

***Participatory Challenges in the Urban Environment:
Developing and Sustaining Community-Based Forestry and Research***

U.S. Community Forestry Research Fellowship
Final Report
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Research Purpose, Question, and Community Benefit

Baltimore, Maryland is a city of about 650,000 people—just the right population, it would seem, for a city built on a human scale. But when you consider that it once housed nearly twice that amount (1.2 million), you begin to get a sense of the difficulties experienced by a city trying to maintain an infrastructure built for a much larger population, and the struggles endured by a citizenry that is either determined or condemned to stay. Although the exodus began in the city's post-industrial decline of the mid-20th century, even between 1990 and 2000, more than 80,000 people (or 12%) left the city and an additional 15,000 housing units were left vacant.¹ The decline has not been felt evenly throughout the city, however—in the three Southwest Baltimore neighborhoods I studied most closely (Sandtown-Winchester, Franklin Square, and Washington Village-Pigtown) the population loss was just slightly more pronounced (16%, 23%, and 15%, respectively²) but the decline in the neighborhoods' social ecology has been significant. Houses have been boarded up, entire blocks and high-rise public housing complexes have been bulldozed, trash gets dumped in massive piles on corners and vacant lots, and drugs and violence have to varying degrees taken control of the streets.

Such inner-city neighborhoods can enter cycles of decline when the fabric of local social life begins to unravel, leaving many urban communities without the organization and resources to improve or sustain their quality of life. Some neighborhood residents in Baltimore have responded by taking responsibility for their social and physical environments through street tree planting, conversion of vacant lots to green spaces, community gardening, and tree nursery operations. In many cases these initiatives may help to build 'social capital' through the rehabilitation of 'biophysical capital.' But in the context of the changing social and physical

¹ Baltimore City Department of Planning. 2000. *Neighborhood Statistical Areas*. Baltimore City Department of Planning.

² Ibid.

environment of Baltimore's poor and underserved neighborhoods, such activities are difficult to sustain, in spite of the benefits they are often thought to confer on their surrounding community. As Bryant Smith—a life-long resident of inner-city Baltimore, former community forestry field worker, and now US Forest Service researcher—explained: “Neighborhoods are tough places to live and they change so much. Bolton Hill today is a beautiful community. A good wave of dope hits Bolton Hill, and it's going to be a bad community. Nothing is constant...and we have to take that into consideration in our definitions of success.”

My research aimed to advance the understanding of urban community forestry, particularly the social, political, and institutional factors that influence the outcome of its projects and the operation of the programs responsible for its implementation. The impetus for this research came from discussions with people that have been involved in community-based natural resource management in Baltimore for many years. Discussions with such individuals have revealed that community forestry and related activities have been in constant evolution and adaptation since 1989. There was an acute need to capture information that has not gotten passed along. As one observer put it, “how we do and how we define community forestry has changed.” Discussions and on-site observations revealed uneven outcomes across Baltimore neighborhoods and uncertainty as to which factors determine the trajectory of a particular project over time. Furthermore, a recent follow-up report suggested that neighborhoods and projects that were the focus of attention and resources ten years ago now exhibit an “increase in neglect and abandonment” and a “lack of continuity and interest in maintaining [the initial effort].”³ As one informant with a history of involvement with community organizing and revitalization in Washington Village-Pigtown pointed out, getting a project off the ground is the easy part—it's building the capacity and support mechanisms necessary to leave behind more than just a physical product that is the real challenge. My research, therefore, became more focused on understanding the factors that contributed to this perceived or actual lack of continuity.

Some research in Baltimore has contributed to answering questions related to the factors that influence the continuity of community forestry projects. The Parks & People Foundation reports that “sustainable and viable community-managed open spaces share a number of common characteristics”: a person who acts as a catalyst within the community, community interest, community participation from the onset and in all phases of the project, community cohesion, a community-originated and appropriate project design, adequate funding, participant age diversity, an organized principal group, a division of labor and responsibility, support from city agencies, clear site delineation and boundaries, presence of strong ‘community-based or community-assisting organization’, access to information and resources, and adaptability to change.⁴ This type of analysis is helpful in that it identifies conditions that are important (or necessary) when developing community forestry activities within neighborhoods. What this approach lacks, however, is an understanding of how the community forestry program functions, how it has changed over time, and what the underlying values, debates, and decisions are that influence its projects. Research was needed to further identify and describe factors that contribute to this situation, to develop a more substantive understanding of factors on multiple levels, and to better understand the efficacy of using environmental rehabilitation projects as a

³ Jiler, J. 2002. *Baltimore Report: Monitoring Trip August 7, 2002*.

⁴ Parks & People Foundation. 2000. “Neighborhood Open Space Management: A Report of Greening Strategies in Baltimore and Six Other Cities.” Baltimore, MD.

tool for neighborhood revitalization. The overarching question that this research addressed was: *What are the key factors and conditions within community forestry programs that affect the continuity and interest in maintaining inner-city environmental rehabilitation projects in Baltimore, Maryland?*

The benefit of this research to the ‘community’ was based on an inclusive understanding of the larger community that it was intended to serve. Therefore a report, which is currently being reviewed by my partner at the United States Forest Service, will be submitted to the Baltimore Ecosystem Study, the United States Forest Service, the Parks & People Foundation, and the Urban Ecology Collaborative as a baseline for future analysis, comparison, and sharing between other cities. Furthermore, a benefit realized by this project was the incorporation of multiple voices into a conversation about what community forestry does, what community forestry has done, and what community forestry could do in the future. My intention was not to offer solutions, but to provide descriptions of how community forestry has operated and developed since 1989. By doing so, I believe that I was able to convey a broad range of perceptions and opinions that may not otherwise have been communicated to those responsible for community forestry in Baltimore. And, although it was often of much greater interest and value to me than to those with whom I worked, my contribution of labor to individual community forestry projects during my field research could also be noted here.

Preliminary Findings and Analysis

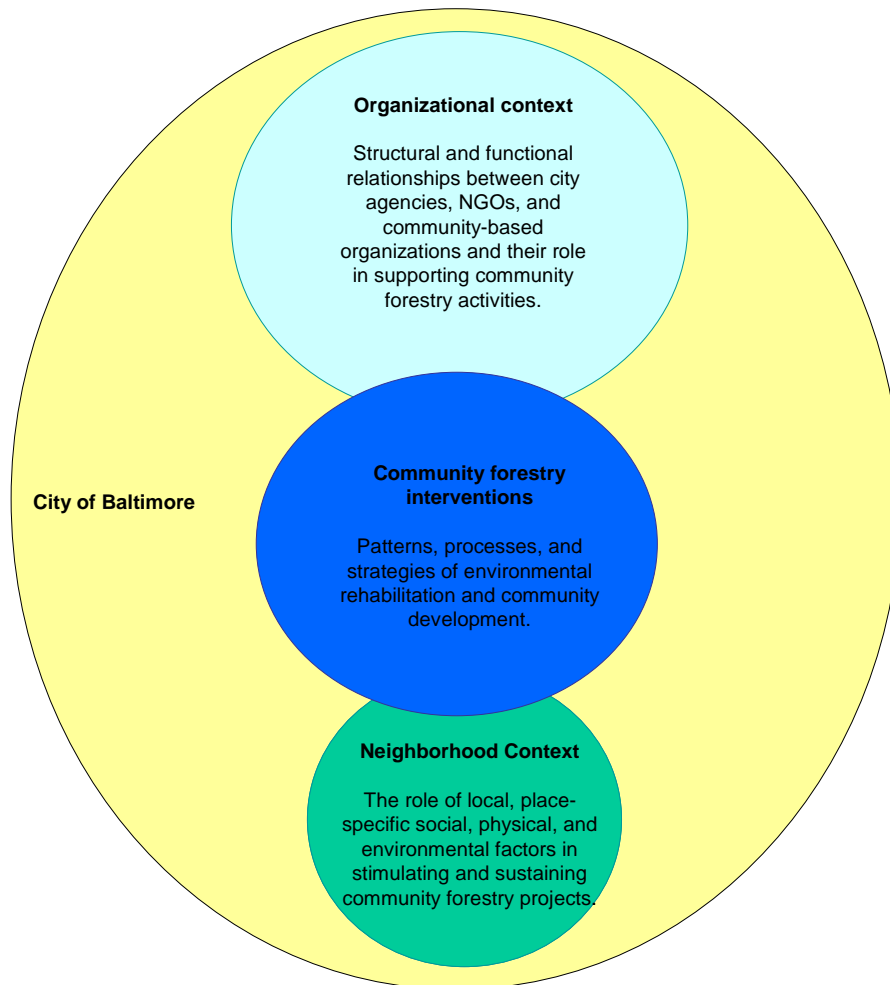
The primary objectives of this project were as follows: synthesize the central themes effecting community forestry work over the past decade, highlight important considerations on multiple levels (i.e. city-wide, organizations, and local/neighborhood), examine how and why strategies have changed over time and how people have responded to such changes, and give a baseline of information on which to base future research, monitoring, and evaluation. In general, the lessons learned from this research were a synthesis of insights gleaned by a range of people involved in community forestry work from 1989 to the present combined with observations and analyses conducted by the author.

As William Burch has long encouraged, researchers of the urban environment must recognize: “Human ecosystems can be described at several spatial scales and/or units of analysis, and these are hierarchically linked. Hence, a family unit, community, county, region, nation, even the planet can fruitfully be treated as a human ecosystem”.⁵ My research took this approach, and found it be essential. I found that factors on multiple scales affect the program participants, their immediate neighborhood, the related non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the city agencies—all of which have comprised the community forestry experience in Baltimore since 1989. Thus, the major body of the research was divided into two parts.

First, the community forestry project was analyzed on three levels (see figure below): 1) the city of Baltimore, 2) the relevant organizations, and 3) the participating neighborhoods. On each level, I investigated trends, relationships, and processes that have directly influenced community forestry in practice (for example, the city’s demographic trends, the organizational relationships

⁵ Machlis, G. E., J. E. Force, and W. R. Burch. 1997. The Human Ecosystem as an Organizing Concept in Ecosystem Management. *Society and Natural Resources* 10:347-367.

between NGOs/the city/and community-based groups, and the local histories of people and places involved on a neighborhood scale). In other words, I provided a discussion of the overarching context that community forestry has operated within. Second, my research presented a closer analysis of the community forestry intervention process itself. This section dealt with how community forestry was defined, how community forestry programs identified where and with whom to work, the dynamics of implementing community forestry, and the problem of continuity in individual projects. One of the major lessons revealed by this method was that, as an NGO, it is extremely difficult to manage all these scales.



On one hand, there is tremendous variation within very small areas in urban communities. As Burch has often said, “cities are essentially just a collection of villages, but jammed together.” The field observations and data collection of the Baltimore Ecosystem Study is showing this, and my research backs it up. Numerous factors vary block by block, even within what may seem on the surface to be a relatively homogenous neighborhood: for example, there are factions and relationships among residents, differing crime conditions, diverse housing stock, and varying amounts of vacant land. So much differs on such small scales, that when considering an intervention, one must almost pull out a microscope to really see what is going on. This partly breaks down our assumptions about cohesive urban communities that are situated in place and

that will respond to certain stimuli of resources in a uniform way. It also suggests that urban researchers and practitioners must be able to look very closely on micro scales to be able to design effective and sensitive projects. On the other hand, large-scale forces are also greatly affecting urban communities and programs such as community forestry. So while a microscope is needed in one hand, an airplane or a satellite image is needed in the other. This is intended as a metaphor for how important it is, when looking at small-scale neighborhood-level interventions, not to lose sight of large-scale political-economic factors as well: policy implications (welfare reform), demographic trends (outmigration), economic shifts (deindustrialization), residential patterns (segregation), and fiscal cycles (budget crises within the city) all can play major roles.

My research suggests that although community forestry organizations must think on these levels, they must ultimately act on a microscopic scale. Tough decisions must therefore be made about how, where, and with whom to work. A combination of two approaches—both based on community development—has characterized urban community forestry in Baltimore. One approach aims to strengthen the networks, relationships, and shared purpose that often comprise notions of ‘community’. The other relies on an illusion of community structure, strength, and stability to support a short-term infusion of resources. My research suggests that when programs divert their attention from strengthening communities to simply infusing them with resources, continuity tends to weaken. Jackie Carrera, the executive director of the non-profit organization that supports community forestry work in the city, said it well during our discussion of the most challenging, but important aspects of this work: “[we] have to be focused on the end goal of building community and leadership development and on making sure that what we are offering as a service is not just a tree in the ground, but we are leaving the community with the ability to take care of it from there and do more of it in the neighborhood on their own, if they so desire.” The community forestry spectrum below shows a group of thirteen categories that constitute the major orientations of any community forestry program or project—essentially how a program that engages social and environmental problems in cities should work. The community forestry spectrum shows the tensions that underlie decisions that have to be made by NGOs involved in community-based work in urban settings. Within each of the 13 categories, there are two ideal types. Although, these don’t always function together (i.e. a program can work primarily with individuals, but have a short-term commitment), my gut instinct is that they usually do.

Community Forestry Spectrum

Community Forestry Spectrum		
<u>Categories</u>		
Primarily works with:	<i>individuals</i>	<i>organizations</i>
Tries to build:	<i>relationships</i>	<i>partnerships</i>
Scale of focus:	<i>neighborhood-based</i>	<i>city-wide</i>
Process vs. product:	<i>process oriented</i>	<i>product oriented</i>
Initiative for projects:	<i>with the neighborhood ("bottom up")</i>	<i>to the neighborhood ("top down")</i>
Role of staff:	<i>capacity building, community organizing</i>	<i>resource providing, technical assistance</i>
Time commitment:	<i>long-term commitment</i>	<i>short-term commitment</i>
Range of offerings:	<i>flexible offerings (fits offering into needs)</i>	<i>inflexible offerings (fits needs into offerings)</i>
Presence:	<i>field/street presence</i>	<i>political/financial presence</i>
Accountability:	<i>accountability to community members</i>	<i>accountability to funders</i>
Works within:	<i>informal neighborhood structures</i>	<i>formal neighborhood structures</i>
Location of work:	<i>look for where there's interest</i>	<i>defined target areas</i>
Emphasis:	<i>social networks, community capacity, empowerment</i>	<i>environmental quality and appearance</i>

The degree of continuity in community forestry projects initiated ten years ago appears to depend on at least the following three factors: (1) the existence and development of effective local leadership, (2) the amount and nature of support from organizations inside and outside of the neighborhood, and (3) the creation of localized support mechanisms to sustain projects, participation, and successive leadership within the neighborhood.

The identification and support of active local leaders is necessary, but not sufficient; sustainable community forestry projects do not rest on the shoulders of one individual. Site visits of community gardens and tree planting activities and interviews revealed that the ebbs and flows of projects are commonly related to the presence or absence of individual persons. Often local residents said “things were going well until so and so died” or “she got too old to be active and then moved away.” Local residents frequently explained the condition of sites based on the presence or absence of key individuals. This is not to suggest that other factors don’t influence the ability (or inability) of these individuals to make an impact, but that individual leaders seem to be critical components of any long-term strategy. As Max Weber and, in her own way, Jane Jacobs argue, the charismatic authority of public characters plays a major role in social cohesion and change. But it is transitory and can only be exercised for a short period of time. It is difficult to effectively transfer charismatic authority to others, and rarely can charisma and leadership be formally institutionalized. Therefore, there must be more than just a focus on identifying and supporting individuals—instead social institutions like block-watches, senior associations, schools, environmental education programs, and churches are important for the support of ongoing projects.

The efforts of the individual—especially when supported institutionally within the neighborhood or by outside organizations—drive individual projects. However, the challenge lies in understanding how to transfer the individual energies and actions of a local leader into a support structure that can be reproduced and sustained. We are still faced, however, with what could be called the “community forestry paradox”: that the individual and their leadership potential are of the utmost importance to a successful local-level project, but cannot be continuously counted on or formally institutionalized. Therefore, both leadership development and institutional structures may be two important sides of the coin of community forestry and environmental rehabilitation—if it’s to happen in cities.

Fieldwork and Data Collection Experience: Lessons Learned

The remainder of this final report will focus on questions of methodology and participatory research. What does it mean to do community-oriented research in the inner city? And, when is there a role for a participatory research process? I draw upon my experience as well that of community forestry in Baltimore—the latter having a decade of experience in encouraging the participation of residents in collective action. I aim to contribute to the discourse that has already been generated by fellows of this program through newsletter articles, and presumably in workshops that preceded my attendance at the September 2003 meeting in Washington.⁶ My hope is that the methodological questions that arose during my research will relate to those of

⁶ See Yung, L. Summer 2001. Some Lessons from Participatory Research. *Regeneration* 1:5-8 and Sarathy, B. Winter 2003. The Outsiders in 'Community'. *Regeneration* 3:2-3 for relevant critiques.

others operating in geographically diverse sites as well as highlight important considerations specific to urban areas.

When planning my research during the semester that preceded my summer of fieldwork, I became interested in the concept of participatory research and how to apply it to the work that I would be doing. During the semester, and as I transitioned into fieldwork in Baltimore, I was increasingly critical of my inability to think of more original or innovative ways to make my research participatory. I struggled with the question of whether this was due to my lack of imagination and courage to challenge conventional research models or to the structural limitations built in to academia and graduate study. Or was it the lack of fit between participatory research and my specific project and site? Rather than placing the “blame” on the methodology, I will describe four barriers that I found to participatory research.

(1) *The birth of the research question*—My experience suggests that the situation in which the typical Master’s student determines what, where, and with whom they will do research influences how it is done and to what degree it can be ‘participatory’. The research topic usually, and specifically in my case, arises out of a student’s personal interests in combination with the direction of an academic advisor. In some cases, there is a professional commitment to funding sources as well as to an employer/advisor who expects the research to fulfill specific needs. Furthermore, the research design is often devised in a classroom—in my case within the context of a social science research methods class—and therefore begins in a way that is inherently bound by the walls of academia rather than by the interests of the people involved in the upcoming research. These factors limit the flexibility necessary to designing and beginning participatory research.

(2) *The local relevance and importance of the research topic*—Stemming, in part, from the above conditions, a research problem defined in the mind of an academic researcher and outside of local context runs the risk of being partially or entirely irrelevant to the local population. This can be especially true in the American inner city, where violence, trash, crime, drugs, and poverty are among the most pressing issues and concerns. If local people are likely to participate, the research must be directly related to these fundamental issues and offer a real possibility of providing tangible benefits by asking questions that they are interested in trying to understand by way of research. But even in situations where these conditions are met, a researcher intimately familiar with Baltimore’s most distressed neighborhoods bluntly warned, “people in poor communities are not interested in collecting data unless they are going to get paid for it.” Although this may over-simplify the issue and ignore opportunities where research offers potential benefit without economic incentive, it highlights the disconnect between the values and needs of the researcher and of the members of the research setting.

(3) *The geography of the research*—Community-based research aimed at incorporating active participation of community members seems to assume a cohesive, homogenous, and self-contained unit. More than one community forestry practitioner that I interviewed referred to certain Baltimore neighborhoods as, in the words of one of them, “communities of strangers” where people live in near isolation from each other. In the words of participatory methodologist Peter Park: “where there is little shared life, participatory research must first create a community

base before it can do collective investigation.”⁷ Social scientists, as well as previous CFRF Fellows, have discussed the levels of conflict and heterogeneity that often exist in communities and research settings. However, it is the role that geography (for example, physical location and spatial concentration) plays within the urban context that I wish to stress. Acknowledging that defining boundaries is often problematic, I suggest that, in contrast to a small rural village, a city has relatively few officially recognizable boundaries (outside of neighborhoods) on which to focus a research question. ‘Community’ may be an even more indefinite construction in cities than in seemingly self-contained villages. In fact, Park seems to predict precisely this: participatory research “in the less-developed areas of the world is made easier in comparison with industrialized urban settings...as in the cities of North America, [where] the destruction of the communal way of life is more complete, [making] it difficult to recover [that which] forms the basis for communal unity.”⁸ In addition, the geography implied by the research question also makes a difference. As I was looking at community forestry activities specifically related to a program that operates in numerous inner-city neighborhoods across Baltimore, the lack of geographic concentration of ‘participants’ made it difficult to conceive of a way in which any aggregate of people could meaningfully have a stake in this research.

(4) *The fear of hollow promises*—In Baltimore’s most distressed neighborhoods, there seems to be a culture of cynicism based on broken promises by organizations and politicians unable to deliver tangible results. The current mayor’s campaign of billboards, bumper stickers, and television ads telling Baltimore’s citizens to “Believe” is designed, in his words, “as an anecdote to cynicism that has taken over Baltimore.” Mayor O’Malley and his administration believe that “there is a real culture of failure that exists in Baltimore...[that] needs to be eradicated.”⁹ This mistrust of outside interventions and programs by people who have seen ideas come and go is based on real experience and should influence the actions of a visiting researcher. In my case, I hesitated to promise that my research *could* result in tangible benefits in areas of concern and need without my having a high degree of certitude that it *would*.

Despite these barriers, it is worth mentioning briefly three ways in which participatory research might meaningfully occur in Baltimore (or similar settings). First, the researcher could be committed to participation in the research effort from the beginning stages of its conception. This requires that the researcher have an extended period of time (or base of experience) in the local area and have established relationships with people and organizations in order for the participation to flow from a flexible and locally relevant research problem. Relationships have been key in community forestry as well. Erika Svendsen, a community forestry field worker in Franklin Square in the mid-1990s, saw individual relationships as the building blocks of the trust and credibility it takes to stimulate active participation, whether in tree planting or research. Her ability to forge personal ties with two important women in the neighborhood—a young, energetic community organizer/recreation center director and one more senior neighborhood figure—created the conditions for other adults and children in the neighborhood to get involved in community forestry projects. Without these relationships, barriers within the same neighborhood

⁷ Park, P. 1993. “What is Participatory Research? A Theoretical and Methodological Perspective,” in *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada*. Edited by P. Park. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Danois, E. B. 2003. “The Believer,” in *City Paper*. Baltimore, MD.

would have been insurmountable as evidenced by unsuccessful later attempts to work with Franklin Square after both women were no longer active. Patricia McGuire makes a similar point in the conclusion of her discussion on participatory dissertation research: “Developing caring relationships with people, oppressed or otherwise, takes time for meaningful involvement in each other’s lives and nurturance of the relationship. There is no way to short circuit the process.”¹⁰

Second, another way of approaching participatory research could be to expand our conceptions of ‘community’. Rather than exclusively seeking communities of place, we can also work with communities of interest. In Baltimore, where communities of place are far from communal, it would be possible to bring together a network of neighborhood participants with staff from the local community forestry NGO to share and develop knowledge of what works and what doesn’t. Both my narrow view of participatory research as solely involving the most disadvantaged and my desire to preserve independence from the community forestry NGO led me away from seeing Parks & People and their ‘clients’ as a ‘community’ with which to work. Ironically, this approach might have had more potential for elevating the opinions and presence of the disadvantaged into the organization’s decision-making structure than my approach of treating them as separate entities.

And finally, I suggest an approach to research that strives to avoid presupposing values and priorities that people may not have—regarding either the specific topic or the accumulation of scientific knowledge in general. Care must be taken to recognize that people in whatever community we study will rarely have the same level of interest and stake in the research as the researcher. Furthermore, in order to prioritize the reality, experience, and knowledge of community members in my research, I felt that it was more important for me to participate in *their* activities and *their* lives. Community forestry field workers Patricia Pyle and Erin Hughes suggested similar approaches. Pyle said “you have to share the reality of the people you are working with, and this means sharing the bad bus system...the lack of trash pick up...[this] allows you to develop a common language.” Hughes recalled that when she would go into a neighborhood and talk to people, trees were the last thing she would bring up after spending time learning about their lives, their neighborhood, and their problems. Therefore, I suggest that the participation of the researcher in the lives and activities of the ‘subjects’ may be more fundamentally important than the participation of the ‘subjects’ in the research of the student. By this, I suggest a reversal of the participation rhetoric whereby the onus of participation rests more heavily on the researcher. This concept finds common ground in what previous dissertation fellow Laurie Yung might have meant when she called for more “reciprocal, egalitarian relationships” with people we interact with as researchers, and thereby take steps towards, she hopes, “establish[ing] the kinds of relationships that open the doors to more participatory work in the future.”¹¹ Why should we be more intent on finding ways for people to participate in our work than in learning how to participate in theirs? The latter may lead to both a more egalitarian exchange between human beings and a route to better understanding of community forestry, whether rural or urban, domestic or international.

¹⁰ McGuire, P. 1993. “Challenges, Contradictions, and Celebrations: Attempting Participatory Research as a Doctoral Student,” in *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada*. Edited by P. Park. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

¹¹ Yung, L. Summer 2001. Some Lessons from Participatory Research. *Regeneration* 1:5-8.

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