Volunteer Urban Environmental Stewardship, Emotional Economies of Care, and Productive Power in Philadelphia

Alec Foster

Abstract: Recent efforts to increase urban forests and greenspaces rely on the volunteer labor of individuals and environmental nonprofits. The estimation of market values has often justified urban greening. These neoliberal approaches to urban environmental governance have been heavily critiqued, revealing the uneven power relationships and urban environments that result. This paper aims to move beyond such critiques by exploring how the reproduction of urban nature can be valued outside of the market. Fieldwork with volunteers participating in environmental stewardship in Philadelphia revealed their participation was motivated by intense emotional attachments to their neighborhoods, other participants, and nonhuman others, leading me to propose emotional economies of care as an alternative framework. The circulation of emotions and affects between participants, places, and nonhuman others forms an emotional economy. The generative power of this circulation makes emotional economies of care collective bodies or multiplicities. Furthermore, these multiplicities produce power from below, in counterpoint to the top down power of neoliberal environmentalities. However, just as these multiplicities come together, they can come apart or change directions. I close with ideas on how emotional ecologies and economies of care can be brought into being and processes of change within them shepherded in progressive ways.

Keywords: environmentality; urban greening; Philadelphia; neoliberalism

1. Introduction

Historically, most research on urban forests and greenspaces has focused upon quantitative analysis that attempts to understand the dynamic relationships between humans and urban environments and/or guide their management. This positivist approach has largely overlooked consideration of how power works in urban socioecological systems. Questions surrounding marginalization and exclusion, of who creates what type of urban ecological knowledge for whose benefit, are often eclipsed by analyses of the extent and benefits of urban greenspace. This is not to say that this work is not important, rather that it needs to be balanced with and supplemented by empirical and theoretical analyses of the power-laden political processes behind the production and distribution of benefits.

 Thankfully, emerging political ecology approaches to understanding the power dynamics present in urban environmental reproduction (the improvement, maintenance, or degradation of material urban environments) offer a way forward. The two dominant explanatory frameworks for the rise of urban environmental volunteerism in urban political ecology are environmentalties and green neoliberalism, sometimes combined in discussions of neoliberal governmentalities or neoliberal environmentality [1]. Environmentality synthesizes Foucault’s [2] concept of governmentality with issues of environmental reproduction, arguing that the state actively and intentionally produces environmental subjects to achieve desired levels of environmental quality through the use of knowledge, power, and practices [3–6]. Foucault [2] saw governmentality as existing in a shift in state practices of government from a punitive approach towards past transgressions to influencing and guiding future behavior through the creation of norms. Thus, the interest of government became the consciousness of citizens, individual and plural [2]. Green neoliberalism [7–9]
theorizes the reliance on volunteers for urban environmental reproduction as part of a larger project of hollowing out the state and its provision of public services, relying instead on the market and private sector. In green neoliberalism, we see a shift in responsibility for urban environmental management that relies upon the enrollment of citizens as environmental stewards [10]. Neoliberal environmentality approaches combine the two, seeing the mutual constitution of environmentalist and neoliberal subjects. Research in this vein has proved fruitful and developed many insights into how power operates in urban environments and their reproduction. However, it also raises a major concern. Namely, environmentality and green neoliberalism often present the state and/or neoliberal capitalism as the only source of power, operating from the top down to create environmentalist and capitalist subjects [11,12]. In other words, the agency of urban residents is severely limited by such approaches [13].

This paper aims to further understand the power relationships in urban environmental reproduction. Specifically, how can we explain the recent rise in urban environmental volunteering? To do so, I worked with local, everyday neighborhood, volunteer environmental stewards who participated in tree plantings, urban gardening, and park cleanups in Philadelphia. I used in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and neighborhood walking tours to investigate their reasons for participating. The methods were chosen to reveal why the individuals and groups I worked with participated in volunteer urban environmental stewardship.

I found a much more nuanced play of power on the ground in urban environmental reproduction. Participants were motivated by emotional attachments to their neighborhoods, neighbors, and nonhuman others. The intensity of these attachments explains their participation in urban environmental stewardship.

The discussion section explores the implications of my findings through the development of an alternative framework for valuing urban environmental stewardship outside of the market. I begin by presenting critiques of using markets to value urban environments and their stewardship. To go beyond critique, I next propose emotional economies of care to value urban environmental stewardship. Emotional economies of care are thought of as multiplicities and becomings in the style of Deleuze and Guattari [14], allowing us to think of them as a composition of multiple human and nonhuman bodies joined by their increased capacity to act (their affects).

However, multiplicities are constantly evolving, shifting, and changing. This makes it essential to work towards making their movement and change positively impact urban environments and their residents. I find an encouraging prospect for this challenge in Althusser’s [15] aleatory materialism of the encounter. Specifically, an ongoing series of encounters can lead to the growth of emotional economies of care. Furthermore, three concepts from Spinozan-inspired ontologies provide hope for the persistence and growth of emotional economies of care. (1) His treatment of the philosophical concept of conatus, which can be interpreted as an innate tendency towards self-preservation [16]. (2) The tendency of bodies (singular and plural) to strive to enhance their capacity to act (their affects). My participants demonstrated this tendency through their coming together to produce positive impacts on their neighborhoods. (3) The affects of joy and hope that arise alongside producing these positive impacts can drive the persistence and growth of multiplicities. Finally, this understanding of increasing affects through the becomings of multiplicities allows us to recognize the possibility of a positive, productive generation of power from below in volunteer urban environmental stewardship that can be held in tension with the more hegemonic versions of top-down destructive power in neoliberal environmentality.

2. Materials and Methods

Philadelphia is the setting for this study. The city has always worked towards urban greening, establishing a street tree ordinance in 1700 [17] and expanding the Fairmount Park System to over 3000 acres by 1869 [18]. The recent Mayoral term of Michael Nutter saw the city return to its environmental roots through a broad campaign for sustainability, seeking
to make Philadelphia the greenest city in America [19]. The City’s Green Cities, Clean Waters stormwater management plan is also innovative, seeking to manage stormwater through green infrastructure rather than underground pipes [20]. The Environmental Protection Agency has since sought to expand the model nationally [21].

A large part of this sustainability renaissance relies upon volunteer time and labor to improve Philadelphia’s urban environments, including the city’s tree planting goals. Target 11 of the City’s sustainability plan is to increase tree coverage toward thirty percent in all neighborhoods by 2025 [19]. The city recognizes that it does not have the funds to complete these ambitious objectives alone, necessitating the significant involvement of private citizens in tree planting and the aggressive pursuit of public–private partnerships with neighborhood, civic, and business groups [19].

Research participants were local, everyday neighborhood, volunteer environmental stewards who participated in tree plantings, urban gardening, and park cleanups, events that fit into the realm of the everyday and the local. The results of these environmental efforts are part of the daily spatial activities of participants across the environmental landscape of their neighborhoods. Following Lefebvre and Levich [22], tree plantings, urban gardening, and park cleanups are the beginnings to a change in space and the city that can transform the everyday, and the local is seen as the “primary scale where abstract environmental principals or values intersect immediate quality of life concerns” [23] (p. 1).

I used three qualitative methodological techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and neighborhood walking tours (Table 1). The first was 30 in-depth qualitative interviews of at least an hour in length. The interviews were mostly open-ended, encouraging individuals to tell stories about their environmental concerns and practices, constructing narratives together that explain their attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and emotions [24]. The open nature and extended length of these interviews allowed for participants to provide a more nuanced and richer portrait of their reasons for participation in volunteer urban environmental stewardship than traditional survey procedures [25–27]. However, prompts were used to uncover core reasons for participation if they did not arise organically out of the interviews. Interview prompts included questions around: the types of environmental stewardship participants took part in, their reasons for participation, and how participation made them feel. Thirty interviews allowed for data saturation to be achieved, where additional interviews were not producing more themes [26,28]. The qualitative research software package ATLAS.ti was used to analyze interview results and identify common motivations and themes [29]. Results were coded for themes, metaphors, and tropes. Reflexive journaling after each interview helped me to understand the results of the interviews along with my place in producing and interpreting those results in an attempt to understand rather than eliminate my effects as a researcher upon the results [30].

| Table 1. Methodological approach. |
|-----------------------------------|
| Method               | Number of Participants | Research Domain                  |
|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| In-depth Interviews   | 30                     | Motivations for participation    |
| Participatory Observation | 240                    | Embodied and emotional impacts of participation |
| Walking Tours         | 10                     | Connections to place             |

The participatory observation consisted of engaging in 10 neighborhood-based environmental stewardship events. I participated in tree plantings, urban gardening celebrations, and neighborhood cleanups alongside over 240 research participants. We worked together to co-create knowledge and use our bodies as research instruments [31,32]. The stewardship events ranged in length from one to six hours and averaged three hours of participation and interaction. By digging, planting, watering, and collecting trash, I attempted to uncover the embodied emotions that these activities create, along with the motivations that stem from them. Furthermore, the shovels, dirt, and trees themselves involved in
these research events affected our bodies and were affected by them, drawing attention to how these various entities participate in the continuous construction of bodies and identities [33]. Finally, understanding how bodies occupy and negotiate space enables the understanding of both [34]. This method supplements the traditional qualitative practice of in-depth interviewing by having the body talk along with talking about the body [32].

The final research method employed was 10 neighborhood walking tours with participants [35–40], which furthered understanding of how participants make sense of their urban environments and their identities. The tours were on average an hour long, with most recorded and transcribed. Participants defined their neighborhoods, as perceived neighborhood boundaries may differ from those defined by City agencies or nonprofits [37]. Crucially, individuals both make these places and are made by them in a continuous, set of co-constitutive, relational processes [38,39]. Furthermore, walking tours address the embodied nature of place, space, and identity construction, as the physical negotiation of the everyday by bodies is addressed by this method [39]; this embodied negotiation of space brings in all the senses, as it is tactile, aural, and olfactory as well as visual [41–43]. Finally, these tours also helped to understand the affective and emotional nature of place and identity making. Following Duff: “to experience place is to be affected by place” [38] (p. 881, emphasis in original). Open-ended discussions with participants on the walking tours increased understanding of the deep layers of emotion involved in everyday places.

3. Results

Results revealed the strong influence of participants’ emotional attachments to their neighborhoods, neighbors, and nonhuman others. Attending to emotions and affects in local everyday urban environmental stewardship recognizes their power in the mutual constitution of practices and identities. Following Ahmed, “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” [44] (p. 119, emphasis in original). For me, this intensity of attachment to participants’ neighborhoods, between participants, and between participants and nonhuman others provides the explanation for their participation that is lacking in environmentality and neoliberal nature approaches. Volunteers were assisting in urban environmental reproduction because they cared intensely, emotionally, and affectively about their neighborhoods, their neighbors, and trees as nonhuman others, rather than being enrolled as environmental citizens by the state and/or the market. Of course, the situation on the ground is often more complicated than this simple binary between cooptation and resistance [45]. Care should be taken to draw out the rich interplay between the two, recognizing that individuals and organizations can do both at different times.

3.1. Attachments to Community

Invocations of community were often used to explain participation in volunteer urban environmental stewardship. While recent scholarship highlights the often problematic and exclusionary usages of community [45–51], I explore how participants used the concept to demonstrate their emotional attachments to their neighborhoods. Often, during or after stewardship events, participants expressed a strong sense of pride and accomplishment in their efforts, feeling that they had immediately improved their neighborhoods. Indeed, one participant stated that the tree care performed by her group had an “everyday immediate impact” through shade, beauty, and pollution removal. Explaining her reasons for joining a community gardening group, one participant said “I never got . . . .like my mom would garden when I was little but I never really got into it. I don’t know I just really wanted to support the cause because the neighborhood looked like shit and we tried to make it look nicer”, and later on, the same participant framed her working in the garden as an attempt to spread the new sense of hopefulness that she felt in her life for the first time:

“Honestly, no I was always ahh, I mean like, most of my life I went through this really nihilistic, I had this really nihilistic ideology where everything was pointless and blah, blah, blah, and then I realized that like no, it’s not, and there’s
a way to make your life matter and I started being involved in the garden because I wanted to do something good, I wanted to help people, to show people that there’s hope. I wanted other people to feel the hope that I feel now.”

3.2. Attachments to Neighbors and Fellow Participants

An attachment to neighbors and fellow participants also influenced participation in everyday local urban environmental stewardship. Many participants mentioned the friends that they made and the value of their interactions working together over the years. One interviewee, speaking on the friendships and relationships between participants in a tree care group, highlighted the ability of participating in environmental stewardship activities to build friendships and even end interpersonal conflicts:

“tree tenders is also because of its positive nature, there’s a friendship among people. One of the founding guys, Dan Berger, had a neighbor at his back, Alex, and the two of them are both World War II vets, and Alex and Dan were enemies across their back. One or the other pushed leaves one way or the other, I can’t remember how it was. But then, they both joined tree tenders and really gradually they’re bosom buddies now.”

Similarly, interactions between participants and non-participants at stewardship events highlights the power of this attachment. At most events, several non-participants briefly thanked participants for pruning trees, planting trees, or picking up trash, often commenting on how nice the results looked. Other participants asked how they could get the tree in front of their house pruned or a planting in front of their house. All the participatory observation events that I attended involved some form of sharing food, ranging from coffee and donuts to a full buffet, sometimes before the event, sometimes after, and sometimes both. This speaks to both the embodied physical labor involved in volunteer environmental stewardship consuming calories and the connections developed through sharing food [32].

3.3. Attachments to Nonhuman Others

Finally, participants formed an intense emotional attachment to trees and other non-human others. Many participants had held what they defined as strong environmental values for as long as they could remember. One leader of a tree stewardship group said “I’ve always liked trees. Part of the reason we moved to this neighborhood was because it was a tree lined neighborhood.” It was common to see and hear participants having strong negative reactions to trees in poor shape during the tree plantings and prunings. Participants felt both sad that the trees were in such poor shape, but also sometimes mad that people were not taking care of them. One participant, talking about the emotional impact of seeing a tree in really bad shape said: “It’s like seeing a hurt animal or small child” and another said that when trees go down “it’s like I lost one of my friends.” Another participant became involved in stewardship due to her emotional connections to the trees in front of her house: “The first tree that got planted died so I took the training. It wasn’t about getting involved in the neighborhood; it was about taking care of my tree.” Finally, another participant became involved due to the emotional connection that he had to the trees in their neighborhood: “And ah, I took the tree tender course in June of 96 because I saw that there were big trees, you know. And I loved the trees, but also that some were dying and needed to be replace . . . ” The three intense emotional attachments influencing participation in volunteer urban environmental stewardship generate emotional economies of care.

4. Discussion

Participants cared for trees due to their deep, intense emotional attachments, but how were they participating in emotional economies of care? What is the significance of framing their actions in such a manner? Most significantly, this framing begins to provide an alternative to market-based approaches that have become the dominant way of
valuing urban (and rural) environments [52,53]. Market-based environmental valuation and payments for ecosystem services have been subject to extensive critique, a summary of which follows.

First, a simplification of complex, interrelated natural systems is required for the market valuation of ecosystem services [53–60]. The boundaries necessary to establish value are difficult to draw [57,61] and enforce [55,61]. Second, drawing boundaries around ecosystems for the valuation of their services makes them vulnerable to fluxes in markets [54,61,62]. As with other commodities, they become subject to market crashes and failures. Third, the valuation of, and payment for, ecosystem services can lead to deepening inequalities and marginalization due to asymmetries of power at multiple scales [53,56–58,61,63–65]. Local and traditional resource users have been further marginalized, with elites receiving the benefits [58,63,64]. Finally, along with negative social impacts, valuation has also produced negative environmental results [55,57]. For example, environmental degradation due to payments for forest ecosystem services have been documented on multiple continents [55,57].

Along with the critiques of market-based environmental valuation, research has also documented the success of non-market approaches to environmental management. Work on common resource management has demonstrated the success of commons, some of which have survived for centuries [61,66,67]. Furthermore, recent research has demonstrated that volunteers act as stewards for urban and rural environments without considering economic values [11,55]. Market-based environmental valuation often takes precedence over these other approaches to environmental management [57,60,68–70].

While establishing practical and ethical reasons against estimating market values for urban and rural environmental reproduction, it should be clear that the argument is not against the value of these activities. Rather, what follows is an attempt to think through how they could be valued outside of the market, as Guattari argued “a thousand revolutions in value-systems are within reach; it is up to the new ecologies to define their co-ordinates and to make their weight tell within the political and social balance of forces” [70] (p. 146). Essential to this attempt is an embrace of relational thinking and process-based ontologies, an emphasis on becoming rather than being, enabling us to envision urban environments as flows instead of stocks [71]. The everyday, local urban environmental stewards that I worked with participated due to the intense emotional and affective attachments that they formed with their neighborhoods, other participants, and nonhuman others. The first two attachments serve to demonstrate the coexistence or coproduction of environmental and social reproduction [70,71], working to dispel the split between the natural and the social that monetizing urban environmental reproduction [54] and other forms of neoliberalizing nature [72] widens. The third attachment speaks to the power of emotional and affective relationships between humans and nonhuman others. Indeed, we can think about these relationships as circulating value, perhaps even as transactions between humans and nonhumans where value is exchanged.

Thinking through the three attachments simultaneously is even more productive towards theorizing the constitution of emotional economies of care. There is a nice symmetry with Felix Guattari’s (1989) The Three Ecologies, which he termed mental, social, and ecological. The three intense emotional attachments could be neatly mapped onto the three fields. Care for one’s neighborhood and community seems to be a reaction against structural conditions within the mental field. Care for one’s neighbors and fellow participants in local everyday neighborhood environmental stewardship could be situated in the social. Finally, care for trees and other nonhuman others maps to the ecological field. Situating the three intense emotional attachments in the three fields of Guattari’s framework seems to make sense, but it also seems too easy, simple, and straightforward. Something messier must surely be going on. This concern over a neat partitioning of the three frames and the three intense emotional attachments is strengthened by arguments that the discursive, structural, and material can be co-present, and indeed, co-constitutive
of objects and actions [73–75]. Indeed, Guattari [70] argues that it is wrong to regard action on any of the three ecologies as separate from the others.

Given the concerns expressed above, how might we think of the three emotional attachments and the three ecologies together? There are many possibilities for such a holistic approach, but I find Deleuze and Guattari’s [14] concept of multiplicities to be the most productive. Multiplicities are becomings of heterogeneous bodies (understanding bodies in the widest possible sense, with their characteristics emergent rather than innate: “‘Body’ for Deleuze is defined as any whole composed of parts, where these parts stand in some definite relation to one another, and has a capacity for being affected by other bodies” [76] (p. 35); “each multiplicity is symbiotic; its becoming ties together animals, plants, microorganism, mad particles, a whole galaxy” [14] (p. 250)). The power of affects and intensities guides these becomings of different bodies. Becomings focus upon the constant processes of difference, flux, and change that Deleuze and Guattari [14] use as a counter to traditional philosophical concepts of being, essence, and identity. Deleuze and Guattari are not just talking about the relationship between bodies, but bodies becoming each other or becoming together. “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body” [14] (p. 257).

Emotional economies of care can be theorized as a multiplicity, a becoming. The affects of local everyday urban environmental stewards such as my participants enter into composition with the affects of trees and other nonhuman others, pedestrians and other nonparticipants in the stewardship areas, the saws, clippers, shovels, and other tools of stewardship; the dirt, cement, concrete, asphalt, and other surfaces; the sun, wind, clouds, and rain, and many other bodies. Multiplicities are also composed of enunciations, both plans and legal documents along with statements [50]. What residents and nonresidents say about neighborhoods and urban environments can add to or subtract from the affects and emotions involved in the emotional economies of care. The sense of pride in improving environmental conditions that was revealed during every participatory observation event served to emotionally support the stewardship groups. Indeed, if we follow Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of Spinoza, we can think of these bodies as not only entering into composition but joining with these other bodies to form a more powerful one. Thus, “two individuals (or more) who come together to enhance their potential collectively constitute a new individual” [77] (p. 2594). While this may seem quite abstract, “a multiplicity is, in the most basic sense, a complex structure that does not reference a prior unity” [78] (p. 181), so we can understand urban environmental groups such as those I worked alongside during the participatory observation events as multiplicities working together to improve urban environmental reproduction. Nilan and Wibawanto [79] theorized becoming-environmentalists in Indonesia. Perhaps the urban environmental stewardship multiplicities could be thought of as becoming-emotional-ecologies?

Becoming-emotional-ecologies share some similarities with Ahmed’s [44] affective economies that help us to understand how they are emotional economies of care. For her, as with Deleuze and Guattari [14], affects and emotions do not reside in individual bodies or objects; rather, they circulate, similar to capital in a market economy. As with multiplicities, “it is the very failure of affect to be located in a subject or object that allows it to generate the surface of collective bodies” [44] (p. 129). Emotional economies of care as becoming-emotional-ecologies function through the circulation of emotions between human and nonhuman participants that generates new collective bodies. The circulation of emotions and affects increases or diminishes the value of particular emotions. Thus, “some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to ‘contain’ affect” [44] (p. 120). The constant invocations of community by my participants serve as an example of such an affective increase in value through the heavy circulation of signs. So,
increasing the size and number of becoming-emotional-ecologies could serve to increase the circulation of affects and emotions, strengthening their power and ability to struggle against the dominant market-based forms of valuing urban environmental stewardship.

Recognizing market relations as the hegemonic form of valuing urban environmental reproduction has three essential ramifications. First, occasions of hegemony are seen as rare and temporary rather than persisting in perpetuity [80]. This means that there is an opportunity for other forms of value to become hegemonic or for a mixed system of values where none are hegemonic. Second, hegemonies require active maintenance [81]. Thus, “there is nothing automatic about them. They have to be actively constructed and positively maintained” [80] (p. 15). This means that new work is constantly needed to prop up the dominance of measuring via the dollar. Expanding market estimation to new urban environmental benefits or new geographical locations are examples of this maintenance of hegemony. The pedagogical portion of hegemony highlighted by Perkins [9] in education surrounding the monetary benefits of Milwaukee’s urban forest is a strong example of the active construction of hegemonies pointed out by Hall [80]. Crucially, this recognition of the struggles to maintain the market’s hegemonic position in valuing urban environmental reproduction reveals ecosystem services as a social process of value articulation, rather than the rational and objective solution they are portrayed as [82,83]. Following Gidwani, “capitalist value constantly battles to assert its normative superiority over and autonomy from other forms of value production that interweaves with it” [83] (p. 773, emphasis added). Third, and most important for this research, there is a difference between hegemony and a totality [84]. What this means is that even in a situation where hegemony is present, the field of the social remains heterogeneous. In other words, although marketization is the dominant form of valuing urban environmental reproduction, other value forms persist alongside it.

Multiplicities, however, are constantly evolving, shifting, and changing: “Since its variations and dimensions are immanent to it, it amounts to the same thing to say that each multiplicity is already composed of heterogeneous terms in symbiosis, and that a multiplicity is continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities, according to its thresholds and doors” [14] (p. 249, emphasis in original). Indeed, multiplicities are processes rather than things, which is a powerful lens through which to view the shifting nature of the relationships, the emotions, and affects of the different participants (human and nonhuman) in emotional economies of care, recognizing that, although it may be the same individuals and even groups involved in urban environmental stewardship, there is still a continuous shifting play of affects and intensities. Deleuze and Guattari and other vitalists have often been critiqued for the lack of structure in their ontologies [85]. However, as detailed above, there is an interplay between permanence and contingency. Following Braun (2006) on Deleuzian ontologies: “This is not to say that there is no organization to the world and that everything happens in a chaotic manner, nor that bodies have no permanence, only that there is no pre-existing order that defines the earth’s socio-ecological organization in advance” [85] (p. 204, emphasis in original). The shift from things to processes makes the normative question: how can processes of urban environmental stewardship and flows of urban environmental amenities be directed in more progressive ways? Recognizing the constant movement and change of multiplicities, how can they be brought into being, how can they be sustained, how can their movement and change positively impact urban environments and their residents?

One encouraging prospect for the becomings of emotional economies of care is found in Althusser’s [15] aleatory materialism of the encounter. Similar to Deleuze and Guattari [14], Althusser here is heavily influenced by Spinoza. What he adds is the necessity of encounters taking place for the existence of beings, thus, “for a being (a body, an animal, a man, state or Prince) to be, an encounter has to have taken place (past infinitive). . . . an encounter has to have taken place between beings with affinities” [15] (pp. 192–193). Despite the strong (and often negative) association in the academy of Althusser with rigid structuralism [86], his philosophy of the encounter is completely based upon contingency,
without a hint of prefiguration: “Every encounter is aleatory, not only in its origins (nothing ever guarantees an encounter), but also in its effects. . . . nothing in the elements of the encounter prefigures, before the actual encounter, the contours and determinations of the being that will emerge from it” [15] (p. 193). While this is at a very high level of abstraction, it is possible to bring it down to the concrete in terms of emotional economies of care as multiplicities and becomings. At the most basic level, encounters need to happen for emotional economies of care to begin, persist, and grow. The intense emotional attachments that participants had to their neighborhoods, neighbors, and trees and other nonhuman others grew out of a variety of encounters with people, places, and things. Furthermore, if we think of emotion as circulating and creating value, it is apparent that there needs to be an ongoing series of encounters for these emotions to circulate between more and more participants to enable the growth of emotional economies of care and the accumulation of value. However, there is a tension between reading aleatory materialism as completely up to chance and recognizing the effects of previous encounters [87]. What bringing in this sense of history helps to retain is the balance between pure prefiguration and pure contingency, acknowledging that “the present encounter reopens past encounters” [88] (p. 53).

One of the gardeners I worked with illustrated the power of encounter in meeting one of the neighbors near the garden who later ended up painting a mural sign for the garden and helping to coordinate a neighborhood block party at the site: “Cesar was really like our first strong neighborhood contact, he was walking his dog, and he kept walking his dog by the lot, and just kind of like stopping and looking at us for long periods of time. So finally we went up to him and talked and he was really interested in the idea and found out that he was an artist and he really wanted to, he had all these ideas for it.” The example of the community gardeners bringing Cesar into their emotional economy of care shows the power of history and repeated emotional and affective encounters. Thinking about how to facilitate and increase encounters seems to be an urgent task for those who wish to foster the growth of becoming-emotional-ecologies and alternative forms of value. While it might seem most productive to seek to foster encounters among similar bodies to encourage their composition, following Ruddick [16], it is important to also work towards encounters across difference (see also [89]). These uncomfortable encounters of difference are what cause us to challenge our ways of thinking and doing in order to spontaneously and creatively respond to different types of human and nonhuman bodies. Specifically, regarding social movements, protests, and activism, Chatterton refers to these encounters of difference as uncommon ground, finding it to be “a site brimming with affect, emotions and ethical interplay” [90] (p. 268) that holds much potential for increasing counter-hegemonic power through the finding of commonalities between previously antagonistic others. Groups involved in local everyday urban environmental stewardship should stretch outside of their comfort zones and facilitate encounters with new spaces, places, and bodies.

The inability to be certain in advance of the outcomes of these encounters along with the instability even after an encounter has taken place [15] necessitates that as many as possible occur so that the maximum amount of progressive results can be achieved. Furthermore, these encounters allow for creativity and spontaneity; in fact, not knowing the outcomes ahead of time necessitates this willingness for a flexible and adaptive politics of urban environmental reproduction. Thus, “it [vitalism] reminds us that our politics of nature must invariably be a kind of active experimentation” [91] (p. 676), and Guattari argues for the need to expand the realm of creative practice “not only is it necessary to not homogenize the various levels of practice—not to join them under the aegis of some transcendent instance; we have also to engage them in processes of heterogenesis” [70] (p. 139, emphasis in original). This creativity and spontaneity of encounters brings us back to the level of everyday life, as Vaneigem [92] and Lefebvre [93] argued for the necessity of creative praxis to transform everyday life, and the spontaneity of everyday encounters is what allows becomings of emotional economies of care to come into being, persist, and grow. Finally, this call for an increase in creative, spontaneous encounters across differences heeds Valentine’s [94] call to not romanticize encounters and their ability to increase the
understanding and acceptance of difference. The example of Cesar becoming interested in the garden in his neighborhood could easily be contrasted with the many others who passed by repeatedly and did not get involved or even interested. Similarly, at one tree pruning event, one resident we encountered angrily told us to leave “her corner”, resisting any explanations for why we were there. Valentine’s research found that encounters can serve to harden prejudices and disdain for others, and care will have to be taken to try to minimize this result of encounters, instead fostering the unsettling and uncomfortable encounters that can lead to a change in emotions and affects.

Once emotional economies of care have been brought into becoming through diverse, everyday encounters, how can we work to increase the possibilities of their persistence and growth? Given the constant shifting and mixing of intensities and flows in multiplicities, this seems to be a Sisyphean task. However, we must also remember that multiplicities and assemblages are flexible enough to allow for some persistence, if not permanence. Taking that into account, there are several possibilities in Spinozan-inspired ontologies that provide hope for the persistence and growth of emotional economies of care. The first of these is his treatment of the philosophical concept of conatus, which can be interpreted as an innate tendency towards self-preservation, or “the tendency of each thing to strive to enhance its capacity to act, its potential” (p. 2593). Recognizing that bodies and multiplicities strive towards preserving themselves helps to understand how some of the contingent emotional economies of care were able to persist despite structural pressures from without, with some of the tree stewardship groups I worked with having been around for almost twenty years despite reductions in funding and the aging of members. The second interpretation, centered around the tendency of bodies (singular and plural) to strive to enhance their capacity to act (their affects) is even more promising. As discussed previously, similar and dissimilar bodies join together in a multiplicity to increase their affects and their capacities to act. In terms of emotional economies of care, individuals join with stewardship groups and enter into becomings with other humans and nonhuman others to multiply the effects (and affects) that they can have on their neighborhoods. Furthermore, it is the desire for the joy that comes with an increase in affects that often drives the persistence and growth in multiplicities. Thus, “the motive for collaboration arises from a desire to reproduce the joy that accompanies our enhanced capacity to act” (p. 30). This joy was evidenced in my fieldwork through the sense of pride and accomplishment after urban environmental stewardship events, along with comments regarding the power of the impact that participation had on the quality of neighborhoods. The intense emotional attachments that participants formed with their neighborhoods, neighbors, and nonhuman others all revolved around joy in one way or another. Joy at increasing urban environmental reproduction in one’s neighborhood and over convivial encounters with one’s human and nonhuman others often served as the driving factor in participation in urban environmental stewardship and emotional economies of care. Finally, hope is an affect along with joy that can lead to the becoming of emotional economies of care, as evidenced by this quote from one of the gardeners: “I started being involved in the garden because I wanted to do something good, I wanted to help people, to show people that there’s hope.”

5. Conclusions

Recent increases in engagement with key urban political ecology questions of power and identity provide exciting opportunities to expand and enrich the field. However, these opportunities have been unfortunately constrained due to a limiting focus upon overly deterministic applications of environmentality and neoliberal natures, failing to provide agency for urban environmental actors and positive conceptions of power. This article offers emotional economies of care as an alternative explanation for everyday local urban environmental volunteer stewardship in Philadelphia.

Research found that participants volunteered because they cared about their neighborhoods, their neighbors, and nonhuman others; the emotional economies of care that they
participated in lead to two major interventions in the field of urban political ecology. First, understanding emotional economies of care as circulating emotions and affects between and within multiplicities provides an alternative form of value for urban environmental reproduction than that of the market. I suggest potential ways to foster emotional economies of care as multiplicities, namely: through the multiplication of diverse, creative, and spontaneous encounters, the desire to increase the joy found in the increased affects of multiplicities, and finally, the sense of hope provided by the presence of multiplicities. Second, recognizing that the becoming of multiplicities increases their power to act can provide an alternative to the hegemonic theorizations of power as disciplinary and negative in neoliberal environmentality approaches to urban environmental reproduction. These alternate styles of power are similar to Spinoza’s potestas, or the power to “dominate, or to separate something from what it can do, from its capacity to act in its own interest” [77] (p. 2589), and potencia “translated roughly as empowerment, the impulse to increase our power to act” [77] (p. 2589). Recognizing the copresence of potestas and potencia in volunteer urban environmental stewardship allows for creative, joyful, and inventive struggles to tilt the balance more towards potencia, to refuse potestas, and to reproduce urban environments that more suit our collective hopes and dreams.

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