



Campus sustainability at the edges: Emotions, relations, and bio-cultural connections



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ABSTRACT

The university campus is often considered a key site for the development of environmental sustainability initiatives. At the same time, the concept and practice of sustainability has been critiqued for its lack of conceptual clarity and its proneness to co-optation by neoliberal institutions and organizations. Using a just sustainabilities framework, this article strives to respond to this tension by exploring the possibility of a campus sustainability at the edges, one that is interested in engaging the broader socio-spatial context of a university as well as in tapping into the emotional and relational realms of fostering more sustainable socio-ecological assemblages. Through a case study analysis of the Philadelphia Urban Creators (PUC), a youth-led organization operating within the Temple University-North Philadelphia interface, I find that grassroots sustainability actors possess important knowledge for understanding how sustainability can be a tool for restoring emotional affinity with the environment as well as for enacting transformative socio-ecological change in the urban university context and beyond. Through these explorations, my purpose is twofold: (1) to envision a more diverse, inclusive, and meaningful campus sustainability model that seeks to confront urban crises such as gentrification, racialized poverty, and mass incarceration, and (2) to incorporate emotion and affect geographies into the just sustainabilities research agenda.

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1. Introduction

Research on university campus sustainability initiatives tends to conceptualize higher education institutions as spaces uniquely equipped for practicing sustainability and for providing leadership to the sustainability movement (Orr, 1994; Uhl and Anderson, 2001; Alshuwaikhat and Abubakar, 2008; Lozano et al., 2013). Concurrently, critical sustainability research has exposed the processes through which the concept of sustainability has become institutionalized and coopted in ways that limit, or even undermine, its potential for transformative socio-ecological change (Agyeman, 2005, 2013; Gunder, 2006; Krueger and Gibbs, 2007). Jones (2012), for example, critiques UK universities' fixation on institutionalized sustainability assessment mechanisms and invites them to instead self-reflectively address the question: "To what extent do our universities emotionally disconnect us from the natural environment and if so, how and why could this emotional affinity be restored?" (p. 643). Jones calls on universities to reflect on this question in order to embrace the complexities and the emotional capacities embedded in the mobilizations of and

challenges facing sustainability initiatives. Beyond merely serving as an opportunity for academic and institutional reflection, however, Jones' question can also be seen as a rallying call for university actors to operationalize sustainability approaches that actively re-connect students to their natural environment at an emotional level and thus inspire new types of human-environment relationships and narratives, what Jones refers to as "bio-cultural connection."

The reflection question that Jones proposes to university sustainability actors emerges out of a critical analysis of sustainability that he advances, namely his critique of western universities' focus on:

short-term, top-down, technology focused [initiatives] rather than the wider inherent social, environmental and economic stakeholder transitional conflicts and longer term, systemic transdisciplinary engagement challenges of sustainability. (p. 632)

Jones' criticism of the prioritization of short-term techno-fixes over more long-term systemic questions and challenges of campus sustainability stems from the concern that sustainability initiatives that focus on the former are created and implemented "from an

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increasingly judgmental, self-righteous” and, I would add, neoliberal perspective (p. 633). Moreover, he worries that such a perspective is failing to attract meaningful and “pluralistic” participation in campus sustainability. For Jones, bringing emotional connectivity to the center of a university’s sustainability discourses and practices is fundamental to achieving meaningful experiences and outcomes for students, who he calls on stakeholders to see as “pluralistic citizens” to be engaged rather than “customers” to be satisfied (p. 644).

I find Jones’ critique to be provocative but limited. In this article, in order to broaden Jones’ inquiries, I take his reflection question as a point of departure for calling attention to the importance of university students’ emotional (re)connection not only with the “natural” environment, but also with the ecologically-embedded socioeconomic contexts in which campus sustainability initiatives are operating. Specifically, I investigate how building relationships across difference (both social and spatial) might be a mechanism for accessing the connective, emotional realm of university sustainability work, as well as for operationalizing a university sustainability vision that takes local context seriously. When applied to *spatial* inquiries into campus sustainability initiatives, Jones’ attention to emotions and relationships invites not only a shift in analytical approaches to sustainability, but also a reconceptualization of the spaces and spatial dynamics in which urban universities’ campus sustainability initiatives are playing out.

My method for attending to the emotional and relational realms of campus sustainability might be different than initially expected. Rather than identify a university and assess the official sustainability discourses and practices that are developed and enacted within the institutional space of the campus, I instead locate a university’s spatial context and investigate the grassroots sustainability work occurring “at the edges,” which I define as *within* the spatial context but *outside* of the spaces of the institution. My reasoning for this is twofold: (1) it helps me envision a campus sustainability that extends *conceptually* beyond what Jones summarizes as “prescriptive, short-term techno-fixes” (p. 633) such as recycling competitions, printing quotas and car shares and (2) it extends the analysis *spatially* beyond the confines of a university campus and toward its edges, the spaces of encounter where the university interfaces with its urban-ecological context. Geographers have long theorized edges, borders, interfaces, and boundaries as both productive and contentious spaces of encounter (Tuan, 1989; Gilmore, 2007; Forsyth et al., 2013). For the purposes of this research, I am interested in a university’s edges as porous and emotion-laden spaces where creative tensions and social differences circulate, tensions that may have historically been productive for disconnection, separation, and alienation, but that have the potential to be activated in ways that engender new opportunities for meaningful and beneficial emotional connection among different human beings and between human beings and nonhuman natures.

Inquiries into the emotional realm of university sustainability work are brought together through a case study of a youth-led organization called the Philadelphia Urban Creators (PUC). Operating at the interface of North Philadelphia and Temple University (one block from Temple’s football complex and three blocks from the main campus), PUC describes their sustainability work as a process of “restoring broken relationships” at multiple scales. In the analysis that follows, I explore the specific ways in which PUC’s sustainability work manifests in the North Philadelphia-Temple context and find that approaching sustainability through the lens of relationship restoration allows them to engage meaningfully with their spatial context to foster emotional connections between participants and their urban ecological environments. Also, rather than theorize *about* sustainability via the PUC case study, I theorize *with* PUC throughout the article, utilizing their conceptualizations

of sustainability to interrogate North Philadelphia and Temple University histories and current socio-ecological dynamics. From this analysis and the findings that it produces, I ultimately argue for a campus sustainability at the edges, which prioritizes localized urban environmental justice initiatives and emotionally-driven bio-cultural connection. In so doing, this article also makes the point that grassroots organizations like PUC hold some of the keys to understanding how sustainability can be a tool for restoring emotional affinity with the environment as well as for enacting transformative social and ecological change in the university context and beyond.

In order to investigate edges and emotions in a way that is relevant for urban environment-society geographic inquiry, I employ McClintock’s (2010) metabolic rift framework, which for his research, helps explain the rise of urban agriculture, and for my purposes, helps make the case for a university sustainability that engages with spaces of disconnection and rift. In the current research context, North Philadelphia’s blighted urban-ecological landscape constitutes the *ecological rift*, Temple University’s institutional commodification and reconfiguration of urban social space constitutes the *social rift*, and the strained relationships and emotional disconnections among human beings and between human beings and nonhuman natures constitutes the *individual rift*. While these three scales of urban-ecological disconnection (and potential reconnection) are co-producing and interrelated, I am not implying that connection between people and “nature” can be equated with connection between university students and local community members. What I am asserting, however, is that university sustainability initiatives should be attentive to both, and that the emotional realm is a potential entryway for both.

2. Context: Why grassroots sustainability in the North Philadelphia-Temple University interface?

Interestingly, McClintock’s three scales of metabolic rift are also reflected in the way that PUC conceptualizes sustainability, as a process of restoring broken relationships at the scale of the self, the community, and the environment. This context-specific understanding of sustainability emerges out of the particular urban-ecological fabric of North Philadelphia, which I will briefly discuss before speaking more about PUC.

2.1. North Philadelphia’s urban-ecological history through the lens of the North Philadelphia-Temple interface

North Philadelphia’s particular urban-ecological fabric, like many other deindustrialized urban areas in the United States, reflects histories of disinvestment, institutionalized racism, and socioecological neglect. In the 19th century, North Philadelphia had transitioned from its previous ecological designation as farmland to being firmly positioned as part of the “Workshop of the World” (Cole, 2007, p. 11). During this industrially booming time, the institution now known as Temple University began in 1884 in the basement of Grace Temple Baptist Church, as a place of academic opportunity for working-class parishioners (Hilty and Hanson, 2010). By 1891, Temple College was incorporated by the state, with a charter that stated its mission of being “primarily for the benefit of Working Men,” that tuition was free, and that no previous education was required for entry (Hilty and Hanson, 2010, p. 12). At the time of its inception Temple’s location in the heart of industrial North Philadelphia was crucial and appropriate, since the institution was specifically for working class people.

Mid-century de-industrialization created a major rift in North Philadelphia’s urban-ecological fabric. For one, shutdown factories

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