



Not-So-Common-Ground: Critiquing “Multicultural” Environmentalism in Seattle Urban Gardening

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The Beacon Hill Neighborhood

Beacon Hill is a neighborhood located in the Rainier Valley area of southeast Seattle. Predominately white until the mid-1900s, the neighborhood – adjacent to the city’s International District – is now home to an Asian majority, with a population just over 50%. Yet, the area remains rather mixed, with 20% white, 13% black, 9% Hispanic/Latino, and 7% other residents.³ The neighborhood is considered one of the most diverse districts in the city.



“The Beacon Food Forest recognizes diversity as the definition and essence of a healthy ecosystem and a healthy human community.”¹

Thesis

There exists a disconnect between the ways in which environmental organizations talk about diversity in the abstract and the means of engaging with diverse communities. With my thesis, I explore these internal narratives of inclusion that stands in anxious opposition to claims of institutionalized racism, and how the “multiculturalism” of a community can serve as a proxy for inter-organizational diversity. I demonstrate that such practices are not only the result of inefficient social organizing, but likewise speak to history of racial exclusion inherent in mainstream environmentalism, considering how such trends reflect the contemporary broader “diversity crisis”² within the United States.

The Beacon Food Forest

- 2009: Original idea for food forest developed; location of the project selected, a 7-acre plot of Beacon Hill’s Jefferson Park; form the overseeing group, Friends of the Food Forest
- February 2010: Organization holds public meeting
- December 2010: Receive \$22,000 grant from the Department of Neighbors P-Patch program; continued community outreach
- 2011: Design blueprint for forest
- 2011-2013: Receive over \$100,000 dollars in grants; begin hardscaping
- 2014: Complete first phase of project; sign memorandum of agreement with P-Patch and Seattle Public Utilities

Methodology

Content Analysis: I gathered a collection of written material, ranging from the organization’s grant proposals and meeting notes, to press releases. Reading through these pieces, I noted the trends in rhetoric as it related to the project and the “diversity” of the surrounding neighborhood.

Interviews: The interviews consisted of a formal interview with a member of the steering committee and the original designer of the project, Glenn Hurley, as well as an informal conversation with a member of the outreach committee.

Participant Observation: I attended several of the organization’s Saturday work parties, along with a steering committee meeting.

Surveys: Finally, I sent out a series of surveys to the volunteer base of the organization.

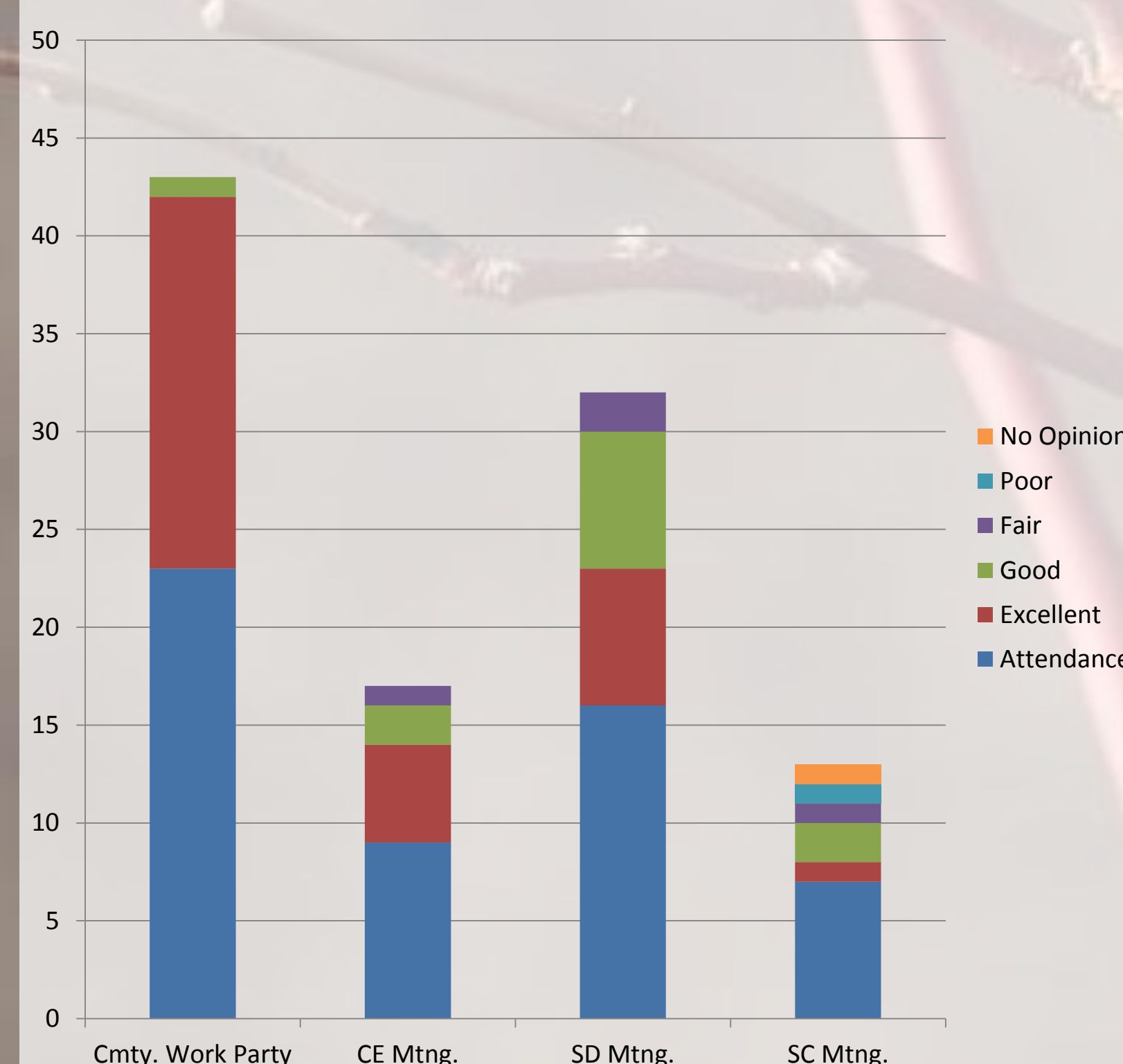
Left: Ladies footrace at the annual Japanese-American picnic, 1920. Seattle was, and continues to be, a major gateway for immigrants entering the U.S.



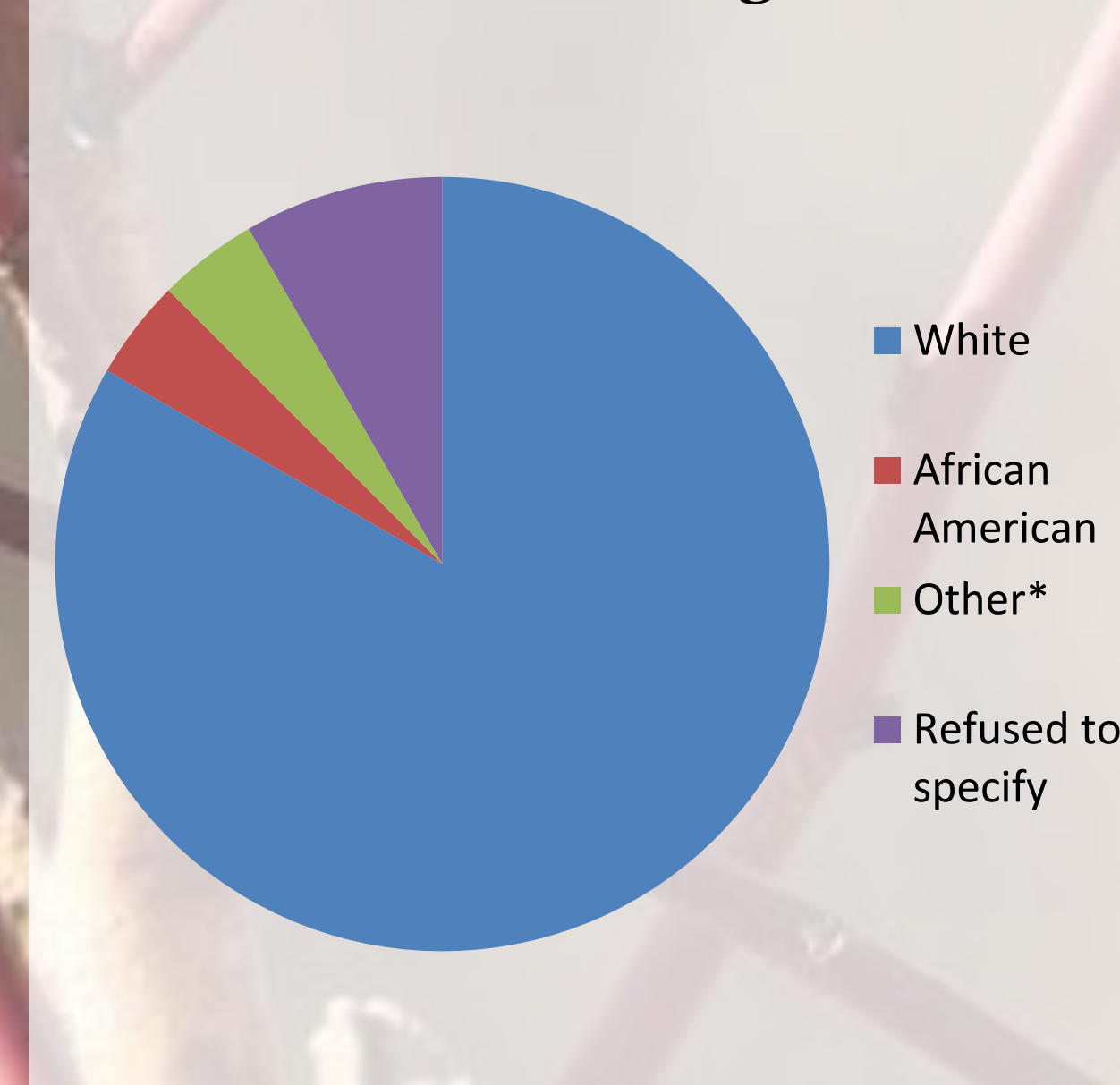
The Road Ahead

Proximity to diversity does not signify internal group diversity. What’s more, diversity and multiculturalism have become value-added concepts. As the case of the Beacon Food Forest suggests, environmental organizations are in danger of lapsing into patterns of exclusion that propel the misapplication of these concepts. It is evident then that community outreach must move away from the representational model of engagement, to a model focused on strengthening relationships. The conversation must grow beyond looking at intent to focus more on the tools and processes of environmentalism.

Volunteer Participation and Satisfaction



Racial Background



*One individual who selected “White” also wrote in “mixed” under the “Other” category



References

1. “Frequently Asked Questions,” Beacon Food Forest, <http://beaconfoodforest.org/faq.html> (accessed September, 2013).
2. Marcelo Bonta and Charles Jordan, “Diversifying the American Environmental Movement,” *Diversity and the Future of the U.S. Environmental Movement*, ed. Emily Enderle, (2007), 13-33.
3. “North Beacon Hill Neighborhood in Seattle, Washington,” <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/North-Beacon-Hill-Seattle-WA.html> (accessed March 12, 2014).