

DIY FOOD: HOME FOOD PRODUCTION AND ITS CONTRIBUTION
TO FOOD JUSTICE

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to food justice advocates, food workers, plants, animals, and the entire environment. May we find a way to heal the splits caused by the industrial food system.

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ABSTRACT

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JUSTICE

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My dissertation, “DIY Food: Home Food Production and Its Contribution to Food Justice,” explores home food production as a means to raising food consciousness. Using textual analysis, I investigated the blogs of home food producers. Ecowomanist/new materialist theories frame my evaluation of home food production’s overall contribution to food justice movements. I argue that producing food at home is a type of spiritual activism, in which the gardeners develop a food consciousness that allows them to consider daily the spiritual interconnections between communities around the world that include the environment. My work contributes to the field of Women’s Studies through the spiritualization of food practices, using a spiritual activist lens influenced by womanist theory. Although food injustice has been a major concern for social justice scholarship, my work pushes the definition of food justice activism by theorizing a spiritualized food practice.

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INTRODUCTION

*Eating a bowl of posole made from locally grown corn, land, and chili is equal to going to the state legislature to demand fair water rights. This is because when one either grows one's own ingredients for the posole or barter or purchases the foods from someone who did, one is supporting a resilient process aimed at sovereignty – Enrique Salmón, *Eating the Landscape**

The seed of this dissertation was an actual seed, or a packet of seeds to be more specific. While I was checking out at a local natural grocery store a few years ago, the cashier handed me a complimentary packet of carrot seeds with the words “Help Grow No GMO! Spreading the Word One Seed at a Time” printed on the front. Although food justice was something I already tried to consider through my daily food choices, this packet of seeds made me consider some of the more material, more active, more radical, more creative, and potentially more effective ways that food justice activists work to help people make just food choices and ensure just food options.

To begin such consideration, I wanted to explore the implications of my daily food more closely. I realized I already had a relationship with food justice from embracing vegetarianism at a young age. At that time in my life, I began to think about the source of my food through my personal love for and relationship with non-animals. I further realized, however, from learning about GMO food and locavorism, that food justice was more complicated than not eating animals, and my research will show just

how complicated making ethical decisions about food can be. As I interrogated my own decisions, the carrot seed packet inspired me to take on my own gardening practice; I planted tomatoes, spinach, and green beans in a large container and a raised garden bed, and I started a compost pile at the side of my home. As I gardened, I witnessed the energy of growing plants and was humbled by the life force of tiny sprouts. And later, I was disappointed and confronted with my own feelings regarding loss of control when a severe rainstorm snapped the stem of a tomato plant and drowned spinach sprouts. I experienced a tiny triumph in the form of a handful of green beans that I harvested from a very sparse plant. I was also able to reflect on my own consumption practices as I watched my compost pile fill up with food scraps and other compostable material. I multiplied my weekly compost scraps by months and years, feeling guilty about the waste I had contributed to already overcrowded landfills. I realized that the private work I was doing—or not doing—at home, *could* have an impact on the world around me; this potential of private work became something I needed to explore.

When I began thinking about home-centered food justice work, I set out to answer a few research questions: How does home food production (HFP) shift the relationships between humans, food, animals, and the environment? In what ways does HFP shift thinking about food? How does HFP challenge the typical industrial food system? How accessible is HFP? What are the challenges, assumptions, and claims made by people who produce food at home? My dissertation also engages in a broader question about food justice: how does HFP contribute to food justice?

There is a rich supply of activist literature that centers growing food; movements like Food Not Lawns,¹ community gardens, permaculture², locavorism³, and Women Who Farm⁴ espouse the message that growing food can have an impact on the broken food system. A large component of these movements is new media. Since HFP is often private, people who grow their own food often use social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and other blogging formats to share ideas, spread the word about the benefits of HFP, and document their work to address food injustice with their HFP practices. It was through this recognition that I started reading blogs (public online journals) written by people who heavily engaged in home food production work and used their blogs to allow a wider audience a glimpse of this work. My dissertation data, then, became a study of five homesteader⁵ blogs, with topics including gardening/composting, raising chickens, and canning/preserving, all from home. Based on my study of these five blogs, I argue that HFP contributes to food justice work because HFP encourages home food producers to shift their food consciousness; they bring intentionality and awareness to their everyday food decisions and micro-interactions. Through this shifted consciousness, home food producers come to recognize the interconnected relationships they have with people around the world, food itself, non-human animals, and the environment.

¹ <http://www.foodnotlawns.com/> for more information

² A garden design principle based on “whole-systems thinking and ethics” that are meant to closely follow natural processes (“Permaculture Principles”).

³ A movement to eat mostly food obtained within a small distance.

⁴ A Facebook page featuring women farmers from around the world.

⁵ People who have taken on intensive food production tasks.

Why Blogs?

Blogs establish a place for home food producers to carefully construct their own narratives about why they participate in HFP. Since blogs take time and thoughtfulness to construct, their authors present a carefully crafted narrative of their HFP practices that they know is visible to a wider audience. These narratives reveal details of at-home work to the public and allow us to appreciate work that often remains private, unappreciated, and that is so often done by women, people of color, and working class people. Bloggers who write about HFP often do so to participate in a wider narrative about food justice by sharing and receiving tips for food production.

Food bloggers, especially home food producers, in addition to their experiences preparing daily meals, share HFP practice activities that might normally be considered mundane and of little influence, but that can gain new meaning through blogs. For example, turning a compost pile becomes an act of recognizing the energetic vibrancy of otherwise wasted food scraps and the potential to create new life from waste, while picking cherries from a front-yard tree becomes a deep meditation on globalization and the interconnectedness of the entire planet. The bloggers I studied theorize these messages through material food production interaction and share them via blogs so they become deeply meaningful to a vision of a more healed food system. Researching these blogs as a witness to these everyday activities, through reading the blogs and practicing HFP in my own small ways, helped me recognize how bloggers turn typically underappreciated tasks into acts of personal, and potentially social/environmental, transformation.

Blogging is both a narrative that straddles the line between personal and public, and a communicative act. Julie Rak writes that, “blogging [...] is about the act of writing one’s self into existence for others to read and comment upon” (176). Rak argues that blogging is identity formation because it helps a person reaffirm their identity in relationship to a community. Aimée Morrison writes that, “Blogging texts circulate according to network rather than broadcast theories of transmission, and this distinction alters the relationships between members of this public, as well as their relations to the texts that frame their communities” (37). In other words, blogs are public not simply in the sense of broadcasting to a wide audience; they work within networks to build audiences that can create larger food-conscious communities, for example. The bloggers are able to write their own food consciousness into existence with the help of a network of community members. This view of blogging as both public and private, identity-affirming and communal, is important to my analyses of food blogs as consciousness-shifting.

My research affirms everyday work by drawing attention to an everyday, home-centered activity, specifically one that allows people to feel empowered in their sharing of stories. To analyze the work people do through blogging is to value the time they spend in their everyday lives making their worlds better. Emily Matchar also points out that, especially for women, writing about their experiences affirms everyday acts: “For some food bloggers, especially those with young children, blogging about their recipes is a way of gaining recognition for that most underappreciated of domestic chores, cooking the nightly dinner” (102). Home-centered blogs especially reinforce the importance of

everyday work not just for the bloggers but for anyone who participates in these often unaffirmed acts. Paying attention to blogging, but especially blogging about the home, is valuable to marginalized people who typically do this type of work.

Often, bloggers who write about home do not selfishly write about their lives as navel-gazing, but instead they share valuable information and ask their readers for feedback. In an interview with *Publisher's Weekly*, blogger Lori Duron shares her experiences parenting a gender nonconforming child. Duron's experiences support many parents in similar situations who would not have it otherwise, since this type of parenting is not seen often in mainstream media. She says in her interview, "I couldn't find blogs or parenting sites that catered to families like ours. Now we have a gender nonconforming playgroup. I love getting e-mails from parents who say that they weren't enjoying parenting their child until they read my blog" (qtd. in Bloom). Duron's blog affirms her family as she builds a community to support herself and her child, and it reaches out to offer guidance and support for other parents. By recognizing the positive impacts community building can have on a blogger's lived experiences, blogging research encourages these positive experiences and supports further community building. Through her blog, Duron has created a space for talking about parenting and gender. Layli Maparyan writes, "The simple act of communicating with another being [...] is a basic act of recognition, honoring and connection" (*The Womanist Idea* 58). The bloggers rely on communication through their blogging as central to their work. Though the simple act of communicating is important, what bloggers communicate about also informs my

understanding of blogging as a form of social justice work. Their communication centers consciousness shifting.

The bloggers model home-centered consciousness shifting that begins with self-change. Maparyan writes, “To change the world is to change the spirit first, and to change spirit is to change self. Thus, self-change is the heart and mechanism of social change” (*The Womanist Idea* 101). Bloggers who write about their own experiences in their homes begin within themselves. They imagine a better alternative, like HFP, and then they work on themselves to become that change. Chuck Vitello, a blogger at stayathomedadblog.com, became a stay-at-home dad despite pressure that encouraged him to stick to social norms. He writes, “It is a bit of a shift in traditional thinking that breaks away from ‘his job’ and ‘her job,’ leading to everything is ‘our job’.” Vitello did not wait for social norms to shift. He changed his thinking on “traditional” domestic roles and began living those changes. In turn, through his blog, he helps others visualize how men can participate in important domestic work. By blogging about producing food at home, the Do It Yourself (DIY) food bloggers I studied imagine a more healed alternative to the dangerous industrial food systems.

Which Blogs?

I analyze five blogs, all of which focus on two or more aspects of HFP—gardening/composting, raising chickens, and canning/preserving. I’ve chosen bloggers who allow me to explore a diverse set of experiences with DIY food blogs. Each blogger has a different social context and geographic location. The bloggers also situate

themselves differently in terms of their food production practices, yet each blogger is similarly interested in growing, raising, and storing food themselves.

Meet the Bloggers

I offer brief descriptions of each of the five blogs:

Root Simple: (rootsimple.com, July 2006–present) a husband and wife who blog about their experiences homesteading in urban Los Angeles. They include musings on gardening, chicken-keeping, and composting. This blog represents home food producers who live in an urban area. Their blog has been active since 2006, and explores various topics related to homesteading, including sharing information, how-to guides, opinions, and personal narratives. The bloggers who run Root Simple are more political than the other bloggers in their style of writing and engage with food justice activists/organizations more explicitly. Since these bloggers are a husband and wife team, their blog allows me to include a man-identified perspective on DIY food, and explore gendered relationships to food production. Throughout my dissertation, the bloggers at Root Simple are referred to as Root Simple. I use plural pronouns to indicate that quotations and analysis from Root Simple are attributed to two people.

Tenth Acre Farm: (tenthacrefarm.com, July 2013–present) a woman in suburban Cincinnati blogs about her journey turning her suburban home into a suburban homestead. She writes, “I found my calling as a modern homesteader and established a connection with land that was surely never expected to be anything more than lawn” (“About”). The blogger at Tenth Acre Farm is a certified permaculturist, and thus represents a specific type of home gardener. She gardens heavily, probably the most of all

the bloggers in this study, and uses specific permaculture crop rotation, companion planting, and garden design techniques. She also does some canning and preserving. The blog uses a mostly informative, how-to tone, although sometimes ventures into arguments about food justice. Tenth Acre Farm also represents a Midwestern, suburban perspective. Throughout my dissertation, I refer to Tenth Acre Farm as Tenth Acre.

Cold Antler Farm: (coldantlerfarm.blogspot.com, August 2007–present) a woman in rural New York blogs about her journey starting as a new homesteader, from getting her first chickens to running a small working farm. Cold Antler Farm has been active as a blog since 2007 and documents a long homesteading/farming journey for the blogger. The woman who runs Cold Antler Farm also identifies herself as a full-time writer (although when she started blogging she worked as a graphic designer for a catalogue) who “writes about her adventures following her dream life as a homesteader, archer, falconer, equestrian, hunter, spinner, and low-rent cook” (“About Me”). Her blog follows more of a journal format; she shares personal struggles and triumphs, thoughts and opinions, and updates about her homesteading journey. Her blog represents a rural perspective. Throughout my dissertation, I refer to Cold Antler Farm as Cold Antler.

Northwest Edible Life: (nwedible.com, January 2011–present) a woman in suburban Seattle writes about growing vegetables, keeping chickens, and preserving. She describes herself as an “accidental garden writer.” She’s a former professional chef who decided to quit her job in order to homestead full-time. As a former chef, the blogger at Northwest Edible Life writes most extensively about food itself, including how-to guides, and less politically or personally. Her most extensive blog content focuses on canning

and preserving. She is also the only blogger on my list of home food producers who has children. When she does share personal perspectives and stories, they are often in relationship to her children. Throughout my dissertation, I refer to Northwest Edible Life as Northwest Edible.

Homesteading in Hawaii: (kaufarmer.blogspot.com, October 2013) a retired-age woman runs a small farm in Hawaii where she keeps chickens and grows fruits and vegetables. She considers herself a permaculturist, although she does not follow permaculture exclusively. Her blog, although written from a personal perspective, is mostly a how-to guide offering tips and techniques for growing food and raising chickens. She does offer a differing perspective compared to the other four blogs as a farmer in Hawaii. This perspective means she has developed techniques of her own with little reliance on farm-based guides that do not typically contain extensive information about growing in tropical climates. She does not have as much blog content as the other four, so her work is not included as extensively as the other bloggers. Throughout my dissertation, I refer to *Homesteading in Hawaii* as *Homesteading in Hawaii*.

Three of the blogs are run by white women between the ages of thirty–forty (although one blogger was twenty-five when she started her blog). The fifth blog is run by a woman of retired age whose racial identity is unclear. The socio-economic class of the six bloggers (including the husband and wife team) is difficult to define, especially because the bloggers are characteristically quite frugal, choosing to forgo extra income and limit their consumption as part of their homesteading philosophy. Although, it should be noted that all six bloggers are homeowners (two of the bloggers own a home together).

The fact that the blogs are run by mostly white people, and mostly white women, has influenced my analysis in that I consider the gendered and raced implications of their work, including its inclusivity and its privileging of things like land-ownership, access to food and knowledge, and assumptions about moving freely (and sometimes illegally) in their geographic locations. In other words, the bloggers often do not acknowledge that their specific brand of food justice work is not available to others who do not have the privilege to own land, move to new places (somewhat) freely, or who may have unequal access to knowledge. I critique the bloggers' lack of attention to privilege in several places; however, I also offer suggestions for how their alternative to food production is but a template for a more just food system.

Methodology

I selected the above blogs based on home food production criteria—each blogger must participate in three of the four activities I identified as the most common HFP activities: gardening, composting, chicken-raising, and canning/preserving. Four of the five blogs selected practice all four of these activities, while Tenth Acre Farm practices all except chicken keeping. Tenth Acre Farm, however, extensively discusses the practice of chicken keeping and provides a useful counter argument for not keeping chickens (“Why I Don’t Keep Chickens”). Additionally, I selected the five blogs based on the volume of content. Each of the blogs had at least two years’ worth of posts and posted at least once a week. Each of the blogs was also still active at my time of reading, which I found important for providing up-to-date context. It was also important to select bloggers who posted regularly, since that act shows that each blogger has remained committed to

their homesteading practice. I also considered the availability of these blogs. A single author, or, in the case of Root Simple, two authors who live in the same household run each blog I analyzed, while other homesteading sites include multiple authors. I found this to be an important characteristic since each blog then presents a cohesive message to its readers.

I then chose blogs based on a variety of geographic locations within the U.S.: urban L.A. and Cincinnati, Rural New York state, suburban Washington state, and tropical Hawaii. Despite the varied geographical locations, a white or white-passing person runs each of the five blogs. This whiteness presents a limitation for my study. However, since white people, and especially white women, represent the majority of homesteading blogs—especially homesteading blogs that have a large readership—this sample represents the majority of homesteading blogs. Whiteness, however, plays a role in the assumptions about the universality of their own food-growing based on their epistemological whiteness. This is an issue I discuss more in Chapter II.

Once I selected blogs, I gathered data from each blogger's entire history of blog posts until April 2016. After gathering data, I analyzed blog text based on ecowomanist and new materialist frameworks. I chose this framework because I saw the bloggers bridging epistemology and ontology, human-nonhuman animals, human-environment, and nonhuman-objects. Because this framework bridges ideas, it allowed me to study the intersections of the bloggers' variety of topics. Additionally, a womanist framework falls in line with the bloggers' valuing of everyday DIY work. Based on this framework, as well as the overlapping themes that the bloggers addressed through their posts, I copied

and pasted data from the bloggers' posts that addressed ideological ideas, or when they opined about ideological aspects of HFP. I read through the data four times and then color-coded this document based on how they fit into several themes. I identified the themes of consciousness (or self-work), attention to people, discussion of food itself, and discussion of animals and the environment. These themes emerged from both my framework and based on what several blogs had in common. I then separated this document into four separate documents based on my color coding that served as the basis for each chapter.

After my original data sorting, I began the writing each chapter by simultaneously and non-linearly working with my primary data and writing analyses based on key passages and researching secondary data to inform my analyses. I chose textual analysis as a method, rather than content analysis, because it allowed me to evaluate how the data pointed to larger conversations in the homesteading belief system. Furthermore, I chose to analyze blog content rather than interviewing homesteaders because the act of publishing blogs means that this data is available to a wide audience. In other words, I not only find important what the bloggers believe about their homesteading, but also in the fact the bloggers communicate these beliefs to a wide audience via self-published blogs, which gives their work a certain impact.

Although I find importance in how the bloggers present homesteading ideology to a wider audience, I also situate their claims in a wider community of homesteaders who don't blog. For example, Rebecca Kneale Gould, in her book *At Home in Nature*, studies homesteading as a spiritual practice through interviews with homesteaders. I found many

similarities between Gould's participants and the bloggers that I studied, including that they find meaning in embodied practices. Furthermore, books written by homesteaders, including, for example, Shannon Hayes book *Radical Homemaking* serve as important secondary literature throughout my dissertation. Additionally, I looked to other new media formats like the Facebook page "Women who Farm," which highlights short interviews with women homesteaders around the world. This use of secondary literature allowed me to situate the bloggers within a wider homesteading community. I also found particular meaning in knowing these bloggers in my study were constantly presenting their ideas to a wider public and revising their ideas based on feedback from the public.

There are strengths and limitations to my method of analyzing blogs. For example, I only analyze five blogs, which I would not consider a wide range of data. However, I found this method to be useful because it allowed me to engage more deeply with the data and get to know the style and personality of each of the five blogs. Additionally, a program like Nvivo for qualitative data analysis might have streamlined the analysis process rather than using a Microsoft Word document. Although other frameworks could have been equally as useful for analyzing the blogs—for example, I analyze many homesteading practices exclusively from food studies or environmental studies literature—I chose to situate my analysis in a broader body of literature. This decision reflects my training as an interdisciplinary scholar and is intentional to engage in interdisciplinary scholarship.

Ultimately, my study is not an analysis of blogs. Rather, the blogs serve as a starting point to introduce a theory of food consciousness as component of womanist

spiritual activism. The blogs allowed me to study how people who engage with food intensively and extensively think about and experience food. This data then allows me to see the epistemological and ontological shifts that come from working closely with food in everyday life. In the end, my theory of food consciousness extends beyond HFP blogs since I believe that a food consciousness can be developed through practices besides HFP, and because I believe the bloggers are still somewhat limited in their view of the parts of the food system; they do not always understand it as an interconnected assemblage that resists boundaries and hierarchies. My theory of food consciousness, as a component of spiritual activism, asks readers to extend food consciousness beyond what the bloggers espouse in their work.

Scholarly and Everyday Conversations

In order to engage fully with food justice research that specifically centers food justice work, I looked to a variety of voices in the genre of food justice and garden studies and thus build on both scholarly and non-scholarly sources. I engage food justice and garden studies scholars, activists, and journalists. This approach to research has served me best to investigate my research questions because it has allowed me to explore everyday, grassroots work to build just food communities as well as scholarly perspectives. In addition to engaging with food and garden studies to situate my work in existing literature, I also frame my analysis in a field of scholarly theory that I define as “ecowomanist new materialism.” Ecowomanist new materialism combines womanist principles, those that apply specifically to environmental justice, with a New Materialist

belief in nonhuman agency. In this section, I summarize some of the major conversations in food justice, gardening, and ecowomanist New Materialist literature.

Food Justice

The organization Just Food presents what I would consider the most complete definition of food justice. They write, “food justice is communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat [food that is] fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers, and animals.” This definition accurately reflects the complicated combination of concerns that food justice encompasses. Food justice cannot be reached without concern for all aspects of the food system that Just Food lists. In order to work toward ending food injustices, we must be able to see all parts of the food system as intricately connected to each other. Food justice scholarship works both at the level of critique and of imagining alternatives. For example, most food justice scholarship critiques the industrial food system; these critiques are a point of agreement. Scholars diverge when it comes to suggesting alternatives to the unjust industrial food system, although locavorism seems to be the dominant suggested alternative. The bloggers offer another alternative to the industrial food system.

Most food justice scholars acknowledge the intersections that create food injustices; however, different studies highlight different issues, such as health, workers’ rights, environment, or class, which makes the field difficult to define. Food systems, because they are overly complicated, have a wide impact on all parts of the food system. An industrial food system negatively affects all participants along the journey of food

production. Food workers have some of the most harmful jobs because of dangerous pesticides for field workers, dangerous equipment in animal slaughtering, and low pay, along with other issues. An industrial system also negatively impacts the environment because it leads to issues such as deforestation, heavy fuel use and pollution from transporting food, and harmful chemicals and animal waste contamination of land and water. Furthermore, this system produces unhealthy food and low access to healthy or any food for people who are low-income, especially in areas predominantly inhabited by people of color. I advocate for an approach to food justice that centralizes interconnections. This approach is an idea my theoretical framework, ecowomanist new materialism, primarily influences as I consider several aspects of food justice. Such aspects include worker rights, environmental degradation, animal welfare, personal health, food quality, and access through my study of HFP. In order to develop an interconnected approach, I first consider the role of several aspects of food justice separately, as they are reflected in the literature. These aspects include health, access, treatment of food workers, concern for the environment, and advocacy for local food. In other words, I will look at how the differing concerns of food justice work separately, then together.

To begin, health is a major concern for food justice advocates and an aspect of food justice that often gets the most mainstream attention. Many food justice scholars explore how food nutrition has been declining over the last 150 years, and most blame industrialization of the food system for this decline. Industrialization of food affects both growth and distribution of fruits, vegetables, and grains, and factory farming of animals.

Barry Estabrook, in his in-depth study of factory farming of tomatoes, *Tomatoland*, writes:

Today's industrial tomatoes are as bereft of nutrition as they are of flavor. According to analyses conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 100 grams of fresh tomato today has 30 percent less vitamin C, 30 percent less thiamin, 19 percent less niacin, and 62 percent less calcium than it did in the 1960s. But the modern tomato does shame its 1960s counterpart in one area: it contains fourteen times as much sodium. (xiv)

Since, as Estabrook discovered, mass produced tomatoes are picked before they are ripe and then exposed to ethylene gases to artificially ripen them, tomatoes are neither bred for health nor taste, but are instead bred and picked in order to withstand transporting and distributing them across the country. Industrial food systems also rely heavily on processed foods that can be mass-produced and easily stored and shipped. These types of foods, as Thomas Macias points out, have “minimal nutritional value” (1092). Factory farmed meats also suffer nutritional deficiencies for the sake of mass production.

Factory-farmed meats present two major harms to modern diets: rapidly increasing meat consumption and grain-feeding along with hormone use, which leads to higher fat content in farmed meats. The effects on human health of unhealthy characteristics of modern meat are exacerbated by high levels of meat consumption caused by an increase in inexpensive meat, produced through damaging industrial systems. Anthony Winson, in his book, *The Industrial Diet*, points out that “Americans eat almost two hundred pounds in total of red meat, poultry, and fish per capita annually,

most of it produced with the CAFO [Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation] system” (145). Since animals in CAFOs are mass-produced mainly for consumption, their maturation is stimulated through use of hormones in order to increase production and thus increase profit for these CAFOs. The quickened maturation process, and the practice of feeding CAFO animals mostly grain, impacts the overall nutrition of the meat because it increases the fat content.

An industrial food system uses excess resources to meet the needs of people around the world who do not have access to enough food, yet fails to actually provide people around the world with enough food. This is because the capitalist food system provides food for those of higher socio-economic class in the Western world, and fails to provide fresh, healthy food to poor people in the U.S. and abroad. McLeod-Kilmurray points out that “there remain millions of people in the world without adequate food supplies, despite the fact that it is well documented that industrially produced animal products require more inputs of water, grain, and energy than they produce in protein and calories for human consumption” (73). Increased meat consumption requires large inputs of resources, which is unacceptable considering that many communities do not have enough to eat.

Food justice advocates express deep concern regarding low-income communities’ access to healthy foods. Winson reflects on how health and access are tied. He writes:

If this incipient movement [food justice] has a central motif, it may well be that it is oriented to the struggle to ensure that maximizing health, rather than profit making, is the highest priority in the provisioning of food to the various sectors of

society, and *in particular the most vulnerable sectors*, including children and youth, the old and infirm, and those who find themselves economically and socially marginalized. (254, my italics)

Winson's focus on marginalized and low-access communities criticizes mainstream food movements for their tendency to advocate for *choosing* healthy foods as a political statement because this focus on choice reinforces a neoliberal approach to social change. In other words, mainstream food movements claim that people should just choose healthier food to send a message to industrial food companies, which implies that everyone has equal opportunity to simply choose healthier food. As Alkon and Agyeman explain, this rhetoric of "vote with your fork" (2), a popular slogan for food movements, does not take into consideration that low-income communities do not have equal access to these healthy foods. In his article "Growing Food *and* Justice: Dismantling Racism through Sustainable Food Systems," Alfonso Morales writes, "[M]any Americans, particularly low-income people and people of color, are overweight yet malnourished. They face an overwhelming variety of processed foods, but are unable to procure a well-balanced diet from the liquor stores and mini-marts that dominate their neighborhoods. These groups are food insecure, but furthermore, they are victims of food injustice" (149). Morales is referring to what is known in mainstream media as a food deserts. According to the USDA, around 13.6 million people live in areas with low food access ("Definition of Food Deserts" 1). The USDA has linked food deserts to poor diets and, incidentally, diet-related chronic diseases, and thus consider food deserts a public health concern ("Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food" 2–3). By extension, food justice

scholars examine how industrial food production creates injustice for people in multiple ways beyond diet.

One major way: mistreatment of food workers. Industrial food systems create an environment where major corporations who manage industrial food production abuse food workers. These workers are often immigrants and other low-income people of color. A globalized food system relies on exploitative labor practices to produce food cheaply and in large amounts. Food is not the only industrialized system prone to exploitative labor practices like relying heavily on under-paid immigrant workers. Yet the food industry (especially) creates unsafe work environments via pesticides or other chemical-based growth enhancements that present dangers to exposed food workers. To summarize the maltreatment of food workers, Magdoff writes:

Farm workers live daily with chronic exposure to pesticides, the lack of sanitary facilities and clean water, as well as low pay. Whether in the sugarcane fields of Brazil, the new commercial estates of Africa, the oil-palm plantations of Malaysia, or the tomato fields of Florida, farm workers have very little bargaining power and are treated poorly. This includes the workers in the meat and poultry processing facilities who work under unsanitary and harsh conditions. (25–6)

Mistreating farm workers through exposure to chemicals, low pay, and other harsh working conditions has led to major health concerns for these workers. In *Tomatoland*, Estabrook follows a case of several babies who suffered major birth defects after their mothers worked in tomato fields that had recently been sprayed with pesticides (74–95). This is only one of many well-documented cases of workers who suffered health risks

after working near pesticides and other chemicals. Food workers are also subject to violence and poor living conditions by their employers according to Estabrook and many other food justice scholars. While use of pesticides and other chemicals affects workers, it also affects the environment surrounding industrial agriculture and CAFOs.

In addition to health, access to nutritional food, and worker rights, industrial farming and CAFOs also greatly affect the environment. In their book, *Food Justice*, Gottlieb and Joshi claim that, “When food is produced through an industrial system and distributed through a global supply chain, the inputs into food production, processing, and shipping generate enormous environmental stresses that cause pollution of the land, air, rivers, and streams, and place crushing health burdens on farm workers and other food producers” (226). Gottlieb and Joshi highlight the many points of impact on the environment from mass production of food by a few large corporations. Estabrook specifically examined the use of chemicals for growing large amounts of tomatoes and artificially ripening them. He writes, “Not only is methyl bromide a potent poison to humans and wildlife, it is also one of the leading causes of the depletion of the atmosphere’s ozone layer [...the] bromine in methyl bromide is fifty times more destructive to the ozone layer than the chlorine found in chlorofluorocarbons, which have been banned from production since 1996” (51). Estabrook discusses the dangers of methyl bromide on the environment, but that is just one of many harmful chemicals used in industrial food production. Another food justice scholar, Tony Weis, author of *The Ecological Hoofprint*, adds that, “[the] increasing scale and industrialization of livestock production and the inherent feed conversion inefficiencies have a magnifying effect on

the land area, water, energy, and other resources that must be devoted to grain and oilseed monocultures, and to the pollutants and GHG emissions ensuing from them” (9). Both industrial agriculture and industrial livestock contribute to massive environmental ills; food justice advocates point to locally produced food as a solution to these environmental harms. The bloggers I studied also critique the industrial food system in ways similar to both mainstream food justice activism and food justice scholarship. The bloggers discuss industrial food typically in the context of a warning. They present their own HFP as a more mindful, just alternative to a dangerous industrial food system.

Addressing the role of animal ethics in food production is another important aspect of food justice, yet animals have been largely left out of food justice conversations, or relegated to their own bodies of study. For example, Gottlieb and Joshi write, “while animal abuses have gained notable attention and are important, the food justice argument is more comprehensive and systemic when it comes to how food is grown and produced” (38). With this statement as explanation, Gottlieb and Joshi choose not to discuss animal welfare as part of the systemic problems with food justice. These authors do address, though, how industrial agriculture has negative impacts on land, particularly how people lose a sense of connection with land through industrial agriculture. Gottlieb and Joshi seem to be focused on people and their benefits and risks from industrial agriculture, yet they find a relationship between people and land. If sustainable land use and relating to the land are part of food justice, why wouldn’t sustaining and relating to farm animals not also be part of food justice?

I argue that both land and animals are part of the food justice system and are connected to how the food system affects people. For example, animals kept in CAFOs produce large amounts of waste. This waste, which is not dangerous when kept and disposed of in small amounts, is often difficult to handle and ends up in local waterways. The waste pollutes water, which in turn affects wild animals and plant-life. Contaminated water ultimately affects people. These examples show ever-present connections between the ills of an industrial food system. This is a perspective that food justice scholars do not take, or do not discuss as a guiding principle throughout their work. This perspective of interconnectedness influences my reading of the blogs. I argue that by continually discussing the ways in which food justice issues are intricately linked, and by letting such links be a guiding principle for food justice work, we can in turn provide more holistic solutions to food injustice.

The inarguable presence of animals in a food system and the need to include animal studies in food justice aligns with the overall philosophy of an interconnected food system that I and other food justice scholars advocate. As McCance points out, animals are an integral part of our food system and suffer harsh mistreatment because of that system. He writes, “Over 100 million cows, pigs, and sheep are raised and slaughtered in the United States alone each year [as of 2013]; and for poultry the figure is a staggering 5 billion, which means [...] that on our dinner table and in our supermarkets, we are brought into direct touch with the most extensive exploitation of other species that has ever existed” (9–10). Since treatment of animals is an integral part of the food system, my research includes explorations of better treatment for animals as a part of

food justice by analyzing the impacts and motivations of backyard chicken keeping and vegetarianism. Considering animals as part of a larger system relies on a philosophy of interconnectedness in the food system, even when we look at food practices on a very local scale. Such a definition of HFP systems as valuing interconnections will help me analyze the more radical acts of home food production as contributing to food justice.

Scholars laud local food production and see purchasing locally grown food as the solution to the points of oppression I've shown are a part of food justice studies.

Scholarship extensively covers local food as a means to decrease negative environmental impacts of mass food production and inhumane animal treatment, and also reduce the mistreatment of food workers. Most food justice advocates often argue for local food approaches to give low-income communities more autonomy in their food choices, for example.

Alkon and Agyema assert:

Communities of color and poor communities have time and again been denied access to the means of food production, and, due to both price and store location, often cannot access the diet advocated by the food movement. Through food justice activism, low-income communities and communities of color seek to create local food systems that meet their own food needs. (5)

Since low-income communities are often denied access to food that is fresh and culturally appropriate, they have demanded as much through food justice activism. By keeping food access local, low-income communities can more easily have a say in their food choices.

This local approach helps increase access to healthy foods for local communities,

especially those of low-income. Allowing more autonomy for low-income communities is only one example of local food benefits⁶. Locavorism as a priority of food justice overlaps with the bloggers' idea of a more just food system, because locavore scholarship advocates for community gardens.

Food justice scholars centralize concepts of local food community gardens and community garden programs to their solutions for lack of food choice. In her article "Measuring Sustainability Performance of Local Food Production in Home Gardens," Sumita Ghosh writes:

Local food production could contribute meaningfully in improving sustainability performance, food security issues; social connectivity and cohesion; provides [sic] easy access to fresh food; community participation and awareness; providing better nutrition and public health and building stronger local economies (Gaynor 2006, Daniels et al. 2008, Kneafsey et al. 2008). It minimises transport emissions by facilitating shorter food supply chain; efficient resource and energy use; reduces food wastage; improves overall carbon footprints; and facilitates better human –nature interactions for improved biodiversity (Halweil 2002, Gaynor 2006, Daniels et al.2008, Garnett 2011). (4)

Based on the benefits Ghosh lists, it's understandable that more local community garden-grown food, produced through work and advocacy, is the main goal for most food justice movements, and that food justice scholars endorse that goal. I agree that community

⁶ For more about the potential benefits of local food: Fitzgerald, Kathleen J. "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally." *Humanity and Society* 40.1 (2016): 3–21.

gardens and their support have an important impact on food justice work. Although there is extensive research on community gardens and other organized local food projects, there is little scholarship in the food justice field exploring home gardens/home food production's impact on food justice, which would undoubtedly still fall under the local food category and include all the benefits Ghosh lists. In order to introduce home gardens into food justice work, I turn to the work of garden studies scholars.

Garden Studies

What I define as garden studies consists of a body of writing that critically analyzes the interconnected relationships people have to the land, nature, and animals through gardening. Since the bloggers' main practice is through gardening, garden studies provides a useful framework for analyzing gardening as a means to develop more mindful relationships with food. This field typically intersects with other fields. It explores both food-growing and leisure gardening flowers and non-food plants. Brooks defines gardening as "The actions by a person to nurture plants, to shape and develop, or just to encourage what grows" ("The Virtues of Gardening" 14). She elaborates, explaining gardening is an intervention that improves the natural environment, "such that after gardening intervention, it is in a better state than before, or perhaps in a similar state—rather than the impoverished one that would have resulted from our lack of intervention" (15). In other words, human intervention in nature is considered gardening, whether planting seeds, trimming, watering, mulching, or fertilizing. Whether Brooks believes that nature is inherently impoverished without human intervention or if humans have set it up for impoverishment through poor stewardship practices is unclear. The

main point I take from this definition of gardening is that humans must become respectful and helpful members in a system of growing. Furthermore, this intervention must work with natural processes for the betterment of the environment as a whole. Scholarship that explores gardening centers the relationship between humans and the environment as they contribute to the positive growth of plants. Interconnections shape these relationships.

Interconnectivity emerges as a major theme in gardening scholarship because of a garden's synergistic nature. Micro-organisms work in communion with each other to generate movement and change in the garden. Soil, seeds, water, and insects, for example, work together to make it possible for each to survive. Without one part of the system, the others would not thrive. Lacy, a gardening writer, claims that the pleasure of gardening has "to do with connections, but with experiencing them, rather than merely observing, perceiving, or knowing about them" (186). In other words, it does not do to simply observe how worms and soil work together to grow a green bean; a gardener places themselves⁷ within the system, as well. Although Lacy does not claim so, other scholars specifically include humans in this synergistic relationship. Flores also emphasizes relationships when she encourages gardeners to recognize the gardens' and gardeners' interconnectivity with the larger community. She writes, "The ecological gardener assumes that every garden is linked with the larger community, which includes not just the natural setting but also the social and economic cycles within" (160).

⁷ I use plural pronouns in order to remain inclusive of all gender identities.

Through recognizing and appreciating relationships, gardeners engage with the environment for the betterment of the entire community, which includes plants.

Gardening scholarship, centered on relationships, emphasizes union with the environment, specifically through discussions of land. Enrique Salmón, a food justice scholar whose work engages deeply with growing food, explores Indigenous relationships to the land in his book, *Eating the Landscape*. He explores the sustainable relationship humans uphold through interaction with land and food growing, which is why I chose to include his work among garden studies scholars. He argues that “Native agriculture has mostly been low impact. It has normally worked in concert with systems that mimic natural processes. As a result, soils maintain their nutrient value and, most important, their microfungi, which act to bind and rebuild soil nutrients” (43). By emphasizing systems and working within systems of nature sans exploitation, Salmón values Indigenous knowledge because it gives people a just way to relate to the environment. Similarly, Caroline Brazier emphasizes the mutuality of working with the land: “In coming to love our local environments, we begin to live in ways which support them rather than undermining them. Ultimately, this kind of work may be as effective in bringing about a planetary change of consciousness as more direct communication of political and social messages. A change of heart leads to a change in action” (16). Engagement with land, with particular care for the environment, is an important aspect of finding connections with the earth. Gardening scholarship in general posits that through gardening, we are better able to develop relationships with the land. The types of relationships these scholars advocate for, those that value connecting and caring for the

land through conscious and reflective engagement with the environment, are relationships I also saw the bloggers striving to create. Root Simple claim that “our daily decisions shape the natural world around us” (“We Are All Gardeners” 4/2/15). Tenth Acre gives extensive advice regarding providing for beneficial insects through gardening choices (“Fall Blooming Flowers”). I discuss more examples of how the bloggers seek to deepen their relationships with nature through gardening in my fourth chapter.

In developing relationships with nature, gardening encourages caring for the land, which is bound up in the idea that gardening is focused on giving and maintaining life. Heather Ovkat studied gardening as a therapeutic technique and found that “leisure gardeners reported on their relationship with nature as one that involved caring, committed, mutual, and intimate connections, not only with other people, but also with nature” (378). By caring for the environment, gardeners can appreciate their role in maintaining the life of the plant. Gardeners get deep satisfaction out of their relationships with plants because, as Lacy points out, “being wholeheartedly involved with gardens is involvement with life itself in the deepest sense” (190).

Besides a focus on nature-human relationships, garden scholarship has defined gardening as socially healing. Gardening provides people agency in their own communities and empowers them to make positive changes in those communities to support both the environment and people. Gardening can be especially empowering for marginalized people. Monica Smith, author of “Sisters of the Soil,” which explores a Detroit-based, Black women-organized gardening project, claims that “gardening in the city is an undeniable, everyday act of resistance” (20). Will Allen, a Black food and

garden activist in Milwaukee, claims that “planting a small garden in your yard can provide the self-respect of being a little more self-sufficient in a world where we often are made to feel powerless victims of the Dow Jones Industrial average, or the rise and fall of oil prices, or the employment market, or the fates of large corporations” (249). Gardening becomes a way for marginalized communities to take control of their own environment in a positive way. Importantly, gardening, as George McKay points out, is “praxis” (10). It is an active practice that can represent both resistance to unjust systems as well as creation of more positive systems, which the bloggers worked actively to create.

Ecowomanist New Materialism

In order to analyze the blogs, I use a field of theory that I define as ecowomanist new materialism. This area of theory is in part an amalgam of ecofeminism, womanism, and new materialism; however, I am not simply combining parts from all three theories. Instead, I have chosen and named this area of theory because there exist ecology, womanist, and New Materialist scholars whose work finds common ground. By merging ecowomanism with new materialism, I am able to more deeply explore the link between ecological justice and important aspects of New Materialist scholarship: a questioning of a human-centered framework and valuing of nonhuman agency. I begin a brief explanation of these important aspects of new materialism before incorporating them with ecowomanist scholarship.

I specifically focus on two characteristics of new materialism: attention to nonhuman matter and ontology. It specifically explores a way of being that recognizes

the ability of matter to move without and within constant enmeshment with humans. Considering definition alone, one could argue that new materialism is not new as a field of study (new materialism shares many Indigenous theory concepts); however, the naming of attention to this matter is fairly new and simultaneously manifold; it is a theory that goes by many names. At its core, new materialism is defined by a recognition that matter has agency. Diane Coole and Samantha Frost go further: “Materiality is always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (9). Activity and agency, then, characterize matter for New Materialists.

Jane Bennett and Karen Barad both focus on matter, or nonhuman objects, to theorize that matter has agency. Matter moves in ways that affect humans. Barad argues that matter is agential in its movement. She writes, “*matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity*” (822, her italics). In other words, matter is inherently agential in that it is in constant motion; it moves as it interacts with other matter. Bennett theorizes similarly that nonhuman objects are active and moving, and argues that humans and nonhumans are permeable with the same kind of agential energy. She concluded her book *Vibrant Matter* with what she calls a “kind of Nicene Creed [or profession of faith] for would-be vital materialists”:

I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually *doing things*. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and

that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. (122)

Bennett believes that matter has energy and agency—the same kind of energy and agency as humans—that the world is constantly in motion as this one matter-energy animates all of us. Although Bennett specifically argues against equating this animating matter-energy with spirit, she culminates her book with a profession of faith. Coole and Frost leave room for discussions of spirit, writing “in this monolithic but multiply tiered [New Materialist] ontology, there is no definitive break between sentient and nonsentient entities or between material and spiritual phenomena” (10). Anzaldúa’s and Maparyan’s theories of spirit-stuff nonetheless work toward similar purposes as new materialism. New materialism, however, is not generally situated within a spiritual context. Womanism centralizes spirituality and, more specifically and importantly for my research, theorizes a concept of interconnectedness. Both advocate for unseating hierarchies that would place humans as more important than matter or the environment and that both types of theories can be used toward ecological justice. Combined, then, Ecowomanism new materialism recognizes matter agency and approaches this theory through spirit.

Womanist theory is sometimes defined as Africana Womanism; however, Western Black women have explored other applications and implications of Womanism. Clenora Hudson-Weems, for example, explains that Africana Womanism is “grounded in African culture” and is “separate from both White feminism and Black feminism” (10). Despite Hudson-Weems’ insistence that Africana Womanism is for African women,

black scholars have used womanism as a theoretical framework, rooted in spirituality, to address concerns of black women more generally. Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd and Evelyn Simien claim that “the master narrative and characteristics upon which [Africana Womanism] is based [...] fail to join theory with practice and depend on an ahistoric, monolithic view of African cultures” (68). Other womanist scholars who use Africana Womanism as a foundation to develop a more inclusive theory share Alexander-Floyd and Simien’s critique of Africana Womanism as limiting to Black women.

Layli Maparyan’s definition of womanism, which I use most heavily, is careful to acknowledge the academic roots of womanism as well as the everyday work of women of color, while expanding the breadth of womanism to include the entire universe. Important to my study, Maparyan uses spirituality as a method to address social injustice. Through her acknowledgement that everyday women have created the womanist idea from their work “‘out there’ in the ‘real world,’” Maparyan also argues that “Womanism is a gift to the world from women of color[,]” and she invites “all who are attracted to the womanist idea to the table of discourse and action” (*The Womanist Idea* 31–32). Maparyan’s invitation for all to explore womanist discourse does not mean that scholars should embrace womanism without historicizing its roots. My definition of ecowomanism relies heavily on Maparyan’s definition. You could even say this dissertation uses a Maparyanist theoretical framework, rather than a womanist framework. However, as Maparyan is careful to root her theory in the history and work of women of color, I want to acknowledge that her theory is rooted in the everyday struggles of women of color

who have developed spiritually-based, everyday strategies to work toward a more just world. My own argument further explores the value of such everyday work.

My understanding of womanism relies heavily on Maparyan's concentration of spirituality as a way of working toward social justice goals. Spirituality for social justice is particularly effective because a general belief of a higher power that is religiously pluralistic empowers social justice work with a moral framework. Harvey, Johnson, and Heath claim that spirituality "fosters a sense of meaning, purpose, and mission in life. In turn, this relationship produces fruit (such as altruism, love, or forgiveness) that has a discernable effect on an individual's relationship to self, nature, others, and the ultimate" (62). Melanie L. Harris similarly claims that through womanism, "scholars have raised important questions of how communal love points to a moral imperative for Earth justice" (108). For womanists, a love for all things guides a moral center that spirituality creates, linking love and spirituality. Through spirituality, a moral center guides social justice work that allows a person to live their activism through everyday practices. Since moral purpose grounds these actions, they are especially effective in shifting our individual actions toward collective justice. I chose womanism as a framework for my analysis because of this moral center, whereas a concept such as ecofeminism relies heavily on critique in comparing environmental degradation to patriarchy.

Ecowomanism and New materialism separately explore themes that include spirituality, interrelations to the earth, cosmic citizenship, agency of matter and nonhuman animals, ecological healing, and everyday intentionality. The main commonality that links these two fields of scholarship is an attention to interconnection,

specifically an interconnectedness that values human and nonhuman agency. Both ecowomanism and new materialism use interconnection as an underlying belief that shapes how scholars explore the other themes I have listed. By combing these fields into ecowomanist new materialism, I hope to draw particular attention to the value of interconnection as a spiritual concept, specifically when analyzing HFP. The following section briefly explores these major characteristics major scholars that I name as ecowomanist new materialists define.

Layli Maparyan defines ecowomanism as follows:

Ecowomanism is a social change perspective based on a holistic perception of creation encompassing humans and all living organisms plus the nonliving environment and the spirit world. The focus of ecowomanism is healing and honoring this collective human-environmental-spiritual superorganism through intentional social and environmental rebalancing as well as the spiritualization of human practices. Ecowomanism assumes that this superorganism has been wounded by careless human endeavor and that this damage hurts humans, animals, plants, and the nonliving environment—and offends the spirit(s).

(“Veganism and Ecowomanism” 422)

Maparyan’s ecowomanism values care for the environment, which is reliant on the well-being of people. She sees spirit as the link between humans and the environment and believes in holistic healing that encompasses humans, animals, the environment, and the spiritual realm. Ecowomanism is broader than ecofeminism, which, according to Chaone Mallory, “hold[s] that in order to ensure the survival and flourishing of all life systems on

the planet, the patriarchally identified values of domination, exploitation, and control that condition western attitudes toward nature must be replaced with the more life-sustaining feminist values of nurturance, care, and reciprocity” (176). Mallory cites patriarchal principles of domination, exploitation, and control as the cause of the degradation of the environment and animals as well as the oppression of marginalized people. Both ecofeminism and ecowomanism link the well-being of the planet, specifically the environment, with the well-being of people. Maparyan’s ecowomanism, however, moves beyond the assumption that patriarchy is the main principle in reproducing oppression. Furthermore, Maparyan sees this caring work as a spiritual endeavor that imbues all parts of the environment with spirit.

By recognizing that humans and the earth are connected through spirit, womanist scholars become motivated to perform the spiritual work of shifting their consciousness to more ecological consciousness, or more awareness about these spiritual connections to the planet. Anzaldúa’s theories fit my definition of womanism because she perceives her human coupling to the natural world as spiritual. She writes, “Often nature provokes un ‘aja, or ‘conocimiento,’ one that guides your feet along the path, gives you el animo to dedicate yourself to transforming perceptions of reality, and thus the conditions of life [...] You experience nature as ensouled, as sacred” (“now let us shift” 540). Anzaldúa’s use of both “ensouled” and “sacred” espouse a spiritual understanding of the world. Ensouled relates to the idea of matter agency in that nature has an inner force, whereas sacred values this soul as something divine that must be appreciated. To Anzaldúa, *conocimiento*, which she defines as a multi-stage transformational epistemology and

consciousness, is incomplete without developing an ecological consciousness, or as she later describes, motivation “to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, or ocean—to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing [people and the environment]” (“now let us shift” 558). Once humans are able to recognize the spiritual correlation between the well-being of humans and the rest of the planet, they can develop what Maparyan defines as “global society” and “planetary citizenship” or even “cosmic citizenship” (*The Womanist Idea* 4). This belief in the spirit of all things resembles a New Materialist belief in monist, nonhuman agency.

By looking at a womanist definition of spirit, I argue that womanist spirit and nonhuman agency, as Barad and Bennet theorize it, are similar enough to combine them for food/environmental justice purposes. By combining the concept of nonhuman agency with ecowomanism, I may push further this idea of interconnection that Maparyan centralizes. If all matter has agency, then all matter is, undoubtedly, interconnected. This interconnectedness paints a clearer picture of a synergetic system: each part is moving and mutually affecting. By considering spirit or energetic agency as a commonality in all things, people may be more likely to develop more just relationships with the earth because they value its livelihood. Maparyan defines spirit as that which is alive and active in everything. She writes, “Spirit is what is ‘real’: it is at the bottom of things or what is behind everything. In addition to being the basis of life, that is, alive, spirit is full of power, beauty, and splendor, and its qualities transcend or exceed what is typically visible or manifest at the mundane level of life” (*The Womanist Idea* 34). Later, she claims that “spirit is energy, energy is spirit” (35). I interpret Maparyan’s definition of

spirit as that which energizes all beings and makes them alive. This definition fits within Bennett's theory that material objects are alive and that the environment and the world around us are agential. Both agency and spirit can be used to argue for a relationship to earth that values it as living, because both words imply its energetic livelihood.

Ecowomanism relates to blogging in that it values community-building, especially interspecies/inter-object communities. These communities work interconnectedly; every piece of the community affects every other. To ensure a valuable and just community, Maparyan suggests practicing harmony within communities. She writes, "Harmony as a womanist value refers to positive and mutually enhancing interrelationships among various subgroups or entities comprising a community or ecosystem" (*The Womanist Idea* 45). My exploration of blogging and food production as community building includes this goal of harmonizing. For example, Tenth Acre often writes about "Community fellowship." She upholds this aspect of the specific gardening philosophy by meeting people in her community ("Growing Community"), sharing some of her harvest with neighbors ("Parkway Planting"), and by blogging ("About Me").

Lastly, ecowomanist new materialism values everyday activism that has intentionality. In other words, ecowomanist new materialism values the *intentional* everyday practice of working toward shifting consciousness to recognize the interconnections between humans and the environment for a more socially/ecologically just world. A. Breeze Harper, in her essay exploring veganism in Black communities, claims that paying particular attention to oppressions perpetuated through food choices encouraged her to "take on other intentional practices that prepare me for living in a more

balanced and sustainable way with a more populated and interconnected global human society” (633). Harper’s engagement with food, especially in relation to black identity and oppression, make her food-related ideas useful to how I define ecowomanist new materialism. Her argument for intentionality specifically related to food gives me a starting place for including food in an ecowomanist framework. Furthermore, this intentionality fits well within an ecowomanist new materialism framework that values the everyday work of shifting consciousness, since to intentionally find cause/effect between your actions and the impacts on the environment (and vice versa) helps people work toward more ecological justice and earth healing through a theory of interconnectedness. This type of everyday activism is different than the definition most food studies scholars use.

Spiritual Activism

Food justice scholars have defined direct action to address food injustice. Alison Hope Alkon and Kari Marie Norgaard define food and environmental activists as “actors working through such diverse strategies as direct marketing initiatives (farmers markets and community-supported agriculture), urban and/or self-sufficient production (urban farms, community and backyard gardens), and policy work (food policy councils, attempts to influence the farm bill)” (291). Alkon and Norgaard’s use of the word “actor” to describe activists is notable, because it restricts activism to direct action. Tsui et. al, also describe the activist work of the Health Equality Project, which focused on food. The specific work of this project included “interactive workshops on neighborhood health disparities, food environments, and health outcomes; food- focused research projects

conducted by youth; and small-scale action projects designed to change local food environments” (819). In other words, activists take direct, public action to address these issues, and these actions are outcome based.

I use the Anzaldúa’s concept of spiritual activism as a descriptor of the type of activism food bloggers represent. Keating defines Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism as “spirituality for social change, spirituality that posits a relational worldview and uses this holistic worldview to transform one’s self and one’s worlds” (54). Although spiritual activism includes the personal, individual work of self-care, such as “using spiritual tools to cope with [...] tendencies toward self-destructiveness, feelings of betrayal and powerlessness, and poverty of spirit and imagination” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 572), it also “intertwines ‘inner works’ with ‘public acts,’ private concerns with social issues” (57). Keating continues: “Indeed, this simultaneous attention to personal and collective issues/concerns is a vital component in spiritual activism” (57). Akasha Gloria Hull, furthermore, explains how personal/spiritual and social/political work are always intertwined. She writes:

Being spiritual is also a legitimate way to participate in social struggle. If being spiritual means meditating to make connection with the larger self that is part and parcel of the greatest whole, and trying to see, feel, and know our oneness with it; if being spiritual means going to therapy in order to feel and heal our own pain so that we can identify with and heal the pain of others; if it means traveling to Machu Picchu or Egypt to enlarge our vision of the world beyond our own backyards, money worries, and personal problems; if being spiritual means taking

up Tibetan Buddhism to open our hearts and minds so that we are moved to alleviate suffering and misery wherever we encounter it, in whatever way we can; if it means seeking transcendent merging with the whole so that we no longer name as “other” those who are different from us and those whose life scripts challenge us to get outside our own comfort zones; if it means doing yoga to reduce the stress and tension ballooning inside us so that we can open our eyes to the world around us and really be present in it; if it means visualizing our health and prosperity as pieces of the health and prosperity of every living being; if being spiritual means all of these kinds of things, then, surely, it is a more-than-legitimate way to participate in struggle. Unfortunately, the service aspect of spirituality is glaringly absent from too many spiritual books and activities. Nurturing such a broadly conceived spirituality, we would, I believe, find ourselves acting politically—that is, spontaneously intervening in situations where detrimental inequities of power and privilege are operating, and doing so in ever more creative and effective ways. By so doing, we move from politics to spirituality to creativity, and back again to politics, with not only our flesh-and-blood identities but also our breath-and-spirit soul selves engaged. (7)

Womanist spiritual activism is a particularly useful framework in which to place the food justice work of the bloggers because it, unlike other theoretical frameworks, centralizes interconnectivity. The interconnectivity ecowomanist New Materialist scholars, including Anzaldúa, theorize works within a spiritual belief-system, because the radical, extensive interconnections that the scholars describe are not seen, but rather felt and imagined.

In my analyses of these blogs, I choose to define activism in everyday terms, freeing it from only public or visible action or only on behalf of certain issues. In other words, activist work can take place in the daily practices of people who pay close attention to their interconnections to the world around them. I borrow Patricia Hill Collins' description of "Black Women's activist tradition" as everyday work that ensures the health and well-being of self, families, and communities (and I would add nonhuman animal and nature/object communities) (*Black Feminist Thought* 139; Maparyan, *Womanist Idea* 44). I also use Maparyan's description of womanist methodology to further expand the scope of activism:

Womanist methodology (womanist methods for changing the world and the logic behind them) emanates from a deep love and concern for humanity that originates in love and concern for our family, friends, and loved ones, our communities, the natural environment, and the spirit world. Our motivation is the healing and wellness of the world [...] Womanist methods capitalize on everyday interactions in everyday spaces and places, and maintain a grassroots quality regardless of the social status of the actor. (*The Womanist Idea* 84–85)

In other words, activism can be the outer work, the everyday work, and the one-time or more sporadic actions that a person engages in to work toward a healed world. We gain a richer sense of activism when also considering its manifestations as "inner work," such as, "changed hearts and minds" (*The Womanist Idea* 52). Maparyan explains,

Any farmer knows that the quality of seed and soil (and water and light) determines the quality of the eventual crop [...] Why should it be any different for

the conditions of the larger society and the natural environment? Tracing the origins of social and environmental problems back to their roots in terms of human thought and feeling leads to the opportunity to rework the ground-level platforms of human experience. (*The Womanist Idea* 51–2)

The bloggers in my study combine personal, public, everyday, and more sporadic undertakings to address food injustice. They use everyday food practice to see the interconnections between themselves and the entire food system. For example, Root Simple write in their book:

We wanted to show how many of these [home food production] projects are interdependent and interrelated, how tools and skills from one project apply to and are expanded upon in another, because that is the nature of the home arts. For instance, if you're growing your own vegetables, you'll end up with a lot of vegetable scraps and trimmings, which should be composted, because you'll need compost to grow more vegetables. Compost becomes vegetables and vegetables become compost. (2)

Root Simple view their work as home food producers not as separate projects, but as a single, interrelated act of production. Although Root Simple and the other bloggers in my study do not specifically describe themselves as activists—perhaps because the term is often restricted to direct action—they enact a food-centric spiritual activism by engaging deeply with their food, considering carefully their relationships to food and an interconnected food system, and purposely creating communities that also value food consciousness.

My dissertation follows a nonlinear cycle of a home food practice and the intertwined personal/social being theme. The bloggers, and others who wish to deepen their relationships with food, work continuously to build a food consciousness that values self-care and personal growth, caring for others and building community, food agency, and nurturing the environment. First, I discuss the ways the bloggers use their personal relationships with food for developing self-awareness about their own role in an interconnected food system. Through their everyday interactions with food, the bloggers can contribute to the oppression of the environment, animals, food itself, and food workers, or they can begin to develop strategies to reduce their personal contributions to these injustices. The bloggers develop more just relationships by finding ways to understand how they are enmeshed in their food despite a food system determined to disconnect people from their food source. Thus, the bloggers develop a sense of how they are only one part of an interconnected system. The bloggers, although sometimes stuck in the personal or inner works aspects of spiritual activism, also do work to address food injustice in a collective sense by writing about (and encouraging others to develop) a more just food consciousness through their blogs; by taking direct action, like changing their personal consumption patterns and creating community gardens; and by finding and creating communities dedicated to spreading food justice awareness.

Overview

I have divided my dissertation into four chapters that explore separate but interconnected parts of a more just food system. Each chapter relates back to my main research questions: How does producing food at home shift the relationships between

humans, food, animals, and the environment? How does HFP shift the blogger/gardener's understanding and ways of being with food? In what ways does HFP challenge the typical industrial food system? How does HFP contribute to food justice? The four chapters overlap and converge in many places because it is impossible to explore any part of food/environmental activism without including the others. I have also divided the dissertation into two parts: the first focuses on people, while the second focuses on nonhuman animals and objects. This organization is not meant to separate humans and nonhumans, but rather to build on a human framework, which is more familiar, so I may explore human kinship with nonhuman animals and objects.

In Chapter I, I argue that the bloggers pay close attention to shifting consciousness, which is central to their food justice work through HFP. They advocate for: imagining new and creative alternatives to food production, embracing old knowledge and creating new knowledge around food production, and practicing mindful consumption by considering how everyday food choices engross each person in an interconnected food system. Thus, I argue, that the bloggers question their relationship in this food system and consider carefully their own actions in this interconnected system. The first chapter uses the ecowomanist New Materialist framework of inner work and provides a basis for the next three chapters by constructing food consciousness as the spiritually activist goal of home food production. The inner work to build food consciousness is the first step; the second is to coalesce with other people around the world.

In Chapter II, I move from inner work of building food consciousness to outer work of reducing harm to food laborers and building more just food communities. I examine how the bloggers consider their relationships with people across the world by exploring two complex areas. First, how food indicts the bloggers to the exploitation of food workers and low access to food for underprivileged communities. Second, how food can alternately build positive communities that focus on more just food practices. This chapter relies on the ecowomanist New Materialist concept of everyday activism. I examine how a theory of interconnectedness can help us spiritually identify with people around the world from our own homes through everyday HFP work. I then analyze the bloggers' relationship with other people assuming that food consciousness allows us to impact people in different locations without ever having met them.

In Chapter III I rely mostly on a New Materialist framework, but am also influenced by ecowomanism. I claim that the bloggers see food as agential, which helps them break down the hierarchy between themselves and nonhuman objects, leading to more positive growing techniques that do not rely on controlling food crops. Viewing food as agential, I argue, helps bloggers see themselves as part of an interconnected assemblage with their food. The bloggers engage with the materiality of food in ways that are both helpful and restrictive to reframing human/food relationships. They attempt to break down the hierarchy that places humans above material food, and thus material food as the property of humans for manipulation. The bloggers also, however, set purity boundaries around food by claiming that certain types of food are more natural, which plays into a human/nature binary. The bloggers' relationship with food, then, is

confounded by their struggle to reframe and recreate food/human and whole/fake (as they deem it) food hierarchies.

In Chapter IV, I examine how the bloggers relate to and interact with animals and the environment. I claim the bloggers see their role in the relationships with animals and the environment as complicated by a desire for caretaking and an acknowledgement that animals and nature are outside of their control. Using the ecowomanist New Materialist concept of nurturance to analyze the bloggers' discussions of animals and the land, I argue that the bloggers encourage finding balance with animals and the environment. Finding balance relates back to the idea of a cyclical relationship between humans and nonhumans. Humans must enter the food system as active participants, yet find a way to do so that ensures the well-being of the entire planet.

Shifting consciousness through home food production is an important foundational argument to my dissertation. Therefore, I begin with this idea in Chapter I. Each chapter builds on the idea of working with food as it grows, and rethinking our relationship with the food system through this practice. The first chapter, which can roughly be described as the inner work, in Anzaldúan terms, lays the foundation for a food practice that breaks free from the status quo industrialized system and imagines an alternative way to be with food, animals, and the environment.

CHAPTER I

BUILDING FOOD CONSCIOUSNESS

The bloggers engage in food activism through inner work that encourages more mindfulness, and the enjoyment, fulfillment, and spiritualization of food production. By prioritizing self-care and healing through everyday practices, the bloggers focus on self-change or shifting consciousness. Furthermore, the bloggers' attention to self-care is often linked to their food justice work. Inner and outer work, then, are cyclical. I focus on the inner work the bloggers engage in, and argue that bringing more personal awareness to their everyday interactions with food is a spiritual practice. This spiritual practice opens the bloggers to a potential shift in consciousness about the interconnectedness of the food system that can lead to more just food choices. In other words, inner work has the potential to shift one's food consciousness and can have an outward effect on food justice around the world.

Self-change, I posit along with other scholars, is an integral part of community work. Other scholars in women's studies and womanism also make the argument that self-work must be part of social justice work. This idea comes from perceiving self-care as personal healing and as practical. Catherine G. Valentine writes, "We can't change society without changing ourselves, and we can't change ourselves without recognizing our embeddedness and interconnections in social and environmental structures and processes" (5). To Valentine, community work is incomplete without self-change or attention to a personal consciousness because, according to Valentine, without personal

change toward more peaceful and just worldviews, our work within a larger community will always be incomplete (5–6). Maparyan also links inner work to spirituality, writing, “When we design social or ecological change activities, we do so in ways that help participants or beneficiaries tap into their own Divinity and power, thus creating spiritual sustainability” (*The Womanist Idea* 129). The work to heal one’s self and shift one’s own consciousness toward contributing to global healing is a spiritual endeavor that links people to the interconnected world in various ways. I understand this idea of healed self to mean that cultivating a healed spirit that runs through everyone and everything can create enough positive energy to heal the planet. This claim influences my exploration of the bloggers’ inner work.

By defining spirituality as a specific way of being in and interacting with the world, I argue that engaging in everyday spiritual practices affects a person’s consciousness, allowing an opportunity for an epistemological shift. Further, by recognizing the interconnectedness between ourselves and the world around, we can bring more meaning to the work we do to heal our spirits. Ultimately, by doing the work of mindful everyday interactions with the world, we find new, spiritual, ways of seeing it. Gloria Anzaldúa’s explanation in her book *Light in the Dark* Influences my definition of spirituality. She writes:

Spirituality is an ontological belief in the existence of things outside the body (exosomatic), as opposed to the belief that material reality is a projection of mentally created images [...] Spirituality is a symbology system, a philosophy, a worldview, a perspective, and a perception. Spirituality is a different kind and

way of knowing. It aims to expand perception; to become conscious, even in sleep; to become aware of the interconnections between all things by attaining a grand perspective. (Loc. 1382)

Anzaldúa claims that spirituality is both an ontological and epistemological belief. We find new knowledge in our ways of being. It seems, to me, that the ontology influences or perhaps even creates the ways of knowing. Because of daily practices that the bloggers feel in their bodies and being, they create new knowledge about food. Anzaldúa continues, “One finds one’s way to spirit through woundings, through nature, through reading, through actions, through discovering new approaches to problems” (loc. 1384–85). Perhaps, then, through engaging with the everyday practices of home food production that pay attention to connectedness with the universe, we can shift our perspectives and find solutions to the problems of violence within the industrial food system.

People may create a food consciousness by immersing themselves in the interconnections between people, animals, and the environment, and by giving attention to the ethics of food choices within this interconnected worldview. By placing ourselves as part of this system and continuously engaging with food systems’ interconnectedness, we can, ideally, engage in everyday activities that value the well-being of all parts of the system. Mindful engagement in food interactions leads to a food consciousness shift. Schipper defines raising our consciousness as “undergoing a shift in our understanding of reality” (191). More specifically, I see the bloggers in my study developing what Rifkin

describes as a “biospheric consciousness,” or a coming into awareness of our interconnections with and personal responsibility to the entire planet. He writes,

If every human life, the species as a whole, and all other life forms are entwined with one another and with the geochemistry of the planet in a rich and complex choreography that sustains life itself, then we are all dependent on and responsible for the health of the whole organism. Carrying out that responsibility means living out our individual lives in our neighborhoods and communities in ways that promote the general well-being of the larger biosphere within which we dwell.
(598–99)

Combining Schipper’s and Rifkin’s comments, a biospheric consciousness shift requires that we understand reality in terms of Earth community, or a community that includes all humans and nonhumans. This requires that we develop compassionate and mutually respecting relationships with the non-human world.

Developing more mindful ways of interacting with food in particular can lead to raising/shifting consciousness. The everyday work to continuously engage with and decide on the most ethical food decisions, along with the material-bodily work of growing or otherwise producing food at home is the work of building a more mindful food consciousness. Schipper writes, “Collective public mindfulness practices focus not on changing a particular social institution or system, but rather on collectivity waking up and helping others to awaken to the disturbing realities that our contemporary ways of living create” (189–90). Widening consciousness through constant awareness of

interconnections among people, food, and the environment can lead to more mindful decisions that could have positive effects on the entire food system.

In order to argue that growing food at home is a spiritual pursuit, I engage with Buddhist and Hindu scholarship that centers mindfulness and ahimsa. Parth Parihar, a Hindu environmental activist and mathematics scholar, defines ahimsa as non-harm. More specifically, according to Parihar, ahimsa is a consciousness about how our individual everyday actions affect every part of the environment. The second important aspect of ahimsa is consciously shifting those actions toward reducing as much harm as possible to the world around us (39). He writes,

In asking us to make a commitment, [ahimsa] invites us to rethink our learned behaviors on our own, thus allowing environmental stewardship to become rooted in the way we organize our daily lives and calibrate our choices. It is this relearning, rethinking, and reinvigorating of a broader concept of ahimsa that could plant the seeds for a spiritually rooted Hindu environmentalism to flourish in the future. (39)

Parihar believes that applying the Hindu concept of ahimsa is an important step in rooting environmental stewardship in spirituality because this concept can help people rethink their daily choices and activities in relationship to the environment, and change their actions toward environmental healing. Parihar's vision for ahimsa-influenced environmentalism overlaps with the Buddhist concept of mindfulness in his attention to consciousness. Jeff Wilson defines mindfulness as "simply observing changes as they occur within oneself or in one's environment" (217). Additionally, Germer writes that

mindfulness can be used “to describe a theoretical construct (mindfulness), the practice of cultivating mindfulness (such as meditation) or a psychological process (being mindful)” (6). Germer’s definition influences my own application of mindfulness in that I see mindfulness in all three ways that he describes, but I especially explore mindfulness as a psychological process. I apply the term mindfulness to the bloggers’ food work as a practice. Similar to Belinda Khong, and a bit different than Germer, I see the bloggers using mindfulness as rooted in everyday practices. Khong writes, “The practice of mindfulness is not confined to when one is meditating [...] It is intimately connected with the joys and sorrows of daily living, its activities, dilemmas, and intellectual occupations” (122). Through cultivating deep awareness, or mindfulness, about their role in an interconnected food system, the bloggers develop deeper understandings about their relationships in this system.

Scholars have also argued, similar to what the bloggers believe, that increased awareness connected to spirituality—and sometimes to specific religious beliefs—can contribute to ecological awareness and more just relationships with the nature. Parihar argues that ahimsa “calls us to a deeper mindfulness about the environment and a community-based commitment to environmental stewardship” (39). Additionally, Ahern describes three important “premises of ecological spirituality: our interdependence with all life forms, the transience of selves, and the value of each living being, a value which is grasped through our communion with all things and persons” (221). This ecological spirituality comes from raising our consciousness about our connections to all parts of the

world. Increased awareness and deep listening, or listening with respect, then, helps develop an ecological spirituality.

Although scholars describe the implications of using mindfulness in various ways, they generally agree that mindfulness is about being present and aware in each moment. Khong, a mindfulness scholar, describes mindfulness as deep, non-judging awareness. She quotes Gunaratana who “explains that mindfulness involves ‘the ability to see things as they really are... to give bare attention and just looking at whatever comes up in the mind, or in each situation as it occurs’” (122). In other words, mindfulness means being aware of whatever comes up before trying to change or reinterpret it based on personal feelings or emotions. Mindfulness “nurtures greater awareness, clarity and acceptance of present moment’s reality” by encouraging a person to see reality before reacting to it (Khong 122). Mindfulness encourages acceptance of outer and inner reality. Khong writes, “mindfulness entails cultivating constant awareness to what is ‘actually happening to us and in us’ moment by moment” (122). Practicing mindfulness means bringing non-reacting awareness to each present moment in order to see reality inside and out. My definition of mindfulness combines deep presence with daily actions, influenced by Saba Mahmood’s argument about religiosity. She writes, “belief is the product of outward practices, rituals, and acts of worship rather than simply an expression of them” (xv). By this, Mahmood means that religious actions make a religious person. I am influenced by this argument to say that mindfulness comes from mindful practices.

Although I use the terms “mindfulness” and “ahimsa” in a way that contextualizes their religious roots, it’s also important to acknowledge that these religious concepts can

be and often are used secularly, especially for social justice purposes. Parihar, for example, specifically advocates for using the Hindu concept of ahimsa as a guide for environmental activism. Khong argues that mindfulness as a concept, although rooted in Buddhist teaching, “can be considered a universal human capacity proposed to foster clear thinking and open-heartedness” (121). So while Khong claims that mindfulness is not only the property of Buddhist thought, she and other scholars warn against the appropriation of the term, especially when it is divorced from Buddhist religious grounding. Khong argues for conceptualizing mindfulness in Buddha’s teachings (“dhamma”) in order to fully embrace the benefits of mindful practice. She writes, “Without understanding the dhamma, especially in relation to impermanence, interdependence, non- attachment, acceptance and letting be, and letting go, mindfulness will remain only one tree in a forest of skillful practices when it is actually much more” (133–34). Jeff Wilson similarly argues that counselors and nutritionists have appropriated the concept of mindful eating without consideration for the context of Buddhist practice. He writes that other mindfulness authors “talk about the ‘healing’ nature of mindfulness, rather than its traditional context of detachment from the suffering world and escape to nirvanic consciousness beyond the slings and arrows of mortal life” (229). Although I use mindfulness to describe the bloggers’ spiritual inner work with food production, I use it contextually with other Buddhist concepts like impermanence, because I see the bloggers engaging with these two ideas in relationship to each other. Additionally, I think it’s important to honor the Buddhist roots of mindfulness while acknowledging it as a concept that can be beneficial in secular or non-Buddhist contexts. The bloggers, for

example, see mindfulness as specifically related to food practice and not necessarily contextualized in Buddhist religious philosophy. Although the bloggers' use of the concept may be an appropriation of a religious philosophy, their work to engage with food through conscious-shifting is a useful endeavor to healing the food system.

Beyond mindfulness as a psychological process, I specifically explore its link to nature. In other words, cultivating mindfulness has a specific meaning when it is applied to being in nature. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who was written extensively about the practice of mindfulness, describes his own practice of mindfulness through connection with nature by means of walking meditation. He writes,

I like to walk along on country paths, rice plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious

reality. People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle.

But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. (74–75)

Nhat Hanh finds joy and purpose in connecting silently to the earth through the simple act of walking. Like Thich, the bloggers aren't seeking extraterrestrial miracles to be mindful, but instead find miracles in the earth itself. The bloggers theorize about HFP as a mindful practice, but their idea of mindfulness is deeply rooted in plants, animals, and the land.

To find the bloggers' general contributions to food justice work, I analyze their blogs' text to search for broader themes. These include gratitude, authenticity, self-care

and healing. These themes all point to the bloggers' approach to food justice as a spiritual pursuit. In this chapter I focus specifically on themes that emerge from the bloggers' work as they engage in inner work, because I saw that they continuously attended to everyday practices that would bring about more food awareness. In other words, I examined how the bloggers engage with their own food consciousness. I found that the bloggers wrote about several themes across their texts: mindfulness, enjoyment and fulfillment, authenticity, self-care and healing, and spirituality.

Mindful Everyday Practices

The bloggers write about their personal journeys toward finding more awareness in their everyday food production practices. They claim that one of the major benefits of keeping chickens and growing food is that it makes people pay more attention to the present moment, a practice the bloggers believe is a good thing. As Cold Antler claims, "A farmer is never not present" ("I Will Go" 12/7/11). This attention to the present that the bloggers say comes easily with the tasks of producing food, helps to make people more conscious of how food, plants, and animals interact with them in multiple, various, and profound ways. As the bloggers raise their awareness about the food they're growing with mindful attention, they often shift their consciousness toward more just food practices. They are thus more present regarding how food is produced, how they are interacting with nature, what's inside and outside of their control, and how the choices they make affect communities in a global context.

Their attention to mindfulness means that the bloggers' everyday practices are impactful to how the bloggers understand food. Their attention to everyday work allows

me to see it as overlapping with Maparyan's womanism, which also values the work of everyday activism. She writes in *The Womanist Idea* that for womanists, "consciousness change is framed and enacted with the 'everyday' sphere, through 'everyday practices' by 'everyday people'" (50). Maparyan believes that a tenet of womanism is to use the everyday sphere to react to social injustices as they come about in everyday lived experiences, explaining that "Consciousness raising becomes a daily activity, achieved through ongoing streams of microactions" (xxxix). In other words, womanist activism is rooted in consciousness-raising, and consciousness-raising, for womanists, is rooted in everyday actions. Since mindfulness also lives in the everyday lives of homesteading bloggers, they value and encourage their readers to take up mindfulness as a form of everyday activism that is rooted in shifting and transforming consciousness. Bloggers do the difficult work of inner change as an important aspect of their social justice work.

The bloggers encourage readers to take up some food producing, whether growing, raising chickens or other animals, canning, or cooking fresh food more often. The bloggers also encourage readers to find how this food producing can fit into their everyday lives. In this way, they emphasize the importance of the everyday. While finding ways to change their daily practices, the bloggers also recognize that their efforts have an impact on the world around them. Northwest Edible writes, "I'd encourage any backyard homesteader who might be feeling like their garden demands a bit more time than they really have to do their *own* assessment and find that right balance point. Don't be afraid to make adjustments based on the ebb and flow of your life" ("The Time in the Garden" 4/9/14). The importance of food production, for Northwest Edible, is not for

readers to overextend their time and energy by creating high standards that require high stress or work-loads. She wants people to find how food production fits into their lives so it becomes an everyday practice, and perhaps increase their mindfulness about several aspects of their gardening practice, including time in the garden, to evaluate its effects.

I see the bloggers engaging with food in a way that emphasizes awareness of how food connects to their lives entirely, and how their everyday actions connect them to every part of a food system. Tenth Acre writes, “Homesteading is a lifestyle [...] We’ve (American) [*sic*] dreamed of reaching for a cuter house or a bigger piece of land, but we’ve also learned that there is power in appreciating where we’ve already landed, and making that space—regardless of location or size—the most productive and efficient as our time and budget allows” (“Is Homesteading Attainable?”). How Tenth Acre frames homesteading as a lifestyle characterizes it as a conscious effort toward contentment in a place, and working within that particular place toward a healed relationship with the self. She asks readers to consider their unhealthy lifestyle choices and shift them to a homesteading lifestyle that brings, in each and every moment, more awareness about how people affect every part of their environment in relationship to food. Cold Antler also writes that, “Homesteading has made it into every corner of my life” (“hard cider!” 10/9/09); it is not held in the moments of working specifically with food but saturates every part of her daily, lived experiences and her consciousness.

Engaging experientially with the materiality of food leads to a mindful relationship with food production. For the bloggers, doing HFP labor encourages more

mindfulness. Brooks explores a similar concept of experiential knowledge through gardening. She writes,

Gardening brings us face-to-face with the world, and with gardening, unlike say the latest findings in physics or neuroscience, it is with our world *as experienced by us* in context of the home environment. We need to be able to meet the world as it is, not how we have created it in our imaginations. The significance we create for ourselves in the world has to accommodate how the world is, and engaging this accommodation is another counter to our hubristic tendencies. (“The Virtues of Gardening” 23)

Brooks claims that gardening helps bring awareness to the reality of the world around us through personal experience with it. Even more, these experiences become mindful when we can, as Brooks claims, meet the world as it is. This goal falls in line with the concept of mindfulness that I discussed earlier. So, while the experience is important in its own right, it is important specifically in the sense that our experiences connect us to the “real” world. Presence of reality and of one’s own body and mind helps that person interact with and develop corporeal relationships with food, nature, and people. But those relationships begin with an awareness of the self—the inner work. The bloggers develop a corporeal relationship with food, which I will discuss in Chapter III, but they must continuously foster more awareness of how they are/should/hope to interact with food. Understanding ourselves as part of nature, including the plants, animals, and landscape that we often separate from humans, we become aware of how our actions affect other parts of an interconnected web.

The central everyday practice of producing food—through growing, raising, cooking, or preserving—can lead to an awareness of how each choice a person makes affects several areas of their food web; when we interact with food, we might begin to think about its story—how it was grown, what other parts of the system it touched. We may also begin to think about it differently. The bloggers encourage their readers to use their HFP as a starting point to bring more awareness to everyday food and other consumption choices. Tenth Acre writes, “Growing all of your own food is a lofty goal. Yet it’s rarely achieved even by the best of the most dedicated homesteaders. When you need to leave home to buy food, what are the most responsible, efficient, and economical options?” (“What if You Can’t Grow all of Your Food?”). Tenth Acre’s thinking represents a shift in how she considers her interactions with her food. Her gardening informs her food shopping as she pushes herself to think about the most ethically interconnected food buying options. By becoming more aware of the value and potential harm of each food choice, Tenth Acre shifts her food consciousness and encourages her readers to do the same. So, the goal is not just production of food, but mindful engagement with food that may happen through production. The bloggers participate in a consciousness shift similar to Rosemary Radford Ruether’s ecofeminist vision for a more just global community. She writes, “A healed relation to each other and to the earth then calls for a new consciousness, a new symbolic culture and spirituality. We need to transform our inner psyches” (4). Ruether’s vision for a healed earth begins with shifting our own psyches and resembles Anzaldúa’s vision of *conocimiento*, which also focuses on shifting consciousness. To reach *conocimiento*, according to Anzaldúa, means using

everyday acts to think about, “relatedness—to self, others, world” (“now let us shift...” 570). According to Anzaldúa, “These everyday acts contain the sacred, lending meaning to your daily life” (574). In other words, everyday acts that foster more awareness provide sacred opportunities to make more just choices.

A specific focus on everyday practices can lead to a lifestyle of ecological healing. In other words, the bloggers do not only think about how they affect food choices sporadically, they consider it daily, because they interact with the production of food daily. Root Simple write that,

We are all gardeners [...] Gardening, after all, is a universal metaphor, so the idea that “we are all gardeners” appears with equal validity in conversations about spiritual matters as it does in those about child development. The phrase is also often used in permacultural circles [...] In permacultural terms, to say we are all gardeners means simply that everything we do influences our environment.

Whether we will it or not, our daily decisions shape the natural world around us, as surely as a gardener shapes her plot. (“We are all gardeners” 4/2/15)

Root Simple claim that gardening is used as a metaphor because of its universal benefits and its emphasis on positive or productive growth. Root Simple maintain that to think of yourself as a gardener, you think of how your everyday practices either help or hinder the world around you. Once you realize this, you can begin to engage in more ecologically healing practices. Salmón, like Root Simple, also notices how gardening provides a metaphor that can be applied universally. He writes, “Ecologically related metaphors pervade everyday language, which means they permeate thought and action”

(73). Salmón's belief that gardening metaphors permeate action lead me to claim that ecological awareness can permeate everyday actions. In other words, if you become more aware about the state of the natural world, you may shift thoughts and actions toward interacting more ecologically with the world around you.

The bloggers encourage their readers to be mindful about the time they spend in their gardens and how it can be useful to their inner work; this act of situating themselves in their HFP work is an important step for the bloggers because it allows them to think critically about their place in the food system. Root Simple prompt their readers to, "Think and meditate on your goals before drawing up a plan. And for those of us in the urban homesteading movement, I think it's important to measure productivity in more ways than just the amount of food you get from your yard. How will the garden provide peace and well-being?" ("How to Design a Garden" 1/24/12). In other words, gardening/food production is not solely producing food, it's also about changing relationships with food. In this particular emphasis on relationships, Root Simple encourage their readers to meditate on their goals and make sure gardening provides for their peace and well-being. They emphasize centering oneself in the relationship, if only at first. This centering, however, is far from selfish. By centering themselves through mindfulness, the bloggers can consider their own impact in an interconnected food system and make more just food choices. Furthermore, the gardeners believe that a central theme of HFP should be gratitude.

Gratitude

The bloggers emphasize enjoyment and fulfillment as part of their food justice work, in order to encourage others to be grateful that humans are able to enter into a synergetic cycle of food. They show gratitude and find beauty in their connection to nature so that a more just relationship with nature serves a higher purpose than obligation. The bloggers believe, ultimately, that nature provides them with all the resources they need to survive, and for this, they should be grateful and respectful to the processes in place. In a spiritual sense, the bloggers' search for gratitude and a sense of fulfillment creates positive energy that permeates all interconnected parts of their food justice work. Using examples from the blogs, I explore how enjoyment and fulfillment through everyday food practices contributes to an overall theme of gratitude that the bloggers believe is nurtured through HFP.

All the bloggers take time to decenter themselves from the gardening process, which shows their gratitude for these processes. Tenth Acre expresses gratitude each harvest season for the bounty she and the garden were able to produce. She writes,

The edible backyard is brimming with beans, beets, carrots, collards, garlic, herbs (chives, fennel, lavender, marjoram, oregano, parsley, sage, thyme), kale, lettuce, okra, onions, pumpkins, spinach, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, turnips and winter squash. The strawberry bed produced 13 pounds of fruit this year, the figs are coming on, and the new juneberry bushes and plum tree seem happy and healthy. The edible front yard produced 7 pounds of pie cherries, black raspberries, and red and black currants. A new strawberry bed is filling out for

next year, and the Swiss chard and bell peppers are coming on. Herbs have grown and flowered, including chives, mint, sage, and thyme. Life is good. (“Growing Independence”)

Tenth Acre specifically lists each item her garden grows as if to remind herself of the large amount of food her garden can produce (with her own help). She finishes simply with “life is good” to show gratitude for this amount of food. The bloggers express gratitude by showing appreciation for the food their gardens provide to them, and they eschew full credit for their food bounties, which is important to the type of gratitude I see the bloggers projecting. Although Tenth Acre must have done a lot of work to cultivate these plants, she recognizes that some parts of growing food are outside of her control. In a later post, she writes, “[C]hecking in on harvest totals is always a fun way to see what kind of abundance the garden is offering us” (“July Harvest Totals”). Tenth Acre frames her statement in a way that shows she credits the garden itself with producing the harvest. By decentering herself from the gardening process, Tenth Acre works to break down the harmful expectations that nature’s purpose is only to serve human desire. Tenth Acre’s attitude shows a type of gratitude that respects the agency of food plants. Her gratitude then appreciates the work her food plants are willing to perform to produce food that nourishes her.

The practical gratitude for fresh grown food leads the bloggers to spiritual gratitude for that food. Specifically, Tenth Acre is grateful that she has fresh food to eat, while Cold Antler expresses gratitude for the process of growing food and the meaning it gives her. Cold Antler writes of a moment of gratitude in her kitchen after a day’s work:

I don't think it is possible to be truly happy unless you are deeply grateful. You need to meet every day on your knees in thanks for what you already have, and when you start a day feeling that way you can't possibly not find more things to be thankful for. Some how [sic], this practice found a way to mutate inside me on it's [sic] own. It welled out of me, at this banal moment, as something so profound I can only call it grace. ("The most peculiar thing")

Cold Antler's moment of grace came about from the simple reflection of a day working with sheep and making pie. Her moment of gratitude can be seen as a moment of spirituality within the framework Phillip Costigan outlines. Writing about the experience of cosmic gratitude that comes with developing more awareness of nature, Costigan explains that:

A spiritual encounter often begins with an overpowering experience of ecstasy, awe, peacefulness or cosmic *gratitude*. For many environmentalists, similar life-changing experiences are found in their immersion in nature. Thus the environmentalist may be predisposed to be attracted to an eco-spiritual stance. The physicist Fritjof Capra (in Porritt 2005, 300) claims that "[u]ltimately, deep ecological awareness is spiritual or religious awareness" believing "that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest sense." (41, my italics)

By correlating awareness in and for nature to a religious experience, Costigan claims that environmentalists develop a sense of overpowering cosmic gratitude. In other words, a deep awareness of one's connections with nature can imbue daily labors with spirituality and cultivate gratitude for the cosmic gifts of nature, as Cold Antler experienced.

Scholars in environmental/ecological and food studies often talk about the humility that comes from decentering ourselves in food-human relationships. Caroline Brazier posits, “if we engage in an other-centered way, we stop seeing the world as functional to our personal needs, and appreciate it for what it is. When this happens, the natural world speaks to us and we start to listen. Thus, nature has the capacity to awaken us from our self-preoccupation” (16). Nature or plants, then, can help us to get outside of ourselves. Brazier’s understanding of gardening emphasizes overcoming a human-centered expectation that the environment can be manipulated to serve human needs. In this way, humility created through ecological gardening can also help humans, in that humility leads to a more healed relationship with the environment. When the bloggers, and other gardeners, begin to interact with nature, they must learn to set aside ego and plans in the face of nature’s unpredictability. Plants may fail or harvest at unexpected times. The blogger/gardener must practice patience since growing food takes time. Brooks also expresses the importance of learning patience, a virtue, she thinks, gardeners can’t help but absorb. She writes, “The impatient person just has to wait and in the waiting learns how to wait and that waiting is okay – even enjoyable. When little seedlings at last germinate and the seed leaves appear with the seed husk still attached to their tips the gardener can enjoy their sudden appearance all the more. In the nurturing of a garden we are thereby nurturing patience as a personal disposition” (“The Virtues of Gardening” 20). Brooks’ patience can elicit humility because we understand food plants have their own will, instead of seeing their purpose as only to serve humans. Although

food plants may be beneficial to humans who eat them, they must first allow the full expression of the plant and practice nurturing care first.

As a path to finding gratitude, the bloggers also express fulfillment and joy in homesteading. The fulfillment and joy they find comes both from the actual practice or work being done, as well as the result of the work. Northwest Edible expresses her fulfillment for homesteading both from the freshness of the food she eats and the process of watching the food grow. She writes, “‘Is growing your own food worth it?’ When I get asked that question, people are talking about cash-in-hand not harvest-in-hand. They aren’t saying, ‘Is it worth it to have the very freshest sugar snap peas?’ or, ‘Is it worth it to see your child poke a bean seed in the ground?’ because there is, clearly, only one answer to those questions” (“Is Growing Your Own Food Worth It?” 1/9/13). Northwest Edible implies that, although it may be more expensive and time consuming to grow food, she thinks the production of fresh food and the value of interacting with the food while it’s growing is fulfilling enough. And, so there aren’t any doubts for her readers, Northwest Edible finishes the post by writing, “And for us, oh yeah, it’s totally worth it.” Northwest Edible thinks “it’s worth it” to grow her own food because she gets to see her children interact with growing food and she gets to enjoy the taste of freshly grown food. Cold Antler takes a simpler approach to showing how much she enjoys her homesteading practice. She writes, “I have found that ever since I started homesteading, I smile more” (“the best laid plans” 11/8/09). Although joy and fulfillment are not mutually exclusive, I see the bloggers linking these terms in their texts. Northwest Edible uses the phrase “worth it” to express a type fulfillment in gardening, yet this conclusion, that gardening is

worth it, comes from the pleasure of eating fresh food or from watching her child engage with food plants. Cold Antler's blog deals with her search for meaning through becoming a farmer. When she claims that homesteading makes her smile more, she refers to the acts themselves that make her smile, as well as the general knowledge that performing these tasks means she is accomplishing her goal.

Scholarship on gardening therapy found similar results as what the bloggers express: working with nature, particularly cultivating plants, brings joy. Therese Eriksson found that the women participants in her garden therapy study also expressed feeling joy and happiness being in the rehabilitation garden. She writes,

The issue of experiencing enjoyment was of great importance for the women and was most often described in connection with the activities performed in the garden. They felt free to do whatever they wanted, and they did not feel afraid of failing. The permissive atmosphere evoked memories from childhood that contributed to the experiences of happiness and joy. (Eriksson 277)

The participants in Eriksson's study, as well as the bloggers, experience joy in being present in their gardens. This type of experience in the garden is often not something people get to experience in other daily interactions that may be stressful. In fact, Eriksson's participants were women who had taken time off from their daily jobs because of stress-related illnesses. Tenth Acre, through the story of her blog, started eating fresher food that contributed to her overall well-being. Tenth Acre even claims that she cannot be of service to anyone else unless she first feels well ("Affording Good Food"). From this point of self-care, she goes on to start a community garden project. When not expressed

in terms of joy, scholars in environmental studies expressed gardening as generating pleasure.

Conscious interaction with nature generates pleasure for gardening. Cold Antler's expression of smiling more and Northwest Edible's insistence that gardening is "worth it" gives us glimpses of this pleasure. In relation to homegrown food, a homesteader in Gould's study expresses that, "Eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure that does not depend on ignorance—is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world" (82). The participant finds pleasure in eating homegrown food not because of the taste, but because he knows that notions of environmental healing and nutritional integrity helped grow the food (82–83). The participant grew the food with consciousness and attention to the connection between him and the rest of the world. Brooks also writes about connecting with nature. She describes a sense of pleasure that comes with being present in the garden and being open-hearted. She writes,

Our wonderment at this [plant] being opens our hearts and in that openness we receive something and are improved by it. To call this experience pleasure, even a higher pleasure, requires that we take away pleasure's hedonistic overtones, or perhaps we should just leave pleasure behind and call it grace. We receive something from nature and in that instant, in that involuntary smile, we recognize that we have been touched. The experience is uplifting in a way that no self-imposed attempt to cheer up, nor any personal effort to be open-hearted, can ever achieve. These shifts in consciousness and their attendant potential to improve

one's character do not work in the same way as exercising one's biceps, and yet there is something of the same process of engaged activity involved. (24)

Brooks claims that the experience of physically interacting with the garden leads to a sense of being—an ontological connection with nature that brings pleasure because it has the power to develop open-heartedness in the gardener. The importance of pleasure, then, is its ability to grow from engaged awareness while being in and connecting to nature. Pleasure in this sense is not selfish, but comes from finding interconnections with the world and caring for others. The process Brooks describes is, she claims, one of shifting consciousness. In other words, being in and allowing oneself to connect to nature has the potential to shift how we view our relationship with nature in a profound way. We can move from possibly exploiting nature, or at the very least remaining complacent to its exploitation in a standard food system, to seeing ourselves as we are connected with nature and changing our actions to sustain it. Our ontological presence in nature can shift our epistemological relationship with it. This is a process of inner change.

The bloggers' consciousness-shifting work is framed around gratitude and specifically gratitude for what nature provides them. In short, when the bloggers remain mindful about natural processes that work together to support a synergetic existence around them, they feel joy from becoming a non-violent part of this system. They express gratitude that such a system exists. Joanne Adams, in her article that investigates the effects of gardening on aging people, also describes the joy of connecting to nature. She writes, "A sense of connection was frequently difficult to describe in words. It was particularly evident during conversation while walking around the garden: in the manner

of expression, enthusiasm, and obvious joy of being in the garden” (20). Adam’s participants found joy in simply being in the garden. The recognition that enjoying nature is simple matters here because it underscores the accessibility of finding more joy in a life disconnected from nature. Such joy finding can also signify a shift in worldview: from a view of nature as disconnected from humans to one of interconnections. For the bloggers, and any of their readers who may be searching for more joy in their own lives, they only need to be active among nature to find joy.

Cultivating gratitude for nature is deeply important to the bloggers. To them, gratitude means imagining and implementing relationships with food that emphasize respect for natural processes. Tenth Acre feels that consumerism has made society lazy and ungrateful. She writes,

In modern times, as we’ve drifted from the practice of sustaining ourselves from our own land, we’ve also gotten away from gratitude in its pure form [...] In times past, simply opening a spigot wouldn’t bring fresh, clean, abundant, water at just the preferred temperature and desired pressure of the moment. Access to food, clean water, and warmth are a few of the things that the original traditions celebrated and for which ancestors prayed and demonstrated gratitude. (“Tis the Season for Gratitude to Our Place”)

Tenth Acre seems to long for an era where resources like water didn’t come so easily, because, she concludes, people were more grateful for their resources when they needed to work for them. Tenth Acre links self-produced food with finding gratitude she feels industrial food systems lacks. Since the industrial food system causes a myriad of

inequalities, showing gratitude for nature allows the bloggers to work within non-exploitative practices while providing for their own material survival and the sustainable survival of the entire planet.

Authenticity

A sense of finding meaning in a life of connecting with nature and eating more consciously was often described by the bloggers in terms of living a more “authentic” life. The bloggers used the term authentic or authenticity often and also expressed the prevalence of the term in homesteading circles. When the bloggers use the term “authentic” to describe their participation in homesteading practice, they refer to a few different ideas: their beliefs that humans are meant to live close to nature (a belief that often gets conflated with preindustrial homemaking skills), that the work of growing food gives their lives meaning and purpose, and that they value physical work interacting with something real or material (as opposed to virtual). Despite their habit of taking up authenticity narratives, the bloggers also question what it means to use the term authentic. The bloggers expressed a desire for authenticity both explicitly and implicitly through their tendency to set up a binary between what they consider real and virtual. They base their concepts of realness, which they conflate with authenticity, on the material, which has important implications for the way they value work and the types of work they value. Virtual, then, is anything immaterial. For Cold Antler, virtual means working on a computer all day for a direct-deposit paycheck. For Root Simple, virtual means social media. The bloggers often expressed a preference both for getting in touch with historic homesteading skills and for learning skills that benefit their immediate and material

survival. The tasks they value place them in control of their own survival (i.e., they would rather learn to grow food than do virtual work to buy food). Although this real/virtual dichotomy could be empowering in that it allows people to control their own needs, it could also be oppressive to people who are struggling to gain control of their own material survival because of their marginalized status. In this section, I explore how the bloggers both implicitly and explicitly value realness or authenticity, and offer suggestions for potentially healing ways to empower people to control their own material survival.

The bloggers both overtly name authenticity and describe authenticity in terms of realness, practical purpose, or divine purpose—with statements along the lines of, “this is how humans were meant to live.” Cold Antler specifically acknowledges authenticity as a theme that emerges in homesteading communities. She writes, “One of the keystones to modern homesteading, be it rural or urban, is *striving for a more authentic life*. You must read that phrase, speak it yourself, as much as I do. It comes up over and over in the world of homesteaders, small farmers, authors and bloggers.” Cold Antler acknowledges how prevalent this sentiment is in homesteading communities. People in these communities believe that growing food and living close to the land leads to a more authentic life. In an effort to define authenticity in terms of homesteading, she cites other people’s thoughts: “some authors write about how the only way they felt authentic was being pulled out of a rut and forced to change to new circumstances, find themselves so to speak.” Cold Antler ultimately decides to ask her readers what *isn’t* authentic, in an attempt to parse out what remains as authentic (“What isn’t authentic?” 1/17/12). Cold

Antler is unable to define authenticity except in terms of what it isn't, which shows that the term authenticity, especially when tasked with describing a person, is difficult to define.

For most of the bloggers, authenticity means connecting to pre-industrial skills. This belief comes from a sense that consumerism is not authentic, or more broadly, consumerism leads to social injustice in multiple ways because it perpetuates an industrial food system with which they often express their disagreement. Cold Antler cites this as one example of authenticity for some homesteaders: “stripping the house of anything that may bring inklings of consumerism, materialism, or character-building shortcuts” (“what isn't authentic” 1/17/12). Cold Antler's comment about “character-building shortcuts” applies to using products that save the consumer from doing pre-industrial labor. An industrialized system, then, is partly to blame for a loss of authenticity in our food production. Root Simple describe a type of authenticity or “realness” as antithetical to the way industrially-created consumer goods occupy people's time and energy. They write, “Our ancestors could distinguish between hundreds of plants, but that ancestral memory has been hijacked by commercial interests. Now, instead of plant identification skills, we name and distinguish things like cars and mobile devices” (“Will the Larn Rebate Turn LA into a Gravel Moonscape?” 3/9/15). Root Simple's comment indicates both a distaste for current consumer culture and a longing for old skills lost with the advent of industrialization, like plant identification. Tenth Acre claims that, “Our primal ancestors were connected to nature all day, every day. Nature was their *being*. It's in our genes to need this exposure” (“A Suburban Homesteader's

Vacation”). In other words, connecting to nature is preferable, according to Tenth Acre, because that’s what humans’ primal ancestors did. And, because we do not do preindustrial tasks or other things that connect us to nature, our bodies lack something they need.

Although the bloggers value their time blogging since it connects them to a larger community, they participate in food production because they value physical, material work for its realness. Cold Antler expresses her desire and satisfaction engaging materially: “I’m really looking forward to working on something three dimensional and useful. After weeks of staring at a computer screen, nailing and painting outside feels remarkably satisfying” (“sara” 4/1/08). Root Simple offer a similar juxtaposition in different kinds of labor, contrasting time spent in front of a computer playing online farming games with the work of HFP:

It is even suggested that the popularity of these [social media] farming games is indicative of a collective yearning for a more pastoral life. I’m not sure I get this. I spend all day outside in the dirt making things grow. At sundown, I lock up the chickens. Then I harvest something to make into dinner or on a special evening, I’ll make a big batch of jam or sauce and spend hours canning. I’d rather spend as little time online as possible. I can’t wrap my head around how a video game can in any way replicate the experience of farming. I may be an urban dweller, but I get my satisfaction by getting real, not virtual, dirt under my fingernails. (“Digital Farming – What’s the Deal?” 10/31/09)

Root Simple disagree with the use of farming games to connect with a more pastoral life, not because they dispute the goal, but rather because they oppose the means. Based on the perspectives described in several of their blog posts (their valuing of pre-industrial skills, for example), Root Simple are also in search of a more pastoral life. But they believe the means to reach this goal should be connecting materially with the earth: getting “dirt under [their] nails.” They set up a dichotomy between what is real and what isn’t. Cold Antler again expresses her longing for realness through physical HFP. She writes,

Starting your day like this - with animals and misty mountains and good dogs beside you, makes getting ready for work harder and harder. Every weekday I get in that car and drive the ten miles to the office. I do it with loud music and plenty of coffee, so it's not too depressing. But the deeper I get into the world of small farms, shepherding, animals, and gardening the more it starts to feel like a farce. A front I put up to pay rent and buy dog food. Something that drains energy from the real work of growing food, collecting eggs, planning a sheep farm and learning to shepherd. (“hazy morning” 7/22/08)

Cold Antler expresses appreciation for being outdoors with animals. She creates a romantic image of “good dogs” and “misty mountains” to express this idealization of farmwork. To her, driving away from this image to an office job as a graphic designer for a catalogue is depressing. She describes office work as a “farce” and farmwork as “real work.” Cold Antler believes farmwork is real for several reasons based on my analysis of her blog: farmwork is active and tangible (she works with her hands and engages her

whole body with the materials of the farm); farmwork benefits basic survival (producing food and shelter); and she interacts with animals and the land (she feels connected to beings outside of her self). This realness gives Cold Antler a purpose that office work cannot give her. She believes it is more real, or in homesteading terms authentic, to disengage from a virtual system of paychecks for symbolic work. She instead longs for a system that values the realness of working toward material everyday survival, which, incidentally, provides Cold Antler with more meaning.

Some food scholars reinforce the idea that homesteading reflects/leads to a more authentic life by advocating for locavorism. Benjamin Zeller, for example, blames industrialization and globalization for the food systems' inauthenticity, writing that "Locavorism centers on authenticity and the quest to reestablish authentic eating and social relations in a globalized world" (298). Zeller continues to explore authenticity in the scope of globalization by claiming that local eating is a way to heal disconnections created through continued distancing from our food (298–9). How bloggers describe their own longing for some authenticity they hope physically growing food yields is evidence for Zeller's claim that locavorism is an attempt to connect to the land among the social woes of global capitalism.

Physical work that connects people to the land seems to be a key method for homesteaders to find the authenticity they so long for. Gould discovered that the homesteaders she interviewed saw value in connecting to the natural world through physical, material labor. She describes the importance for one of her participants to haul water to her home and use a kerosene lamp as a way of connecting to a more authentic

life. Gould analyzes this view: “It is not physically necessary that she haul water from a well or grade papers by the flickering light of a kerosene lamp, but it is symbolically and ritually necessary for her to do so” (65). Later, Gould claims that “the experience of nature that occurs in and through symbolic and ritualized activity [including physical labor] remains *authentic* and, for many, transformational” (69, my italics). Gould found that the homesteaders she studied were particularly interested in physical work because it provided them with a material connection to nature, and that connection to nature helps homesteaders feel they live authentically. Gould’s findings in this study influence my own analysis of the five blogs I studied. I, too, found that the bloggers used everyday material food-growing interactions as a way to meaningfully connect with nature. Unlike Gould, however, the bloggers I analyzed also criticized being too strict with how others should find this authenticity.

Despite her use of qualifiers like what makes real work, Cold Antler also questions the rules and restrictions placed around the term authenticity, specifically as it applies to homesteading/farming. She writes, “[D]on't let someone else's definition of authenticity validate you. Not the people who roll their eyes at your backyard chickens, and not bloggers like me. Who we are is our business, and a gift we can only give ourselves. If you want to be a farmer, then become one however you know how” (“sheep, for example, are not assholes” 11/12/11). Cold Antler expressed her struggle to define herself in terms of farming and homesteading. Her litmus test for homesteading is based on expectations to be self-sustaining, or to eschew modern inventions and technology that provide “character-building shortcuts.” Cold Antler’s comment ultimately attempts to

harness the daily work of connecting with nature and produce food instead of relying on industrial food. Cold Antler does not overlook the relationship between homesteading labor and inner work.

Like Cold Antler, I am wary of the continued use of authenticity to describe homesteaders' particular goals. I understand authenticity, as the bloggers and other homesteaders and scholars use it, to mean seeking meaning through connection with nature, or producing food with attention to justice for all interconnected areas of the food system. The era of globalization and commodification of food has made people feel disconnected from their food in various ways. This disconnection has been the root cause of food injustices: many humans view the land, animals, and people around the world—especially people of color—as commodities to be exploited rather than living systems to which they are connected. I understand the inclination for homesteaders to seek more meaning in their lives. But, as Probyn points out, “In clear terms, the appeal to food's authenticity is not as innocent as it might appear. The 'authentic' is placed against the apparently artificial and non-indigenous formations of identity” (25). Probyn's claim that authentic is set against non-indigeneity refers to a conflation of natural with authentic. This is especially visible in the blogs when the bloggers describe industrialized (inauthentic) food/food systems as fake, placed in opposition to natural. To describe a food, or a lifestyle connected to that food, as authentic is to set up a binary between what is authentic and what is artificial. As Peter Singer points out, the ethics of food are sometimes complicated. For example, he asks, is it better to buy local food to support a hobby farmer, or to buy food that supports a small farmer in a poor village in the global

South? Or is buying and shipping foods from poor farmers really the best way to support them (141)? The questions about what makes food authentic are complicated. The bloggers' attempts to find authenticity in their lives is better expressed in terms of finding a relationship with food and earth that is healing.

Self-Care and Healing

The bloggers considered self-care an important part of their food activism. They generally believe that in order to perform food production labor, they need to be well. Since homesteading takes some difficult physical labor, the bloggers were careful to reduce stress and find time to relax and heal as much as possible in their work. They felt they needed this time for self-care to continue working and effectively grow food—something they considered of utmost importance. Furthermore, the bloggers often believed spending time outdoors on their homesteads to be a form of self-care. They deemed their work close to nature as a way of healing the disconnections that a globalized world created. This healing is essential to their continued contribution to food justice.

The bloggers' attention to self-care and healing through HFP strikes some similarities to ecotherapy. The field of ecotherapy combines the goal of personal health and well-being with the health and well-being of the environment. Through this connection, ecotherapy posits that humans can gain personal growth and wellness through interaction with the environment (Davis and Atkins 275). Ecotherapy also emphasizes interconnection. It defines health beyond individualistic pursuits and sees human health as connected with nature. Or, as Davis and Atkins write,

Beyond the obvious awareness that spending time in nature can be healing, ecotherapy calls for us to redefine the concept of mental health within an environmental context, seeing humans as part of the intricate web of nature. The practice of ecotherapy expands the definition of mental health from an emphasis on individual autonomy to include the capacity for experiencing mutually enhancing relationships and reciprocity with nature. (275)

The pursuit of health through a synergistic ecotherapy system also centralizes spirituality. Clinebell argues, “Healing involves enhancing awareness of the spiritual meaning of our profound interdependence with the whole interdependent community of life” (100). My purpose in engaging with ecotherapy, then, is to use it as a framework to explore how the bloggers center their inner work, and how that is inseparable from their concern for the environment. Additionally, I found that scholarship on food and homesteading already focuses on the spiritual personal growth of the homesteaders or the person who may take on a non-mainstream food practice.

Furthermore, food is widely recognized in food studies scholarship as medicinal. Many food justice scholars see growing wholesome food as important because healthy food provides better health and nutrition for people. In her chapter for the collection, *Sistah Vegan*, Maparyan claims that, “Food is known as a form of medicine among traditional healers, and the art of healing with food can be considered a lost art in industrialized society. In a society that requires healing on individual and collective levels, we can consider food itself a method for social change” (530). Salmón’s insights about the role of food in Indigenous communities support Maparyan’s claims: “Growing

food,” according to a tribal healer Salmón interviewed, “is equivalent to raising medicine for the community... The foods themselves are medicine for both the soul and the body” (42). The importance of Salmón’s statement is that it is not just food that can heal bodies and souls, but homegrown food. This is because healers can connect to the spirit of food as it grows.

The bloggers discuss their own attention to personal wellness extensively. Tenth Acre writes about the pressures people can put on themselves when they decide to take up homesteading:

Homestead Perfectionism: Grow, harvest, cook, preserve all of your own food! Raise and process all of your own meat, eggs, and fiber. Make all of your own clothes, buildings, energy, personal care products, and medicines. The list goes on. And on. *Don’t let perfection be the enemy of good.* Pick the things you are passionate about and want to learn. Feel empowered to continue to learn and do as much as you feel able to do. Remember, go easy on yourself. (“Is Homesteading Attainable?” her italics)

Tenth Acre engages with the goals of homesteading in a way that balances necessary HFP work and feeling pressure to be a perfect homesteader who produces everything themselves. Cold Antler shares her decision to slow down on her own homesteading practice after a bout of food poisoning she thinks was caused by a chicken she butchered herself. She writes,

I’ve decided to slow down a bit, be a little more realistic about my abilities. The garden isn’t being expanded anymore. No corn this year (boo), but there will still

be pumpkins (I demand pumpkins) and plenty of lettuce, onions, broc, and tomatoes. I discovered a USDA butcher one town over that will process my poultry (from clucking chicken to shrink-wrap) for three dollars a bird. It's not that I can't do it here, but after the food poisoning (which I think came from careless chicken processing at home) I think I will let the pros have at it. ("as I get older" 6/11/10)

Cold Antler, after her illness, must find a way to balance her physical duties to maintain her homestead and her own feelings of self-doubt. But, to continue to grow and raise her own food, she must be sure that she cares for herself, which includes reevaluating the strict guidelines she places around growing her own food.

Although definitions of self-care vary person to person, the bloggers see self-care as connected to their outer work. Contributing positively to a more just world requires the bloggers to be in good health. Tenth Acre writes about how healing her and her partner's health was a first step to their community work. She writes, "Homesteading wasn't a goal, but it didn't just happen. It came out of [my partner] and me taking one step at a time as we continue to build our life together and figure out how we could have the most impact in the world. You know what we discovered? That we had to take care of ourselves first before we could offer anything of value to others" ("How I started homesteading"). Tenth Acre's self-care led her to create a community garden in her neighborhood and encourage others to grow food through her blog. The bloggers throughout their texts describe their engagement with both self-work and explicitly state

their belief that growing food benefits a larger community. The bloggers begin with self-care and extend this work to care for others, which I will explore in chapter 2.

When considering the links among gardening, homesteading, spending time outdoors in an environmentally just way, and personal wellness, scholars agree with the bloggers, that one must balance care for self with care for others. For environmental scholars, balance means finding ways to act more justly with the environment, while also considering your own wellness. In Adams's exploration of gardening for aging people, she found that, "[one] participant saw the garden as a means to achieve balance" specifically in regards to self-care and care of others, career, and other responsibilities (20). The garden gave this participant an opportunity to completely focus their attention on gardening, a form of meditative awareness. Maparyan reminds, "Self-care and care of others need to be balanced" in order for each person to be well cared for (*The Womanist Idea* 44). Maparyan believes that everyone should live well and that without self-care, people would suffer. Additionally, if one's social justice work does not include aspects of self-care, they are in danger of overwork, which ultimately leads to that person's inability to continue to contribute to social justice activism.

In broader contexts, self-care and care for others are intricately related. This is because one cannot contribute to their community projects unless they are well, as Tenth Acre found out. Furthermore, wellness is not individually exclusive, but rather collective. Maparyan writes that,

Bodily well-being is the foundation of other forms of well-being; the lack of good nutrition, fitness, and health make it hard for people to contribute their energy

toward higher level concerns. In the current social context, many forms of infirmity are the result of oppressive conditions and processes. Arguably, suboptimal bodily health also relates to violence and hatred. Thus, from a womanist perspective, the most basic forms of health and healing are related to rebalancing the world socially, environmentally, and spiritually. (*The Womanist Idea* 53)

Without self-care, care for others would be more difficult. This is because, according to Maparyan, for anyone/anything to be well, everything must be well. White, in her article, “Sisters of the Soil,” studied a community garden project. Besides contributing to the practical need for nutritious food, White found that the gardening space provided the women participants with a place for nurturing themselves, while also healing their community. She writes, “Gardens operate as a place for conversation and for healing, as a safe space, a place where we can give birth to ideas, give birth to concepts, and to new ways of doing and being. It’s about healing as it relates to our historical wounds and perceptions around farming and gardening” (23). White frames the garden space in terms of both community and environmental healing, and healing for the participants themselves; she does not separate the two ideas because they are ultimately linked. Tenth Acre’s participation in a community garden project also linked self-care to community care, since, according to Tenth Acre, she could not be of service to anyone else unless she was well. So, after healing herself through fresh food, Tenth Acre was inspired to create opportunities for others to do the same. To participate in community gardening is to

rebuild multiple parts of the food system and the community simultaneously, including oneself.

Homesteading balanced with care for plants, labor, and self-care provided the homesteaders with a way to heal their hearts and souls from the guilt and disconnection they felt in a typical consumer culture. This holistic healing of bodies, minds, and spirits is central to the bloggers' definition of self-care. Although they at first felt grief and guilt for the way humans live and how it negatively affects other parts of the world, Root Simple came to see this grief as impetus for action. They write,

First, we in the developed world must own that our lifestyle has cost this planet dearly, and impacted all our fellow creatures as well as our fellow men. No matter how “good” we try to be with our recycling and organic produce, we are the heart of the problem. Us. Not other people. We use the roads. We fly. We shop. We use gas and petroleum and electricity and coal. We all carry the responsibility for what is happening now [...] That is the path of atonement between us and the natural world. Grief is not an end, it's a beginning. Can we re-form our hearts to make them big enough to encompass the world? I think we can. (“Grief is the pathway to action” 4/19/15)

Root Simple explain their own purposes for homesteading as opening their hearts to a more just way of living. Root Simple believe that personal, everyday action can contribute to wider social justice so long as it involves healing the disconnections that lead to unjust practices and opening hearts to how we connect to those other parts of the foodshed.

We can view interacting with nature in just ways as a form of healing the soul and the spirit. Healing then, balances care for self, and others, including the environment. Clinebell claims that to achieve “Soulful living,” (living in a way that heals these disconnections with the food system that are caused by and cause unjust and unhealthy relationships with food and the earth) we “must include loving interaction with the biosphere” (96). This type of loving interaction includes “nurturing nature in one’s everyday life,” while in turn “being nurtured by nature” (96). This nurturing/nurtured reciprocal relationship calls for the acknowledgement that nature and humans are, again, interconnected. Davis and Atkins, whose research considers the potential of ecotherapy to heal both people and the ecosystem, emphasize the interdependence of care for people and care for nature. They claim that, “personal health is related to the health of the planet, not just physically, but psychologically and spiritually as well” (275). Further, Burls and Cann, who also advocate for the potential of ecotherapy, claim that the importance of ecotherapy is its ability to “recognize the interdependence between healthy people and healthy ecosystems” (1222).

Although self-care is, by definition, focused on the self’s well-being, the bloggers, along with food and environmental justice scholars, show that self-care is not a necessarily selfish pursuit. To care for one’s self is to care for all parts of the ecosystem because people and nature are always interconnected. Using methods like finding balance in/between work, eating homegrown food, and seeking more just relationships with nature to heal disconnections, the bloggers use self-care as an important aspect of their larger food justice work. The continued work of the bloggers, I hope, is to enact and

embody their belief in the interconnections between self-care and care for others, since their own healing helps them understand the need for healing others—this would lead the bloggers to a consciousness shift. As Janine Schipper writes in her essay, “Letting Go and Getting Real”: “Wise views and intentions are not enough. We must behave in ways that support our understanding of reality” (191).

A Spiritual Pursuit

The practice of mindfulness, the enjoyment and fulfillment the bloggers get from homesteading, and the attention to self-care are reasons to believe that the bloggers value the inner work of their food production practice. I would even say that the bloggers experience nature, healing, and divine purpose through food growing in a way that provides their lives with spiritual meaning. The bloggers see their practice in growing food and interacting with nature while they grow food as a spiritual pursuit that is both personal and connected to the entire universe. In order to find spiritual meaning in their food-growing practice, the bloggers use guiding spiritual principles, including rituals. They also recognize the magic of nature as they realize that everything is connected and interacting with each other. Additionally, the bloggers specifically engage in a type of religious practice by viewing food itself as a type of religion and developing ethical principles about how to interact with the food system based on this “religion of food.” The bloggers’ tendency to view their food practice in both spiritual (unorganized and more personal) and religious (more structured) terms works at the intersection of inner and outer work. The bloggers develop inner beliefs about the food system that will then extend outward.

Gardeners, including the bloggers, focus on finding interconnection in a disconnected food system as part of their spiritual pursuit. Allen, in his story of reclaiming farming as a Black man, says that, “It can be a spiritual thing simply to touch the earth if you have been disconnected from it for so long” (160). Zeller specifically claims that locavorism is similar to the comfort and purpose of religious practices. He writes, “Contemporary eaters in the West have become alienated from food, and many experience anxiety because of that alienation. Like religious beliefs, practices, and membership in religious communities, beliefs, practices, and communities based on food help assuage such anxiety and root people in space and society” (309). Zeller also claims that people look for spiritual comfort through specifically sourced food because they feel disconnected from their food source.

The bloggers use their blogs to share spiritual principles that shape their beliefs about food and food production work. Their practices aimed at becoming more intimate with their food provide the bloggers with spiritual purpose. These spiritual tenets are ways of knowing or ways of shifting their worldview. Root Simple write:

The fundamentals that guide us are:

Everything comes into this world hungry.

Everything wants to be digested.

Everything flows towards soil. (“Nancy Klehm” 12/11/09)

Although Root Simple specifically focus on these three fundamentals as part of their preparation for winter, I found that through my analysis, the bloggers applied these perspectives to all parts of their HFP practice. The repetition and guiding principles of

these three phrases make them ritualistic, and imbues them with spiritual meaning. This is because the ritual serves no other purpose than to provide guidance for Root Simple's consciousness shifting. Tenth Acre has a similar mantra as she preserves her harvest, transforming it into jams and sauce or simple canned fruits and vegetables. In this instance, she is preparing gifts over the holidays. She explains her mantra: "My land is a gift to me that I have gratitude for daily, and I will pass that gift on to the recipients of my gifts. I give freely from the heart. This mantra I will practice repeating to myself each and every holiday season" ("A Jammin' Holiday"). Tenth Acre vows to remind herself of this belief in giving throughout her food practice. Tenth Acre's principle, rooted in gratitude, helps her develop her own character; it reminds her to show gratitude to the land and to mirror the land by giving with an open heart. The repetition of this mantra makes it so that expressing gratitude is ritualized. Through repetition, Tenth Acre hopes to feel this gratitude deep within her spirit.

The bloggers ritualize the work they do so that homesteading labor becomes more significant in its repetition. In this way, the bloggers find deep spiritual meaning in performing physical, repetitive tasks. Root Simple write about their foray into biodynamic agriculture, specifically the "preparations of biodynamics": "a specific set of substances made of manure, silica, and herbs are buried in cow horns, bladders and skulls. After a few months they are unearthed, ritually stirred and applied to soil and compost piles." Although Root Simple think it's important not to be "dogmatic" (in their own words) about the ritual aspect of biodynamics, like with the number of stirs, they appreciate the guiding principle that ritual helps people develop a sense of intention. Root

Simple explain, “[biodynamics is] an intention that ties us to the land, the elemental spirits of plants and animals that were tangible to our ancestors. We could all use ritual that ties us to nature” (“Stirred, Not Shaken” 10/23/15). Root Simple find meaning in the ritual of this specific type of composting because it provides a mindful method for connecting to the land. By repeating the same process for preparing soil each time, Root Simple hope to make this everyday task more meaningful. Cold Antler talks about the rituals of work in a more practical way. She writes about sticking to a schedule of chores “religiously” (“the rules” 9/3/09). To Root Simple and Cold Antler, repeating tasks like preparing soil or performing daily chores provide meaning in the doing. The bloggers enact their spirituality by doing it repeatedly. Their work, then, becomes about more than material survival; it becomes a way for them to live their philosophy every day. The ritualized labor allows bloggers to reconsider their worldview. They begin to develop a connection to the spirit of food, whereas a typical system relies on disconnecting people from the food system.

Gould’s extensive study of homesteading communities also found a link between food producing and ritualizing labor. Gould claims that ritualizing labor helps homesteaders practice the type of life they imagine. She writes, “[S]elf- chosen farmwork is not simply a job but also a ritualization of a new way of life” (66). The labor becomes representative of a more socially just way of interacting with parts of the food system. She continues, “The realm of everyday action, then, is also the ‘extraordinary’ realm of ritual, a realm in which embodied action on and in nature enacts a vision of what the world should look like and how it ought to function” (103). That is to say, Gould’s

homesteaders embody their vision of an ideal world, then perform this vision through physical labor. The bloggers show a similar emphasis on labor.

The bloggers take time to engage in a sense of wonder about nature around them. In this sense, they acknowledge a spiritual/magical element of plants and animals, especially food-bearing plants and animals. Northwest Edible suggests that it is imperative for the gardener to feel the magic of nature. She writes,

If you are a gardener and you do not see magic in the ripe swelling of the bud, the spread blossom that yearns to grow into an apple, the unfurling of the seed leaves – well, then I humbly suggest that you find another hobby. This is the time for magic, for awe, for wonder... if you see the bud and the sprout and you do not feel a pull and tug in your deep core that is beyond those elements of understanding, the garden is not the right place for you. (“Garden Magic” 3/17/15)

Northwest Edible paints an expressive picture that invokes growth with movement and energy through her use of words like “swelling,” “yearns,” and “unfurling.” To Northwest Edible, this growth is magical because it is ‘beyond understanding.’ She cannot explain the many processes and micro-interactions that create this new growth. Northwest Edible’s discussion of the energetic growing of plants is similar Maparyan’s claim that everything is energy, and that energy is spirit (*The Womanist Idea* 35).

Northwest Edible imbues the blossom with a kind of spiritual energy that yearns to grow an apple. Seeing this energy can help Northwest Edible feel a connection to her plants. Furthermore, Northwest Edible expresses how this growth makes her “feel a pull and tug

in [her] deep core.” She not only sees the energy of the unfurling seed leaves, she feels connected to it. Her description emphasizes connections to the self that are beyond understanding.

The bloggers learn from nature that everything is connected, and that they themselves serve as an integral part of the interconnected food system. The bloggers’ view of their gardens, chickens, and themselves as connected to each other and to the universe through these tasks shapes their sense of spirituality—interconnections for the bloggers are felt, rather than supported through reason, and lead to moral claims about how to interact with nature in a respectful manner. Root Simple explore timing planting according to moon, sun, and zodiac cycles. They defend this idea by reminding readers, who may not be so quick to embrace such a spiritual tradition, that the importance of following cycles of the earth that may or may not have direct effects on the growth of their garden is in the symbolic message: “all is connected, all is one” (“Stella Natura” 3/11/10). Root Simple may not faithfully embrace the idea of planting according to moon, sun, and zodiac cycles, but they believe without question that the earth and universe are connected in all its parts. Root Simple affirm their belief in interconnections through their continued appreciation for compost, which provides a small-scale model for how the entire earth is mutually-affecting. Root Simple write:

I’ve been struck, for a long time, at the connections between alchemy and composting. I thought it might be interesting to “thoughtstyle⁸” on the alchemical

⁸ Root Simple use this term frequently to mean a sort of everyday type of theorizing.

process and what it has to teach us as a metaphor for composting [...] At its heart, alchemy is a metaphor for spiritual change. When we compost, we're participating with and accelerating one of nature's miracles: the transformation of waste in to life. Compost, then, is the spiritual, life-giving transformation of the planet. ("The Stages of Alchemy as a Metaphor for Composting" 3/29/12)

Root Simple write in numerous other posts about the literal process of composting and how it reveals parts of the system working with each other to sustain new life. Yet, in this post, they focus specifically on the spirituality of this process. The bloggers use their everyday food production practice to observe the small-scale process of composting. Root Simple believe that this small-scale process is a metaphor for the entire earth-system. If the bloggers can see parts working together in interconnected ways, they can use spiritual belief to understand the larger meaning of the universe: that all parts are continuously affecting one another.

The interconnections of all parts of the universe has been widely theorized, but the focus on food as an example of this interconnected system provides an important central point for an interconnected world. Salmón points to Raramuri tribal knowledge that has theorized interconnectedness for centuries. He explains, "*Iwigara* is the soul or essence of life everywhere. Therefore, *iwigara* is the idea that all life—spiritual and physical—is interconnected in a continual cycle. We are all related to and play a role in the complexity of life" (23). Adams found that his participants specifically connected the practice of gardening as a method for understanding the interconnected nature of living things: "Gardening allows a responsiveness that deepens the experience of gardening and

likens it to a spiritual practice in which all living things are connected and form part of a cyclic process” (13). Interconnectedness is a spiritual belief because spirit or energy helps us understand how we connect to the earth and other people.

The bloggers use spiritually influenced observations to develop deeper meaning about the entire universe. Home food production, then, becomes a kind of spiritual practice for the bloggers who use their everyday food labor to transform their consciousness and extend their ecological and food ethics to make larger claims about the nature of existence, which in turn shifts their inner consciousness. In other words, the bloggers’ everyday practices have a profound influence on who they are in relation to the rest of the universe. They use food production practices to draw conclusions about their individual place in an interconnected system. Cold Antler specifically writes about this larger exercise of using food to make profound meaning: “Regardless of your creed, race, age, gender, location, wealth, or sexual orientation, hell *species*: we are all united in the Great Religion of Food... I want to go home to that mind that sees the world as a hundred pieces of one life, complicated and forever, like the growing season” (“raven in the corn” 5/25/11, her italics). Cold Antler uses food as common ground to connect all people, animals, and plants. Because we all have the common need for food, Cold Antler extends this idea to claim interconnection. She believes that we are all one earth who are continuously affect one another.

The everyday work of HFP increases a feeling of connection to the food system, and through this connection we can begin to imagine a better system and develop more socially just actions in pursuit of this system. The links between spirituality and food are

rooted in the idea of an ecological network, as Anupam Pandey points out, but also to ethics. The bloggers, and the exercise of engaging with the life cycles of food generally, use “the religion of food” to write a type of code of ethics that dictates how people can better interact with their food system to ensure the well-being of all its parts. According to Pandey, this process of writing an ethical code begins with conscious awareness about our role in the food system. She writes,

In fulfilling our moral responsibility toward nature, we are only recognizing all that makes us human, i.e. our relationships with others within a complex web of society and ecology that make us what we are. It is through these bonds that we formulate principles of ethics in the first place. In realizing our ethical responsibilities toward the interests of human and ‘non-human’ others, we are securing our own material and emotional needs. (355)

Our connections to plants, and the recognition in the larger interconnectedness, allows us to develop ethical ways of being within our environment. The bloggers begin by imagining a system that takes the well-being of all its parts into consideration, but this system is ever-changing. This evolving system is similar to what Ruether imagines: “Let us begin by envisioning something of the goal that we seek, not in the sense of a static ‘once-for-all’ future perfection, but in the sense of healthy societies that can be sustained from season to season, which are no longer building up toxicities of destruction” (258). Reuther, too, emphasizes imagining a more just system. Importantly, this imagined society and its code of ethics based around the religion of food is continually (re)created through everyday interaction with all interconnected aspects of the food cycle. As Gould

explains, “the art of farming turns theology into praxis” (89). In other words, by interacting daily with more just relationships with food, even on such a small scale as a backyard garden, the bloggers are continuously enacting, imagining, and creating a more just food system.

Conclusion

For the bloggers, the work of food justice activism includes inner change. Although it is an essential first step to food justice activism, the bloggers root down in their own consciousness to reach out and affect different parts of the food system. Maparyan explains the value of such self-change:

The Spirit is the root or foundation of transformation itself. To change the world is to change spirit first, and to change spirit is to change self. Thus, self-change is the heart and the mechanism of social change. Spiritual practice *is* activism, because it changes energy of things and initiates a chain reaction eventuating in a transformed outcome. (*The Womanist Idea* 101)

Maparyan claims that womanist spiritual activism is rooted in self-change because self-change is always connected to everything else. Producing your own food, then, is a form of spiritual self-change because it requires a shift in consciousness. People who produce their own food at home are continuously aware of how their everyday actions affect the rest of the world, thus they are hopefully continually conscious about making better choices for the sake of the whole world.

The bloggers *must* start and continue to nurture self-change as an integral part of building food consciousness. Because they are connected to all other parts of the food

system, self-change is never insular. Shannon Hayes, in her study of radical homemakers who use their domestic skills as a method for social change activism, explains that although the work of food justice begins at home, it must extend outward:

Healing our planet, our hearts, and our bodies, bringing peace to our society, finding happiness, social justice and creative fulfillment, all begin by turning our attention first to our homes. But it does not end there. Reclaiming our domestic skills is the starting point; our continued happiness, creative fulfillment, and further healing of our society and planet requires that we look beyond the back door and push ourselves to achieve more. It is not enough to just go home and put down roots; we must also cultivate tendrils that reach out and bring society along with us. (249)

Although this chapter focuses specifically on the roots, the next chapters concentrate on the tendrils.

CHAPTER II

BUILDING COMMUNAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The bloggers show a concern for people around the world in multiple ways through their home food practices: thinking about other people's access to food and/or knowledge and land to grow food; considering how their own food choices affected people around the world through globalization, worker rights, and environmental impacts; and developing communities both in person and virtually that are dedicated to building more just local food systems. Moreover, the bloggers expressed a concern for other people as a major motivation for growing food at home, but privilege sometimes complicated their relationships to other people. Home food production for these bloggers is not a solitary pursuit. In the blogs I analyzed, home food production, specifically when combined with blogging, helped people form communities and think more critically about how their food actions affect people in other parts of the world, like Indigenous people, for example, who must work for industrial food companies or whose land industrial farming has displaced. In this chapter, I have framed the bloggers' social justice work as a concern for other people around the world, which was manifested through food actions. This chapter explores how the bloggers grapple with unequal access to food and land, how the bloggers work toward sharing food-growing knowledge, the role of globalization and workers' rights in the bloggers' food actions, and how the bloggers work toward building communities in multiple ways as part of their food justice activism.

The bloggers begin with the idea that there is distance between all parts of the food system; globalization represents this distance. Since the industrialized food system obfuscates the processes of growing, packing, transporting, and selling food, people are less likely to know various exploitations of this system. In this chapter, I explore how this distance severs the person-to-person relationships within the food system. The most glaring example of this distancing of people is the current relationship between the West, who are mainly consumers of food, and people in the global South, who the West primarily exploits as producers of food. Furthermore, the industrialized food system has created unequal access to food. To address these two central food problems affecting people, the bloggers explore solutions that include community gardening, guerilla gardening and other individual food-procuring practices, and the spreading of knowledge. Ultimately, the bloggers use this problem/solution discussion to shift their food consciousness toward communal well-being. I argue that the bloggers engage specifically in a spiritually interconnected system that links them to people around the world through food production. They recognize, through this spiritualized interconnectedness, that the food system is unjust, and thus work toward solutions like a philosophy of communal well-being.

Distance

Globalization, and specifically the globalization of the food system, is an issue the bloggers sometimes acknowledge, but almost exclusively in their advocacy for a more localized food system. Globalization of the food system is also an issue of major concern for food scholars. The practice of shipping food from other countries into the U.S. raises

major concerns for the environment, as businesses clear excessive land for food crops and animal raising. In the process, these same organizations create pollution while using large amounts of fuel. My aim in this chapter is to show how a globalized food system interacts with people who are affected by a globalized food system. Creating distance, both literal and metaphoric, between people and the source of their food makes people more complacent in the food system's oppressive treatment of people, specifically poor and Indigenous people in the non-West. In this section, I explore how the bloggers acknowledge (or not) the oppressions of people and advocate for a localized system that, they think, will lessen these oppressive conditions.

The mainstream food system creates oppressive conditions, especially in the global South as the industrial food system contributes to food worker enslavement or subjects them to poor working conditions. Food scholars have written extensively on the globalized system that hides these oppressions from Western people who benefit from cheap food. These same scholars also reveal people of color in the global South, who are subjected to dangerous equipment, harmful chemicals, low wages, and sometimes enslavement often raise that cheap food for Westerners. A. Breeze Harper, in her essay for her edited collection, *Sistah Vegan*, argues that people of color especially should develop more mindfulness when it comes to their food choices. Food choices are linked to different forms of oppression—from disparate health concerns for people of color, to environmental racism, to “cultural genocide of our own brown and Black indigenous brothas and sistahs as well as the working poor, locally and globally” (791). Additionally, Harper argues:

Our unmindful consumption is not only harming our own health in the U.S.; we are supporting the pain, suffering, and cultural genocide of those whose land and people we have enslaved and/or exploited for meat as well as sucrose, coffee,

black tea, and chocolate, too. Unless your addictive substances are labeled “fairtrade” and “certified organic,” they are most likely supporting a company that pays people less than they need to live off, to work on plantations that use toxic pesticides and/or prohibit the right to organize for their own human rights. (799)

Harper argues that links between food choices and oppression are complicated, and that activists of color should take food choices into their activist work because of these links.

In other words, she believes people of color cannot work toward racial and other forms of justice unless they consider how their food choices may be adding to their own

oppression and the inequalities the food system creates for people in the global South.

Harper, then, points to the necessary view of food as a system that implicates us with inequalities around the world.

The current practice of globalized food production creates distance between consumers and their food in several ways. By growing food outside the U.S., those consumers are less likely to know their food’s production conditions, as well as the impact of the global food economy on local communities outside of the U.S. In this case, distance refers to the literal miles that food has to travel to reach the U.S., as well as the lack of knowledge about food production. As Barndt suggests, “By looking at how food regimes have reshaped the relationships between commodities, production methods and wider processes of capitalist development, it becomes clear that the industrial food

system perpetuates distance between production and consumptions and between producers and consumers” (459). This distancing can lead to unmindful consumption practices for consumers. Moreover, by maintaining distance between consumers and food, people remain unaware of their food producers’ treatment, and the industrial food system more easily exploits its workers. Both Estabrook and Barndt document the mistreatment of tomato workers in the industrial food system, including poor working and living conditions, exposure to harmful pesticides, dispossession from land for Indigenous communities who are then forced to work in the industrial system, and threats of physical violence.

Research has found poor working conditions common among all types of food workers, particularly in fields and slaughterhouses. Immigrant/migrant workers and women of color typically fill food-related jobs. Curtis and Heldke note that food production and preparation is often the work of women or the work of “slaves of lower classes,” and those in power dictate that work (xiii). Gottlieb and Joshi point out that chicken manufacturer Tyson has a 75 percent annual turnover for jobs in chicken processing and that the majority of the workforce is “low paid immigrant labor [who were] subjected to hazardous working conditions, constant abuse, and the threat of firing or deportation” (36). Barndt notes that tomato workers in Mexico are often Indigenous peoples displaced from their lands by multinational corporations. These corporations expose Indigenous peoples to pesticides, forcing them to work in unsustainable agriculture operations that ruin the fertility of the land (248). Often, these big companies abandon operations when soil is no longer productive, leaving Indigenous communities

with no jobs and infertile soil. One of the main causes of poor conditions for workers like those Barndt describes is the industrialization, and thus globalization, of the food system, as the above scholars point out. This type of industrialized system creates distance between people and the food system: the opposite of an interconnected system that allows consumers to see the ways in which their daily food practices affect people around the world. An ethical spiritual food practice would see these interconnections and encourage people to make changes to their daily food practice to support the well-being of people around the world. By building on their food consciousness, as I discussed in Chapter 1, perhaps the bloggers can begin to consider the impact of their food consumption on people near and far. The bloggers help to call out the various harms of the food system and work to reclaim an interconnected food practice. Their attention to the treatment of oppressed people, however, is lacking.

Globalization is a main concern for the bloggers who saw outsourcing food growing as unmindful consumption (which does not build a just food consciousness) that has a negative effect on people's relationship to food. Globalization, in short, hides the various oppressions of the food system from everyday consumers. Although the bloggers often emphasize the industrial food system's impact on the environment, they do so through a concern for universal access to a thriving, sustainable food system. In a post about GMO crops engineered to resist pests, especially pests not native to their area that have been brought over with shipments from China, Root Simple argue for smaller-scale

production as a solution to “unexpected ‘black swan’ events like HLB,⁹ colony collapse disorder and SARoot Simple.” They continue,

We may enjoy the efficiencies that come with globalization and huge monocultures, but Mother Nature doesn’t work that way, and she will, ultimately, defeat our intentions with tragic results. A more biodiverse and distributed agricultural system with far less international and interstate shipment of goods is less vulnerable. It’s too late to deal with HLB this way, but perhaps we can head off other catastrophes. In the end, more of us will have to to [sic] plant our own vegetable gardens and run small farms. (“Genetically Modified Oranges” 12/9/10)

Root Simple directly cite globalization, a part of large-scale agriculture, as the cause of several threats to food security. Their solution is to grow more food at home. Their concern for globalized, large-scale agriculture seems to start from a place of effects on people in the U.S. who experience increased food safety threats as large-scale agriculture continues to dominate the food industry.

Local Food

Overall, the bloggers encourage their readers to be mindful about their food choices, endorsing a philosophy that emphasizes awareness about food actions and their effects on people around the world. More specifically, the bloggers believe that food justice comes from being aware of your food’s origins, and from procuring food that you can be certain was produced justly along its journey to your plate. Although there are

⁹ Huanglongbing disease, a fatal citrus disease.

likely many methods to ensure you buy food that has not created oppressive conditions for people, the bloggers maintain that local food is the best or only solution to a globalized food system. Although local food closed the literal distance between people and their food, whether localization is the only or best way to close the metaphoric distance between people and their food—which includes all other people along the journey—is worth further discussion. Root Simple ask their readers to consider, “Do we buy food grown close to home, or from far across the world? Who is growing our food, and how?” (“Day to day, our decisions count” 4/30/15). With this advice to consider your daily food and its history, Root Simple ultimately argue that food grown close to home is better than food from supermarkets, especially supermarket food packaged and shipped long distances. Root Simple place particular emphasis on cases where food is produced, packaged, and shipped from other countries. Northwest Edible also briefly considers how her food choices affect workers when she writes about her desire to know how her food is grown. She writes, “I know how [food crops] were grown, how they were nurtured and how the people involved in their production were treated” (“What’s in a name?” 10/6/11). Northwest Edible’s solution to exploitation of food workers is to take them out of the equation and do the work herself. She eschews getting food from a globalized food system in favor of getting food locally (from her own backyard).

The bloggers believe in a local food system, as discussed in chapter 1, because of its many benefits as a more just alternative to a globalized system. I bring up the localization perspective again because it shows the bloggers specifically wrote about disrupting a globalizing system. Although globalized food concerns intersect with issues

affecting the environment like gasoline use and pollution, the bloggers also show concern for food workers and people who experience violence because of the food system around the world. Cold Antler, in a blog post that serves as an open-letter to animal rights advocates, asks vegetarian activists to consider how “men and women in battle died” to make and ship tofu from another country, because “fertilizers are made from petroleum now, and those fields of tofu seeds are literally being sprayed with oil we are fighting wars over” (“An Open Letter” 7/15/14). Cold Antler may be only referring to U.S. soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, but she still shows a concern for people. In a post about growing plantains in their backyard garden, Root Simple write, “We’ll be our own banana republic and do the world a favor considering the amount of blood that has been spilled bringing bananas to North America. Witness Chiquita’s recent admission to teaming up with right wing terrorist groups in Columbia”¹⁰ (“Plantain!” 8/10/07). By turning a post about growing plantains into a brief commentary on the politics of food production, Root Simple at least briefly acknowledge how daily food choices can exploit people around the world.

By considering how their food footprint connected them to people around the world, the bloggers showed another level of caring for how their food choices affected the overall environment, but the bloggers’ tendency to think about their food in relation to their own well-being is consistent with an overall trend in alternative food movements. Robbins explores the alternative food movement’s trend toward localization of

¹⁰ Hyperlinked article: <http://www.pww.org/article/articleview/11517/1/385>

agriculture and argues that “not all local food systems are a manifestation of [transnational] food sovereignty (451). Or, local food does not always provide people with more control over the types of food to which they have access. In other words, alternative food justice activism aimed at concentrating food sources locally, does not necessarily address the needs of people outside of the U.S., or even immigrant food workers within the U.S.

Perhaps an increased food consciousness can include concern for global workers. In this case, food choices cannot be made with broad rules, like “eat only local food,” but must continuously engage in critical reflection about how each meal connects a person in multiple ways to each part of the food system, and specifically to people around the world. Food consciousness means continuous critical engagement, rather than following simple broad rules like “eat locally” or “become a vegetarian.” Food consciousness would see food as always interconnected. A theory of food consciousness resembles Thich Naht Hanh’s concept of mindful eating. Describing the practice of mindful eating, he writes, “I chew very carefully, with one hundred percent of myself. I feel a connection to the sky, the Earth, the farmers who grow the food, and the people who cook it” (226). If the bloggers can bring this sort of consciousness awareness to how food is connected to other people around the world, perhaps we will begin to make more socially just food choices.

Access

The bloggers address the issue of food access. Yet, the access issues they examine, including a globalized food system, point to injustices this globalized system

places on people. Mainstream food scholars take a similar approach to discussing access: they focus on a person's and community's access to food. This issue of access, I argue, is more complicated than the problem of whether people can get healthy food close to home. The bloggers' continued referral to an interconnected food system leads me to consider access as more complicated. In this section, I wish to discuss access in terms of person-to-person relationships, or how our procurement of food affects other people in the food system.

Localization of the food system will also, according to many food scholars, help create more access to food for communities that currently have low access. Food access is a major concern for food justice scholars, who explore the many ways that people are denied access to food, or are limited due to location, transportation, access to land, and cost/income. Lack of access to fresh, affordable food for low-income communities is a result of a globalized food system (Armitage 27). Macias notes that "12 percent of the nation's households [in 2008 had] a limited food supply at some time during the year because of a lack of financial resources" (1088). It is important, then, for food justice work to address this basic need for access. Richard Topolski, Kimberby A. Boyd-Bowman, and Heather Ferguson, in a study about quality of food based on varying socio-economic class, found that low-income community grocery stores sold lower quality food. Participants in the study rated low-income area produce "as both appearing and tasting less fresh than their counterparts in high SES [socio-economic status] neighborhood supermarkets" (116). This study indicated that low-income communities

do not have equal access to fresh foods, which points to larger inequalities in food distribution and access.

Furthermore, scholars have found that food access is a matter not only of supply but also of distribution (Flores 8). In other words, food access is denied to many communities, particularly low-income communities, because industries that create unequal distribution control food access. The failures of the industrial food system has led food justice scholars and activists to advocate for a food system that values smaller communities' agency to promote increased food access at a community level and control their own food choices. DeLind, in her study of food as a civic issue, found that people were concerned "that the food system is controlled by others, primarily corporations, and that ordinary people have little decision making power in the food system" (70). In other words, food justice scholars and activists hope to empower individuals to work within their communities to decide what kinds of food they need, obtain the means to grow or purchase that food, and to do so reasonably within their space.

Eating local food addresses several areas of a food footprint: it supports local growers who presumably have more just growing practices for animals and the environment and produce more nutritious and tastier food. Local food, the bloggers and food justice scholars believe, provides access to foods for local communities and neighborhoods who may not be able to procure fresh, nutritious foods. Cold Antler wrote

about a challenge she participated in requiring her to eat only locally produced foods for 30 days. Cold Antler reports on her first couple of weeks doing the challenge:

It is taking more time, money, and effort than conventional eating, but worth it.

Hands down, worth it. So why am I doing this? Jumping through all these food hoops? Because seasonality has become sacrament to me, and it is how I want to live my life. I don't want to import my meals from far away, I want to savor what home tastes instead. There is honesty in eating the food that is produced around you, that rises and falls with the turning of the year. It is an agricultural economy that needs our help, and supports our neighbors and landscape. (“checking in on eating in” 6/21/11)

Cold Antler lauds eating locally as a just practice, despite the extra work it requires for several reasons. She believes it is “honest” to eat food obtained locally in respect to natural growing practices, which relates to the idea of authenticity explored in the previous chapter in that knowing your food means it is more real or meaningful. The bloggers generally believe natural food is more authentic. She hopes to endorse an agricultural system that places food production into the hands of people whom she trusts and who live close by, rather than a system that is far away and hidden, and thus aids exploitative practices, such as mistreated workers and environmental degradation. Cold Antler believes that eating locally is worth the extra time and money it requires because of local food's benefits, but it's worth noting that eating locally does take more time and money, which may deter some people from being able to procure local foods either because of lack of money, access (including transportation, mobility, etc), or time.

Food justice activists and scholars often extol locally grown and raised food as the best means to address all areas of food injustice, including access. In their edited collection, *Cultivating Food Justice*, Alkon and Agyeman point to locally cultivated food as a way for low-income communities to have more autonomy over their own food choices. Alkon and Agyeman claim that the food movement does not address the needs of communities of color and low-income communities, and even alternately demonizes low-income people for not adhering to strict standards of good food. The mainstream food movement sets high standards for what kind of food is accepted as the most just. These standards may include only organic, only local, or only food purchased directly from growers. However, these standards are difficult to follow for low-income and/or communities of color who do not have equal access to these types of foods. Importantly, by advocating for this local food autonomy, Alkon and Agyeman specifically address weaknesses within the mainstream food movement, especially when it comes to advocating for low-income and communities of color.

Although local food is commended as a more just system because it supposedly gives people more access to healthy food, low access to land to grow food, especially land with water hospitable for growing, creates even more inequality in food choices. Considering that income, location, transportation, and land access often hinder food choices, I would say those choices are bracketed in multiple ways. Food justice activist Will Allen reminds readers that African American farmers, through a series of laws from share cropping to the disparity of home loan approval for African Americans, are less likely to have access to farming. Allen cites the decline in Black farmers: “In 1920, there

were more than 900,000 farms operated by African Americans in the United States. Today, there are only 18,000 black people who name farming as their primary occupation. Black farmers cultivate less than half a percent of the country's farmland" (6). Lombard, in her study of Navajo gardening advocacy in New Mexico, found that "The cost of water and access were widely cited as the biggest agronomic barriers to gardening" for Navajo communities (227). The bloggers should be careful, then, about making claims that suggest food growing is an available alternative to industrial food for all people.

All of the bloggers believe that personal food responsibility and increased food access can come in the form of growing and donating your own food and that DIY food production is cost-effective for people who have low access to land and money, but other bloggers also addressed ways that local governmental policy affected their growing food at home. Root Simple, for example, express concern over a price increase for community garden plots. They write,

The City of Los Angeles Department of Rec and Parks just announced fee increases for community garden plots. The rental of a 10 by 20 space will go from \$25 to \$120 a year. In the midst of an economic crisis, when the city should doing [*sic*] everything it can to encourage growing food in the city, we get this. The good news is that, unlike national politics, we can make a difference by getting involved at a local level. ("City of LA Shakes Down Community Gardens" 12/2/10)

Although Root Simple place a high value, both morally and practically, on food grown by the individuals eating it, they do not place the burden for consuming the supposed-right kind of food solely on individual families. Instead, they encourage readers to advocate for policy changes that would benefit all interconnected aspects of the food system footprint. But mostly, they advocate for a policy change that would have a positive effect on people with low access to land and/or fresh vegetables. Northwest Edible specifically addressed her class privilege, which affords her access to land, by designating a portion of her growing space to food she will later donate to a local food bank. She asks her readers to participate, writing, “If you are fortunate enough to have the space, will you consider joining me in some planned giving this year?” (“Weekend Inspiration” 3/4/11). She takes a much more direct approach to land access, although one that may not have much long-term effect.

Access Alternatives

The bloggers believe that providing alternatives to procuring food outside of the mainstream food system is a useful method for improving the nature of person-to-person relationships that affect where we get our food. Since they see the globalized food system as exploitative to people, they propose and endorse alternatives that seem to eliminate the relationships altogether to end exploitation. They suggest fruit gleaning, urban foraging, and guerilla gardening, for example, as ways to get direct access to food in a way that ensures people are not treated unfairly in the system—because these methods, if practiced wholly, would eliminate the need for a system. These alternatives, however, could

reinforce a sense of individualism that does not do enough to ensure that everyone has access to food.

Besides personally working toward and advocating for policy change to support DIY growing and giving fresh grown food to local organizations, the bloggers took on more radical—as in, outside the system of governmental policies/organizations—approach to address food access concerns; one method of radical activism is guerilla/pirate gardening. McKay defines guerilla gardening: “guerilla gardening most commonly takes place in cities and towns, on what is considered to be wasted or neglected ground, where the ownership is held by a public authority, and where floriculture is privileged. It is a small political gesture of aesthetic expression and environmental transformation—‘beautiful spaces built out of wasted ground’” (183). The ideology behind guerilla gardening relies on more radical, anticapitalist perspectives, but guerilla gardening not only values the anti—or the questioning of the systems in place—but also the creating—or turning wasted land into something both beautiful and beneficial to the material survival of a community. Instead of being anti-capitalist, I appreciate McKay’s description of guerilla gardeners as people who “seek to inhabit a different real world to the ‘free-market economy’” (194) because McKay implies that guerilla gardeners, by questioning the systems in place, are simultaneously building an alternative system that values individual agency.

Although Root Simple express concern about city ordinances that specify what can be planted in community spaces, such as the parkway between the sidewalk and street in front of homes, they also gleefully write about their own experiences as pirate

gardeners who plant food-bearing crops in this space despite knowing they are violating city ordinances (“LA’s Parkway Garden Dilemma”). Similarly, they express a desire to claim (“take back”) unused spaces in Los Angeles to be used for food growing. They write:

Follow this link¹¹ to the Eastsider blog for a little profile piece on a man raising crops in a median strip. This is exactly what we should all be doing. Well, except maybe standing in traffic to water—if at all avoidable—but I do tip my hat to this intrepid fellow gardener. There’s so much wasted space in this city. Yesterday [we] were walking down the sidewalk, admiring a flat stretch of dry, weedy ground betwixt sidewalk and street, 10 feet across and almost a block long, with perfect East-West sun exposure. We wondered how much food could be grown in that space. Probably enough to put veggies on the table of everyone living in the apartment building fronting that strip. (“No Garden Space? Check this out” 7/28/10)

In addition to praising people who take unused space to plant crops, Root Simple also actively support other growers who take on practical and creative approaches to individually growing food in small and unused spaces. For example, they write about a friend who “took over the front yard of a foreclosed triplex earlier this year and planted a vegetable garden” (“Foreclosure Garden Foreclosed” 7/30/10) and an impressive rooftop garden they spotted at an old seafood warehouse on the border of skid row (“Rooftop

¹¹ <http://www.theeastsiderla.com/2010/07/echo-park-urban-farmers-take-to-the-streets/>

Garden Classes” 8/10/10). Tenth Acre also participates in pirate gardening by planting in the parking strip in front of her home. Some guerilla gardeners may be privileged in their ability to essentially break the law without fear of consequences. Root Simple, however, take a holistic approach to ensuring food security, access, and quality. They advocate for policy changes while simultaneously working outside of those policies with practical, creative approaches to growing food in a city with low access to land, especially for lower-to-middle-class people. This shows that Root Simple develop solutions that don’t place the food-procuring responsibilities solely on the individual. However, Root Simple were the only bloggers who advocated for policy change.

Fruit gleaning and urban foraging, specifically for fallen fruit, is another more radical strategy the bloggers encouraged their readers to explore. Northwest Edible writes about her friend, “the Shoreline Fruit Lady” who gleans fruit from the neighborhood: she walks around her neighborhood to look for overgrown fruit trees. When she finds one, she leaves a note with her contact information asking the owner of the tree for permission to harvest any fruit they won’t use. Northwest Edible writes, “Last year with little except gumption and a step ladder, my friend harvested over 500 pounds of fruit” (“It’s Called Gleaning” 3/8/11). Root Simple also wrote about their day spent with the organization Fallen Fruit, who guide people to places around the city with unharvested fruit. Root Simple write:

FALLEN FRUIT is a mapping and manifesto for all the free fruit we can find.

Every day there is food somewhere going to waste. We encourage you to find it, tend and harvest it. If you own property, plant food on your perimeter. Share with

the world and the world will share with you. Barter, don't buy! Give things away!

You have nothing to lose but your hunger. ("Fallen Fruit" 4/20/07)

Encouraging readers to collect and glean fallen fruit is a way for the bloggers to embrace multiple solutions to food insecurity and low food access and quality outside of system. In this passage, Root Simple show that they value creative and DIY procurement of food. They value working within one's own means, yet outside of legal systems.

Scholars like Flores encourage a type of food justice activism that emphasizes sharing. Flores endorses home food production, but with it, she thinks, should come a shift in the way people think about food and their relationship to their community. Sharing, then, can mean many things, including sharing food, knowledge, or encouragement. She writes, "Sharing, the act of giving away what we have, challenges social and economic barriers by giving underprivileged people better access to resources and information. This helps to establish a truer equality among community members and creates a healthy climate for a mutual and ecological evolution" (Flores 197). Flores asks gardeners, even home gardeners, to place their work within the context of larger communities to more deeply engage and grapple with how our home food practices can work in collaboration with our community, especially its underprivileged. The alternatives that the bloggers explore in previous examples do not seem to emphasize this idea of sharing, but rather place the need to find food on individuals. Community gardens, however, seem to diverge from this idea of individualism, at least in part.

Community Gardening

Working on community gardens was a functional way for the bloggers to connect to food access in their neighborhoods without relying on changing governmental policies. In this way, the bloggers spent their time everyday contributing to a more just food culture in their communities. Two of the five bloggers helped create community gardens in their neighborhoods. However, Tenth Acre stood out because she was the only blogger who wrote extensively about her community garden project. Her detailed description of starting a community garden could help readers who wish to begin their own. She takes readers through the entire process: finding a space; addressing pushback from community members who thought, “community gardens are an inner city thing” and didn’t see a need; and gathering participants. One of the major concerns Tenth Acre faced were attitudes from her neighbors in suburban Cincinnati who didn’t think there was a need for a community garden since most residents had access to transportation, had grocery stores close by, and owned homes with yard space. In other words, some members of her suburban community associated community gardens with poor people with low access. She writes, “They don’t want to associate with an activity that is the antithesis of all of those responsible homeowners in the suburbs who have their own land, can produce as much meaningless lawn as they want, and are affluent enough hit up the grocery store at their convenience to meet all of their food needs.” Alternately, Tenth Acre also had difficulty gathering participants, because people in her neighborhood viewed community gardens as an activity for retirees or stay-at-home parents. She hoped to address the bias that people who work full time didn’t have time or interest to dedicate to “such non-

essential shenanigans.” Tenth Acre addresses the need for a community garden even in suburban areas with higher access to grocery stores. She reminds her readers that eating self-produced food helps reduce harms across the food footprint that occur when food must travel long distances to reach grocery stores.

In addition to providing an example of a more just food system, Tenth Acre hopes to address food security through community gardening. Specifically, Tenth Acre believes that building locally supported food practices, like community gardens, will help increase the overall food security of local communities, which, in turn, will enable greater access to food. By relying on industrial food systems, which Tenth Acre sees as both unjust and in constant danger of interruption or even collapse—with concerns like E. coli, workers’ strikes, fuel shortages—even people who have steady income are not food secure. In other words, the less reliant local people are on industrial food systems, the better. Tenth Acre writes,

The health of my local environment, and the food security of the people within walking distance of my house directly affect me. If there are only 3 days-worth of food on grocery store shelves, then I am no more food secure than my disadvantaged neighbors in the event of a job loss in my household or a localized emergency. Which means that we are all in this together, and the future success of our local communities, the residents, and the charitable organizations will only come with synergy, collaboration, and participation. (“Community Gardens: Rebuilding Culture Part 2”)

Tenth Acre advocates for a synergistic approach to addressing social justice; we must think of food access/security collaboratively and as interconnected in our communities. And people who attempt to “opt-out” by participating in status-quo consumer culture must see themselves as connected to people who have low food access, as well as the environment. Even more radically, Tenth Acre hints at a rethinking of American consumer culture in general. By relying on paychecks through our current economic system, Tenth Acre believes people are never food secure. She suggests taking food security into our own hands instead of trusting the larger food and capitalist systems to provide good food.

The goals of community gardens are varied. According to Kaiser, “Community gardens have been proposed as a method to produce fresh produce, strengthen social relationships, encourage sustainable development practices, and promote entrepreneurship” (55). Although the obvious goal of community gardens is to provide access to fresh food, they also provide a way for communities to strengthen their agency in food access concerns, since choices now exist as to what is grown and how it is grown in community gardens. Strengthening agency is particularly important for marginalized communities who are not well protected by laws, policies, and governments. Alkon and Agyeman note the importance of empowering marginalized communities to control their own food access: “Engaging communities that have been historically excluded from the mainstream alternative foods movement is critical in the movement for food justice. Within food justice, it is simply not enough to examine the ethics of going slow to go

local. One *has to go deep*, and this means respecting local knowledge, wherever and whenever it is found” (201, their italics).

Womanist activists developed DIY, outside-of-the-system attitudes for social justice work. Maparyan writes, “For womanists, activism, like identity, is self-authored. Womanists don’t wait for leaders to show up, rather, they become leaders; womanists don’t wait for government to ‘do something,’ rather, they ‘just do it’” (*The Womanist Idea* 68). In other words, womanist theory has developed as people of color activists had to invent their own ways of working toward social justice outside of systems that did not support their communities. This DIY activism encourages action that supports communities, everyone contributing what they can toward a better system, rather than an individualistic approach. Maparyan believes in the power of communities of color to work together to create more just systems, and encourages people to work in relationship to their communities. People of color have recognized the failures of systems, as Maparyan points out, because they have been the victims of oppression through these systems.

A community gardening project led by Black women in Detroit is an example of womanist DIY, community-based activism. The women in Monica White’s study decided to organize a community gardening initiative in a neighborhood that had low access to fresh food “as a way of [...] reclaiming personal power, freed from the constraints imposed by consumerism and marketing” (13). In other words, these women took on a

DIY food justice project to have more control over their food access in an area public policy overlooks. The women chose an activist, DIY project specifically:

Instead of petitioning the city government to increase access to fresh food, or lobbying for more grocery stores and markets to locate in the city, they transform vacant land into a community-based healthy food source that allows them to be able to feed themselves and their families and to provide an example to their community of the benefits of hard work. In addition, food becomes a point of entry for discussing how African Americans might gain control over other aspects of their lives, including access to affordable housing, clean water, community policing, and decent public education. (19)

Their decision to engage in DIY activism at a community-level, which keeps in mind their larger community, shows that these Black women activists in Detroit must engage with systems of power differently because of their marginalized status within them. Their project connects more to a womanist set of beliefs since they work toward more community food access and connect their actions to wider community concerns. They eschew public policy change in support of individual organizing that has direct benefits to their community, benefits which they themselves control. Community gardening, then, can be a womanist act. Perhaps if the bloggers collaborated more with people of color and low-income activists, they would be able to develop even richer methods for DIY activism to more directly benefit entire communities.

Knowledge

The bloggers hoped to use their blogs as a way to share knowledge and resources to find more knowledge about producing food at home with a wide audience. Thus, one of the main purposes of the blogs is sharing knowledge, which provides a kind of access to HFP for readers. There are two ways the bloggers share knowledge: (1) through their blogging, which relies on experimentation and exploring success and failures and (2) by teaching people in person, which also relies on skills and knowledge they've gained through growing food at home. This sharing of knowledge that came from developing their own home food producing skills helped the bloggers encourage their readers to grow their own food and made it easier for their readers to do so. In this section, I explore the two types of knowledge sharing the bloggers engage in, as well as the implications of using knowledge disconnected from a history of colonization.

The bloggers use their blogs as a place to share the things they've learned with their readers who may not be able to put time, energy, and money into a garden that might fail. By supporting more HFP, the bloggers potentially make their vision for a more just local food system more widespread. By offering suggestions and access to knowledge, bloggers help readers increase their chances of successfully producing food on their own. Through sharing information, the bloggers spread their practice, or at least create an easier opportunity for more people to take on HFP. Northwest Edible specifically cites sharing information as a main purpose for keeping her blog: "Northwest Edible Life is about sharing the information I learn and the planning tools I develop for my own mini-homestead" ("New Year, New Blog" 1/5/11).

All five bloggers embed gardening advice throughout their blogs. The bloggers hope to share their own experiences with their readers so home food production can become a sustainable practice for many. Root Simple continually embed advice throughout their how-to type posts. For example, in a post about growing arugula, they write, “If I could boil down my vegetable gardening advice to one sentence it would probably be: just grow stuff that does well and tastes good” (“Rucola” 3/7/16). Northwest Edible often repeats her motto to “think like a plant” as advice for her readers. Tenth Acre’s posts are often instructional. A scroll through her blog posts reveals topics such as “How to Start a Garden on a Budget,” “Transitioning to a No-Till Garden,” and “How to Choose the Right Permaculture Class.” The importance of sharing their gardening knowledge is that their practice has the potential to create a web of more widespread food production. By sharing their knowledge that they have gained through experience, the bloggers can make gardening easier for people around the U.S. or globally. This easy access, aided by the Internet, could potentially build a more sustainable food shed.

The bloggers also share their knowledge through direct interaction with their communities. Homesteading in Hawaii posts photos of the community garden she created and helps run. She writes, “These photos are taken in the community garden on my farm, where gardeners not only learn but experiment” (“Double Cropping” 2/16/15). Homesteading in Hawaii acknowledges that having the space and resources to experiment is an important part of garden success that many homesteaders may not have. Tenth Acre, who built her community garden on a university campus, embraced the location as a great setting for sharing knowledge about composting. She writes, “we hung

an educational sign about composting to give directions for anyone wanting to compost food scraps. The community garden is a popular place for students and faculty to eat their lunches or an afternoon snack in between classes” (“Building the right compost bin”). Tenth Acre has helped create a space that provides an enjoyable setting for people on the university campus to take a break, a space that additionally raises awareness and helps educate those people about composting. By allowing faculty and students this space to eat their lunches, the garden also provides an opportunity for them to recycle food scraps they may not have recycled otherwise. Tenth Acre hopes this information will encourage more people to compost their food scraps in other spaces. Cold Antler even began hosting gardening and animal-raising workshops at her farm (for a fee) to help future homesteaders learn about tasks like shearing sheep, slaughtering chickens, and building chicken coops and garden beds.

Hands-on training and practice, like what Tenth Acre provides through her community garden, is an important tool for DIY food production. Garden studies scholars and activists argue that providing space to learn skills by doing is important to developing food justice through gardening. In a study about encouraging gardens on a Navajo reservation in New Mexico, Lombard found that study participants cited hands-on training as a major factor in their ability to learn gardening techniques (228). Lacy, a gardening writer, claims that garden knowledge must be based on experience and that, “You can sometimes take advantage of the experience of others by reading a book (although not always, for garden literature is filled with half-truths and guesswork parading with authority on its sleeve)” (189). Lacy asserts that garden knowledge

depends on context, and so must be based in individual experience and engagement with the plants, land, and weather. Further, Lacy believes that garden knowledge is always incomplete because plants, land, and weather carry uncertainties and are ever-changing. So, in order to share and develop garden knowledge, one must consider the importance of hands-on work.

When it came to knowledge about growing food, Root Simple recognized they embrace Indigenous community techniques. When Root Simple decide to try biochar¹² as a growing method, they write, “There’s nothing new about biochar. It was in use by native peoples in the Amazon region before Columbus” (“Biochar: Miracle or Gimmick” 5/17/13). By crediting Indigenous communities with the knowledge they now have about using biochar for growing, Root Simple take an important first step to recognizing—although they don’t say so explicitly—that Indigenous growing knowledge is extensive. Root Simple wrote in an earlier blog:

Many native [plants] yield edible and medicinal crops. In North America the best way to delve into this topic is to figure out the plants that Native Americans in your area used. Native plants not only save water, they save species. Learn about crucial native plant-animal relationships and gardening to attract birds, butterflies and hummingbirds. With only 4% of our wild lands left, urban and suburban native plant gardens will be the “make or break” difference to the support and preservation of bio-diversity. (“Native Plant Workshop” 2/4/09)

¹² A practice of creating soil enhancers with agricultural waste by heating it without oxygen for more information see: biochar-international.org.

Root Simple teeter on the edge of awareness that Indigenous people developed growing practices long before being colonized and appropriating this knowledge in a way that seems to imply Native Americans no longer use these practices (based on Root Simple's use of the past tense), or worse: that Native Americans no longer exist. By recognizing and naming their plants as Indigenous, then acknowledging industrialization created unjust growing practices, Root Simple give some credit (to Indigenous peoples) for this knowledge. Root Simple's statements about Indigenous growing begin to point to colonization (and loss of Indigenous planting knowledge through food), but because of their privileged position as white, middle-class homeowners who have the means to consciously shift their food choices, they may not fully engage with food's inexorable links to oppression throughout history, particularly in regards to colonization. Root Simple are also the only bloggers who write about Indigenous plant knowledge.

Gregory Cajete discusses the importance of experiential, intergenerational plant/food knowledge for Indigenous communities in his book *Native Science*. He writes, "Direct experience is the cornerstone of plant knowledge. Through experience, careful observation, and participation with plants, Native people came to possess a deep understanding of plant uses and relationship to humans, animals, and the landscape" (109). Native people, according to Cajete, "possess a tremendous storehouse of knowledge," due to their years of applied gardening practice and ancestral knowledge. This knowledge has been lost due to centuries of violence and exploitation, while remaining Indigenous experience is sometimes explored in communion with Native communities, often eventually being exploited, stolen, and renamed (133). However,

bloggers can benefit from this lost knowledge while giving credit to centuries of gardening experience that produces gardening knowledge for Indigenous communities. It is imperative, then, that food justice activists who advocate for gardening to acknowledge and credit, rather than co-opt, native knowledge.

Root Simple's brief mention and lightly examined use of Indigenous knowledge points to a larger trend of white liberal food movements' tendency to undervalue knowledge from communities of color. Cajete addresses this propensity of the food system to rename old skills and techniques:

Western science has been reluctant to recognize Native peoples' agricultural methods, much less acknowledge its debt to them. Permaculture techniques are being introduced to our children in schools today as newly developed ideas. Only now, when serious problems have resulted from large-scale monoculture, from insect invasion and pollution of food products grown in soil ruined and poisoned by pesticides, are agriculturists and healers looking back to practical methods, knowledge, and philosophies used by Native peoples for many generations. One might ask what Indigenous people today and of the recent past think about the contributions of their ancestors to the wealth and vitality of Western culture, which has spread throughout the world, while their own cultures have been undermined and their achievements ignored or treated with disdain. (147)

Cajete's above claim points to a need to historicize and give credit for food growing knowledge. In order to work toward a more just food system, people must contextualize their food growing knowledge within a history of colonization and theft of Indigenous

knowledge. By acknowledging this history and giving credit, this imagined more just food system could begin from a place of healing rather than erasure. Attributing their skills to the roots of food growing knowledge could help the bloggers build the part of their food consciousness concerning their relationships with other people. In short, a gardening praxis originating from a place of theft and appropriation of knowledge does not constitute a shifted food consciousness. Will Allen writes of reclaiming skills his father, who used methods like composting, taught him, and those of his mother who grew a kitchen garden out of necessity. Allen grapples with his relationship to growing food as a Black man not long separated from past oppressions related to farming, like slavery and sharecropping. Allen embraces the agricultural knowledge his cultural and familial identity formed and maintained as a way to empower his community; they could learn about more just food practices and Allen could offer them (a community of poor people of color) access to fresh food. Allen and Cajete acknowledge the history and current reality of dispossession that creates an oppressive food system through globalization, which is something the bloggers could do more.

Whiteness

The bloggers' understanding of gardening knowledge and their noncritical use of Indigenous planting methods without giving credit where it's due points to the epistemological whiteness of the bloggers, or the knowledge they possess that is based around and governed by whiteness. None of the bloggers specifically identified their race in their blog text; however, they show a way of thinking that, I argue, is based on whiteness as an epistemological concept that is not necessarily related to whether they are

white-raced. Epistemological whiteness is a framework that creates cultural rules based on dominant ideology (Frye). Interdisciplinary scholars agree that the characteristics of whiteness allow it to exist as the unspoken, privileged norm¹³. Whiteness is invisible in that the ideology of whiteness is dominant in culture, literature, politics, and history, and is seldom questioned. For example, while a person of color is often identified as such, white people can exist solely as individuals. Anzaldúa examines whiteness not only as a set of behaviors, but as a way of thinking about the world. She writes:

The whole time I've been in school the producers of knowledge have been middle- and upper-class white people – those with power in the universities, science establishments, and publishing and art houses. They produce the theories and books we read. They produce the unconscious values, views, and assumptions about reality, about culture, about everything. We internalize, we assimilate, these theories. (“On the Process of Writing *Borderlands / La Frontera*” 188)

Anzaldúa claims that whiteness becomes normalized as white people define knowledge. They enforce their knowledge and experiences as universal truth because they have the power to do so. This historical knowledge has been culturally passed on as the truth rather than identified as a dominant ideology. Therefore, part of identifying whiteness as

¹³ For example: Yancy, George. “Introduction: Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness.” *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*. Ed. George Yancy. New York: Routledge, 2004. 1-23; Kincheloe, Joe L. “The Struggle to Define and Reinvent Whiteness: A Pedagogical Analysis.” *College Literature* 26 (Fall 1999): 162-94; Taylor, Paul C. “Silence and Sympathy: Dewey’s Whiteness.” *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*. Ed. George Yancy. New York: Routledge, 2004. 227-41

dominant is drawing attention to knowledge production from multiple groups of people and their experiences. Sharing experiences where whiteness is decentered will help us imagine and accept realities in which whiteness is not the norm.

More specifically, whiteness as an ideology assumes universalism in experiences. As the dominant way of thinking, whiteness has become so normalized that people often assume that white experiences are universal, while people of colors' experiences are other.

Scheurich writes:

The result of this historical dominance is that the styles of thinking, acting, speaking, and behaving of the dominant group have become the socially correct or privileged ways of thinking, acting, speaking, and behaving. One of the main ways this happens is that the ways of the dominant group become universalized as measures of merit, hiring criteria, grading standards, predictors of success, correct grammar, appropriate behavior, and so forth. (7)

Scheurich points out that this universalism has led to ways of judging people based on how they live up to standards of whiteness. So, the assumed universalism of whiteness casts judgement on people who do not display whiteness in action, ideology, and/or appearance. The bloggers' rhetoric of gardening as a just practice often teeters on judgement for people who don't choose to practice HFP. For example, Tenth Acre, in a post about how to afford "good" food, writes, "There are people in my life who whine about being victimized in one way or another and make excuses about why they can't buy real food. Certainly there are temporary and tragic situations out there. But the

bottom line is that *most* people don't plan or budget for real food. Then they throw in the towel by saying, 'well, I'm not as lucky as you. I'm dealing with x,y,z.'" ("Affording Good Food"). Tenth Acre's judgement and proclamation that most people could afford better food if they made better choices does not acknowledge the array of experiences of people who may not have access to fresh food, knowledge about fresh food, land to grow fresh food, and many other privileges that Tenth Acre enjoys. For example, the participants in White's study, "Sisters of the Soil" were all Black women in Detroit who realized that living in their Detroit neighborhood meant that they and many of their neighbors were affected by the statistics that show, "lower-income and African American neighborhoods have fewer supermarkets and greater access to liquor and convenience stores with lower-quality food and limited access to more expensive, healthy food options" (14). Although these women were able to provide more fresh food for their neighborhood, they did so through community gardening rather than by insisting that people in this neighborhood could have better food if they planned or budgeted for it, as Tenth Acre suggests. Furthermore, Tenth Acre and the other bloggers do not recognize that their judgements about food assume that all people *should* hold their view of growing food at home.

The bloggers also ascribe to the norm of whiteness when they assume that their ways of thinking about gardening are universal. This assumed universalism does not acknowledge that the bloggers have ways of thinking, specifically about growing food, that their whiteness influences. For example, let's look again at a passage written by Root Simple from Chapter I: "We are all gardeners [...] Gardening, after all, is a universal

metaphor, so the idea that ‘we are all gardeners’ appears with equal validity in conversations about spiritual matters as it does in those about child development” (“We are all gardeners” 4/2/15). This assumed universalism, I argue, is a symptom of their whiteness. Their statement assumes that everyone *should* garden and/or that everyone has views of gardening as positive. This assumption does not consider that people of color may have different relationships with food-growing or agricultural practices based on, for example, a history of slavery/share-cropping or migrant laboring. Will Allen, a Black farmer who started the community farm project Growing Power, for example, wrote that he often gets questioned by people of color for his gardening/farming because of the oppressive history of farming for people of color. He writes, “[A] black friend asked me about my farming habit. ‘Why do you want to do slave’s work?’ he said. It was a good question. I did not have an easy reply. To my friend, the profession was tainted with the historical legacy of slavery and economic hardship. In returning to farming, I was swimming against a current that had carried my family and millions of other black people out of South Carolina and into Northern cities” (37-8). Allen’s parents were share croppers who were impoverished and exploited by the share-cropping arrangement, but he was able to assuage this history and find power in embracing farming; nevertheless, he does not judge other people of color who choose not to take up farming.

Furthermore, the bloggers do not acknowledge that their white privilege allows them to take up space differently—they are even allowed to perform illegal gardening without repercussions. For example, Root Simple gave a televised interview about guerilla gardening where they showcased their parkway garden. They even

acknowledged that this garden was illegal, writing, “We did the interview down in the parkway next to our illegal street-side vegetable garden” (“A Mystery Philippine Vegetable”). They also knowingly violate city ordinance by using greywater from their washing machine (“Using Greywater”). Root Simple seem proud of their law-breaking gardening ventures because they believe their actions are more just than the laws they violate. This may be the case; however, Root Simple should also acknowledge that not everyone has the privilege to break laws—even for the most just reasons—for fear of repercussions. In fact, they posted about a Black woman in Miami who was forced to remove a 17-year old vegetable garden from their front yard¹⁴ (“Front Yard Vegetable Gardeners”). Root Simple defend the gardener, Hermine Ricketts, yet fail to explore the role of race in their own ability to perform illegal gardening acts while others are subject to harassment and fines for doing the same.

Blogging as Community Building

The bloggers cite connecting to and creating a community as a major purpose for growing food at home and blogging about it. In their daily work at home, the bloggers connect to real-life communities by attending community gardening events, talking to neighbors, and hosting workshops or just inviting friends over to help garden. By blogging about their homesteading, the bloggers created a second, virtual community with people across the world. The bloggers build community in their specific places, connecting to their neighborhoods and people met virtually through blogging and other

¹⁴ Full story here: <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/12/16/249342738/in-florida-a-turf-war-blooms-over-front-yard-vegetable-gardening>

digital communications. More than community building, the bloggers' food justice work, in addition to blogging, allowed them to shift their food consciousness to one that values communal well-being.

Communal well-being is also a tenet of Maparyan's womanist activism. By caring for the well-being of all members of a community, womanists develop what Maparyan calls "commonweal," "the state of collective well-being; it is optimization of well-being for all members of a community" (*The Womanist Idea* 68). When Maparyan discusses collective well-being, she refers to a philosophy of community wellness. For the community to live in a state of optimal wellness, each member must be well. To achieve commonweal, members of the community must pay attention to self-care and do so in a way that contributes positively to the community. For example, if a community member is well-fed through means that contribute to the hunger of other members of the community, then that community member is not enacting commonweal. By stating that all cannot be well if each individual member is not well, commonweal acknowledges the way all livingkind are connected. In order to reach optimization, each member of the community must understand that they are interconnected with other members of the community. Flores notes, "Your own garden becomes a hundred times more bountiful when placed in the context of the larger community" (16). Flores does not mean that a garden will be literally bountiful (by producing more food), but that it will become more fulfilling when considering relationships to a larger community. The bloggers collaborate with their neighbors and virtual communities to build immediacy and a sense of personal empowerment to bring about more just food.

The bloggers often used their home food growing practices to connect with neighbors and create a community with people who shared their concern for food justice and their want for and enjoyment of homegrown food. The bloggers even talk specifically about growing food at their homes to connect them to their neighbors. The parkway garden, for example, which Root Simple and Tenth Acre wrote extensively about, served as a means to take their gardens to a more public place in hopes their neighbors might see and share their harvest, or talk to them about it, or even be inspired to grow their own (Root Simple, “Moringa!” 9/14/06). Root Simple wrote about how they decided to grow a parkway garden after they saw their neighbors growing one. Root Simple then turned their parkway garden into a form of connection to other neighbors. They write,

We’ve encouraged neighbors to help themselves to vegetables from the parkway garden, though few have. What has been nice has been the conversations we’ve had with neighbors while watering and tending the space. Several neighbors have said that it encouraged them to plant their own vegetables, albeit in their back yards. With more people growing vegetables our neighborhood becomes more self-sufficient and a wasted space has been reclaimed. (“Garden like a Pirate” 9/20/06).

Through making their home garden space a little more public, Root Simple connected to their neighborhood while also promoting their variety of food justice, which emphasizes small everyday action that, through a perspective of interconnectedness, can contribute to the wider community. The parkway garden also makes their food justice more visible, which means Root Simple and Tenth Acre may be connecting with community members

they never speak to. With their parkway gardens, Root Simple and Tenth Acre help to create a new reality based on food justice; they imagine a society where wasted space is made useful with plants, and they create that reality in their own small spaces and hope that it extends outward. Through making their gardens public, the bloggers increase the community's wellness (or at least they hope to). By sharing food and ideas for planting food, the bloggers contribute to the well-being of their immediate neighbors who they hope will eat and be nourished by fresh food the bloggers grow. The bloggers also hope their neighbors will be inspired to begin their own HFP practice, which will benefit a worldwide community.

By finding people who are also gardening and raising chickens, it was easier for the bloggers to continue their own DIY food with the support of others. Tenth Acre cites this as a major motivator for her community garden project. Since her neighborhood is not necessarily low-income or low-access, Tenth Acre focused her community garden on bringing people together. She summarizes her goals: "We asked ourselves how the garden could best serve the community, so that more connections would be made, more people would feel confident to lead and create, and more would be inspired to learn useful skills that promote health and well-being" ("Growing Community"). As a result of examining these goals, Tenth Acre, and others involved in the project, created a communal space for participants without individual garden plots, fees, or required work hours. Any participants working on a harvest day shared in the harvest. Tenth Acre's vision for her community garden project centers around atypical needs in terms of food security: she wanted to encourage people who have access to grocery store food to

recognize a need to grow their own food. By growing food, even when you have easy access to it via a grocery store, Tenth Acre believes people can participate in a community that values food in a way industrial food practices does not reflect.

The communities created by the bloggers not only helped them find—or convert—like-minded fellow gardeners, but also provided support for homesteading. Northwest Edible writes about how one of her ducks left behind eight eggs that needed care after being killed by a raccoon. Northwest Edible was able to borrow an incubator from a neighbor and continue to care for the eggs. She writes, “This is all further proof that the greatest emergency preparedness tool we can have is a decent community around us” (“The Life and Death of Ducks” 4/19/15). Homesteading in Hawaii also writes about her experiences participating in local seed exchanges and posting requests on Craigslist for new seeds. (“Boldly Going...” 11/23/14). During these seed exchanges, Homesteading in Hawaii found new varieties for her garden, and gave her own seeds to other gardeners. Exchanging seeds is an act of resistance to climate change that can help preserve crops for communities. Erin Sagen wrote about a seed exchange through Indigenous farmers from Peru, Bhutan, and China. Exchanging seeds, she wrote, “will enable the farmers to experiment together from a distance, so they can find the hardiest, most resilient varieties. Doing so will ensure better food security for the farmers’ families and communities because having more crops that can survive the unknown, potentially destructive effects of climate change will increase their yields and mitigate strains on various resources” (Sagen). Homesteading in Hawaii, then, is participating in a practice that can have long-term positive effects on a more food resilient community. With the

support of a gardening/bird-raising community, the bloggers found practical and emotional support that allowed them to continue their DIY food practices. These practices contribute to food resilience in their communities.

Despite the bloggers' efforts to foster community for their DIY food practices, they did face challenges from people in their communities while they expanded their food growing. The bloggers attributed these challenges to a misunderstanding with neighbors regarding their purpose of looking outside typical food systems. Cold Antler writes about her strains renting a home in rural Idaho with chickens and a heavily gardened yard. She struggled with neighbors frustrated by her chickens sometimes leaving her yard and wandering into theirs, despite Cold Antler's attempts to assuage their frustration with some of her chickens eggs and homemade pie ("Pie and neighbors" 5/8/08). At her rented cabin in Vermont (which she moved to from Idaho), Cold Antler talks with a neighbor who takes issue with the aesthetics of her homestead. She writes, admittedly defensively:

Since I've moved in I'd turned the overgrown backyard with an empty dirt-garden into a thriving small farm. I had made useless land into a place that fed, clothed, and filled me with joy. But what I had considered beautiful, she considered an eyesore. The sagging fences, the chicken poo on a stepping stone, the bags of feed behind the garage, the hay stacked on the porch.... all of this was aesthetically unpleasing to the non farmer. I had turned a lawn into a pasture, an abandoned metal garden shed into a chicken coop, and a porch into an open air hay barn [...]
I didn't spend the summer mowing lawns (what a waste of sheep food) or planting

flowers. I spent it turning the one acre I had at my disposal into a place that could help sustain me. (“never looked worse” 2/6/10)

Cold Antler ascribes her neighbor’s opinion that her small farm is an eyesore to complacency with the status quo: that small yards are not meant to house small farms and maybe that food production belongs in a farming community and should be separate from typical homes. Cold Antler eventually moved to a right-to-farm community in rural New York, not far from her former Vermont home, to further ground her DIY food practice in a community of like-minded people. In this way, Cold Antler is better able to practice her food growing work since it is sustained in a supportive community. Cold Antler’s story about her neighbor shows that community building is difficult and includes complications, especially when community members disagree about the best ways to promote community wellness. It’s important for Cold Antler to find a comfortable space to continue to grow food since she uses her developing skills to encourage and support others to grow food. Cold Antler decides to leave her community and join another, whereas another option may have been to “stand in¹⁵” a community that does not support her HFP and hope to influence others to understand the benefits of HFP eventually. Cold Antler’s decision to find a more supportive community helped her continue to grow her HFP practice, which has an interconnected effect on even her former neighbor in Vermont who may now have access to local food because of Cold Antler’s nearby farm.

¹⁵ This is a concept described by Marparyan as: “a conscious decision [...] to ‘stay inside’ a putatively oppressive institution [...] in order to change it from the inside and help it realize its liberatory potential” (70).

Root Simple do not share Cold Antler's problem with having neighbors who take issue with the aesthetics of a home garden, but Root Simple still encountered frustration with how their neighbors interacted with their garden. Unexpected plant theft sometimes derailed Root Simple's hope to create community with their parkway garden. They write, "I know I'm supposed to be Mr. Groovy Permaculture Dude, but it's hard not to get angry when a barrel cactus gets jacked out of the front yard. The irony is that I planted this cactus to keep people from stealing the nectaplums higher up the front slope. Clearly I need to either let go of it all and accept the free exchange of the universe thing or plant a giant man-eating Venus fly trap to protect the barrel cactus" ("Plant Thievery" 4/15/14). These experiences of "plant thievery" provoked Root Simple to reconsider their relationship to people in their community and to their sense of ownership of their plants. Root Simple cite, for example, learning to embrace "the free exchange of the universe," which implies that if a plant is "stolen" from them, they will in turn gain something else within their connections to the universe, including the other people in it. More specifically, Root Simple see this issue of plant thievery as an opportunity to reflect on how they hope to build community as part of their food growing activism. Root Simple's story also shows the complications of building community. Root Simple could instead consider that the person who stole their cactus needed it more than Root Simple. Or perhaps, Root Simple could be provoked into considering their own understandings of plant ownership. The important point though, is that Root Simple are spurred into considering their place within their community and how they must interact with others in their community. Root Simple were able to think differently about their relationships

with other people through food growing. This interaction helped them shift their consciousness to embrace their interconnectedness with other people.

Tenth Acre is also faced with developing a relational connection to people in her neighborhood when someone harvested comfrey she grew in her parking strip garden. Tenth Acre grew cherry trees in the space, anticipating that people in the neighborhood would take some cherries. She went as far as offering cherries to onlookers as she harvested them, and admits to being disappointed that she kept all 27 pounds of cherries herself. However, someone had taken some comfrey leaves that Tenth Acre grew under the cherry trees as a mulch and fertilizer. The comfrey harvester left a note on Tenth Acre's front porch saying they took some comfrey, which can be used for healing, for their dog who had broken its legs and promised Tenth Acre "I'll bring something in September in return." Tenth Acre confesses that she had many emotions about the harvest: surprise and alarm that someone could take some without her noticing, concern for the dog, an unsettling of her expectations that the comfrey was to serve as fertilizer for the cherries. Ultimately, this event led Tenth Acre to think more about the mode of the industrialized food system and the uncertainty that things like sharing bring into this individualist system. Since this post was recent, it's hard to tell whether this realization will have any effects on Tenth Acre's gardening practices. However, her documented shift in consciousness is an important step toward a more community-based food system that values communal well-being. She also wrestles with her own expectations and plans, and talks about letting go of expectations she had of what community sharing would look like ("Someone Harvested from My Yard").

By attempting to let go of plans to exist among a community of plants and other people, and accept “the free exchange of the universe,” Root Simple and Tenth Acre embrace a sense of community with others and plants resembling what Freya Mathews calls the poetic nature of the universe. Mathews writes, “The transactions with the world whereby we ensure our own self-maintenance need at the same time to be invitations to conversation, to poetic collaboration” (3). By following the flow of the environment set up by the poetic universe, Mathews argues, individuals can enter a more just community with the environment, because the flow shows you are not trying to change the environment to suit your own needs. I would extend Mathews’ point to relationships between people, because I posit we cannot separate people and the environment; all is part of an interconnected system. If the universe is poetic, or nonrandom and meaningful in its purpose, then people can learn to exist communally with the planet and with each other by practicing attitudes of letting go, like the bloggers often write about. Although Mathews focuses more on individual and societal relationships to nature, extending her ideas about poetics can help us enter communities with other people (who are also connected to nature and with the universe) to create a more integrated, holistic food system. Mathews continues, “To operate in the synergistic mode requires flexibility, detachment from fixed ideas and overdetermined goals, and an eye for opportunities if and as they present” (2). Mathews’s idea of a synergistic mode can be described as a system that values when parts work together rather than when they are fragmented. Working in synergy means that parts must work together in an interconnected state. The requirements for a synergistic system that Mathews endorses could be helpful to the

bloggers as they continue to interact with their community. For example, practicing detachment from fixed goals could help Root Simple, Cold Antler, and Tenth Acre cope with unsupportive neighbors and plant theft. Flexibility and openness to opportunity could help them find new ways to encourage neighbors to start their own gardens, or at least be more understanding of the bloggers' own gardens.

The bloggers express a desire to be more flexible and less fixed in their relationships with the universe, especially their interactions with other people through their food growing. By recognizing the reciprocity of their relationships with their various communities—including their virtual blogging communities—the bloggers became more flexible with their food justice work when they applied various methods of food justice work in different situations. As a result, they could develop more reciprocal relationships with their readers. Interacting with them via comments, for example, the bloggers begin to take varying opportunities to work on their food justice activism as the opportunities are presented.

Virtual Communities

The bloggers used their online presence to create virtual communities, expanding their connection to people across the U.S. and even to other countries. In this way, the bloggers, though participating in seemingly private, everyday activism, extend the reach of their food justice work. All of the bloggers encouraged their readers to give feedback on blog content via comments. The bloggers also extended invitations to readers to send emails, which the bloggers said they earnestly attempted to always answer. By asking for advice and comments from readers, the bloggers turned their DIY food practice into a

kind of communal activity. Cold Antler invited readers to interact with her via her blog by asking them to weigh in on ethical/sociological questions. These queries included topics of curiosity regarding her blog's male readerships and what their relationship was to homesteading ("books and boys" 12/14/09), or publically addressing the many emails she receives from women wanting to keep chickens and asking Cold Antler's advice for convincing their husbands to agree ("Husbands and Hens" 2/26/11). Because of her increased interaction with her online community, Cold Antler also developed ways to increase the level of community for herself and her readers by creating a special forum to make communicating online more of an open conversation. She writes, "The blog has changed a lot over the years. What started as a journal, turned into a story. That story turned into a community. Now when I write here I feel like I'm starting a conversation with friends instead of scribbling into a book" ("what are you doing here" 9/24/10). By recognizing her audience's effect on her approach to writing about homesteading, Cold Antler shifts her consciousness and perspective from daily HFP as individualistic to communal.

Scholarship about blogging often contains a tension between community building and individual expression. Julie Rak asserts that blogging is often an individualist pursuit, writing, "liberal beliefs about the value and rights of the individual remain at the core of most blogging (Browning et al. 153–55), since most blogs still have the opinions and experiences of a single person as their focus" (172). Blogs, then, are a way for an individual to share their personal experiences and assert their individual stories and attitudes. According to Aimee Morrison, however, a blogger's purpose may shift over

time. So if bloggers begin their writing as an individualist pursuit, they may later find connection to community the longer they blog. Morrison writes:

This blending of self-expression—the assertion of a unique experience, or the exceptionality of the writing subject—with community identity is an essential element of the intimate public of personal mommy blogging [for instance]. More than 43 percent of the writers noted that their reasons for blogging had shifted over time; some of these bloggers became more interested in the expressive potential of writing in public, but many more noted a shift from an expressive exigence to an interpersonal one—from self toward community. (43)

Although Morrison's research centers mommy bloggers, her theory of an intimate public—the sharing about and from a personal space with a small-to-large audience—applies to food/gardening bloggers. The bloggers I've analyzed practice their activism in and around their homes and often share photos of their home spaces. Furthermore, the bloggers share and theorize the practice of eating. Because they straddle public and private, the bloggers speak openly about their virtual communities and their desire to create them.

By creating an “intimate public,” as Morrison names it, the bloggers specifically engaged with their communities as a way of building commonweal. Since commonweal relies on synergetic community well-being (a person is not well unless the community is well), the bloggers could gage how they contributed to community well-being through their readers' communication with them. Many readers asked the bloggers to advise them as they began or deepened their HFP practices. The bloggers were happy to offer their

experiences and ask for help with their own practices sometimes. Through this community engagement, they are able to see effects of their work to share HFP knowledge with a wider audience. Readers also held the bloggers accountable for how their blogging affected their communities. Root Simple write, “One of the reasons I prefer blogging to writing books is feedback in the form of comments. The subject matter we write about attracts thoughtful and compassionate people interested in making the world a better place. And I appreciate discussion and constructive criticism [...] [I]t’s good to have accountability in the form of reader feedback” (“2014 a Year in Comments” 12/26/14). Via blog comments, readers keep Root Simple accountable for their food justice work (their blogging is clearly an extension of this work), and for the way they interact with their virtual and non-virtual communities. For example, in a post about a possum destroying some of their garden, Root Simple jokingly wrote that the possums were “partying with the winos and tranny hookers down on Sunset.” They later removed the word “tranny” from their post and added as a note, “*A number of readers, quite rightly, took offence at the word ‘tranny.’ My apologies to anyone who may have been offended*” (“Playin’ Possum” 10/26/10). Through reader accountability, Root Simple reevaluated their language and its oppressive potential (although I would claim that “wino” is also an oppressive word). Root Simple develop their food justice work and relationship to people, as their blog exposes them to diverse viewpoints and allows them to have conversations with people around the world.

The bloggers connected with people in a complicated way due to their privilege, desire to promote food justice, and sometimes strict standards for what they believe food

justice should be. Although I found the bloggers reported their food justice work from a place of caring, they also set high standards for their readers' own everyday food practices. In return, the blogging communities held the bloggers accountable for their own actions, developing an openness to continue the bloggers' interactions with other communities. Although the bloggers held a lot of food privileges they didn't always acknowledge, which allowed them to sometimes co-opt knowledge or misspeak about the struggles of low-income and low-food-access communities, by developing relationships and communities both virtually and physically, the bloggers leave room to continue to develop. Harper writes,

[C]ultural sensitivity is something I think the largely white, middle-class, eco-sustainable, and alternative-health movements in the U.S. need to work on—these predominantly white, liberal, social-justice initiatives—from community food organizing and antiglobalization protests, to veganism, to dismantling the prison-industrial complex—are often entrenched in covert whiteness and white privilege that are collectively unacknowledged by white-identified people engaged in them. This has blunted the effectiveness of these movements' outreach and intent to people of color like myself, who perceive the tone and delivery of their message as elitist and colonizing. (939)

I see Harper's claim in action when the bloggers discuss their food activism. The bloggers sometimes expected their readers to be more personally responsible for their food choices, for example, without showing an understanding of how their readers may struggle to change their personal food choices for various reasons. However, the constant

feedback they receive from their communities, may allow these white activists to grow and become better food justice advocates. I hope that the bloggers continue to develop more inviting ways of delivering their messages to low-income people, and collaborate with these communities to build a more inclusive food justice that challenges the unjust status quo.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICIZING FOOD

The bloggers approach food as a way of life that connects many aspects of the world; the food we consume impacts people, as I discussed in Chapter II, and the earth and nonhuman animals, which I will discuss in chapter 4. In this chapter, I explore how the bloggers recognize food's agency. The bloggers' work with food starts with themselves and extends to other people, which I've discussed in part one (chapters 1 and 2) as the human-human/self-interactions that happen through HFP. Starting with this section, I explore the non-human elements of HFP. I start with the relationship between food and the bloggers as intimate. The relationships developed through food that an agential viewpoint influences extends to the broader environment. I begin to develop the theoretical framework for non-human agency discussions using a vital materialist body of literature. This framework influences my further discussion of how the bloggers interact with the wider environment in chapter 4.

The bloggers start with taste, quality, and satisfaction of homegrown food, and recognize the subjectivity or agency of food and how it moves through its interrelationships with each part of the food system. The bloggers often explore the history of food and their desire to know that history. In this way, they show a concern for how food is treated that has as much to do with food itself as with how food interacts with humans. In general, the bloggers believe that food grown at home is more nutritious and tastes better, qualities they maintain through preservation and preparation that keeps

the food as whole as possible and leads to satisfaction and appreciation of home grown food. Along with this belief in the wholeness of food, the bloggers claim natural as a standard that has many implications. This belief comes from a distrust of factory produced foods, primarily because the industrial food system strips food of its agency. The industrial system treats food as a commodity that humans produce and manipulate. Alternatively, the bloggers exhibit an underlying belief that food has agency that connects them to a synergistic assemblage of food and body. I argue that, by valuing the food's agency and through reflecting on and historicizing their human/food entanglements, the bloggers believe they can develop a more just relationship with it. However, the bloggers' creation of a natural/artificial – nature/culture binary does not allow for a fully developed relationship with material food. In the next section, I outline the theoretical framework I use to explore food as material, highlighting the bloggers historicizing of food. Then, I build on food agency to discuss the complicated entanglements the bloggers have with food.

Agential Food

My claim that the bloggers recognize the agency of food to act of its own accord is influenced by a theory that goes by many names: posthumanism, vital/New Materialism, object-oriented ontology (OOO), and others. I prefer the term vital materialism in this context because it implies energy and liveliness, which is essential to my reading of the bloggers' relationships with food. In order to frame the theoretical structure of food as agential, I will start by defining some major contributions to this field of vital materialism. I synthesize these theories with womanist theory as defined by Layli

Maparyan. Womanism is a perspective not often included in New Materialism; nonetheless, it ascribes to some of the same underlying perspectives, specifically in terms of energy, and also adds a new level to understanding nonhuman agency because womanism theorizes spiritual interconnectedness.

OOO as defined by Ian Bogost, and vital materialism defined by Jane Bennett, assert that nonhuman objects have agency, a kind of energy that flows through nonhuman and human material to connect them. Which is to say, nonhuman objects act beyond human intervention, and with a similar energy. The important point I take from OOO and vital materialism is not only that food has agency, but that if we recognize this agency, we will begin to break down the notion that humans are more important than food or any other object. Bennett writes of disturbing this human/plant hierarchy: “These vital materialists do not claim that there are no differences between humans and bones [or other nonhuman objects], only that there is no necessity to describe these differences in a way that places humans at the ontological center or hierarchical apex” (11). Bennett reminds us that humans and plants may have differences, but these differences should not set up a hierarchy that places humans above all. Bogost concurs with this point, writing, “A posthuman ontology is one in which humans are no longer monarchs of being, but are instead *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings” (16–17, his italics). In his estimation, humans are affecting and affected by acting nonhuman objects, and should not assume a hierarchical perspective.

By questioning this perceived hierarchy that places humans above all, these theorists hope to create a desire for humans to respect the agency of nonhuman objects,

even when they enter complicated relationships with nonhuman objects. Bennett emphasizes this idea by claiming that humans and nonhumans are made up of the same material and thus both have similar capacity for energetic movement. This should lead to a desire to create more just relationships with food. She writes, “This sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically [just]” (17–18). I take from Bennet’s claim and apply it to food, arguing by recognizing that food, for example, has the same inner energy as humans, perhaps humans will begin to break down practices that ecologically harm food.

Energetic movement is a key component of agency. In other words, nonhuman objects have agency because they are always moving. In this movement, objects interact with each other. Agency, then, is always part of a mutually affecting system. Barad claims that nonhuman agency is not static, but rather always in flux. She writes, “Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world” (818). In other words, agency is always active and a nonhuman object doesn't only have agency, it *is* agency. Its agency is constantly enacted and reenacted. The stuff of the world happens or occurs because agential objects (all of the objects) are intra-acting with each other. Barad’s theory recognizes the contributions of matter to the world and importantly decenters humans as the impetus of action. Barad, in this essay, focuses on constant movement as agency. Other scholars theorize that the agential movement of objects interconnects with everything.

Considering womanist theory alongside vital materialism allows for a spiritual perspective, which importantly brings together interconnectedness and ethical action. Womanism and vital materialism both emphasize how all nonhuman and human objects are constantly interacting, but womanism varies in that it sees this agency as spiritual. Through a spiritual lens, I argue, there is more room for just actions from an ethical position. Maparyan defines her version of womanism by claiming that womanists acknowledge the energy and agency of nonhuman beings and that humans and nonhumans are interconnected, or, in other words, that their actions affect one another. She writes, “Humans are not assumed to be the only kinds of volitional beings in the universe, and all things exist in energetic interrelation” (35, *The Womanist Idea*). This theory of interrelationship or interconnectedness adds a layer to a theory of vital materialism because she focuses on spirituality. Bennett, a monist who uses the term “vitalism” in a similar way to how Maparyan uses “spirit,” openly eschews labeling her theory as spiritual. Maparyan, instead, redefines spirit as inclusive—outside of specific religious practice and existing not only in relationship to humans. Spirit, to Maparyan, flows through everyone and everything, just as Bennet thinks of agency. Honoring the spirit of everything, in everyday interactions, may create a need for ethical everyday interaction. If we honor the spirit of things, we may begin to recognize that humans are not apart from nonhuman objects. By finding these connections, we may begin to break down hierarchical thinking that centers human well-being, and part of this practice involves fostering just relationships with agential food.

In order for food to be entangled with humans in an interconnected relationship, we must first acknowledge the agency of food. In this chapter, I use a theory of nonhuman agency and apply it specifically to food as a nonhuman agent. I consider specifically, then, the ways in which food as a nonhuman object interacts with the interconnected system that includes people in unique ways. Lisa Heldke and Kim Hall theorize specifically about the agency of food and the interrelationship of humans with food. Heldke, a feminist philosopher, argues that food is relational. She writes, “The things we eat are the products of multiple relationships” (“An Alternative Ontology of Food” 50). It does not do to simply say food has agency but, to Heldke, we must also see the way we interact with food and are perhaps affected by this agency. Hall agrees with Heldke’s assertion that food is a point of intra-acting, writing that this idea “has the potential to lead to a more complex food ethics” (189) Furthermore, Hall proposes a theory that she names “the metaphysics of compost,” (189) which describes “a process of becoming that is simultaneously a coming into being (building good soil, for instance) and decomposition or loss. Compost is all these at once—never pure, never fixed.” She continues, “As I understand it, compost is less a composite of multiple sites of relationship than it is a Deleuzian assemblage that is constantly being transformed by these relationships” (190). Hall uses the metaphysics of compost to suggest that food exists in an ever-changing assemblage. Compost, actual compost, is a mix of agential parts that combine to form energy itself. Through the energy that the agential assemblage creates, the parts begin to break down and entangle with each other. Heldke and Hall suggest that food has agency, yet they do not consider how humans see themselves in a

hierarchy with food where humans are at the top. This hierarchal perspective is manifested through industrial food. Therefore, putting these ideas in conversation with vital materialism is important because it can begin to break down this hierarchy and also acknowledge human entanglement with food. This perspective is similar to how the bloggers discuss the agency of food.

The bloggers, I argue, see food as agential, as sometimes but not always interacting with humans and inside of human bodies, and they use this idea to advocate for more socially just relationships with food. The bloggers recognize food's agency by historicizing it; they recognize its interconnected history. The implication of ascribing a history to food means that we see food as an agential, interconnected, living object. By eschewing industrial systems in favor of HFP, the bloggers begin to value this agency. To historicize food, as I see the bloggers doing, is to recognize food's ability to move through the world and impact other parts of the world.

The bloggers prefer natural food, or food in its most original state, because they value food's agency and don't believe in human manipulation of food. Food has agency that is separate from its interconnectedness with humans and other nonhuman entities. By starting with this food in itself, separating food for a moment from its interconnected community to locate its agency, the bloggers attempt to recognize the propensity of material food to create phenomena or events with its agency. Large portions of their blogging focus on food itself, which then connects to how food interacts with people, the environment, and animals. Focusing on food itself, the bloggers valued whole food, or food unhampered by pesticides or artificial preservatives. The need for whole foods can

be met, according to the bloggers, from growing or foraging whole foods, or procuring it locally and eating it fresh, or else preserving it at home for later consumption using methods they deem as more natural. The important criteria the bloggers set for recognizing food agency are that food be as close as possible to its natural state, which includes taking into account native planting and seasonality.

For the bloggers, like Cold Antler, valuing food in itself requires a shift in status quo thinking regarding the role of food in a human/nature system. She writes, “The problem is that Americans have convinced themselves that cheap food, a seasonless selection, and endless variety are their rights—not healthy food, in-season crops, and correct variety” (“You are what you eat” 9/15/09). By “cheap” food, Cold Antler doesn’t necessarily mean food that doesn’t cost a lot, but rather food that is mass produced in an unjust, industrialized system specifically to decrease the cost. Cheap food, then, is an example of human manipulation of agential food. Cold Antler asserts that we should not feel like food is a right; this attitude leads to an assumption that humans are to control food as a commodity. This example points to an overall trend in the blogs that natural food is more just than processed foods. The bloggers prefer natural food for several reasons. Throughout this chapter, I explore specifically how their preference for natural foods shows that the bloggers value the agency of food. According to Cold Antler, if we shift our thinking on the kind of food we have a right to, and focus on the value of food in itself—determined by what the bloggers view is the most natural state of food—we can work toward food justice in interconnected ways.

Industrial Food

By criticizing harmful effects on food the industrial system creates, the bloggers emphasize the need to let food be as it is, in all of its energetic potential. The bloggers believe that industrial food practices come from a place of human narcissism, or a need to control the production of food and bend it to the needs of humans. This belief resembles Bennett's claim that we must see food as agential in order to counteract human control. She writes, "I will emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflect of human language and thought" (xvi). The bloggers, above all, agree that plants are difficult to control and understand, but that they must work on developing a relationship with food that recognizes food has agency. Northwest Edible gives this advice to her readers: "Harvest the vegetable when the vegetable wants to be picked, not when you want to eat it. Build your cooking around what the garden is giving you today, not what you want to take at at [sic] moment" ("I Wish" 7/14/11). Northwest Edible sees her garden and its vegetables as agential in that vegetables want to be picked, and this want is not dependent on human need. The bloggers consider the agency of food to grow on its own, therefore they take measures to know how food is grown in order to ensure it can grow agentially.

The bloggers distrust factory farming because it assumes control over growth and thus, I argue, harmful to the agential expression of food. To control the variety, soil, and natural growing process of a food crop is to take away its agency. To strip food of its agency is to perform violence against food, a type of violence that affects all parts of the

interconnected assemblage. The bloggers criticize human dominance because of their attention to the food itself and their attention to the assemblage of food and body, or the way the food interacts with their bodies when consumed. The bloggers criticize control when it does not value the naturalness of food. Any type of gardening the bloggers perform is a type of control over food, but they view factory farming as negative control because it makes food more artificial, using chemical manipulation to artificially ripen fruit or sterilize soil. They view gardening as a type of control that represents reciprocal relationships that value the agency of food, whereas factory farming assumes a type of control that strips food of its agency. Although the bloggers rely on the assumption that whole food is better than factory farmed food, the bloggers place the importance on food that is natural, rather than strictly pure. In many ways, whole, natural foods disrupt the idea of purity because whole foods that factory farming has not sterilized contain many living agents.

The bloggers often cite learning the realities of the harmful industrial food system as the motivation for their homegrown lifestyle. They encourage their readers to become informed about the overall health and safety of the food they eat. The bloggers are certain that a practical solution to harmful food produced in the industrial system is growing your own food to at least supplement food obtained from outside sources. Root Simple write, “The cow dookie in the spinach scandal of the past month should prompt everyone to consider planting your own garden” (“Parkway Plantings” 10/3/06). Root Simple refer to a widespread spinach recall because of E. Coli. Root Simple believe that industrial food systems do not properly protect food from bacteria such as E. Coli, and create

opportunities for *E. Coli* to develop where it normally wouldn't; they blame human industrial system manipulation. Chad Lavin, in "The Year of Eating Politically," traces the philosophical turns in the alternative food movement from organic to local. He writes, "By 2006, retail leviathan Wal-Mart was selling organic produce and organic spinach had been tainted by *E. coli* 0157, a toxic bacteria that owes its very existence to the industrial farming practices that organics ostensibly opposed." Root Simple and Lavin refer to the same *E. Coli* spinach outbreak, which shows that even organic-labeled systems of food production have failed. The idea that industrial food compromises the safety of food heightens Root Simple's distrust of industrial systems. Organic growing still takes the agency from food and places its control on organic farmers who need to mass produce. Yet Root Simple believe valuing food's agency by letting it grow in ways that are more autonomous, instead of manipulating it for human gain, food and humans would work within a more just system. The bloggers made this comment at the beginning stages of their food blog, thus representing an important occasion that sparked their writing. A practical solution to recognizing food's agency: grow your own food.

Diseases and risks to public health in industrial food have been well documented since the 2006 outbreak Root Simple and Lavin refer to, even among organic food production, which the food industry recognizes as least harmful because it is grown without pesticides. For example, a list of selected foodborne illness outbreaks in 2015 cited on the Center for Disease Control's website includes 11 major outbreaks, including large companies such as Blue Bell Ice Cream and Costco, as well as Chipotle, a company who markets their food as "food with integrity" (Center for Disease Control). The list

also includes lesser known food suppliers. For example, 11 people in nine states were infected with Salmonella from raw sprouted nut butter spread distributed by JEM Raw Chocolate, LLC (Center for Disease Control). Outbreaks of food borne illnesses, which the bloggers discuss often, give them evidence for their distrust of industrial food. Food scholars agree that the safety of food should be a priority of food companies. Stuart et al. argue that, “Because food companies set the terms for food production, [...] they have a social responsibility to protect public health” (232). They also claim that the prevalence of food outbreaks point to the need to examine the mechanisms the food industry uses to increase production and how we hold the food industry accountable (232).

The benefits of homegrown food over factory produced food include safety, as well as more varieties of food grown in smaller, more localized ways than an industrial system, according to the bloggers. Root Simple write:

As for the fruit of *Physalis pruinosa* itself, it does not ship well, hence you’ll never find it in American supermarkets, which only seem to carry things that have been shipped for thousands of miles and are therefore both durable and, inevitably, tasteless. Cultivating strange things like this is one of the best arguments for growing your own food—access to flavorful and exotic fruits and vegetables. (“*Physalis pruinosa*” 4/30/07)

Root Simple value food that mass industry does not control. They place value in food that is different from varieties normally seen in large grocery stores because that obscure food represents an alternative to industrial food. Obscure food varieties become a metaphor for the bloggers’ questioning of industrial food as status quo. In this way, obscure food

varieties also become appreciated as having characteristics beyond human control, since harmful human control over natural processes is the central underpinning characteristic of industrial food.

Another reason for tasteless produce from factory farms is the variety of plants grown. Typically, in nature, many varieties of plants grow and become stronger because of genetic diversity. But, since genetic diversity can produce fruit plants that may or may not have consistent taste, growing a genetically diverse crop is too risky for industrial growers who rely on selling produce that consumers can rely on to always taste the same. Root Simple explain several problems with industrial growing using watermelons as an example. They write:

Damn those supermarket watermelons! Every one I've bought this summer has been mealy, old and tasteless. Why? Yet again, the folks who sell us our food have decided to grow only a handful of the over 1,200 known varieties of watermelons...The problem with supermarket watermelons is not due to the seedless vs. seeded issue. Seedless watermelons are created with a complex genetic process you can read about here.¹⁶ What's more relevant to taste is how early watermelons are picked, how long they've been sitting around and the limited varieties commercial growers plant. The Heirloom Exposition eloquently demonstrated the benefits of genetic diversity with its watermelon display and tasting. And that diversity is something we can all address in our gardens, if we

¹⁶ Hyperlink from original: <http://www.ccmr.cornell.edu/education/ask/?quid=651>

have one, by planting unusual seeds. You can bet I'm going to try growing watermelons in next summer's straw bale garden. ("The Genetic Diversity of Watermelons" 9/13/13)

Root Simple cite lack of genetic diversity, genetic engineering, and the process of picking unripe fruit and transporting it long distances as the negative practices of industrial food that produce tasteless watermelons. Root Simple express concern that since industrial farmers breed their foods to survive shipment, without gardeners and small farmers, other—perhaps more tasteful varieties of seed—will be lost. They see it as their responsibility to preserve a lot of different varieties of seeds to preserve tasteful foods. These types of more tasteful foods also happen to be grown in ways that support an agential plant/human entanglement. Flores, another garden activist, takes seed-saving beyond preserving taste. She writes,

The seeds we have today are the foundation of tomorrow's world, and by saving them we save ourselves. If we embrace the need for conservation and integrate seed saving into our garden cycles, then we still have a fighting chance. Through saving seeds and sharing plants and information, we can begin to honor and perpetuate, rather than marginalize and endanger, nonhuman species and create a thriving natural culture. (142)

Other food scholars express concerns similar to the bloggers' that industrial food harms the food system, which humans are a part of, and food itself. Vandana Shiva frames the failings of the industrial food system as "maldevelopment." She claims that although the industrial system is framed as progress or development, it actually harms the

current system. She writes, “Maldevelopment is the violation of the integrity of organic, interconnected and interdependent systems, that sets in motion a process of exploitation, inequality, injustice and violence. It is blind to the fact that a recognition of nature’s harmony and action to maintain it are preconditions for distributive justice” (339). Shiva asserts that the industrial food system disrupts a natural system and replaces it with violence and exploitation. This exploitative industrial system, according to Martha Jane Robbins, relies on the creation of food as a passive substance that only serves to benefit humans and thus can be changed and manipulated to fit human needs. She writes, “Transforming food into a commodity is necessary for the functioning of the industrial food system, as disembedding food from its social, cultural, geographic and ecological aspects allows food to be vastly exchangeable and severely altered from its original state” (459). Shiva and Robbins both claim that food can be exploited, or at the least “severely altered.” To me, Shiva’s and Robbins’s claims show that the agency of food can be stripped when human’s view it as less important than their needs and development. To ensure that we see food as agential, and that its agency is entangled with us but not stripped to become our commodity, the bloggers emphasize the importance of food’s history.

The bloggers advocate for food procurement from sources that they know personally because of their deep distrust of industrial food systems. The bloggers encourage their readers to look beyond the commodification of industrial food systems. Northwest Edible writes, “Plumbing the depth of my own relationship with food, environmental impact, labor rights, animal rights and financial consideration is still

less daunting than parsing the bullshit marketing terminology surrounding a carton of eggs” (“What’s in a Name?” 10/06/11). Northwest Edible shows a distaste for food marketing that is still produced from a large-factory system. This mistrust for labeling shows Northwest Edible’s deeper mistrust of industrial food systems. She feels that these labels are meaningless and best meant to confuse consumers into complacency with unjust systems. A better alternative to this meaningless and confusing food labeling is creating more intimacy: knowing all you can about your food.

Knowing Food

The bloggers place particular importance on growing food out of a desire to “know” their food. When the bloggers claim that they wish to know their food, what they usually mean is they want to ensure producers grow food justly, since consuming such food is the goal. Tenth Acre, in her “About Me” section of her blog writes, “Some are gardening for the healthy benefit and nutrition that comes from eating freshly-picked [sic] produce, and the knowledge that the produce isn’t genetically-modified [sic] or sprayed with dangerous chemicals.” Tenth Acre’s purpose for gardening, as she explains in this section, relies on the value she places on freshly picked food that is not treated with dangerous chemicals or that human egotism or control manipulates. Tenth Acre wants to be sure humans do not modify her food, and her solution to knowing the integrity of her food is HFP. Northwest Edible, like Tenth Acre, values the knowledge that HFP provides about her food. Northwest Edible writes,

I know everything about my hens and their eggs, and I know everything about my kale and my beets and my beans. I know how they were grown, how they were

nurtured and how the people involved in their production were treated.

Labels are one thing – and are very important, in their place. But labels are not a stand-in for the full story. Growing my own, I have the full story right in front of me. (“What’s in a Name” 10/6/11)

By knowing their food, Northwest Edible and Tenth Acre can evaluate the ethics of their relationship with food.

Root Simple revealed their struggles after discovering their soil had high lead content, which complicated their assumption that to grow food is to fully know food. They expressed disappointment when realizing the food they trusted to be of higher quality and contain less harmful components like pesticides could contain harmful lead. After testing their soil, Root Simple discovered the soil at their 1940s home had high levels of lead (“Lead Update” 9/24/11). Root Simple had to make plans to change their growing practices after this discovery, which included buying soil and using containers for planting. Fortunately for Root Simple, they asked their doctor to perform a blood test, which showed their blood contained no lead (“Lead Update” 11/10/11). Still, Root Simple were frustrated that lead paint, an industrial product, thwarted their attempts to eat safer food. This concern grew when Root Simple posted a New York Times article reporting urban chicken eggs could range from containing no lead to more than 100 parts per billion (“Urban Chickens and Lead” 10/9/12). Root Simple expose the unjust practices of large corporations and the harm historical exploitation practices cause. In this way, they connect actions through time and space to a personal moment of feeling unsafe in their food choices. Root Simple also critique the real estate industry for not having

more aggressive policies on notifying home buyers of lead levels, and remind their readers that industrial eggs have their own problems. Furthermore, since they distrust industrial egg production, Root Simple would still prefer not to take their chances since they claim industrial food lacks transparency when discovering potentially unsafe food. At least Root Simple know more fully what is in their food now, even if some of the content is lead.

Knowing how food was grown is a common goal for food justice activists. One of Monica White's participants in the article "Sisters of the Soil" said that, "When you grow a tomato, you know that tomato is not something that was created in a laboratory because you grew it from organic seeds" (21). The bloggers and White's participant set this goal of knowing in opposition to a large industrial system that does not care for food. As Lupton explains, consumers increasingly pursue more knowledge and awareness regarding the life of food. She writes, "In these discourses, a 'healthy' diet is not simply about avoiding animal fat, salt or sugar in foods, as advocated by nutritional science, but is also implicated in the ways in which the food is produced, the care with which food is prepared, the extent of processing it receives and the consciousness of such aspects of the food on the part of the consumer" (89). Lupton claims that nutrition involves not just chemical elements of food but with knowing the history of the food. Importantly, consumers want to know the history for themselves. This need to know food raises an important point: since consumers express a desire to know their food's history, they acknowledge that food has a history. Historicizing food, I insist, acknowledges the ability

of food to move and act. Yet, if bloggers valued food's agency more fully, they must also acknowledge that it is impossible to ever fully know your food.

Accepting that we do not fully understand is an important step toward dismantling this human-led hierarchy. By expressing a desire to know *everything* about food, the bloggers may be exerting human ego in another sense. Assuming that knowing everything about food is possible assumes that humans can understand all parts of food's life. Caroline Brazier writes about accepting the mysteriousness of the environment:

It is easy enough to talk romantically about encountering nature, but when we look more closely at the creatures around us, the idea of really encountering them becomes complicated. The lives of animals and birds and insects can be observed, studied and recorded but too often the subjects of our study simply become our resources. They are objectified. Their living presence becomes meaningless as they become commodities, subjected to human-centered theorizing or used to reflect our self-interested views. Real encounter respects the mystery of others, acknowledging the unbridgeable gap between us, whilst yet attempting to achieve some sort of understanding of that other reality. (116)

Brazier, while encouraging humans to acknowledge their inability to fully understand nonhuman nature, does not say that we should abandon every attempt to understand. We can explore the actions of nonhuman animals and the implications on nonhuman animals from our own actions, while simultaneously respecting that we do not hold the capacity to ever totally know everything about a plant. In fact, our acknowledgement of the mystery of the nonhuman world can help bring us closer to accepting its agency, and

make room for this agency among human propensity to control every part of what they consider their own space. A more just system, then, would involve giving food plants space to grow, rather than claiming all space for human purposes.

The bloggers, who imagine they produce food naturally, still intermingle with their food, and human action always, somehow, affects the food, whether from the bloggers themselves or a network of others. The bloggers seem to accept at some level these interconnections by way of critiquing the harm that industrial food systems have on their small-scale food production. The bloggers maintain the myth that natural is possible because they continue to subscribe to the binary that separates natural and artificial.

Human Entanglements

The bloggers' focus on whole/natural foods also brings up questions of purity and wholesomeness, specifically related to food. The perspective of the bloggers is consistent with foundational voices of the alternative food movement, especially Michael Pollan's. However, feminist food scholars warn against equating whole foods with ideas of purity. According to Hall, Pollan's privileging of raw and whole foods, which is common among food activists, can create boundaries around the idea of purity; food activists like Pollan often define strict boundaries about what the most authentic state of food is, which reflects the presumption "that there are clear and stable boundaries that distinguish between what is and isn't food, what is and isn't edible" (180). Pollan seems to claim that some foods are real or authentic, in contrast to others that artificial or impure ingredients contaminate or those that have undergone heavy processing and chemical tampering. This idea of purity and placing boundaries around what is and isn't pure complicates the goal

to see food as agential, a goal that can be achieved without these purity boundaries.

Seeing food as pure through a human lens does not acknowledge its agential complexity, though, because this assumption that food can be pure does not consider how food and humans (and animals and environment) are continuously entangled.

A perspective like transcorporeality is more helpful to freeing food from purity boundaries while still acknowledging its agency. Stacy Alaimo uses the term transcorporeality to argue that humans and nonhuman objects are in an entangled assemblage with each other. She writes, “Imagining human corporeality as transcorporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (2). Humans do not exist on their own, but exist in entanglement with nonhuman actors. Even acknowledging human actions connect to nonhumans, that is to say each affects the other, does not acknowledge the full extent to which humans are wrapped up with nonhuman animals and objects. Specifically in terms of food as a non-human object, humans are always in a bodily entanglement with food because we consume it, it nourishes us and rests in our bodies as we draw energy from it, and its parts interact with our own and become inseparable.

By arguing for a food philosophy that considers the transcorporeality of food as it connects to human bodies, the ontology of food relies on relationships. In other words, the materiality of food always changes as it interacts with other bodies, including human bodies. Hall argues for seeing food as transcorporeal in order to protect food politics from dangerous forms of boundary policing around purity. If food is always entangled with

humans and the environment, it is impossible to consider food in a pure or whole sense. There are ways to ensure food has the chance to express its agential potential, but this is different than purity. Purity implies that humans leave food untouched, but humans interact with food growing in multiple and complicated ways. Purity, then, is an impossible, if not downright dangerous standard. The bloggers, though they tend to place foods in a hierarchy with pure foods at the top, also consider the agency of food matter to change and adapt to its environments as plants, which is an important start to recognizing the agency of food.

Food on its Own

By seeking out whole foods outside of dominant ideologies, the bloggers pay particular attention to the ways food grows outside of, but still among, humans. Root Simple describe a project in which greens seeds are spread under a fruit tree once, then reseed themselves afterward. Root Simple say that this strategy for growing includes an important step: “sit back and let nature do her thing” (“Growing Greens” 1/25/12). Although Root Simple must take the first step in seeding greens, they also acknowledge that the greens will continue to grow on their own. They enter a relationship with food that calls for action as well as acknowledges food agency on its own.

One actionable method that relies on the agency of plants is urban foraging. The essence of urban foraging is that which already grows outside of human intervention, or at least human intentionality. Root Simple, for example, write several posts about foraging for loquat fruit in Los Angeles. The fruit is not, however, widely recognized by people as an edible fruit, and therefore often goes to waste. For these reasons, Root

Simple write about how loquats are “prime candidates for urban foraging i.e. free food” (“Loquat Season” 4/8/07). Root Simple also encourage readers to look for unused foods to forage in their own areas: from “street trees, those trees growing on the strip of public land between the street and the sidewalk, and fruit which overhangs the sidewalk” or from trees planted on private property by asking for permission from homeowners, especially, if the tree has an abundance of ripe (or overripe) fruit. Root Simple continue, “Homeowners are usually happy to share, even let you onto their land, to make use of their fruit. It turns out most folks just don’t know what to do with the bounty of fruit trees, or just don’t have the time/equipment/mobility to deal with harvest” (“Loquat season is here” 4/28/14). By making use of food that would normally go to waste, Root Simple emphasize that food has value. More specifically, Root Simple, I argue, value urban foraged fruit because it is often grown without much or any human intentionality. Loquats, for example, grow in public places without help from people, and often to the annoyance of people who might consider it a weed. They grow amid human environments but without purposeful human stewardship. So the bloggers who encourage readers to urban forage value food that would normally go to waste, and that has the resilience to grow on its own, which is an act of recognizing food agency.

Fruit gleaning is a helpful example of how humans are perpetually entangled with food. As McLain et al. write, fruit gleaning “blur[s] perceptual boundaries between wild and cultivated areas” (192) since fruit trees are often uncultivated yet grow within cultivated areas. Furthermore, this type of activity, with its blurred boundaries between natural and cultural—a theme that shows up in a few of my chapters because of its

significance to a human/food/environment relationship—has been shown to be sustainable. McLain claims, “gathering can be a sustainable practice depending on the confluence of many factors, including tenure rights and responsibilities, the degree to which products enter into global market systems, the rates of regrowth relative to removal rates, and pressures from competing land uses” (193). Fruit gleaning benefits people and the environment. People receive food, and burdens on the environment to provide global food, from which fuel use and pollution have wrought negative ecological effects, are decreased. Additionally, fruit gleaning encourages a reflective relationship between humans who must acknowledge that fruit trees take up space and continue to grow without intentional cultivation.

Making Space

The bloggers often emphasize the importance of clearing space for food to grow. Because of this value they place in making space for food crops, they often admonish the status quo expectation that homes with yard space should have a lawn. Tenth Acre and Root Simple both write extensively about their profound disagreement that lawns should be the typical mark of a residential home. Tenth Acre writes, “Simply put: We can’t eat lawn. When I found out that *lawn* is the largest crop in the United States¹⁷ – and realized how abundant it is in the suburbs – I decided to give my yard a makeover!” (“See How Easily...”). To Tenth Acre, lawn is simply not practical, especially since she values food. Tenth Acre places value on any space that could grow food but, to her, would be wasted

¹⁷ Hyperlink from original: <http://www.tenthacrefarm.com/2013/07/suburban-homesteading-5-reasons/>

otherwise. I argue that this emphasis on food over lawns helps create more openness to food growing and changing without human ego, disguised as the status quo, hindering it. Lawn is a clear analogue of a desire for human control—people carefully lay out and mow down their lawn in desired areas, whereas food plants are much less predictable—the bloggers often expressed surprise at the actions of food plants and the difficulty they had growing them. It was not nearly as easy for them to grow food as it was for them to grow lawn. By taking on a relationship and risk with food plants, people can begin to let go of their own ego as they share their space with food plants.

The bloggers, along with making space for food and recognizing its energetic potential, enter mutual relationships with it by seeking to understand how growing food places them in complicated interactions with food. According to Yuna Kerouac, a farmer from Columbia, as quoted on the Facebook page Women Who Farm, “Being in the garden is a constant learning experience. It is about observing and reproducing a system that is functional, a system that has always functioned; nature.” Kerouac emphasizes both interactive relationships and learning from nature. I see that the bloggers enter relationships with food both after harvest and as it grows in different ways: the space they make in their homes to allow food to grow; the consumption of food; and the care and restraint they must practice to support the growth of food. Tenth Acre writes about the importance of observing new plants in order to better begin a relationship with them that supports their growth. She writes, “Every time we developed one little bit [of the garden] and observed how it worked within the larger system, we discovered something we hadn’t thought of, and that discovery changed and improved the next little bit” (“How to

Start a Garden”). Tenth Acre observed her garden to see how food plants interacted within her garden system and with her own actions, then changed her actions based on how the plants acted. By recognizing the agency of plants, Tenth Acre developed a strategy to help her steward a garden vis à vis valuing how a plant works within a system.

Naturalness

The bloggers themselves tend to privilege the natural. This may be a reaction to the privileging of humans, who created artificial and “franken-” foods that do not value food’s autonomy. Whatever they may react to, the bloggers privilege nature over recognizing its autonomy: to eschew artificial and seek out what they consider pure nature. This method, however, still polarizes and separates people from nature. This separation the bloggers participate in is further evident in their preference for homegrown, not factory produced food.

Like mainstream food activism, the bloggers unintentionally establish a binary between natural and artificial. This binary reinforces a fallacy that either food is natural or it is not. Food scholars warn that food is more complicated than this. Cold Antler explains that she bases her decision to eat meat on the idea that meat raised on her farm or on nearby farms is an “abundant source of healthy natural food” (“losing my religion” 12/19/09). She places this decision as an alternative to eating “fake meat,” which includes both CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation) meat and meat alternative products. Cold Antler sets up the idea that local meat is “natural,” which is wrapped up in the idea of healthy food, and that non-local, factory-produced meat and other products are “fake.” Lupton argues that we cannot describe food specifically in the limited binary

between artificial/culture and natural/nature. She writes, “Food is a liminal substance; it stands as a bridging substance between nature and culture, the human and the natural, the outside and the inside.” To Lupton, food is never purely natural because it is always bridging between nature and humans. Food exists in relationship to humans in that naming it as food means humans will consume it, and the two will mutually affect one another. Although I use the term “natural” throughout this chapter, I do so because the bloggers subscribe to this idea that food can be natural. This is a claim I question.

The bloggers acknowledge that food growing requires some human control, but make distinctions between relationships with food that are natural and those that turn food artificial, thus imposing excessive control over food. Root Simple, for example, claim “conventional plant breeding,” and genetically modifying plant organisms, are very different because conventional breeding allows plants to adjust to breeding over time and exercise some control over the process (“Neil deGrasse Tyson”). Artificiality in this example, seems to occur when humans exercise too much control over planting processes. Lupton writes,

The continual opposition of ‘processed/artificial’ and ‘natural’ foods is a response to uncertainty. If we can believe that a food is ‘natural,’ then we feel better about eating it. In the context of a climate of risk and uncertainty, being able to hold on to such binary oppositions and their moral associations makes it easier to live one’s everyday life. Ironically, however, there is a growing unease that ‘nature’ itself is not to be trusted. Developments in technology that produce ‘fresh’ food that does not easily decay, such as irradiation and genetic engineering, have

blurred the boundaries between authenticity and artificiality, between fast or convenience food and natural food. Morse refers to such food as ‘frankenfood,’ suggesting that food that is maintained as ‘fresh’ via such processes is subject to disgust. (92)

Here, Lupton points to the natural/artificial binary, one that privileges natural foods and that consumer’s uncertainty about the potential harms of industrial food creates. This boundary, however, is blurry. Lupton also points out that even foods we trust as most natural are now suspect because they may contain Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). The growing distrust of any kind of store-bought food has led the bloggers, for one, to endorse homegrown food as the only means to know their food.

The bloggers hold the assumption that homegrown food is more nutritious and will support better health. By leading their cause with the notion of better health, the bloggers believe that people will feel better and be able to contribute more energy to homesteading. They rely on whole foods to support their overall health, which in turn supports their food-producing efforts. The bloggers enter into a reflective relationship—one that works consciously and reciprocally with food—that acknowledges the agency of food and relies on its acting to support their health. The narrative of healthy eating also falls into the trap of valuing natural over artificial foods, buying into the polarizing binary. Anne Portman makes this point in her essay “Mother Nature Has It Right: Local Food Advocacy and the Appeal to the Natural.” Portman writes, “In fact, *health* is often implicitly bound to the ‘natural’ in local food discourses, and seems to be one of the most fundamental aspects of what the ‘natural’ means for local food advocates” (13, her

italics). Portman claims that healthy and natural are often used interchangeably in food justice advocacy. She continues:

[W]e can see an implied reciprocity between the two concepts; that which is healthy is natural and that which is natural is healthy. In local food discourse this reciprocity even seems to apply in cases where “health” is being used metaphorically. For example, if one argues that local food networks bolster a “healthier” local economy, the implication is that the scale of exchange is more “natural.” That health and the natural are implicitly understood as connected in this way allows for a kind of chaining effect. (14)

The continued chaining of natural with healthy has implications both for food and for people. We use natural-equals-healthy as a yardstick in which to judge the morality of our food choices. The bloggers, in this way, impose a standard on our daily eating. While I think it is important to value so-called natural processes for their autonomy (food plants would express agency without humans). The hybridity or transcorporeality of food is clear in issues related to health and nutrition of even homegrown food, yet the bloggers maintain a natural/artificial binary in their views of these issues while simultaneously using their connections to these issues to value food in itself. The bloggers also maintain this binary when exploring preservation and food waste.

Through valuing food’s agency, the bloggers also subscribe to a binary between natural and artificial, which tends to homogenize and leave unexamined the complicated relationships they have with food. The bloggers, although they don’t identify as vital materialists or womanists, often discuss the ways food acts and interacts with them, the

danger when humans place themselves at the top of the hierarchy of that assemblage, and the specific strategies and practices they take part in that value food (specifically natural food). In a way, this strategy only reverses a hierarchy; they place nature at the top. This idea of privileging the natural relates to the belief in the false authentic life I explore in Chapter 1. The bloggers believe there is a right and authentic way of eating: to privilege the natural.

Preservation

By preserving food in a way that eschews artificial ingredients, the bloggers believe that certain types of canning are more just ways to manipulate food. Overall, the bloggers believe that they honor food's agency by canning it. Canning, to the bloggers, was a common-sense way to avoid letting food go wasted. To the bloggers, respecting food is eating food without much manipulation, yet manipulation is acceptable if it prevents food from not being eaten. Canning, then, complicated the relationships that the bloggers had with agential food. Canning specifically relies on a human-centered process. Humans change the materiality of food to make it suitable for their own consumption after long storage. The claims the bloggers make, then, about canning as a more just process of preserving food and keeping it, in a sense, whole or pure raises questions about how they discern natural and artificial and what types of binaries they may set up in doing so.

Canning with pressure or water bath techniques uses heated water, pressure, and natural citrus (like lemon juice) to preserve the nutrients and taste of food for long-term storage. Most of the bloggers posted about canning the fruits and vegetables they grew in

order to extend their garden work year-round. Cold Antler reminds her readers that fruits and vegetables from the grocery store can be canned to preserve freshness. She writes, “There is nothing wrong with learning to can with store bought fruit right from the supermarket! We all know peaches, strawberries, and such taste a lot better now than they will in February and they cost half as much, too” (“Summer in a Jar” 7/17/14). Cold Antler encourages her readers to can fruits from the grocery store because canning allows a person to value the seasonality of fruits and vegetables, even without growing food at home. Although people may rely on industrial food, Cold Antler and other bloggers agree that in-season produce—even grocery store fruits or vegetables—values the wholeness of food.

The agential nature of food, however, presents risks for canning food. These risks represent the complicated relationship the bloggers have with agential food. By trying to manipulate food for delayed consumption, food sometimes reacts by growing bacteria that is extremely harmful to humans. The relationship between food and people, although mostly beneficial, is not perfect because food can produce harmful bacteria on its own. This complicated relationship points even more to the recognition that food can act on its own and humans do not own it. Whereas industrial systems maintain an attitude of conquering food for ultimate human convenience and safety, the bloggers promote an attitude of respecting the harmful potential of food and working with it to ensure human safety. Northwest Edible, an avid canner, wrote a post titled, “How not to Die from Botulism: What Home Canners Need to Know about the World’s Most Deadly Toxin”

(7/22/13). In her post, Northwest Edible talks about her experience leading canning workshops. She writes,

I once gave a presentation about home canned convenience items and how to use them and, about a third of the way through the presentation, I just stopped. I could see something in the audience's collective eye. "Ok, how many people here don't can because they are afraid they are going to kill their whole family with botulism if they do?" I asked. Fully two-thirds of the audience raised their hands.

Northwest Edible, in her talk and in the blog through an infographic, then provides information about botulism and how to protect home-canned foods from developing the deadly bacteria. She also assures her readers (and I assume her audience at talks) that botulism is very rare and can be prevented with safe canning guidelines, which include maintaining the correct acid levels of canned food or using a pressure canner. What's interesting about this post is that Northwest Edible wants to encourage her readers to begin (or continue) canning at home despite the potential risks, but is not willing to risk industrial food. The health risks of industrially grown food, combined with the potentially harmful use of bisphenol A (BPA) in industrial canning, means homesteaders believe can trust the quality of their foods, as well as their preservation methods, given home canners follow Northwest Edible's or someone else's safe canning guidelines, even despite the risks. The bloggers are willing to take on the risk of canning because they trust their own direct relationship with food more than a relationship the corporate food system mediates.

Although the bloggers enter mutually affecting relationships with food, these relationships are complicated. Food does not always apply its agency for the support of

humans, and to think so risks creating another type of hierarchy that places humans above plants. Bennett writes,

[Vital materialists] experience eating as the formation of an assemblage of human and nonhuman elements, all of which bear some agentic capacity. This capacity includes the negative power to resist or obstruct human projects, but it also includes the more active power to affect and create effects. On this model of eating, human and nonhuman bodies recorporealize in response to each other; both exercise formative power and both offer themselves as matter to be acted on. (49)

Bennet, by recognizing the agency of nonhuman objects, acknowledges that they have the capacity to “resist or obstruct human projects.” When this concept of nonhuman objects creating effects and affecting humans is applied to food as a nonhuman object, canning, in all of its dangers, is a powerful example of how food does not do what humans want or need it to do. Yet the bloggers still believe in their own ability to control food through preservation techniques.

Other canners, it seems, also believe in the ability of humans to manipulate food through canning practices. In a study on the impact of canning for food movement goals, Click and Ridberg found that canners whom they surveyed had three major motivations for canning: to control the quality and ingredients of their food, because they enjoyed the taste, and to store food that they felt was more ecologically just (316). All of these motivations are similar to what I saw expressed through the bloggers’ desire to grow their own food generally. These three motivations are also significant to how the bloggers

develop relationships to food in itself. The impetus to be in control of food may be a reaction to the ills of human-centered industrial food, but this goal sounds strikingly similar to those of industrial food. This goal shows that food activists do not trust the industrial food system, yet they still see themselves as able to control food. The bloggers and other food activists do not seem to perceive their desire to control food, because they view their relationship with food as better than others' in multiple ways. The desire may be to taste food that is more natural: Eric, one of Click and Ridberg's participants said "For me, the biggest part is I think this idea of in the middle of winter, being able to open a can of tomato sauce and smell what smells like summer food, is like sort of a magical thing" (314). Yet, they still express a desire to control the taste of this food through canning, even if they do see their motivations as environmentally just. Instead, the bloggers and other food activists could see their work canning food as an exchange with food, rather than a means to control it.

Food Waste

The issue of food waste, to the bloggers, is detrimental to food agency because wasted food is wasted energy and agency. In addition to seeing typically wasted food as having the power to support other plants, Root Simple also share a UC Davis resource with their readers that provides information for preventing food waste. The resource provides tips for storing fresh fruits and vegetables for longer life ("How to Store Fresh Fruits and Vegetables" 10/20/14). Phillip Ackerman-Leist writes, "Approximately one-third of the edible foods produced worldwide are never consumed by humans. That amounts to a stunning 1.3 billion tons of food wasted annually" (56–57). While food

waste is an important environmental concern to address, Ackerman-Leist frames the value of food in terms of human consumption. Food is considered wasted because it is never consumed by humans. He also points out that this food waste often goes unacknowledged by people because it is well hidden from our “daily orbits” (56). One of the main goals of the bloggers, as I surmise, is to bring the effects of food choices back into our daily orbits. Ackerman-Leist also acknowledges the important role that composting can play in re-envisioning food waste as beneficial, which works toward seeing food as having value beyond human consumption. He gives suggestions for minimizing food waste that include: reappropriating unused foods that are still fit for consumption to food insecure populations; minimizing the long-distance transport of foods; composting food scraps; and supporting zero waste food preparation and consumption (57). These strategies to address large-scale food waste rely heavily on community and large-scale activist projects. The bloggers I analyzed are also adding at-home, small-scale practices to this food activist conversation by minimizing food waste and developing practices of reuse in their daily activities, and then blogging about these actions and encouraging others to do the same. Importantly, the bloggers’ advocacy for changing everyday practices relies on encouraging people to change their relationship to food: this relationship conveys the message that wasted food is wasted energy and agency.

Root Simple especially are concerned with food that goes to waste for several reasons: the space it takes up in landfills, the wastefulness of throwing away food when people are in need, and the concern that food and plants contain energetic potential that

we fail to recognize when thrown away. They write in “Dumpster Herb Score” about finding wilted flowers and potted mums in a Trader Joe’s dumpster. They fret at the waste of these plants that they believe would be put to better use composted. Composting, according to Root Simple, turns what we think of as excess plant life that would normally be wasted (i.e., thrown away) into natural fertilizer for continued growing. If Trader Joe’s composted wilted flowers, the store would be supporting a cycle of growing that, I argue, values the energetic agency of the plants.

Considering food in all of its energy may make people think more carefully about the food they waste. Food scholars/activists like H.C. Flores and Stephen M. Finn consider food waste to be a major hurdle for reaching food justice. Flores points out that “Food is one of the deep diversity of resources found in the waste stream—and recycling the waste stream is the key to long-term urban sustainability” (9). Finn argues that we need to be more conscious of food waste in order to create “recognition of the value of food” (999). Furthermore, Flores asks her readers to “Consider embedded energies in everything you consume” (195). Addressing food waste is important not only because it could feed the hungry and reduce land waste, but because food itself has value and embedded energy. By recycling food waste, through methods like composting, people can help food express its energetic potential to continually morph its usefulness and place within the system.

Conclusion

Similar to how Jane Bennett summarizes the slow food movement in *Vibrant Matter*, DIY food offers people an opportunity to think about the entire life cycle of their food. Bennett writes,

[Slow food] endorses a commodity-chain approach to food that chronicles the ‘life-history’ of a food product and traces ‘the links that connect people and places at different points along the chain.’ This practice provides consumers with better insight into just what is going into their mouths: not only in terms of ingredients such as pesticides, animal hormones, fats, sugars, vitamins, minerals, and the like but also in terms of the suffering of food workers and the greed of agribusiness and its agent in Congress. (51)

By consciously watching their food grow and develop, from its beginning stages of soil preparation to harvest or egg, or watching chickens rely upon them for care and then collecting their eggs, home food producers may come to understand their food’s energetic agency throughout its life cycle. This reflective relationship that the bloggers have with food emphasizes the connections food makes with people, animals, and the environment throughout its existence.

Bennett goes on to argue that broadening “its focus beyond the activities of humans” (51) could strengthen the slow food movement. The bloggers begin to do what Bennett suggests: acknowledge the agency of food in order to enter more just relationships with that food. The bloggers begin to see this energetic potential as they struggle to make food production work for them despite its challenges. Yet, to shift the

current food system to a more just approach, we must continue to think about connections along the chain between growing, harvesting, consuming, and disposing of food, as Bennett says. The bloggers begin their food practice with watching the food itself act. From their realizations that food is an energetic agent, the bloggers start to think about the other parts of the system: other people, animals, the environment and land, and themselves.

Furthermore, seeing food as simultaneously agential and agentially interacting with other agents, helps us to formulate a food justice philosophy that takes into account these multiple agents. Lavin reminds us,

Attention to food reveals our bodies as complex assemblages inexorably implicated in other assemblages – not only the molecular assemblages that organize nutrition and ecology, but industrial assemblages of production and distribution, economic assemblages of labor and exchange, and cultural assemblages of cuisine and class. As the artifact that most visibly demonstrates the unavoidability of these assemblages, food often contains our most distilled and intensified political commitments. (paragraph 4)

Although Lavin's focus is on bodies as assemblages, these assemblages can help us begin to reimagine food justice synergistically, outside of a nature/culture binary. Food, because it is always entangled with human bodies, even when its outside of human bodies, is never purely naturally or cultural. It is always both. Heldke makes a similar point about the interrelationships of food choices by specifically looking at the ways we make ethical food choices. She writes, "Our ethical decision making needs, not more

conceptual silos, but a *barn*, in which we can attend to the interconnections that exist among these kinds of decisions” (81, her italics). By recognizing these interconnections, I argue, we can begin to participate in a more just food system without reducing our view of food into a nature/artificial binary. Whole food that controlling human conditions has not traumatized has a more whole spirit. By eating this whole food, human agents interact with its spirit to create an assemblage. Perhaps we can begin to see how food is never fully natural or separate from human action, while still valuing the agency of supposed natural food. Food and humans can exist in what Bruno Latour calls “hybrids of nature and culture” or “natures-cultures” (10). Thinking about our food choices as more ethical and interrelated to the well-being of multiple agents, including the food itself, can help us to develop more holistic food justice. The complicated relationship the bloggers have with food is only a precursor to their relationship to animals and the environment more generally.

CHAPTER IV

SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH RECIPROCITY

Chickens and gardening are the two basic practices that constitute homesteading, especially small-scale urban and suburban homesteading. Chickens and gardening provide a practical way for people to understand, have a relationship with, and have control over a small aspect of their food footprint. By growing vegetables and raising chickens for meat and/or eggs, people can supplement grocery store or farmer's market products with food they have raised or grown themselves. In order to successfully produce food, these tasks of growing/raising require homesteaders to develop strategies and techniques for interacting with nature¹⁸ and animals. The bloggers write extensively about their connections to nature, especially as achieved through gardening and the chickens they raise for either eggs only or eggs and meat. The bloggers see themselves as stewards who must nurture chickens and as masters of the chickens, using language that implies chickens are workers on their small farms and homesteads. But, while bloggers consider carefully the difficult choice of eating their chickens, almost all of the bloggers have no reservations about killing animal and insect pests who threaten the destruction of their own food production, a contradiction I discuss more in this chapter. Furthermore, the relationship bloggers have with chickens is much different than that with the

¹⁸ Scholars like Bruno Latour and Charles E. Scott have critiqued the use of the term "nature" because it can imply that humans are separate from nature. Scott argues that the ways we use nature "often draw us to an abstracting process rather than to the lives of things in their nondiscursive, dynamic interaction" (23). I use the term nature consciously because the literature and bloggers use it frequently, though I work to use it in non-opposition to humans.

environment. With the latter, the bloggers are at the mercy of the weather. Conditions can be too dry or wet for growth, or can introduce wind and hail while the bloggers advocate for letting nature do what they view as natural. I argue that the bloggers must continuously work toward more just relationships with animals and the environment through their HFP practices; because nature is always shifting, the bloggers' strategies for building just relationships must be flexible. They ultimately strive for a relationship built on reciprocity; through a perspective of being in reciprocity with nature/animals, the bloggers must decide how best to sustainably steward their home gardens and how to balance intervention and control in their relationship with animals and nature to ensure continued mutual benefit. Dissonance and contradictions confront the bloggers while they chose to grapple with their complicated relationships with nature and animals, which they do continuously through daily HFP practices. Because of these persistent conflicts, the bloggers can raise their consciousness and speak specifically to the struggles of developing reciprocal human/nature/animal relationships. Whether or not the bloggers use these conflicts to shift their ways of thinking is something I explore more in this chapter.

Reciprocity

I argue that the bloggers strive for a reciprocal relationship with the nonhuman world—specifically animals and the environment. In order to achieve this reciprocity, which implies a type of exchange to ensure the mutual benefit of both parties, the bloggers must find ecological balance. In other words, they must figure out the most balanced way to interact with the world around them that ensures humans, animals, and

the environment work reciprocally. The bloggers, as well as other environmental/food justice scholars, believe that animals and the environment already live in ecological balance, whereas humans have thrown off this balance. To define this type of ecological reciprocal balance I claim the bloggers search for, I am influenced by Maparyan's concept of womanist balance, which explores ecological balance. She writes:

In the context of the natural environment, for womanists, balance refers to recognizing Earth as a delicate and dynamic system in which humans are neither dominant nor inferior, but rather an integral part of the system. Receiving sustenance from and giving sustenance to this system can and should be a conscious, intentional process from a womanist perspective. People have the ability to observe, monitor, and adjust the impacts of their actions on Earth and its various ecosystems, nonhuman as well as human. (*The Womanist Idea* 46)

Maparyan argues that ecological balance ensures the well-being of both humans and nature in an interconnected way. She encourages people to ask themselves: how do your everyday actions affect the world around you? Can you do more to care for the natural world? In order to find balance with nature, humans must be conscious of the choices they make and how their daily activities affect other parts of the system they inhabit. They then must find reciprocity, in which they find practices that positively influence the well-being of both humans and nonhumans. I contend that the bloggers are conscious of their impacts and their food footprints, and continue to explore the specific ways their actions affect other parts of the food system, specifically nature and the environment.

Everyday actions are central to ideas about womanist balance and reciprocity with nature, because we interact with animals and the environment continuously. The bloggers, further, interact with animals and the environment on an even larger scale through HFP. Therefore, work must be done every day to shift our actions toward more reciprocity. And since humans have been particularly controlling as they interact with nature, Maparyan and the bloggers address human actions so they may come into reciprocal relationships. Maparyan advocates for people to care for and understand their interrelationships with all nature and the environment. She writes, “We are not separate from the rest of creation; even though we have unique qualities and roles in the larger scheme of things, we are not ‘a species apart’ or designed to exercise dominion as domination” (37). By recognizing that humans are part of a divine system of interconnection with nonhuman animals and the earth, people can take their place within it as caretakers and advocates for the entire planet’s well-being. Maparyan further acknowledges that humans have damaged the earth by not upholding “the human half of the equation” (37). In other words, if humans and the environment expect one another to reciprocate caring and nurturing—which the bloggers for the most part believe they should—humans have failed to reciprocate. She continues with suggestions for caring for the earth:

Practical implications of this value for nurturance include, but are not limited to, such actions as: not using more than one needs; obtaining maximum use from those things that one does need (‘reduce, reuse, recycle’); respecting the integrity of ecosystems; working with the cycles of nature; respecting animals and plants

as sentient, volitional creatures; actively promoting the optimal well-being of animals, plants, and even mineral aspects of the environment; using minimally processed materials and goods whenever possible; supporting holistic healing practices that utilize natural remedies and emphasize prevention of disease; using technology to support and align with nature rather than to dominate and control nature; developing communal strategies for solving common problems (e.g., public transportation); and, simply, living simply. (47)

Maparyan offers these suggestions as strategies for entering a relationship with nature and animals that is more socially just since these strategies care for nature. The bloggers, whose written records I analyze using a womanist theoretical framework below, struggle to define their relationships with nature and the environment, but ultimately advocate for a view of humans as part of a mutually respectful, natural system.

The idea of a reciprocal relationship with nature has been theorized in gardening scholarship more widely. These ideas of reciprocity range from kincentric, to idealistic, to practical. Flores uses the term “paradise gardening” to suggest that gardeners should work with nature for the well-being of humans and the environment, an idea that seems romantic in naming, but also has practical elements that centralize reciprocity. She writes, “By insisting that human communities not only provide for their own needs but actually contribute to and improve the natural environment, we can work toward a *thriving* human ecology that might have a chance at perpetuity. In short, when we work with nature, rather than against it, everything gets easier, more delicious, and potentially more sustainable” (17, her italics). Flores’s idea of a paradise garden is one where humans care

for plants and the land by working with nature instead of trying to manipulate natural processes. Cajete writes about a similar endeavor in his experience growing up on the Santa Clara Pueblo reservation with Pueblo gardens. He writes, “Pueblo gardens were constantly cared for to ensure that the relationships among the Pueblo farmer, the plants, community, and land were mutually beneficial to all. The Pueblo garden was a collaborative enterprise involving not only the individual farmer but the entire community and the land itself” (128). Pueblo gardens seem to reflect the kind of reciprocal approach to gardening that environmental stewardship strengthens. Flores and Cajete emphasize that working with nature will benefit both humans and nonhumans through their language of sustainability—a goal that has long-term results.

Environmental justice scholars claim that in order to heal and sustain the earth, humans must consider animals and the environment as part of their own community. These communities take reciprocity into consideration in that well-being in the community is mutually affecting. In other words, all actions taken within a reciprocal, ecologically balanced community are done so with the rest of the community in mind. Flores writes, “Ecology is about relationships, and the integrity of any ecological community depends upon the health and abundance of its diverse, interconnected relationships—from the smallest microorganisms to you and your neighbors” (247). To Flores, seeing ourselves as interconnected to nature is the best way to bring about ecological justice because we realize that what we do affects nature, affecting us. Flores, and the bloggers, see HFP as a path toward this interconnected view of ecological justice. When we see plants, animals, land, water, weather, and the whole planet as an

inseparable part of our communities, we can begin to act in a way that is beneficial to the earth and, in turn, beneficial to human kind.

Indigenous scholars explore the importance of developing relationships between humans and nature in order to sustain the planet, but often use the term kinship similar to how other scholars use the term community. Kinship, however has different implications than community because it denotes a more intimate connection. Gregory Cajete and Enrique Salmón posit that nature/human relationships have and continue to guide Indigenous science and philosophy. Cajete claims that “The intersection of plant and human nature is an integral consideration of Native science and Native societies for they realized that a sustainable relationship with plants is the foundation of all human and animal life” (108). This sustainable relationship requires developing strategies that lead to the mutual survival of plants and animals. Salmón, influenced by Ruramari philosophy, posits that “We share awareness that life in any environment is viable only when humans view the life surrounding them as kin. The kin, or relatives, include humans as well as all the natural elements of the ecosystem. We are affected by and, in turn, affect the life around us” (21). According the Salmón, kincentric beliefs produce interactions that help sustain the natural environment, and, in turn, humans. Through the intimacy of a kincentric relationship with the natural world, people who work among plants can more easily see their connection to nonhuman beings and thus more easily understand that human/nonhuman relationships are mutually affecting.

The bloggers and others who care about ecological practices must find strategies for mutual benefit. One of the first steps to finding reciprocity with nature that mutually

sustains is to observe nature and think deeply about our role in a planetary community. Caroline Brazier writes, “If we engage in an other-centered way, we stop seeing the world as functional to our personal needs, and appreciate it for what it is. When this happens, the natural world speaks to us and we start to listen” (11–12). Brazier is talking about communication with nature for the purpose of developing sustainable relationships. Humans must, according to Brazier, recognize the ability of nature to speak for itself and stop seeing nature as passive and a commodity that exists for our own needs. By first decentering humans, and then closely observing and deciphering how nature might be communicating, we may begin to develop a balanced relationship. Finding this balance, however complicated, is something the bloggers grapple with (through writing) in their relationships with animals and nature, which I turn to now.

Seeing themselves as part of the system was one way the bloggers worked on developing a reciprocal relationship with nature. The bloggers often explored their own connections with the Earth as a way to bring mindful awareness to the needs of the environment, or to make sure they live up to their end of the relationship. Maddy Harlward, editor of *Permaculture Magazine*, writes:

Contact with the soil reminds us that we are an integral part of nature, rather than feeling shut out and excluded. The simple acts of growing and eating our own food, recreating habitats in which nature’s diversity thrives, and taking steps to live more simply are practical ways of living which [sic] connect us to an awareness of Nature’s seamless whole. Permaculture is a spiritual reconnection as well as an ecological strategy. (qtd. in Flores 19)

By emphasizing interconnections and participation within the system, gardeners may be able to better understand the needs of the environment and to ensure mutual benefit.

The bloggers see healthy soil as a useful parallel to their philosophy of interacting with nature reciprocally. Since the bloggers depend on their soil for food production, they have developed natural ways to promote soil health, which works hand in hand with composting. Bloggers had to pay close attention to their soil if they wanted to grow a reasonable amount of food at their homes. Root Simple wrote about discovering lead in their soil and the frustration they have realizing that their 1940s home in Los Angeles is just one example of environmentally detrimental building practices (“Lead Update” 10/24/11). Root Simple must acknowledge that human action (using lead paint) damaged the soil that otherwise would have provided healthy food for them. Homesteading in Hawaii writes about how she uses hydrangeas to gauge how acidic her soil is—blue hydrangeas mean acidic soil (“Mother Nature Has a pH Meter” 6/13/15). She uses this information to gauge what plants will grow in her acidic soil and how to reduce acidity with composted matter when needed. The attention to soil becomes an alchemic experience for homesteaders as they adjust to the present soil naturally (Homesteading in Hawaii has acidic soil because she lives downwind of a volcano) and unnaturally (lead-based paint in Root Simple’ case). By seeking to find a balance between natural and human-made soil components, the bloggers were trying to create balance between nature and human intervention. This balance ensures reciprocity. The bloggers must find ways to grow food and non-food plants that benefit immediate needs. But, through their work to grow more, the bloggers also benefit the larger environment through cleaner air, more

sustainable soil, and more plant foraging for insects and animals. So, the bloggers' work to find balance in their soil for sustainable growing assists both humans and nonhumans.

Composting is a specific activity that bloggers use to support their soil, and, in order to compost, they worked toward an understanding and useful relationship with nature to ultimately nourish both humans and animals. Root Simple explain the importance of composting food scraps:

Every kitchen produces food scraps, and most food scraps end up entombed in a landfill. It's estimated that 20% of landfill material is food waste. This is unfortunate, because food waste is full of nutrients which [sic] will make your house plants, your landscape plants and your vegetable garden grow strong and healthy ("Getting Started with Worms" 8/29/14).

Root Simple advocate humans become a beneficial part of the system through composting, not contributing to an overflowing landfill. And in an act of deep listening, the bloggers often used nature as a model for decomposition's role in the beneficial cycle their environments already established. Root Simple encouraged their readers to let fallen leaves and other so-labeled dead plant parts naturally decompose to create mulch, which served to "shelter beneficial insects, hold in water, prevent weed growth, inhibit soil erosion and [...] even stop acid rain from penetrating soil" ("Leaf Litter" 12/12/06). The bloggers, when possible, let nature create its own beneficial material. When that wasn't possible, they participated in the natural decomposition process by turning what would normally be wasted material into a valuable resource for their gardens via composting.

Soil health, furthermore, often serves as a larger metaphor for building just food communities. This metaphor starts with the understanding that soil, especially healthy soil, is made up of a community of organisms. Using soil as a metaphor for just food communities works in the spirit of both deep listening and kinship. By observing a natural process and using it as a model for how to maintain reciprocity respects the will of plants and emphasizes human/nonhuman interconnectedness. Flores writes,

Whole communities thrive within every grain of topsoil, including athropods, fungi, algae, roots, nematodes, protozoans, worms, springtails, and a billion different kinds of bacteria. As they move through the soil, eating, breeding, interacting, dying, and decomposing, they create a complex web of life that makes it possible to have clean air, clean water, healthy plants, and moderated water flow. (77)

Soil, then, is not a single material entity, but rather an assemblage of living things that work together to benefit the health of the environment overall. Plants are a part of this soil community as microorganisms in each grain of soil aid in growth. And, in turn, plants protect the soil from sun and excess water. Humans enter this relationship when they care for plants and soil, specifically through composting. By looking at the small-scale example of a soil community, gardeners will, hopefully, view this community as a model for the interconnected, reciprocal ways a just food community could work. An important aspect of a soil-inspired philosophy of community is nurturance, which I focus on in the next section.

Nurturance

The bloggers believe their purpose is to nurture the environment as part of their food production practices. Northwest Edible frames this need to nurture with mothering: “Gardening and mothering has taught me that the more attuned we are to what we are growing – plants or children – the better we can respond to their needs. Sometimes they need our help. Sometimes they need us to *not* help” (“Lessons from Plants and Children” 3/31/11, her italics). Tenth Acre writes about planting native plants, trees, and shrubs “to nurture the native and migratory bird species of my area” (“Can Edible Gardening Reduce Deforestation?”). Root Simple write, “We can nurture the soil and teeming life there, making our commitment to all the plants and creatures in our care” (“Of Stickers and Boomers” 4/27/12). By framing food production with caring for the environment and animals, these bloggers value nurturance as part of their HFP work. Nurturance serves as an important aspect of a reciprocal relationship with nature. The bloggers believe that nature nurtures them by providing food through a complex, interconnected system. And instead of nurturing nature back in a sustainable way, the bloggers believe that humans have exploited nature for personal gain.

The bloggers often frame their nurturance of the garden as reciprocal; while they steward their gardens, they do so in a mutually beneficial relationship. In other words, they believe that by nurturing their gardens to grow more nutritious, environmentally friendly food, they are in turn being nurtured by their garden. Northwest Edible writes, “I think that good gardeners love to nurture their gardens and good gardens nurture their gardener right back” (“{Reader Question}”6/24/14). This view puts humans in

relationship to their gardens. Tenth Acre writes, “We are only as healthy as our planet. Caring for the forests, the waterways, and the diverse life forms of our magnificent planet benefits us” (“What is Permaculture”). She also posits that nature and humans live reciprocally. The bloggers often advocate for a type of gardening that requires self-sacrifice and deep listening, which are tools for nurturance. Northwest Edible continues, “It’s a funny thing about nurturing: it’s hard to do if you are anxious. It’s hard to put that away and just be there in your space, listening for what your plants really need” (“Reader Question” 6/24/14). Northwest Edible advocates an attitude of letting anxieties go in order to focus on the well-being of your garden. Once you get past yourself and your anxieties, you can begin to practice deep listening to your garden—what Northwest Edible describes as “thinking like a plant.” Not only does this nurturing require care and listening, it also requires careful planning.

Nurturing nature is often framed in mainstream literature as environmental stewardship, as long as stewardship describes care rather than marketing. Catherine M. Roach warns against the overuse of the term stewardship and urges environmental scholars to use the term specifically. She writes, “we suggest limiting the term stewardship to those environmental philosophies, policies, and actions that incorporate a notion of people *caring for or being responsible for a local area or resource*” (48, her italics). Her definition emphasizes care, responsibility, and locality, which implies that you must care for nature in a hands-on way. Despite the risks of overuse, setting up a human/nature hierarchy, and corporate co-optation, Roach believes that stewardship as a concept is valuable to environmental activism because “stewardship actually aims at

changing people's values" (49). Though stewardship can sometimes be complicated, and the definition stretched to fit unjust practices, the specific definition of stewardship that emphasizes care and responsibility has the power to change values that are deeply rooted in the way people view their role in and relationship with nature. Roach's hands-on care emphasis is central to my blog analysis.

This view of homesteading as nurturance likely comes as a result of the bloggers' disagreement with factory farming and livestock systems. In other words, these bloggers believe in doing the work to become good stewards to the environment and animals, because they believe industrial systems are not good stewards. Root Simple write, "We first got our own hens because we disagreed with the industrial style of raising chickens and farming eggs. But at the time that disagreement was purely theoretical—now it's stronger than ever, because it's based on practice. The more we know, and experience the fundamentals of chicken life, the more appalling the industrial practices become" ("Hens Busy Dust Bathing" 9/19/10). By experiencing the intense responsibility of animal stewardship, Root Simple realized even more so how poorly the industrial livestock system has been at providing adequate care for chickens. Through direct interaction with their chickens, Root Simple develops a wider connection to chickens globally. Having a personal, everyday relationship with chickens helps them to develop a global sense of caring. They develop this sense of caring by realizing the many ways their actions have an interconnected impact on chickens worldwide. Composting and other "green" practices also became a way for the bloggers to reverse the negative impacts of industrial food systems. The bloggers also wrote about the negative effects industrial farming has

on the land, water, and atmosphere, and the mistreatment of animals in CAFOs. The bloggers believe in a DIY approach to more just food to undo the mass destruction and mistreatment of the environment and animals. Their DIY approach entails being aware of everyday actions affecting interconnected parts of the food system, then making everyday choices that value caring for the environment and animals. To undo damage to the environment and animals, the bloggers didn't believe in a passive, do-no-harm approach.

The bloggers believe in developing a caring, empathic view of nonhumans because they believe in the interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans. They see themselves as affecting and affected by nature. The small, interconnected activities homesteaders participate in serve as a metaphor for a larger belief that caring for the nonhuman world through HFP, although small in scale, has an impact on so many other parts of the food system. Tenth Acre writes:

[O]ne of my most favorite activities is learning about my food: from where and how far it comes, and how it impacted the land, people, and animals where it was cultivated. It takes a lot of food to feed all of us humans three times a day, and the agricultural practices of deforestation and toxic pesticide use on large industrial farms is having a devastating effect on our air, water, and soil – not to mention wildlife. (“Can Edible Gardening Reduce Deforestation?”)

Tenth Acre explains how the food that we eat—and we eat a lot in a day—has several points of impact with people, animals, and the environment—what I and other scholars

call our food footprint¹⁹. If we purchase food that negatively impacts people, animals, and nature while on its journey to reach us, then our individual choices do not benefit the rest of the world. By understanding and believing in the interconnections people have through food to several other parts of the world, the bloggers begin to advocate everyday choices and activities that work toward more nurturance, rather than exploitation and destruction.

In order to be active participants in environmental nurturing through gardening, the bloggers must develop relationships with nature that are based on collaboration, respect, and empathy. Scholars grapple with how to create relationships from these three principles of stewardship. Adams claims that “Understanding the needs of the plants in their care, for many, could be described as a process of collaboration” (16). According to Adams, nature-collaboration in the garden requires observing how plants respond to different conditions, then acting accordingly. For example, if a plant seems to wilt in the shade, perhaps try moving the plant into the sun or somehow providing more light. This method requires experimentation and the understanding that the inability to fully communicate with plants complicates collaboration. Ultimately, according to environmental justice scholars, human care aids communication and collaboration for the survival of a plant. Ecofeminist scholar Marti Kheel writes,

¹⁹ Although this term is used widely to study the environmental impacts of food, both in academic and popular scholarship, it cannot be tracked to its first use. The description of impact as a footprint is also used to describe carbon consumption and ecological damage based on individual, everyday choices (“carbon footprint” and “ecological footprint”).

Caring for other-than-human animals can only flourish with the aid of empathy. Empathy, in turn, can be seen as the culmination of many small acts of attention. Cumulatively, these acts of attending can help us to appreciate other-than-human animals as individual beings with subjective identities, rather than merely part of a larger backdrop called “the biotic community,” “the ecosystem,” or “the land.” By pooling our small acts of attention we can exert powerful influence on one another. (227)

The bloggers ascribe to this philosophy of small caring acts toward the goal of mutual benefit.

Chicken keeping is a primary example of how the bloggers nurture nature. I see nurturance as a major theme for the bloggers regarding chickens, because they cite ethical care as a main motivation for keeping chickens at home. In other words, since they wanted to benefit from eating chicken eggs, the bloggers believed it was their duty to care for chickens to ensure the best care possible. Bloggers Root Simple and Cold Antler spend several blog posts responding to concerns from readers about the ethics of keeping chickens for eggs. Root Simple write:

Even though I’m raising hens for eggs not meat (though I don’t have a problem with doing so), there are ethical questions involved in keeping backyard poultry. Is shipping chicks by mail humane? What to do with roosters? Would keeping hens on pasture be better than confined to a run? I believe these concerns are outweighed by the benefits of knowing where my food comes from, but others may disagree and I respect that. (“An Omnivore’s Dilemma” 7/29/08)

Root Simple acknowledge there are ethical questions to consider when keeping backyard chickens, but ultimately decide that it is more important for people to keep chickens so they know where their food comes from, rather than to decide not to keep chickens so as not to treat them unethically or inhumanely. Northwest Edible also takes issue with the industrial practice of forced molt—a strategy to keep chickens laying more eggs throughout the year that often involves starving chickens for several days—which shows that homesteaders care about the welfare of their chickens, so they believe in taking more just food practice into their own hands, specifically by raising chickens for their own eggs (“Chicken Rotation” 1/28/15). I offer two interpretations of these statements about weighing humane treatment with the benefit of getting eggs. One could argue that Root Simple and Northwest Edible believe their ability to know their food—which implies there are nutritional benefits—is more important than their chickens’ welfare. Or, Root Simple and Northwest Edible acted on an underlying belief that, since industrial food systems treat animals inhumanely, the only reasonable way to expect animals raised for food are treated humanely is to care for them yourself. Based on my overall reading of their blogs, the bloggers seem to fall more in line with the second interpretation. At the very least, the bloggers want to eat eggs only if they know and feel comfortable with the level of care the chickens receive.

Since homesteaders also receive the benefit of food from their chickens, they see their relationship with them as more of a partnership that includes their continued nurturance for chickens. Homesteaders ensure the ethical treatment of chickens and, in return, get to keep the chicken eggs to eat. Cold Antler writes:

But besides being outside with a purpose, keeping chickens means taking care of something, knowing that they rely on you for protection and food and their general well being [sic]. It feels really nice to provide that. It really does. And it's not all giving either - the ability to collect fresh eggs, a source of protein that doesn't require taking their lives, is unique and special to the hens. I don't know many other bi-species relationships that can offer feelings of responsibility, enjoyment, and a killer slab of French toast [...] So chickens, thanks. (“The Practice of Keeping Chickens” 4/15/08)

This passage reflects an effort to find reciprocity—that keeping livestock is a partnership. By partnering with animals, the bloggers also seem to develop a respect for animals and a sense of pride and joy for caring for them. Partnering with animals presents complications, however, since it is difficult to know whether the chickens consent to the relationship the bloggers established. Similarly, Northwest Edible keeps chickens for both eggs and meat and to raise consciousness about the implications of her (and her family's) relationships with food-chickens. Northwest Edible's nine-year-old daughter is largely responsible for chicken care. Northwest Edible writes, “Hens are such an easy, fun way to reintroduce some food-system reality back into the average kid's life” (“Best Chicken Breeds” 3/5/14, her underlining). Northwest Edible expresses a desire for her kids to know the reality of how food is provided to them. By having a chicken coop, she hopes her children will benefit from having a more intimate relationship with a food-providing animal. In a Department of Animal Science and Center for Animal Welfare survey of backyard chicken keepers, others expressed a similar desire for their children to

know their food. The majority of respondents said they use their chickens to teach their children about the process of collecting eggs while also how to care for their chickens. In addition, the majority of respondents said their chickens were healthier and happier than industrial chickens (Elkhoraihi et al.). Bearing in mind this survey, I assume Northwest Edible thinks that the benefits of introducing children to chickens are better cared for chickens and possibly the end of, or at least a radical change in, industrial chicken keeping for the welfare of chickens. The benefits of raising chickens, including knowing your food and, presumably, getting better quality foods, is developing a sense of empathy toward animals.

Although chicken keeping has been criticized as a trend or status symbol for urbanite hipsters, these bloggers ultimately show their readers how much time and energy it takes to keep chickens, and implore readers to take chicken keeping seriously to maintain ethical care. Their desire to convey to readers the seriousness of keeping chickens shows that the bloggers continue to develop a relationship with them. The bloggers advocate for taking on the full responsibility of chickens and entering a nurturing relationship with them, which shows effort on their part to respect the well-being of the chickens. Root Simple, Homesteading in Hawaii, and Northwest Edible all keep chickens in either an urban or suburban neighborhood, while Cold Antler keeps chickens at first in rural Vermont and then in a right-to-farm county in rural New York. These homesteaders are not just jumping on the trend of urban/suburban chicken keeping. By cataloging their daily experiences with keeping chickens, along with the benefits and

the challenges, these bloggers provide a very real look at the relationship homesteaders develop with their chickens that includes work and responsibility.

Keeping chickens helps develop a sense of care and connection to animals. By caring for animals who also provide them food, the bloggers must think deeply about the ethics of their care since they acknowledge that they gain something from their chickens. Brandon points out that commercial egg production means consumers can purchase eggs for much cheaper than what home-producers spend on housing, feed, labor, and care for chickens (119). The purpose, then, of raising chickens for eggs is obviously not for cost benefits. Kathy Rudy claims that people who raise chickens “have a reciprocal and connected relationship with their animals” and this connection drives their chicken keeping practice. She continues:

[Chicken keepers] name [chickens], they provide care for them, they allow them room to roam outside, they let them live much longer lives than industrial farms, they encourage mothers to care for their young, they feed them well, provide clean and warm shelter (sometimes in the human’s home). (30)

The bloggers, it seems, have a much less practical reason for keeping chickens beyond cost. Even claiming that the bloggers hope to know their food better does not capture their deeply rooted desire to form a connection with food, specifically animals.

Tenth Acre and Homesteading in Hawaii bloggers warn aspiring homesteaders to commit to care for chickens carefully and evaluate their purpose before jumping into backyard chicken keeping. By questioning whether chickens are best cared for in small spaces, Tenth Acre references the trendiness of chickens and asks her readers to give

raising them more thought. She writes, “I’m concerned that having a coop and run for my chickens would not provide them with adequate space and forage to meet their needs any more so than a modified ‘cage-free’ industrial egg operation” (“Why We Don’t Have Chickens [yet]”). Even Root Simple explore their guilt for not providing their chickens with much room to forage. Such blog entries show these homesteaders’ awareness of the welfare of chickens, as they see it as their responsibility to provide for them. This attitude often develops as the bloggers embrace stewardship to nurture the environment and animals, a form of womanist nurturance.

Beyond chickens, caring for the environment as a whole extends to caring for beneficial insects, especially bees. Northwest Edible responds to increased bee hive loss—full hive loss has increased by 30.5 percent in the past six years—with a call for small homesteaders to “take action” (“Bee Friendly Gardening” 4/3/14). Northwest Edible blames commercially managed beehives, as well as use of pesticides in both large- and small-scale farming, for this increased loss. Commercial bee operations transport hives long distances to concentrated crops for a fee. So, commercial beekeepers might transport, on large trucks that have their own negative environmental impact, a number of bee hives to pollinate almond fields, for example. This practice does not provide proper nutrients to bees since they forage from only one crop. The scale of industrial food systems means farms grow large amounts of certain types of foods in isolated areas and do not provide diversity to bees, leading to bees dying at large rates.²⁰ These bloggers

²⁰ For more information about bee hive loss: <http://www.npr.org/2013/09/27/225440117/why-are-bees-disappearing>

believe that small-scale food production provides more diversity for bees and can ultimately counteract hive collapse syndrome. Northwest Edible also encourages her readers to stop using insecticides, grow plants that support bees, support local, small-scale bee keepers by purchasing honey, take up backyard bee keeping, and question if their fruits and vegetable producers are using pesticides. In this regard, Northwest Edible responds to large-scale beehive loss industrial farming and bee keeping practices cause by encouraging a small-scale solution that relies on everyday actions. Tenth Acre also provides practical solutions for bee care: “The spring broccoli is mostly finished producing, but leaving the plants lets the bees access the flowers. Also, if you leave broccoli plants over winter, they will bolt in the springtime (flower) and it will provide the bees with the all-important early season forage” (“Fall Forage for the Bees”). By caring for bees through her own garden practices, Tenth Acre assists in increasing the bee population in her neighborhood, which will benefit her own garden and help to increase bee populations overall. Tenth Acre’s small-scale contribution, then, eventually benefits the environment overall. Homesteaders not only nurture their individual ecosystems, but they practice a belief in small-scale stewardship benefitting the planet.

The bloggers express nurturing their gardens as an important responsibility that requires planning and resources, which goes beyond only cultivating food; the care the bloggers put into their gardens emphasizes accountability. Responsible planning required to care for plants and animals is more difficult than simply saying you care about them. By writing about their day-to-day activities performed in interest of feeding and caring for chickens, and growing and protecting plants, these bloggers highlight the need for

readers to not just care about the environment, but to take action and claim responsibility for the environment. Homesteading in Hawaii points out the amount of work that goes into caring for chickens:

[C]hicken care takes time. They need clean water daily. Fresh food that never runs out. New bedding. Eggs need to be picked at least daily, if not three times a day. Then the eggs need to be cleaned and refrigerated. It all takes time and work. Plus there's the labor of buying and hauling the feed. And the bedding/litter. And the cleaning the pen. Plus guess what?....it's 365 days a year. No time off, no holidays.....somebody's got to take care of them. (“Don’t Get Chickens (?)” 5/24/14)

Caring for chickens takes time and energy, which overall requires planning and careful thought on whether a person can adequately provide for animals. Homesteading in Hawaii points out how much work goes into keeping chickens, and how that work adds value to homesteading. By examining how difficult and time consuming the work can be, Homesteading in Hawaii urges people to take it seriously. This serious attention, time, and energy required for chicken care is animal stewardship.

Ultimately, these six homesteaders believe that taking nurturing and care into your own hands, with a DIY attitude, is the best way to assure that we properly steward the environment and reverse the harmful effects of industrial food systems. Root Simple writes, “Small is beautiful—better to have lots of people with four hens each rather than a few people with hundreds of thousands” (“Changing Chicken Habits” 8/27/10). And as a solution to the problem of starving chickens to force molt, Northwest Edible points out,

“Of course I’m partial to just doing the whole thing yourself! Our little backyard flock keeps us well fed for eggs – we get more eggs than my family can consume – while also supplying us with fantastic fertilizer” (“Forced Molt” 2/12/14). The bloggers’ research on and DIY attitude toward the industrial food system’s harm on the environment and on the positive impacts of producing food at home—where they control such practices—shows that they are conscious about how their individual choices impact the planet overall. By taking matters into their own hands, the bloggers have chosen to participate in food production in a way that nurtures and cares for the environment. Their DIY attitude and practices helped the bloggers develop a very practical, everyday form of food justice. But focusing on their caring and relationships to animals and nature, the bloggers often struggled to situate their roles as subjects/objects with the roles of animals and plants as subjects/objects. Finding balance with interfering/letting go, or, specifically for the bloggers, accepting that weather cannot be controlled and instead stewarding plants to protect the plants from the weather, is one facet of this subject/object struggle, which I explore in the next section.

Intervention

An important consideration to make as one enters a reciprocal community with the environment is when to intervene. More broadly, the bloggers and other ecological scholars must decide their role in an interconnected human/nonhuman community daily. For example, is it best to let plants mulch, or redirect their energies by moving them to a compost pit? Ecological scholars have also grappled with balancing intervention with nature for ecological purposes and controlling nature. Flores suggests we learn how to

sustainably design gardens, but not “redesign every inch of the earth.” She continues, “wilderness areas should be left as such, and even the most meticulous design is not complete without a little room for inevitable and ubiquitous chaos of nature. However, we should, indeed we must, reevaluate the function of our current human settlements and develop detailed plans to implement options that are more ecological” (162). In other words, Flores argues that we must start to redesign the spaces we already control to ensure their maximum sustainability, while also being careful not to expand human design past what is necessary for sustainability. Stacy Alaimo similarly argues that human intervention could provide the best sustainability. She writes, “It is true that the survival of many species depends on protecting ecosystems and habitats from plunder and degradation, but sustainable human practices within particular environments can also help maintain environments” (15). Alaimo does not advocate for zero intervention, since she believes humans can be a useful and sustainable part of the system. The key, then, to human intervention for the sake of ecological sustainability is conscious awareness and deep listening about how humans interact with the environment.

The five blogs analyzed explore the bloggers’ roles as homesteaders, including what they expect of nature and how they view their chickens. Although the five blogs differ somewhat, all bloggers generally see their relationships with animals and the environment as complicated; while they generally see their gardens, chickens, and worms as working with them to provide them with food while they reciprocate sustainable care, they also recognize that nature could wreak havoc on their food production through extreme hot or cold or dry weather, pests, and poor soil. So in some ways, the

homesteaders struggle to control or work with nature, and in other ways try to surrender to their lack of control over nature. Common among the bloggers was an idea that humans should intervene as little as possible when it comes to growing.

The philosophy of little intervention in nature's growing processes comes from the bloggers' general idea that plants want to grow and will find natural ways to survive harsh conditions. Northwest Edible writes, "The more I learn about farming, the more I realize that plants are truly wondrous things. It's easy to think plants are boring and passive. After all, they just sit there. But here's some news! Plants are powerful chemists and very active participators in their environment" ("Improve Your Soil" 4/25/12). Northwest Edible recognizes plants' agency and accepts that nature acts on its own: the plants actively participate in their environment so they may grow. This perspective of plant agency I combine with Northwest Edible's other posts in order to conclude that Northwest Edible points to a need to let plants grow with only the required amount of human intervention. Homesteaders' relationship with plants as part-time helpers also supports a common theme that nature follows a cycle that homesteaders need to respect, and part of this respect requires appropriate intervention. Root Simple writes, "All plants are useful and you end up with an interdependent, self-sustaining beneficial feedback loop" ("The Three Sisters" 8/31/07). In order for each part of the cycle to continue to thrive and produce life, the other parts of the cycle must also work. Without one part of the loop, the others could not function. Importantly, the bloggers also consider themselves as part of the cycle. By recognizing this cycle, the bloggers specifically realize they need to let nature work with sustainable human intervention, and when

humans do intervene, it should be done so with respect to the cycles that are already in place. In other words, the bloggers believe it is their job to watch and learn from nature and only help when necessary and in the most mutually beneficial ways possible.

For the bloggers, the topic of intervention as related to food growing begins with soil. Soil systems include interaction with insects, which add another layer of complication to the bloggers' human/nature relationship philosophies. The preferred method for composting among the bloggers was to keep earthworms in a containment system to break down food scraps and turn them into garden fertilizer. This process was referred to as worm bin composting and sometimes vermicomposting. This method of composting was often lauded by the bloggers as the easiest and quickest way to compost; Root Simple exclaim that they are continually impressed at how well the worms "eat our garbage" ("Wonderful Worms" 5/22/09). Others struggled to find a mutually beneficial relationship with their worms. Tenth Acre writes about her initial excitement to use worms in her garden and then her failure to use the worms beneficially. She writes about her experiences adding too many food scraps to her worm bin, which created a mite outbreak ("Worm Bin Failure Continued"). In this instance, Tenth Acre struggled to give the worms what they need, which required balancing insects that benefit plants and thus humans, with harmful (or at the least, annoying) insects. Tenth Acre may struggle to define her relationship with "good" vs. "bad" insects, since these descriptors seem to be based on the ability to produce food for herself. However, Tenth Acre also shows remorse that the mites killed a colony of worms that were under her care. In this case, her intervention led to harm. Northwest Edible writes about her struggles with composting as

well, claiming, “I’ve never had the patience to get all scientific with my greens and browns.” However, she encourages her audience to compost anyway because “Compost will, eventually, happen” (“Top 20 Tips” 5/18/15). Despite struggles to compost, the bloggers continued to put in their time and effort to use their food scraps to benefit their gardens. They work every day to establish and balance their relationships with nature in order to ensure their plants survive. Lacy writes, “We can live with insects and weeds, we can seek their total extermination according to the old programs of control, or we can decide where and how we will seek control and when we will not, meanwhile hoping that our choices will be wise—or at least not harmful” (Lacy 197). According to Lacy, then, ecological balance must take intervention into consideration.

Composting also has wider impacts on the environment than nurturing soil (with its more immediate benefits) since the bloggers argue composting can decrease wide-scale pollution. Root Simple points out the environmental benefits of composting: “As to the bigger environmental issues, the good news is that some of the research shows that composting can help reduce pollution. And, since some of us have the space to compost at home, we can all contribute to a cleaner planet” (“Compost and Pharmaceuticals” 5/2/13). Therefore, reciprocity occurs to nature at different scales: micro (backyard) and macro (planet). The bloggers, because they compost, seem to be more aware of food waste and its harmful effects on the environment. By composting, these homesteaders can provide fertilizer to maximize growing, but through their small-scale intervention, they can also reverse the negative impacts of industrial food. The actions homesteaders take every day to nurture their soil by turning food waste into compost has an interconnected

effect on the rest of the planet; composting in your own home can help reduce pollution worldwide because it cleans the air. It is clear why homesteaders believe in small-scale actions that require them to put in effort every day, because these everyday actions support wide environmental healing.

Similar to soil protection, the bloggers often encouraged their readers to support favorable insects in their gardens, creating another mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world. In this case, the bloggers' intervention is deliberate inaction. Instead of continuous pruning and cleaning of their outdoor gardens, the bloggers expressed a need to let plants wilt and mulch naturally. Root Simple encourage their readers to "Designate small corners [of their gardens] as wilderness" ("Don't be so Quick to Clean up" 9/16/12). By leaving leaves and sticks on the ground and letting plants flower or drop to the ground, many insects are cared for by either feeding from flowering plants or living in what has fallen to the ground. By allowing their gardens to have some components of wilderness, Root Simple imply that these unkempt spaces provide natural shelter for insects. This strategy eschews a completely human-designed space that balances natural space with human design. Tenth Acre gives readers several suggestions for springtime flowers to plant that will support queen bees as they emerge out of solitary hibernation and begin building their nests ("Bug Thursday: The Bumble Bee"). The understanding created through planting these flowers is that gardeners provide flowers to support bees, and the bees support the plants, including food producing plants, by cross pollinating. Northwest Edible also points out that "Beneficial [insects] can protect your crops from 'bad bugs'" ("Three Simple Steps" 7/11/13). The bloggers realize that the importance of

providing for beneficial insects enters them into a reciprocal relationship with insects: they support beneficial insects that support their food crops. By caring for these insects, the bloggers ensure the success of their gardening efforts. This type of reciprocal relationship is similar to that which chicken-keeping bloggers had with their chickens. This perspective of intervention for mutual caring became complicated when the bloggers consider the role of the weather.

The bloggers often talked about the weather as an uncontrollable force that can and will potentially destroy their attempted livelihood. Their challenge when facing this unpredictable weather was determining when it is best to take specific action to protect their food crops, and how to let go of what they couldn't control. Cold Antler writes, "As a small farmer there is nothing that excites, terrorizes, or impacts my life more than weather ("Metrics and a Measure" 9/11/11). Cold Antler refers to the idea that weather happens every day and people cannot control it, and in this way weather controls gardeners. The bloggers base all their decisions on weather cycles. Often, unexpected weather negatively impacts the bloggers. Cold Antler writes in an earlier blog about how excessive rain caused many of her raised garden beds to flood. She writes, "My bumper crop, tomatoes, hates my guts ("Rain and Sara" 8/5/08). Cold Antler lost several crops due to weather and must accept this loss. In order to cope with uncontrollable weather, the homesteaders explore and give readers ideas about how to prepare for a variety of weather situations.

Although the bloggers had a mostly positive perspective about amending soil, their view of the weather in terms of their role in an interconnected system is much more

complicated. The bloggers review strategies on intervening in nature, for example, with their own crops, to make sure their food crops grow despite uncontrollable weather. Since a common goal for homesteaders is self-reliance, homesteaders must find ways to produce food in any condition. This need to always be producing means the bloggers must continually find ways to work with and sometimes against nature in order to ensure their food crops survive. Some of these strategies include covering garden beds from frost, and in the case of Cold Antler's 2008 season, building extra drainage. Climate change was also a common concern for the bloggers, who see increased unpredictable weather as a problem they must find ways to overcome. Northwest Edible writes:

But if I know that those cold snaps and dry spells and heat waves and torrential downpours are more likely to come at me, fast and hard and sometimes in sequence, that changes the way I think about my garden. I know I have to build in more stability and diversity in my plantings, be more alert to those weather events, and be pretty constantly prepared to moderate their effects for my plants. Certainly focusing our minds on learning to read our place backward and forward is a good idea – looking for those natural clues – tulips breaking ground, birch trees leafing out – to help guide our deeper garden knowledge. (“What Does Climate Change Mean for Gardeners?” 1/28/14)

Northwest Edible thinks the solution to unpredictable weather is to be more aware of climate change, looking for clues in nature, and to be constantly vigilant about mitigating possible harm that unpredictable weather might do to food crops. The bloggers' acknowledgement that human activity, not least of all industrial food systems, have

created these unpredictable weather situations further complicates their relationship with weather. In some ways, Northwest Edible believes that human intervention in plants is the best way to ensure their growth, and she also advocates for building plants with more “stability and diversity,” which the bloggers at Root Simple also argue. Root Simple write:

Ensuring success, I think, will have to do more and more with identifying and perhaps even breeding *tough-ass, locally adapted* plants. Plants that are known survivors can form the backbone of your garden. Each year you can try to plant tender favorites, exotics, delicate plants of all sorts, whatever you want—and if the roll of the weather dice falls in your favor, you may harvest those plants. But that backbone of tough plants will be there, so you’ll have something fresh for your table no matter what. (“Resilient Gardens” 9/24/12, their italics)

In order to ensure success despite unpredictable and uncontrollable weather, gardeners must develop human strategies that ease harm to plants, support the growth of healthier plants and long-term sturdiness and diversity, and learn to let go and accept failure when they cannot or did not properly prepare for the weather. Although these strategies intervene with nature, they must occur in part because careless human activity had caused unpredictable weather. How deeply interconnected humans are within the environment complicates the question of intervention. Bloggers, then, must find a balance between human control and lack of control in the face of natural processes; they enter the process consciously and intentionally, recognizing their interconnectedness with nature.

Respecting and understanding nature is central to the relationship the bloggers have with the environment and to finding reciprocity.

Letting Go

Homesteaders have a more intimate relationship to life and death, at least of plants and animals, than people who may get their food from grocery stores or even farmer's markets. Of the bloggers who keep chickens, three slaughtered their chickens to eat. Root Simple, who did not slaughter chickens, saw their chickens die from natural causes. Because chickens have a life span of eight-fifteen years, and because the bloggers keep several chickens at a time, backyard chicken keepers see chicken death often (Parker). Additionally, growing vegetables sometimes die before they become harvestable, and after harvest, the remains wilt or fall to the ground to decompose. Homesteaders are also tasked with making life- and death- related decisions about pests. Most of the bloggers talked about killing some kind of animal or insect pest including rats, fox, squirrels, slugs, and insects. The bloggers struggled to define their role in the life and death of chickens and plants, yet they show much less consciousness about killing garden pests. These contradictory perspectives, I argue, show the bloggers have not fully reached the type of reciprocity they claim to long for. The work they do through blogging to critically consider these relationships they develop through HFP, however, help the bloggers shift their consciousness. More specifically, it is through the struggles, contradictions, and questioning that the bloggers are pushed to transform their points of view about food. Chicken death is the most obvious example of the bloggers' dealing with death.

Although the chicken-keeping bloggers admitted to being sad over the natural deaths of their chickens, they also embraced an acceptance of death as a part of homesteading. When one of Northwest Edible 's chickens died, for example, she writes, "If you keep chickens, dead chickens are part of the deal. You get what you get and you don't throw a fit, as I tell my kids... She wasn't sick, injured, or otherwise suffering. She died because she was three years old and half White Leghorn and at the bottom of the pecking order. She died because it happens. She just died" ("Get a Shovel" 11/21/13). Northwest Edible urges her readers to understand how present death is when homesteaders decide to keep chickens. She writes this post as a warning and as a plea to her readers to understand this part of keeping chickens. A few months later, Northwest Edible writes another somewhat severe post about the responsibility taken for the life and death of adopted chickens. She believes that once you get chickens, it is your responsibility to see to their care until the end. She writes:

You do not get to embrace the idea of a more intimate relationship with your food chain and then make that food chain – the food chain you *specifically* set up – someone else's problem when shit gets real. There is absolutely nothing ethically superior – and quite a bit that is ethically dubious, if you ask me – about enjoying the benefits of a young laying hen and then turning over the care or slaughter of that hen to someone else once it stops laying. ("You Absolutely Should Not Get Backyard Chickens" 5/14/13, her italics)

She later clarifies that urban homesteaders do not need to necessarily cull (slaughter) their chickens, but if they decide not to, then they need to commit to caring for chickens

until they die naturally, which will be after the chickens stop laying eggs. So even if chickens stop laying eggs and you do not want to kill them, Northwest Edible believes it is the chicken owner's responsibility to continue to provide care for the chicken in order to maintain a balanced relationship. She also believes that if you eat chickens, you must be willing to slaughter them yourself. This view that you must be willing to cull your own chickens, not hand over slaughter to someone else, seems rather harsh, especially considering the knowledge chicken slaughtering requires and the potential dangers associated with it.

Chicken-keeping homesteaders, like the bloggers, have a respectful relationship with chickens and other food animals that is reflected even in slaughtering, according to some scholars. Kathy Rudy claims that a DIY system of keeping animals is an attempt to create more just relationships with food animals, and is a direct answer to the unjust industrial system of animal slaughtering. She writes, "a once very connected process of living with animals, raising them for food, slaughtering them swiftly, and being grateful for their sacrifice has turned into an industry that treats animals like profit producing flesh machines" (34). To Rudy, caring for animals that you will eat is both a sustainable and just practice since individual farmers care for the well-being of chickens and enter into a "closed system" where nothing is imported onto a farm or homestead and nothing is wasted, including animals (28). She insists that small farmers and homesteaders act ethically in relationship to animals and the environment because they see themselves as interconnected with animals. She writes, "While farmers are dependent on their animals, they also see their animals as agents who depend on and are connected with human

farmers. These farmers do not see themselves as superior to the animals they raise; they are interdependent and connected beings” (30). The bloggers’ relationship with chickens seemed to reflect Rudy’s claims since they expressed concern for the treatment of chickens, yet they also detached themselves from the death of chickens.

Slaughtering chickens is definitely not an HFP task that was—or should be—taken lightly within the blogs. In addition to Northwest Edible ’s views, quoted above, on keeping and slaughtering chickens for food, Root Simple and Cold Antler also spend a lot of time blogging their personal views and experiences raising chickens that may potentially become their food. Cold Antler, after an experienced friend showed her how to slaughter one of her chickens, gave herself food poisoning. She writes, “I learned the hard way how a mistake in backyard meat production can nearly put you in the hospital” (“Livestock and Deadstock” 4/15/11). It seems reasonable that backyard chicken keepers might hand off the slaughtering of a chicken to someone more experienced, especially if that means safer meat and potentially more humane handling. Some might disagree, then, with Northwest Edible ’s argument that you must be a part of the food system you set up until the very end by way of slaughtering.

Taken even more seriously on her blog than Cold Antler’s food poisoning incident, was her evolution from a vegetarian to a farmer who raised, slaughtered, and ate animals, including chickens and pigs. Cold Antler’s decision to begin eating what she calls “responsibly raised” meat was the subject of many discussions on her blog that generated many comments. Cold Antler summarizes her decision to begin eating meat:

I was a vegetarian for nearly a decade, something I decided to do in college when I became aware of the mistreatment and cruelty in industrial agriculture. When I found out I was surrounded by so much grass-fed meat and wild game it seemed ridiculous to keep eating tofu shipped in diesel rigs from California. Since my reasons for being a vegetarian were entirely about avoiding factory-farmed meat: I decided it was time to start supporting the farmers who were raising animals the way I wanted them raised. It took a couple years to take that first bite, but now I am a proud and happy carnivore. I support local meat farmers, I raise my own animals for food, and I hunt wild game as well. (“I Eat Meat” 11/18/10)

Cold Antler says her decision to stop eating meat was made because she developed a relationship to a farming community after moving to a farming area and wanted to support raising and killing animals “the right way,” which she believes is more just than not killing any animals for several reasons, including decreasing her dependence on vegetarian foods that are not local. Cold Antler also says she believes death is a part of nature and that there is a natural food chain that includes humans. Val Plumwood makes a similar argument in her book *The Eye of the Crocodile*. She begins with a story of coming across a crocodile in the wild and realizing that she is not separate from the food chain, but, in fact, her body is meat for a crocodile the same way other animals are meat for humans. She argues that, “In the absence of a more rounded form of the predation experience, we come to see predation as something we do to others, the inferior ones, but which is never done to us. We are victors and never victims, experiencing triumph but never tragedy, our true identity as minds, not as bodies. Thereby we intensify and

reinforce illusions of superiority and apartness” (13). Furthermore, Plumwood argues that viewing ourselves as able to separate from the food chain (by abstaining from meat, for example) further positions us as superior to animals and continues to separate us from the food system (18).

Cold Antler also believes that in order to stop the mistreatment of animals in industrial systems, like CAFOs, there is more efficacy in eating local meat than in not eating any meat. She writes, “Every dollar that goes into clean meat shows the folks making decisions about animal welfare in agri-business that people are appalled and distressed at the factory farm model” (“I Eat Meat” 11/18/10). Cold Antler clearly has a desire to support local farmers and subscribes to the idea that animal consumption can be done ethically with well-cared-for animals instead of mistreated CAFO animals. But, her logic that the only way to take money from CAFO businesses is to give it to local meat farmers isn’t fully informed. People who do choose to refrain from meat may still put their money into locally produced foods and not tofu shipped from California. Or, as Peter Singer points out, “sometimes the most environmentally friendly food is grown far away, under natural conditions more favorable to growing the food, and transport by sea is so efficient, in fossil-fuel terms, that buying food from distant countries can contribute less to global warming than buying locally” (150). Cold Antler’s urge that “If you really care about the humane treatment of livestock then I strongly suggest you eat them” caused a lot of disagreements in her blog post comments that may give some people the wrong impression about what it means to be an urban homesteader in relationship to eating meat (“I Eat Meat” 11/18/10). This particular post from Cold Antler had eighty-

three comments compared to most of her posts that had anywhere from none to twenty. While many of the commenters agreed with Cold Antler's logic, others questioned it. For example, a commenter named Bryan wrote, "I have not seen any evidence that buying meat from small farmers is a more effective way of marginalizing factory farms [than veganism/vegetarianism]." Another commenter named Cindy wrote, "Not all vegetarians support factory farming! My husband and I limit our dairy to what we can eat from local, small farm sources. [...] I have a lot of reasons for being vegetarian, and I guarantee you that I've spent as much time thinking through them as you all have for meat." I would argue that there are many ways to end or change for the better the practices of industrial food production, in addition to always slaughtering your own chickens or eating responsible meat instead of not eating meat, which may include vegetarianism or veganism.

Northwest Edible and Root Simple are much more open to acknowledging that eating home-raised meats is not the only way to end the mistreatment of animals in CAFO systems. Root Simple claim that ending CAFO systems is a matter of personal responsibility. They urge their readers to stop buying meat and dairy products from industrial systems but give their readers several options for not participating in this system: find local meat producers, keep your own chickens—for eggs or meat or both, or refrain from meat and dairy all together ("Chicks, Mayonnaise and Personal Responsibility" 6/12/14). Although they prefer to keep their own chickens, Root Simple seem much more open to the idea that refraining from meat and dairy altogether is beneficial to ending the CAFO system. And when it comes to slaughtering your own

chickens, they write, “There’s no right or wrong in this cull-no cull [sic] debate, though folks can disagree vehemently on the topic. I’ve always said that if you’re a meat eater, raising your own meat is the finest thing you can do. If you want to keep hens as pets, that’s also totally legit” (“How to Start a Chicken Retirement Community” 9/2/11). I agree with the spirit of Root Simple’s views on CAFO systems, and would argue that there are multiple ways to work toward ending CAFOs, whether it’s raising your own animals as HFP, getting local, trusted meat, or abstaining altogether. In order to work toward ending an unjust system, there must be multiple entry points for people who want to advocate for better systems, including vegan and vegetarianism.

Ecology and concern for the environment is a major motivation for veganism and vegetarianism cited in scholarship. The bloggers must consider all arguments for true sustainability in order to effectively decide the most efficient way to sustain the planet and achieve long-term reciprocity (in which humans support the environment and the environment produces resources for human survival). Brower and Leon note that “Environmentalists and western ecophilosophers have joined those who question meat-eating, citing the many deleterious impacts of factory farming on ecosystem health. Cattle ranching, in particular, is known to contribute to soil erosion, degradation of stream habitat, deforestation, and desertification” (qtd. in Kaza 96). Additionally, heavy amounts of manure farmed animals produce contributes to increasing waste that can run off into lakes and streams or leech into soil and negatively influence its composition and ability to support life. Although environmentalists focus on the negative impacts of factory farming, the widespread use of this practice makes it difficult for supposed sustainable

animal production to have much influence, whereas cutting meat consumption altogether appears to decrease greenhouse gas, water pollution, and soil erosion. If a goal of homesteading is reciprocity, as I've noted, it may be most useful for homesteaders to stop meat consumption altogether in order to balance their impact with the negative impact of industrial animal production, and thus nurture the environment more effectively.

Unlike chicken death, which the bloggers spent much time considering, they did not seem to question the need to kill garden pests. This view reflects, I think, a contradiction in their pursuit of reciprocity, at the very least because they seem to lack critical questioning of this practice. None of the bloggers expressed ethical pause when deciding that pests who killed plants, and predators that killed chickens, should be killed. The method of killing, though, carried ethical implications. Most bloggers disagreed with the use of pesticides in industrial farming practices and their own gardens. Root Simple write, in response to an article about the loss of citrus fruits from Asian Citrus Psyllid, an insect that carries a fatal disease to citrus trees, "The race to layer insecticides on top of insecticides and then search for pheromonal solutions is too complex for my taste" ("Asian Citrus Psyllid" 8/6/10). Root Simple believe that insecticides cause deeper environmental strain and their use complicates the processes that already exist in nature. As part of these processes, though, Root Simple believe that humans need to care for their plants and eliminate pests, but do so in a way that has less harmful effects on the overall environment and people. Quoting Nassim Taleb, they write, "Counter-balance complexity with simplicity." In other words, nature is a complex system already, and the response to pests should be simple. They advocate for washing insect pests off plants

with a hose and for killing rats and mice with traditional traps. Although the ability to grow food plants is important to the bloggers' material needs, their readiness to kill pests also shows that they perhaps view their material needs as more important than the life of so-called pests like insects, rats, mice, squirrels, and foxes. Perhaps if they considered more carefully the loss of pest life in terms of reciprocal relationships, they would come to the same conclusion about killing pests. However, the work of at least considering if they work in reciprocity would help them build a more transformative food perspective. When plants did survive garden pests, bloggers struggled to make sense of the loss of plants from other causes.

The loss of plants either post-harvest, during growing, or at the seedling phase led bloggers to philosophize the impermanence and interconnectedness of gardening as a practice. This consideration, which I argue is lacking in their view of pest deaths, helps the bloggers to decenter the human experience to reach a more reciprocal relationship with nature. Homesteading in Hawaii writes,

Many years ago when I first started to garden for myself, I acted like every seed and every seedling was sacred. I just couldn't bring myself to purposely kill a seedling. I don't know why I was like that, but it caused me grief in the long run.

Although I still tend to be quite frugal, I no longer treat every seed as a Demi-god to be saved and nourished regardless of sensibilities. ("Thinning" 4/16/15)

It's understandable that killing seedlings seems counterproductive when gardening is often so focused on getting plants to live and survive until harvest, but by accepting that seedlings must be weeded, perhaps the bloggers attempt to balance accepting death and

celebrating life. The bloggers spend so much time awing the agency of plant life that killing an energetic seedling would understandably cause cognitive dissonance. If plants don't survive, it can seem like a waste of life. Even post-harvest, gardeners must often say goodbye to plants they worked hard to cultivate throughout the season. But by viewing the parts of their homesteads as connected to every other part, the bloggers could understand and cope with the life and death cycles of their vegetables and other plants. Cold Antler reflects on her failure to get some watermelons to grow in her garden and how she decided to view this failure and loss of time and resources positively, since she was able to repurpose the watermelons another way. She writes, "To a farmer they aren't much. But to a chicken....[sic] that is one huge watermelon ("Keeping Time" 8/17/10). Since chickens can recycle food waste, even the death of a plant seems to maintain some life. Most of the homesteaders didn't view the deaths of plants as a loss. Homesteading in Hawaii writes, "In nature, leaves, stems, twigs, and even tree branches and trucks fall to the ground where they eventually decompose. Nothing is wasted" ("Twigs in the Garden" 5/5/14). Even when plants seem to die, Homesteading in Hawaii points out that they become a part of the soil that grows new plants. And even after fruits and vegetables are harvested, seeds can be saved to give new life to new plants later on. The parts of the plants that cannot be saved blend into a beneficial interconnected system that already exists. Paying attention to this interconnectedness makes understanding death much easier.

In this chapter, I argue that the bloggers, through their relationships with nature and animals, search for reciprocal relationships with nature/animals that promote

ecological sustainability. Maparyan writes about her vision for a womanist community that strives to find balance and harmony, rather than dominion over, nature and animals. She posits, “Our optimal state is harmony with and embeddedness within the rest of nature, that is, the ecosystem” (37). Maparyan argues that, through interconnections with or “embeddedness within” the rest of nature, people can recognize they are a part of natural ecosystems. To Maparyan, this state of recognizing our place within a natural community is “optimal” for environmental and global justice. The bloggers, although they sometimes struggle or misstep in their attempts to control nature, continue to work on finding their place within their food system, and they advocate for others to do the same. They recognize that a system of dominating nature has not been beneficial for people or their environment, and the solution is to search for a place where humans walk “within and in nature,” as Root Simple state. This search for reciprocity applies not only to animals and nature, but to all relationships the bloggers develop through their everyday work growing their own food.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

My compost pit was a few months old and full of leaves, food scraps, and soil from my failed plants. Although I had only grown modest tomato and bush bean plants, I felt good about the food scraps I was repurposing and hoped that I would someday have vibrant compost to help grow more food plants. I loved going out to check on the compost every day, adding scraps to it, watching as they broke down. The weather was nice, and emptying my compost bucket gave me an iron-clad excuse to go outside every day. Then the rain came. Rain storm after rain storm flooded the backyard, and my pile, although covered, gathered water from the ground. There was standing water about five inches up my shipping pallet container. So I stopped throwing the food scraps in it and forgot about my interrupted ecological experiment for a few weeks while the rain dried up. Finally, I decided to check on my pit, mostly expecting that the compost would be clearly non-composted. But something amazing happened. I gasped in excitement at the four-foot sprout coming out of the middle of a beautiful pile of compost that was as brown and lively as the photos: an avocado pit had sprouted, perfectly sustained by the food scraps and other organic materials I hadn't tended to in more than a month.

I replanted the tree in a large container using potting soil and more of the deep brown compost from my pile and moved it to the spot of honor (with the most sun) in the

middle of my backyard. I was hopeful that I could help the tree sprout grow and maybe bring it inside during the winter to continue to care for it. I wish I could say that this avocado sprout survived. I once again experienced the disappointment and sense of failure that I came to associate almost exclusively with gardening. If there's a lesson in this gardening experience, it is not fully clear to me. Perhaps it is that I'm not in control. As much as I want to successfully grow food and feel smug about my own contribution to food justice and my own connection to the earth, this want does not translate to plants or weather. Thinking through this loss of authority, this unseating of a human/nature hierarchy I am guilty of believing in, I once again think about my food choices. Specifically, I ask myself: what are the things I have control over and what are the things I don't related to my food? And what decisions should I make when I do have control? What are the impacts of those decisions?

I began my research with questions about just ways to engage with food in our daily lives. If I began with a view that food choices are complicated, I conclude this research with an even stronger sense that food choices are complicated. Let me say it again: factors like localisms, globalization, eating animals, pesticides, slave labor, environmental degradation, and personal well-being complicate how we choose what to eat. If we consider ourselves morally just people, and so many of us do, then we want to come to food decisions with a plan about how to produce, procure, and prepare food in a way that considers how our food choices affect people, animals, the environment, and even the food itself. However complicated, multifaceted, and heterogeneous these choices may be, I also conclude this research with an impression that we *can* take on the

moral task of eating, and we must do so with a vigilant food consciousness. We must consider often how we interact with many bodies, things, and people when we eat. We must accept that parts of this system are outside our control and that the parts that are carry with them numerous implications, and that our interconnectedness with the environment means our relationships are ever-changing. And we must accept that nothing's perfect in even the most morally defensible food system.

I began my research by defining activism through a womanist lens that centers the everyday work inspired by women of colors' everyday activism to ensure the well-being of wide communities that include people, self, animals, and the environment. Layli Maparyan focuses on love, healing, and wellness as motivations for everyday womanist activism (84–85). By evaluating how home food producer-bloggers engage with self-change; global, interconnected communities; food itself; and animals and the environment, I conclude that even the small task of bringing a bit more awareness to your food choices is a form of everyday food consciousness shifting. Kaza reframes Thich Nhat Hanh's famous saying "Peace is every step" to "Peace is every bite" (408). In other words, the practice of everyday food consciousness can lead to engagement with food communities in beneficial ways. If we consider each bite of food as a complex engagement with multiple systems that include multiple communities, then, I hope, our food choices, even when bracketed, will become increasingly peaceful. The bloggers have successfully shown me that changes in food consciousness can be small at first, and will get bigger and bigger as our food consciousness develops. The bloggers use a method of show not tell in order to demonstrate how food decisions can shift depending

on how we engage with food communities. Through reading their blogs, sometimes several years' worth of posts, the importance of engaging in food through a food consciousness journey became clear to me.

This type of everyday work reframes the limits we put on food justice because it focuses on imagining and creating new alternatives, rather than opposing and resisting old ways. As George McKay writes, "Growing a garden has become—at least potentially—an act of resistance. But it's not simply a gesture of refusal. It's a positive act. It's praxis" (10). A gardening, food-producing practice can bring us closer to the various processes of food production. We can view the process from the inside and develop a new perspective about issues that arise in a complex food system. Flores describes this type of food justice work non-oppositionally through her own experiences with food-based activist groups, which led her to the practice of growing food at home. She writes, "I had lived and worked in a radical, anarchist/activist community for years and was inspired by finding a beautiful, positive way to manifest these philosophies. Notions of violent revolution dimmed next to visions of multicolored paradise and peaceful abundance. Dreams of industrial collapse become prayers for communities feeding and healing themselves" (11). The bloggers showed similar positive practice through dreams and plans for their own gardens, through sharing success and failure and the knowledge gained through their own growing, and through a continuous examination of how their individual actions contributed to the collective food system and to the world in various ways.

The bloggers developed their food consciousness beginning with their personal relationship to food. In Chapter I, I argue that the bloggers use their home food practice to develop a shifted food consciousness. This food consciousness contributes to their engagement with other parts of the food system, including their relationship to global communities, food itself, and the environment and animals. This personal food consciousness is the root of the bloggers' food justice work. Food consciousness is perhaps the most important part of their food justice journey because it allows them to start from a reflective place. The bloggers see their gardening practice as healing the splits that industrial food systems have made between people and the earth. Cold Antler writes, "[W]hen I feel a little under the weather, I don't call the doc. I go out to the garden." ("what heals you?" 8/4/12). Cold Antler, in this post, refers to more direct healing through herbs and food, but she also writes about how gardening heals her spirit. A focus on spiritual healing through gardening positions the bloggers to develop their food consciousness and start food justice work from a positive place. Their continuous connection to personal health also allows the bloggers to connect more fully with people.

That the bloggers' food choices affected other people in interconnected ways complicated their personal relationships with food. Although their engagement does not cover every issue global workers face, and gardening does not solve all food workers' rights issues, it allowed the bloggers to use food to form communities. Their work to create and be a part of communities that value food justice allows them to grapple with the ways they contribute to the poor treatment of people around the world through the everyday act of eating. At the very least, building food communities allowed the bloggers

to move from an unexamined view of food to a more conscious view of food. Instead of seeing food choices as merely individual decisions that affect only the eater, the bloggers thought of food as something that connected them to people across the world, for better or for worse. The bloggers, thus, value communities both near and far that they physically and spirituality join through homesteading. Root Simple write, “Creating community is a vital part of the urban homesteading movement. For why should one make jam or grow zucchini without people to share it with?” (“Urban Chicken Enthusiasts Unite!” 8/22/09). Root Simple refer to a physical community with neighbors who are close by. Root Simple, and other bloggers, believe that sharing food is a great way to connect with people in their neighborhoods, towns, and cities in order to create a food-based community. Tenth Acre writes, “[E]ngagement with ‘outside sources’ in your local community is the cornerstone of modern homesteading, which acknowledges that our future health, safety, and happiness is intricately linked with our community” (“The Romanticism of Homesteading”). Tenth Acre writes more generally about connecting with people online, through classes, and through books and other research as a way to gather knowledge and other resources for homesteading. Tenth Acre’s comment relies on a theory of interconnectivity; that her well-being is intricately linked with the well-being of other people. And, I assume, based on her engagement with nature, this theory of interconnectivity extends beyond humans.

The bloggers’ most complicated relationship and engagement with interconnectivity is with food itself. I argue that the bloggers at once both value the agency of food and establish boundaries and rules about supposedly good food that are

harmful and inaccurate. Seeing food as active allowed the bloggers to value its nonhuman agency. This valuing can help to break down a hierarchy that places humans in control and food as a mere commodity for human consumption and manipulation. Their inclination to value the wholeness of food, however, led to a binary between natural and artificial and served to further separate people from nonhuman objects. These conclusions are important for the continuing development of food justice work. Assumptions about a human's ability to know their food or that food can ever be completely whole or pure only plays into a human-centered relationship with food.

The bloggers tried to develop a more justice-based relationship with food through balancing intervention with letting go in regards to their relationship with nature. The bloggers were again forced to deal with a realization that they cannot control nature. Their development of a reciprocal intervention policy helped them to see themselves as interconnected with nature. They had to sometimes let go and acknowledge that nature affected their own food yields and decide when to intervene to help steward natural processes. Finding this reciprocity is an important lesson for developing a food consciousness because it fully acknowledges the interconnections; the bloggers could never escape a connection with the environment and animals, thus they must develop a more just relationship with those non-human forces. The bloggers do not see themselves as separate from their environments and take up gardening and chicken-raising because they believe their purpose is to steward plants and animals without oppressing them. Root Simple write,

Rather as plants need birds to scatter their seeds, plants rely on humans to thin and prune them, protect them and spread them. The elders imagined an active, reciprocal relationship of use between humans, plants and animals. For them, “wilderness” is a pejorative term. When land is untended, it turns feral and declines. In a thriving land there is physical and spiritual intimacy between man, plants and animals. (“The Pinnacle of Permaculture” 8/17/10)

Root Simple see they fulfil a reflective role with nature by growing food in ways that work with plants and animals, rather than seeking to control them and suppress their own processes. This relationship requires the bloggers to listen, in a sense, to the environment and animals. Northwest Edible writes, “If you keep trying, and listen carefully to the feedback from your garden, the right methods for your land and your life will become clear” (“The Book Burner” 2/27/12). To Northwest Edible , listening to the feedback from your garden, which is to say the plants, soil, and climate, will make for a more equitable and reciprocal relationship. People can tend to the earth and become stewards of the environment, then, without lording over or attempting to control it. This is the type of relationship that works toward a more just food system, in which the bloggers attempt to find a balance with the environment and animals.

These sections work together to create a vision for a more just food system. The bloggers, as engaged food consumers, examine the smaller links that make up their interconnected relationship with food and the current food system. They interrogate the effects of many of their food decisions in order to imagine a better alternative. They engage in shifting their food consciousness toward a way of being with food that values

every part of the interconnected system. Although the bloggers' engagement with food through growing is not perfect, they are doing the important work of sitting with the effects of their engagement with the food system. Although the bloggers had some commonalities in the way they engaged with food, their ideas also diverged from each other's. This created a beneficial multiplicity in their food advocacy. They show that justice-conscious food decisions are ever-changing and often messy. They inspired me, at least, to do the complicated work of engaging more consciously with food every day even as new problems arise from a complicated food system.

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