and decay. His word choice also ties Happenings to the spreading of yellow dirt in the horse race ritual of Sienna’s *Palio*, which Dolores LaChappelle discusses; this connection shows that in both performance and urban farming, there is potential in re-grounding ourselves in the dirt of a place where threads can extend like the roots of a plant.

Like Happenings, creative placemaking also invites ecological conviviality and dedication to place—it is a project of economic development that involves the creation of “cultural centers” intended to improve “livability, diversity, jobs, and incomes” in a specific community. Like Happenings, creative placemaking moves art-making out of isolated studios and mainstream galleries and into the rest of the world. The construction of these cultural centers—which may mean community-building rather than tangible construction—invites the participation and collaboration of artists and other community members: “In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities.” As such, a creative placemaking project requires that the community commits to it well past the phase of implementation.

My understanding of creative placemaking also seeks to enhance its potential for connecting people and place. In their white paper, *Creative Placemaking*, Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa describe creative placemaking as a project that is very goal-oriented and is based in economic development:

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57 Ibid.
59 Markusen and Gadwa, 3.
[Existing] creative placemaking developments make important contributions to economic competitiveness, livability, and sustainability. Artists and designers are an entrepreneurial asset ripe for development, and in creative places, they find business skills and access to each other that improves their work and earnings.\textsuperscript{60}

The kind of creative placemaking that they describe is heavily focused on tangible products or metrical data. Though this language might be standard for projects in the field of economics, I am not sure that its emphasis on development and economic competition serves best the purpose of cohabitation in a community. I acknowledge the positive outcomes that Markusen and Gadwa seek in creative placemaking (creating more jobs, re-using vacant buildings, teaching non-arts-related businesses and skills, and so forth), but I want to challenge the sole emphasis on products, entrepreneurship, and innovation because I find that a more interesting potential emerges from the use of (at)tendance as a methodological approach to creative placemaking—that is, the social and ecological potential of fostering connection among people and to the environment. Greater emphasis on process would allow us to enhance creative placemaking’s “arts-anchored revitalization [that] encourages non-arts firms and families to commit to place and to participate actively in remaking where they live and work.”\textsuperscript{61} Lingering in the process of cultivation and gathering enhances the social and locational aspect of creative placemaking—like Jill Sigman’s huts, the cultural centers that emerge through creative placemaking projects serve as catalysts for communion.

Like Happenings, creative placemaking involves many participants; it fosters exciting connections between artists and members of the public, private, and non-

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
profit sectors. However, such collaborative processes and long-term relationships are not without some drawbacks and obstacles, such as the difficulty of creating partnerships, countering skepticism on the part of communities and public leaders, assembling adequate financing, clearing regulatory hurdles, ensuring maintenance and sustainability, avoiding displacement and gentrification, and developing performance metrics.62

These challenges are similar to the ones that Harlem Grown and Swale encounter when they apply for funding, work through zoning and other urban regulations, seek to maintain their spaces and work, and collect data that can be recognized and quantifiable by outside referees. These are the challenges of (at)tendance.

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62 Ibid., 5.
Conclusion: (At)tending Failure

(At)tendance is a method of joining the projects of theater and urban farming in a way that invites critical reflection and offers a point of entry into a way of being-in-the-world that is aligned with deep ecology. For me, (at)tendance involves uprooting and reestablishing our relationships with time, place, and one another. The missions and challenges of Harlem Grown and Swale—and the (at)tendance they encourage—recall Happenings and creative placemaking. The work of (at)tendance at the sites I have identified operates as much in their successes as it does in their failures—what if the plants do not grow? what if no one shows up to a performance? what if the project has unintended results like participants prune too much or passively watch a performance? Farming and art are fields rife with failure—for a myriad of reasons, crops might not grow and performances might not come together in the way one intends. I would venture to say that, in great part, these are practices that encourage a contemplation of how we live with failure. How do we get people to engage in these practices of failure? Why even risk failing to experience (at)tendance? What comes of this failure?

I turn to Jack Halberstam’s The Queer Art of Failure to grapple with the parallels between the potential failures of farming and performance. According to Halberstam, failure is necessary in this practice of pushing through divisions between life and art: “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, umaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”63 Thus, the failures at Harlem Grown and Swale, and in Happenings and creative placemaking, make new
“ways of being in the world” and with one another possible. They guide participants
toward what Halberstam calls heterogeneous, “creative, improvised relationships”
that stress the importance of collective action over the work of a single individual.64
This way of being in the world is (at)tendance. As with Clarence Schmidt’s
mountaintop Environment, “There is no end to the work, quite patently. Parts break
and rot, the artist’s thoughts about a particular project are revised or abandoned but,
he tells us, it often turns out better that way, and it keeps him going.”65 Whether
success or failure, all that unfolds is good and informs the future of the work. As with
the harvesting practices of Harlem Grown and Swale, allowing for failure can mean
new possibilities for learning and interacting.

The processes of Harlem Grown, Swale, Happenings, and creative
placemaking weave threads of relationality in surprising ways and promote
cooperation and community care in a violent, divided world. At the talkback that I
mention in the Introduction, performer Agnieszka Mendel said, “I believe if people
sang together, there wouldn’t be war.” There is something important in the idea, in
that the statement considers that we can survive if we find ways of combating
divisions and coming together. The “we” I invoke here recalls the “we” Muñoz
identifies in Cruising Utopia,66 a “we” that might not yet exist, but one that is made
up of queer, queer of color, indigenous individuals, human and non-human beings, a
“we” that exists outside of the frameworks of heteronormativity and colonialism. I am
not arguing here for sameness or ignoring difference, but rather for acknowledging

63 Jack Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure (Durham: Duke University Press,
64 Ibid.
65 Kaprow, Assemblage, 171.
66 Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 20.
being as singularly plural, which in turn requires us to partake in a relational practice of care for one another and our environments.

Harlem Grown, Swale, Happenings, and creative placemaking cultivate shared spaces for us to be relational beings. Using the concept of (at)tendance—and its characteristics of weaving together multiple temporalities, place-grounding and spacemaking, and cultivating relationality—as a methodological framework to engage in practices that encourage relational presence helps us think critically about how theater and urban farming may foster relationships between people, place, and environment. By identifying the political role of Harlem Grown and Swale as creative placemaking projects, we might even be able to use (at)tendance to protect these sites from threats such as Trump’s proposed cut of National Endowment for the Arts funding. Placing the projects of farming and performance in conversation helps find how they can support and sustain each other.

I wish to end this essay with the words of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Jean-Luc Nancy as a call for action, a plea for (at)tendance. Allowing ourselves to be changed by one another and our environments, to explore sites of environmental destruction and to embrace failure as a learning process enables us to enjoy a more integrated experience of the world. We cannot ignore that the world we live in exists in precarity, as Tsing defines it, and that finding ways of living in precarity and in relation is the only way forward. Tsing writes,

Global landscapes today are strewn with this kind of ruin. Still, these places can be lively despite announcements of their death; abandoned asset fields sometimes yield new multispecies and multicultural life. In a global state of precarity, we don’t have choices other than looking for life in this ruin.67

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67 Tsing, 6.
Nancy’s definition of compassion through contagion, “the contact of being with one another in this turmoil,” recalls Tsing’s ruins: rather than giving up in the face of ruin, we must continue on.68 Similar to how I approach the Latin *attendere* in the Preface, Nancy does not speak of compassion in the sense of a pity that perpetuates itself. His conception of “compassion” is a togetherness (com-) in suffering (-pati), a “disturbance of violent relatedness.”69 The contamination that rises from our encounters, when we experience being with one another, becomes a net of ever-multiplying threads, something resembling the rhizosphere. Recognizing these threads and the effects we have on human and non-human beings and vice versa is crucial to disturbing the “violent relatedness” of war, genocide, colonialism, oppression, exclusion, and hatred.

(At)tendance too attempts to disrupt “violent relatedness,” contaminates participants in this process of care and encounter, and lingers in the in-between.

68 Nancy, xiii.
69 Ibid.
Bibliography

I. Primary Sources—Interviews

I received IRB approval to conduct these interviews. Interviewees gave me permission to use their real names in this essay.


II. Secondary Sources


