

## **Co-opting Restoration: Gender, Voluntarism, and Insurgency in Philadelphia**

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### **Introduction**

Between 1998 and 2003, residents of the predominantly African American neighborhood of Cobbs Creek in west Philadelphia demonstrated a significant and sustained degree of civic environmentalism, volunteering their time and labor towards the restoration of a local park’s natural environment in unprecedented numbers and with a degree of commitment comparable to or exceeding simultaneous efforts occurring around the rest of the city’s Fairmount Park System, of which Cobbs Creek Park is constituent. Local initiative in Cobbs Creek is, at first glance, unremarkable, especially when we consider 1) the rapid growth of the voluntary sector under advanced liberalism, especially in the area of urban service provision (Wolch 1990; Fyfe and Milligan 2003), and 2) recent research suggesting comparable degrees of environmental activism, awareness, and concern among blacks and whites in the U.S. (Jones and Carter 1994; Mohai and Bryant 1998). In fact, the current popularity of ecological restoration itself, both as environmental practice and urban policy, is arguably due to its embrace of a civic philosophy, exemplified by its shown ability to assemble and nurture an often intensely dedicated pool of voluntary “eco-stewards” (Jordan 1994; Miles et al. 1998).

Upon closer inspection, however, there is actually very little to suggest the level of effort and commitment to nature restoration demonstrated by Cobbs Creek locals; in fact, quite the opposite. First, the residents of Cobbs Creek had, for years, demonstrated little collective activism or organized interest in park matters, generally, much less in questions or issues pertaining to the park's nature or ecology. Indeed, for the better part of two decades, the park had been altogether abandoned by the community and for many represented little else but a place of anxiety and fear (Brownlow 2006a). Second, the residents of Cobbs Creek had long decried the Fairmount Park Commission as among the more racist and unjust of Philadelphia's governing institutions, accusing it of systematically underfunding and redirecting resources from parks in black neighborhoods towards those in the city's whiter and wealthier north (cf. Koehler and Wrightson 1987; Wolch et al. 2005; Heynen et al. 2006a). Among many, the commission's – and by extension the city's – sudden interest in and plans for nature restoration in Cobbs Creek Park in the mid-1990s were at best met with antipathy and suspicion. Why, they wondered, after decades of neglect was Cobbs Creek Park receiving political attention? Why now? And why, further, as an object requiring the restoration of some obscure and uncertain “nature” rather than as a park requiring other, long neglected, more socially tangible upgrades, services, and care? Third, and closely related, is the fact that the residents of Cobbs Creek were neither consulted nor invited to participate in the restoration planning process which instead occurred in the distant offices of the Fairmount Park Commission and its partners. Rather, local participation was planned into the restoration process *ex post facto* and in only the most apolitical and corporeal of ways – as unpaid, unskilled, voluntary labor, thus rendering any authoritative claims of local

empowerment or collaborative partnership as little more than empty, if deceitful, rhetoric (cf. Atkinson 1999; McInroy 2000).

And yet, volunteer they did, both in impressive numbers and with a significant, even startling, degree of commitment and initiative. This paper begins to explain this apparent inconsistency. I approach voluntarism in Cobbs Creek, in general, as an historically informed and spatially contingent expression of political protest. In particular, I focus upon the surprising response to volunteer by local adult women, who were both well represented among the ranks of female restoration volunteers and among whom several occupied *de facto* leadership roles. Informed by feminist analyses of women's spatial appropriation and politics of place in the global city (e.g., Lind 1997; Wekerle 1999; Harcourt and Escobar 2005), I argue that, for the women of Cobbs Creek, the motivations to volunteer are political and intensely personal, derived from histories of racial discrimination and political neglect and from place-based experiences with sexual violence. First, women's voluntarism in park-based restoration presents an otherwise rare opportunity for safe passage into a public space of historical significance in the everyday politics and practices of social reproduction – and a place from which they and others in the community (especially children) have long been excluded. In the process, voluntarism creates a legitimate political space from which local women can rightfully claim their rights to the city and to citizenship and from which they can expose the gendered and racial injustices of past neglect and challenge the injustices of contemporary urban policy. From this, women's voluntarism in Cobbs Creek Park is an instrument of place-based identity politics and political activism that “jumps scale” to critique local injustice as a product of regional, national, and global processes (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

Second, restoration itself presents to local women the opportunity to, individually and collectively, respond to, invalidate, and perhaps reverse environmental changes marked as patriarchal and exclusionary and to re-create a local landscape that is inclusive of and accessible to women, children, and the everyday rights and relationships of social reproduction. To this end, the paper introduces feminist analysis to an emerging urban political ecology (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Heynen et al. 2006b; see Rocheleau et al. 1996).

The paper has several aims. First, I hope to expand upon current debates on the political meaning and implications of voluntarism and its widespread growth as an instrument of urban service provision at the turn of the twenty-first century, and to suggest that dominant representations of voluntarism as either “empowered participation” (Fagotto and Fung 2006) or as the latest instrument state regulation and hegemony (Kearns 1992; Raco and Imrie 2000) are incomplete insofar as they 1) respectively embrace and critique voluntarism (and, by extension, civil society and citizenship) using the term’s most normative interpretation as it has been shaped within the larger narrative of neoliberalism, and 2) fail to explore the possibilities for co-optation by groups with alternative political goals and agendas (Jones 2003; see also Mayer 1995).<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, I turn to the compatible notions of “insurgent citizenship” (Holston 1999) and performance (Houston and Pulido 2002; Gilbert and Phillips 2003) as especially powerful and meaningful concepts to account for the practices and spaces that are available to (and often created by) subaltern groups to disturb established representations of society and disrupt normative qualifications of citizenship in their efforts to claim political rights and (re)appropriate political space (see Young 1990).<sup>2</sup> They are fitting tropes to describe

women's co-optation of restoration and its voluntary activity as a gendered and race-based means of political expression and activism (Wekerle 1999).

Second, I similarly hope to expand upon recent claims of discursive Nature's re-emergence and re-signification in urban policy and planning as a means for capital accumulation, eco-gentrification, and/or social regulation (Keil and Graham 1999; Whitehead 2003; While et al. 2004). While these are powerful and undoubtedly legitimate arguments indicating the ever-widening narratives and ever-encompassing geographies of urban revitalization and competitiveness, there is as yet little-to-no attempt to conceptualize or identify how the top-down discourse of Nature may be subverted and co-opted by subaltern groups in their efforts to achieve local goals of political inclusion and access, rather than simply a narrative to be struggled against (Desfor and Keil 2004). This is perhaps nowhere more the case than in urban parks, whose hybrid identities as urban nature and public, political space make them especially prone to contestation and co-optation. Insofar as it continues to depend on a volunteer labor force, restoration, as I show in this paper, offers just such an opportunity for subaltern political activity. Again, I turn to insurgency and performance as especially relevant and meaningful expressions of political agency in urban landscapes whose discursive identities and governance structures are increasingly mobilized to meet the economic conditions and demands of globalization and entrepreneurial urban restructuring (Harvey 1989; Hubbard and Hall 1996; Desfor and Keil 2004).

Finally, this paper is an attempt to reveal landscape restoration as an inherently political project; one (following from above) with both exclusive tendencies and inclusive potential. This is especially so in urban areas, where top-down narratives of

Nature collide with bottom-up narratives of public, political space to produce a landscape and a land management policy rife with the potential for conflict, cooperation, and/or co-optation. To this end, I argue, the motivations and benefits of voluntarism go well beyond the rather simplistic and apolitical explanations of “eco-stewardship” and “re-connecting to nature” posited by many within the restoration field (Jordan 1994; Miles et al. 1998; Schroeder 2000). More than this, restoration offers opportunities for political expression and insertion (back) into the political process, the (re)appropriation of political space, and a venue from which expose and protest environmental and social injustice.

The paper begins with brief introductions to voluntarism and participation, as these notions are interpreted and conceptualized within the larger narrative of neoliberalism and state decline. I discuss the various debates over voluntarism’s (and, by extension, civil society’s) meaning and function, as either an instrument of local empowerment or of state authority, and introduce the concepts of insurgency and performance as each assists in clarifying voluntary activity as a political, historically and geographically contingent activity. The next section introduces the west Philadelphia case study and analyzes and discusses voluntary activity in Cobbs Creek Park using these concepts. The paper ends with some closing thoughts.

### **Voluntarism: Performance and Insurgency**

Urban economic restructuring and the institutionalization of neoliberal economic and political reforms have ushered in a new era of civil society; social services whose provision and distribution were once the domain of the state are increasingly re-framed as outside the responsibility of government and re-located, or devolved, to a rapidly growing

sector of volunteer organizations, non-profits, and religious institutions. Today, the discursive and political turn to civil society and governance (vs. government) is reflected in the now normative narratives of voluntarism, participation, and local knowledge that permeate western political discourse. As Wolch (1990) suggests, the growth of the voluntary sector, in particular, has been embraced both by the political left and the political right. For the political right, the widespread move to voluntarism in western society represents a long overdue move away from the welfare model of an inefficient and bureaucratic government apparatus. It represents on both sides of the Atlantic the ideological and discursive success of small government and local responsibility ushered in during the Reagan and Thatcher administrations of the 1980s and honed and made more socially appealing during the Clinton and Blair administrations of the 1990s (Raco and Imrie 2000). Alternatively, among the political left, the move to civil society and voluntarism represents opportunities for local capacity building and empowerment; an almost utopian model of deliberative democracy structured around community-based governance and decision-making that are informed by and representative of local knowledge and experience (e.g., Fagotto and Fung 2006).

Left and right interpretations of voluntarism and civil society are not mutually exclusive. Their general overlap and broad approval in political discourse has expedited their establishment as normative instruments of local governance and, by extension, citizenship, whereby the “good” (or “active”) citizen picks up where the state no longer functions and donates his or her time, labor, skills, and knowledge to the betterment of a just and democratic society. In short, the discourse of civil society and its affiliates (citizenship, voluntarism and participation) has become political hegemony. This has

raised flags among many social theorists who doubt seriously the unproblematic, benign release of state power and authority to fragmented, diverse, and perhaps oppositional local interests. Rather, to use Wolch's (1990) expression, the voluntary sector takes on the role of a "shadow state", whereby the state – through a variety of institutions and devices – retains discursive control over rhetorically "independent" local voluntary activities as a means of controlling any potential for political opposition and ensuring its own reproduction. This can be assured through intrusive devices like public-private partnerships, state control of competitive state funding and resources, etc. Political economic assessments of civil society have, in particular, adopted this angle of critique (Harvey 1996; Atkinson 1999). A more radical assessment is offered by Raco and Imrie (2000), whose Foucauldian analysis posits that the successful transition in political discourse to active (i.e., responsible) citizenship has involved the widespread creation of new subjectivities of self-governance and self-regulation that are not ideologically dissimilar to the goals and objectives of the state. Here, the devolution of state responsibility to the local scale, discursively reframed by the state as necessary for "active citizenship" and "deliberative democracy" creates the conditions of its own reproduction; the state regulates social relations by "allowing" society to regulate themselves.

There remains, however, the still powerful and popular argument from the left that the ceding of decision-making and action by the state to the local level presents opportunities for local empowerment and capacity building (cf. Young 1990). While Marxist and poststructural critiques have successfully cast suspicion upon such claims, there is growing skepticism about their dismissal or neglect of political agency and the

possibility of political co-optation. For instance, Jones (2003) and Mayer (1995) – while raising their own doubts on civil society’s supposed independence – are nonetheless critical of growing calls among the radical left to abandon participatory discourse insofar as it is corrupted by state influence (e.g., Rose and Miller 1992; Raco and Imrie 2000). For both, this amounts to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Rather, they take a pragmatic approach to the issue, advocating the significance of participation for a subaltern oppositional politics. For them, sweeping claims of the state’s regulation of civil society should be considered along with, instead of to the neglect of, the vulnerability of civil society to co-optation and the agency of “active citizens” to challenge advanced liberalism from within.

From this, I now turn briefly to Holston’s (1999) notion of insurgency and “insurgent citizenship” as an appropriate expression of subaltern co-optation and struggle. For Holston, the “spaces of insurgent citizenship” are defined as those identities, opportunities, and activities from which subaltern groups can disrupt and challenge normative, ideological, and exclusionary accounts of society and citizenship (Young 1990). Holston (1999) intended his concept of insurgency for an increasingly diverse, fractured, politically and economically marginalized urban immigrant population. As Wekerle (1999) demonstrates in her analysis of gender planning in Toronto, however, “insurgent citizenship” is an unrestricted and adaptable concept, one that can be applied to other groups on the social and political margins, especially women. She uses the idea of insurgency to describe how and where the counter claims and oppositional politics of women in Toronto are being inserted into otherwise patriarchal planning institutions and

policies. Indeed, insurgency distinguishes feminist activism against the injustices of patriarchy and economic restructuring in cities globally (Rabrenovic 1995; Lind 1997).

Insurgency is closely aligned to the notion of performance. Houston and Pulido (2002:403) define performance as a form of “embodied revolutionary praxis”, one that is “enacted in specific historical and geographical contexts ... to expose the dynamics of power and exploitation.” Performance, they continue, “operates simultaneously as a space of possibility and becoming, and as a mechanism for working through existing social contradictions [and injustices] by making them visible,” (406). Here, the identity of the performer combines with the place of performance towards the production and representation of a robust politics of place. As I argue below, black women’s performance (in the form of voluntarism) in Cobbs Creek Park provides them the space from which to make political claims and challenge past and present injustices; it also makes visible black women’s decades-long absence from the park. Voluntarism in Cobbs Creek Park is political performance insofar as it reinscribes public space with black women in it. Performance not only facilitates political expression, but is itself a form of identity politics. It is, according to Gilbert and Phillips (2003), an insurgent means to citizenship among the politically marginal – or, what they call “performative citizenship”. As I argue in this paper, performance is not inherently spectacular (e.g., marches, protests, and demonstrations); it can infiltrate more mundane, everyday practices and activities – like volunteering (see Hobson 2006). Used in this way, voluntarism can be co-opted as an everyday mechanism of resistance (Scott 1990; see Houston and Pulido 2002).

## **Cobbs Creek**

Cobbs Creek is the largest neighborhood in west Philadelphia (Fig. 1). Its current history dates to the middle of the last century, when working and middle-class whites fled upon the arrival into west Philadelphia of blacks escaping the ghettos in the city's north and south. In 1950 a majority white neighborhood, Cobbs Creek was almost entirely black by 1970. By then, the conditions of segregation and economic and political neglect were gaining a grip upon what, initially, had been a prosperous and politically powerful middle and upper middle class neighborhood. Today, Cobbs Creek is dominated by social indicators of political neglect and economic impoverishment, including high rates of unemployment (especially among working age males), abandoned housing, and families living in poverty. Violent crime is on the rise. Between 1995 and 2003, rape in Cobbs Creek grew by an annual rate of 11%, a pace 1.5 times that of the rest of the City. During this same period, murder in Cobbs Creek grew at an annual rate of over 4% while the rest of Philadelphia experienced an average annual decline of 6.4%. The local Cobbs Creek Park has been gripped by violence for nearly three decades. Over two-dozen men and women have been murdered or discovered dead in the park since 1980, including an especially horrifying period in the 1990s involving mutilation and burning. Rape and sexual violence are not uncommon. The subsequent abandonment of the park by many locals, especially women and children, was pervasive by the late 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

Cobbs Creek Park is an 800-acre stretch of urban forest following the contours of the neighborhood's (and the city's) western boundary. It is one of seven watershed parks that comprise Philadelphia's Fairmount Park System (Fig. 2). As the neighborhood's largest and most widely recognized public space, Cobbs Creek Park played a critical role

in the growing black community's early social and political development, providing space and opportunity for *ad hoc* leisure and social interaction among generally middle and upper-middle class strangers arriving in the west from the city's northern and southern ghettos. Among women, children, and the elderly, in particular, Cobbs Creek Park was a place for community development and exchange and social reproduction; further, it represented a safe place to avoid the growing tensions and conflicts on "the street" in the 1960s and early 1970s. To many, Cobbs Creek Park was a resource and a haven whose likes had been unavailable in the ghettos of Philadelphia's north and south. The park was also the site of local and regional black political activism and activity, both progressive and radical; from peaceful civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s, to more radical and often less benign gatherings and activities by the local chapter of the Black Panthers in the 1970s and MOVE in the 1980s, the park occupies a symbolic position in the community's and the city's black political history.

The politics of park decline and environmental change in Cobbs Creek is complex, a product of social relations and urban economic change that gripped all of Philadelphia and the urban industrial north during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Brownlow 2006a). Nonetheless, among the residents of Cobbs Creek, responsibility for park decline – like neighborhood decline, in general – is placed squarely at the steps of the city government and its affiliated institutions, especially – in this case – the Fairmount Park Commission. Among Cobbs Creek residents there is widespread consensus that their park, like others in the city's black neighborhoods, has suffered from decades of unjust, racially motivated practices and policies, *de jure* and *de facto*, of neglect and resource redistribution, whereby Fairmount Park's dwindling resources are

parlayed into those parks and park-owned properties seen and used by whiter and wealthier communities in the city's north and, significantly, by the city's growing population of tourists and young, gentrifying residents in the bustling Center City area (Brownlow 2006a).<sup>4</sup> By the mid-1990s, this thirty-year dialectic of political neglect, park decline, and local abandonment culminated in Cobbs Creek Park's reputation as the most unused, polluted, dangerous, foreboding, and ecologically bereft park in the 8900 acre Fairmount Park System. As I have reported elsewhere (Brownlow 2006a,b), in Cobbs Creek, widespread ecological change – especially the unmanaged, uncontrolled growth of weedy, invasive species like kudzu, grape, and Oriental bittersweet (Fig. 3) – is a daily reminder of discriminatory park politics. Among many local women, the interpretation of and response to these changes in the landscape are especially pronounced; to them, the uncontrolled growth of kudzu – as much as abandoned cars, trash piles, graffiti, drug paraphernalia, and decaying infrastructure – represents not just the desertion of Cobbs Creek by park and city officials but, significantly, a complete absence of park-based social control. For women, local ecological change amplified feelings of park-related fear, provided further justification for self-exile, and thus reproduced resentment about their marginal position. In short, to the women of Cobbs Creek, local ecological change is patriarchal through and through, representing, on the one hand, decades on the periphery of white Philadelphia's political and economic consciousness and, on the other, a pervasive and exclusionary fear of male sexual violence locally, both for themselves and their children.

When the restorationists arrived in Cobbs Creek in the mid-1990s, fresh-faced, optimistic, and equipped with their own plan for park improvement and local

participation, it was from this historically and geographically informed stage that they were welcomed.

### **Restoration**

Park relief arrived in 1996 when, in commemoration of its centennial anniversary, the philanthropic William Penn Foundation (WPF) granted the Fairmount Park Commission (FPC) \$26.6 million for the express purposes of ecological restoration and environmental education throughout the systems watersheds (see Goldenberg 1999). It was, and remains, the largest award of its kind ever granted for urban park renewal. Ostensibly a project for the benefit urban ecological systems and the appreciation of urban nature, the significance of park restoration to Philadelphia's struggling economy quickly became apparent, at times overshadowing any ecological imperatives it may originally have entertained.

The WPF is Philadelphia's and the Delaware Valley Region's most ardent philanthropic booster, contributing millions of dollars annually to projects and organizations involved in efforts of economic revitalization and urban competitiveness. To this end, the WPF is an instrumental institution to the politics and processes of place-making in Philadelphia, funding and investing in projects aimed at attracting inward investment, tourist dollars, and full-time residents back into the city.<sup>5</sup> It is, then, unsurprising that the WPF should turn their attention to Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, one of the oldest park systems in the U.S. urban history and among the largest municipal park systems in the world. Indeed, the growing demand for quality of life factors by a discriminating and increasingly mobile public is arguably the driving force behind the

current urban park “renaissance” in North America and Europe (see Harding 1999; Harnik 2000; Thompson 2002; Pincetl and Gearin 2005; also Keil and Graham 1998).

Following the award to the FPC, there was assembled a public-private partnership to initiate, implement, organize, oversee, and administer restoration throughout the park’s 8900 acres of greenspace. The three-volume Restoration Master Plan was developed by the research arm of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences; the project was administered by the newly established Natural Lands Restoration and Environmental Education Program (NLREEP), a quasi-independent agency funded by the Penn grant, attached to, housed within, and beholden to the Fairmount Park Commission. As NLREEP’s Director, the WPF lured away from her powerful position as Program Director at the Center City District (Philadelphia’s largest, most prosperous, and most powerful business improvement district) one the city’s most passionate boosters and creative visionaries. The labor intensive task of restoration, involving primarily the removal of non-native, invasive plant species and their replacement with native vegetation, would be the job of a volunteer labor force derived from park-specific communities, community organizations, churches, schools, and, where they existed, *in situ* park-related advocacy groups.<sup>6</sup> Volunteer activities, solicitation, and organization were administered by full-time NLREEP Volunteer Coordinators. So as to avoid the kind of resentment and claims of discrimination from the city’s black community that plagued the FPC, it was decided by NLREEP early on that Cobbs Creek would be the first community approached and that Cobbs Creek Park would be the first restored.

## Voluntarism in Cobbs Creek

This section explores the dynamics and demographics of voluntarism in Cobbs Creek Park's restoration using data gathered by NLREEP between 1998 and 2003. For purposes of demonstration, data from Cobbs Creek is presented with comparable data from the park system's three principle remaining watersheds: Wissahickon (in the city's northwest); Pennypack (in the city's northeast); and Tacony (in the city's north-central) (Fig. 2). Combined, these four parks constitute almost half of the Fairmount Park System's land holdings. The parks vary considerably in size, with Wissahickon and Pennypack Parks each larger than Cobbs Creek and Tacony combined. Because of their situation in the city's landscape and their place in the city's history, the parks are also distinguished by different constituencies and local politics. Wissahickon Park (or, the Wissahickon) is the oldest protected watershed in Philadelphia and is considered by many the flagship of the entire Fairmount Park System. Adjacent to it are some of the wealthiest and most powerful neighborhoods in the city (Chestnut Hill, East Falls, Mount Airy) and, for over a century, it has enjoyed the advocacy and resources of the influential Chestnut Hill-based *Friends of the Wissahickon*. By contrast, Tacony is surrounded by a rapidly changing, increasingly ethnically and racially diverse working and middle-class population in the city's north, while Pennypack's constituency is almost entirely white working and middle-class. These local, place-based constituencies overwhelmingly constituted the ranks of restoration volunteers in their respective parks.

The degree of, or commitment to, voluntarism is demonstrated in **Table 1. I**

**Table 1.** Fairmount Park Restoration Volunteer Statistics (1998-2003)

	Acres	Events	Vols	Vol Hrs	Hr/Vol	Vol/Evt	V Hr/Evt	Evt/Acre	Vol/Acre	V Hr/Acre
Cobbs Creek	787	466	10656	37113	3.48	22.87	79.64	0.6	13.54	47.16
Wissahickon	1694	1032	16184	30440	1.88	15.68	29.50	0.6	9.55	17.97
Pennypack	1587	284	5643	14504	2.57	19.87	51.07	0.2	3.56	9.14
Tacony	255	199	4336	10581	2.44	21.79	53.17	0.8	17.00	41.49

define “commitment” as those indicators of initiative emerging from within the volunteer labor pool itself (e.g., number of volunteers per event, volunteer hours, etc.) rather than those outside of local control (e.g., number of restoration events). As Table 1 indicates, relative to elsewhere in the Fairmount Park System, the volunteers in Cobbs Creek demonstrated considerable commitment to local restoration. Despite having access to a fraction of the voluntary opportunities made available to the Wissahickon constituency (a statistic perhaps explained by differences in park size, as identified in the comparable number of events per park acre), the residents of Cobbs Creek demonstrated considerably greater participation in the opportunities that were made available to them. For instance, restoration events in Cobbs Creek attracted more volunteers on average (almost 23) than any other park (although Tacony runs a close second at 21). For any given event Cobbs Creek volunteers dedicated, on average, nearly twice as much time *per capita* to restoration (3.5 hours) than did the Wissahickon volunteers (1.9 hours). Similarly, the number of volunteer hours (a collective rather than *per capita* statistic) dedicated to each restoration event was higher by a considerable margin in Cobbs Creek (79.6) than anywhere else in the Fairmount Park System. Cobbs Creek also led all parks in volunteer hours per park acre (47) and was second only to Tacony in the number of volunteers per

park acre. In short, although these statistics do not indicate the quality of work performed, they nonetheless suggest a sustained and – relative to elsewhere in the Fairmount Park System – notable commitment among Cobbs Creek’s volunteers.

Demographically, women were poorly represented among the ranks of volunteers in Cobbs Creek relative to Tacony, Pennypack, and the Wissahickon, constituting less than one-quarter (23.8%) of the local volunteer population. By contrast, women’s participation was nearly twice as great throughout the rest of the Fairmount Park System, averaging 41.5% in the remaining three watersheds, with a high in Tacony of nearly 47% (Fig. 4). This statistic can be partially explained by: 1) the nearly 30-year alienation of local women from and their continued fear of Cobbs Creek Park; 2) ambivalence towards Cobbs Creek Park by the local community, especially among the younger population (i.e., 30 years and under); 3) relatively under-developed and politically weak institutions of park-based support and advocacy;<sup>7</sup> and 4) local hostility and distrust towards the FPC, especially among women. However, among those women who did participate in the park’s restoration, other interesting patterns appear. Foremost among these is the representation of women 40 years and older who constituted nearly one-third (32%) of all female volunteers in Cobbs Creek between 1998 and 2003. By contrast, in the remaining three watersheds, this age group represented, on average, only 19%. Several were over the age of seventy. The average age of female volunteers in Cobbs Creek was 32 years. In the Wissahickon, Pennypack, and Tacony the average female volunteer was 23.5 years old. Further, a handful of older women were *de facto* leaders in the Cobbs Creek project, marshalling local support and enthusiasm for restoration, summoning and assembling volunteers for NLREEP-organized restoration activities in a way and to a degree the

NLREEP staff were unable to. Of note, these women, all in their sixties or seventies, were among Cobbs Creek's original African American pioneers and, on average, had lived in the neighborhood for 37 years. Individually and collectively, they were a font of local knowledge and lived experience. They, like few others, knew the history and potential of the park as a viable and vibrant public, political space: one that was critical to the community's embryonic formation and identity in the 1950s and 1960s; one with profound symbolic significance to the politics of racial protest in the 1960s and 1970s; one of historical significance to women's public sphere participation; and, of course, one whose decline and subsequent estrangement from the local community has had profound social impacts, especially for women and children.

These women were, I suggest, the heart of voluntarism in Cobbs Creek. Their résumés suggest their political motivations in the park's restoration and in community participation. For example, one is the daughter of a late leader of the local NAACP chapter and was married to one of Philadelphia's most prominent black political activists of the civil rights era. She is the founder of Cobbs Creek's first and only environmental center, an organization whose primary mission – while ostensibly environmental (and thus eligible for a certain amount of financial support from the FPC) – is the reintroduction of local youth to Cobbs Creek Park. Another is the mother of a child murdered along the park's periphery upon whose death she reclaimed an in-park building that had been abandoned by the city, developing it into a recreation and cultural center for local youth. A third, now deceased, single-handedly brought ice-skating to the park in the early 1990s in what is consensually agreed upon as the first attempt to reclaim the park for local use and local youth.<sup>8</sup>

When considered in combination with the relatively impressive voluntary turnout by adult women – many of whom were children during the park’s heyday in the 1950s and 1960s – the picture that appears is of first, an insurgent women’s “movement” (however unorganized) whose intent is the (re)appropriation of public space via performative (re)occupation (cf. Wekerle 2005) and second, a mother’s “movement” aimed at wresting the park away from criminal activity and reintroducing it to local youth whose experience with it is, at best, minimal and fearful, among boys and girls alike (Brownlow 2005; see Rabrenovic 1995). Both represent, I argue, an attempt by local women to reclaim political space from its current patriarchal form. Through their voluntary labor and in-place presence, local black women expose and challenge the park’s patriarchal hegemony – as a landscape marked by white political neglect and male sexual violence – and create a feminized politics of place that goes beyond inclusiveness to ascertain rights to the city and to citizenship for local women and local youth, alike. Among land management practices, restoration – despite its normative ecological ambitions and ideological vulnerabilities (i.e., as an exclusionary discourse) – is unique in its permissiveness of (or, at least, its vulnerability to) insurgent subaltern co-optation. Through its philosophical and pragmatic embrace of voluntarism, restoration opens itself up to groups on the political margins as an opportunity for the politics of identity and place. Restoration drew local black women, literally, back into a political space from which they had long been alienated and from which they then could make claims of ownership and rights of access, for both themselves, their children, and their community; voluntarism provided them the performative vehicle from which these claims could be publicized and made legitimate.

## **Conclusion**

Women's social movements, Wekerle (1999, 2005) notes, are at the political fore in challenging the everyday injustices and the decline of everyday life that have accompanied the growing hegemony of neoliberalism and urban economic restructuring in North America (see also Rabrenovic 1995). Lind (1997) argues similarly about women's social movements in developing world cities. Yet their focus on the everyday has resulted in the relative obscurity of women's social movements in urban social theoretical scholarship. As Wekerle suggests, there is little concern for the decline of everyday life and, by implication, women's political space within current metanarratives of neoliberal urbanism and globalization (2005:87; Harcourt and Escobar 2005). To the extent that this, in fact, is the case, and insofar as the "everyday" is a complex and dynamic fabric of identities, spaces, and social relations, women's urban social movements remain poorly understood and infinitely diverse in both form and structure. Globalization suggests that this complexity and diversity will only continue to grow. In this paper, I have adopted these premises to help account for civic environmentalism among Philadelphia's most marginalized constituency. I have argued that, on the one hand, voluntarism in the public sphere provides local women opportunities for insurgent and performative claims to citizenship, and to the rights to the city and to nature both for themselves and for local youth (see Gilbert and Phillips 2003). It is, so to speak, an effort to "take back the park", similar in aims, if not in structure, to the performative anti-violence "take back the night" movements seen on city streets. On the other hand, I have suggested that, among urban land management options, restoration is socially and

politically distinct, offering to local women the opportunity to repair or reverse landscape level changes marked as patriarchal and exclusionary. Voluntarism, like its affiliates (e.g., participation, civil society, and citizenship) is vulnerable to political co-optation, both from above and from below. While the former – co-optation from above, or by the state – has received generous (and legitimate) scholarly attention and is a significant component of a theoretically sound, robust critique of neoliberal state authority, the latter, co-optation from below, has remained relatively obscure. That this should continue to be the case, especially in global cities whose populations and politics are increasingly fragmented and diverse, is surprising to say the least. But it also offers ample, almost infinite, opportunity – suggested by Jones (2003) and Mayer (1995) – for scholarship and discovery, especially as the voluntary sector’s reach continues to broaden, diversify, and move ever deeper into the city’s social fabric. As Wolch’s (1990) shadow state becomes ever more complex, so do the opportunities for its infiltration and co-optation. Finally, insofar as the voluntary sector’s historical feminization (i.e., a patriarchal construction of voluntarism as the normative domain of women) retains any material form or is at all a viable and apt description of the sector today, voluntarism then appears – perhaps more so than ever before – to offer an increasingly diverse population of urban women an especially powerful and spatially pervasive means of political expression, opposition, and struggle for the rights of citizenship.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent research in environmental psychology and environmental sociology that profiles the “average” restoration volunteer as motivated by little else than a desire to reconnect with nature and take on the role of eco-steward is, I argue, grossly apolitical and simplistic (Jordan 1994; Miles et al., 1998; Schroeder 2000). Further critique will not be offered in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Using this definition, Holston’s “insurgent space” or “spaces of insurgency” (1990:37) is very much akin to Lefebvre’s (1990) “representational space”.

<sup>3</sup> Feminist scholarship consistently and correctly decries the repeated misrepresentation of public space and stranger attack as the site of women’s risk (Valentine 1989; Pain 1997, 2001). I take this critique seriously and have commented on it elsewhere (Brownlow 2005, 2006a). My focus on public space is in no way intended to reproduce the misrepresentation of sexual violence as primarily a crime of the public sphere.

<sup>4</sup> Center City is the only neighborhood in Philadelphia experiencing population growth.

<sup>5</sup> Since 1960, Philadelphia’s population has declined by nearly 25%. The loss of population to the surrounding suburbs has been disproportionately white. According to the 2000 census, whites were in the city’s minority for the first time in the city’s history.

<sup>6</sup> There are currently over 100 park-related “Friends” organizations, most devoted to the protection and stewardship of a certain portion of the Fairmount Park System or to the protection of certain rights within the park, e.g., bicycling and horse-back riding.

<sup>7</sup> By contrast, Wissahickon, Tacony, and Pennypack Parks each enjoy the support and advocacy of organized Friends groups.

<sup>8</sup> Guffawed by city politicians and park commissioners as an activity that would attract few blacks, the Cobbs Creek ice skating rink has produced several junior Olympians and many city, regional, and state ice skating champions.