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Shifting Food Consciousness: Homesteading Blogs and The Inner Work of Food

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Abstract: This article explores the often overlooked work of growing food at home as food justice activism. It explores several questions, including: is home food production food activism/social justice work? How accessible is at-home food production? What are the assumptions and claims made by people who produce food at home, and what challenges do they face? Using an ecowomanist theoretical framework, the article analyzes blog posts written by four homesteading bloggers. It argues two points: that growing food at home shifts and develops a food consciousness, which leads to a more just relationship with food, and that the bloggers engage in intentional food production practices in order to bring more awareness to their individual interactions with all parts of the food system.

Keywords: food justice, homesteading, ecowomanism, food production, gardening

Introduction

Food justice has become a major concern for people in the U.S. as mainstream authors like Michael Pollan have written about the dangers of industrialized food. Food activists and scholars are concerned about many issues related to food including food access and nutrition, worker rights, animal welfare, and environmental degradation. 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' (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010).

Scholars have written about the many intersecting concerns with industrialized food, including the decline in nutritional value of industrialized fresh foods (Estabrook, 2012; Barndt, 2008)) and the advent of processed foods (Macias, 2008). Nutrition is also a major concern for scholars who note that meat consumption has grown rapidly, and that industrial meat, since it relies on Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) systems where animals are fed mostly grain, is less nutritional than grass-fed meat (Winson, 2014). The CAFO system is also harmful to the environment and requires larger inputs of resources than it produces in protein and calories (McLeod-Kilmurray, 2012). Scholars believe that animals are also exploited in the industrialized CAFO system since they must live in inhumane conditions (McCance, 2013). Additionally, industrial foods are shipped long distances, which increases pollution to air and water and fuel use (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010 and Weis, 2013). Furthermore, the industrial food system creates unequal food access, as low income communities and people of color are less likely to have access to fresh foods that are affordable and more likely to live in 'food deserts', or areas where food availability is limited to processed foods from convenience stores (Morales, 2011). Injustice toward people continues as farm workers, mainly consisting of poor immigrants, are exposed to harmful chemicals while they work in fields with lack of access to clean facilities and fresh water, and are paid little (Magdoff and Tokar, 2010).

Producing food locally and encouraging people to buy it has been lauded as a way to decrease environmental impacts of mass food production and inhumane treatment of animals, and also reduce the mistreatment of food workers and give low-income communities more autonomy in their food choices. The main focus of local food for food justice scholars has been community gardens and community garden programs. In their article 'Measuring Sustainability Performance of Local Food Production in Home Gardens,' S. Ghosh writes:

> Local food production could contribute meaningfully in improving sustainability performance, food security issues; social connectivity and cohesion; provides easy access to fresh food;

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> 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). (Ghosh, 2014: 4)

Based on the benefits Ghosh lists, it's understandable that more locally produced food through community garden advocacy and work is the main goal of most food justice movements and is endorsed by food justice scholars. Community gardens and the support of them have an important impact on food justice work. While there is extensive research on community gardens and other organized local food projects, little scholarship in the field of food justice has explored the impact of home gardens/home food production for food justice, which would undoubtedly still fall under the category of local food and have all the benefits Ghosh lists.

This article is a study of four blogs written by homesteaders, people who have taken on intensive food production tasks in their homes, including gardening/composting, raising chickens, and canning/preserving. Home food production contributes to food justice activism because the work encourages at-home food producers to shift their food consciousness; they bring intentionality and awareness to their everyday food decisions and micro-interactions. Thus activism in this context is defined as inner-work. By shifting their own consciousness toward more just food decisions, and considering a theory of interconnectedness, the bloggers engage in personal food activism through this shifted consciousness.

Methods

Four blogs were analyzed that all focus on two or more aspects of home food production—gardening/composting, raising chickens, and canning/preserving. Each blogger has a different social context, geographic location, and situates themselves differently in terms of their food production practices, yet each blogger is similarly interested in growing, raising, and storing food themselves. Although geographic locations, within the U.S., were spread out, the work of homesteading, and especially the combination of blogging and homesteading, is taken up most often by white women. One blog is run by a husband and wife team, where the husband blogger was quite active in posting. The three additional blogs are run by white women between the ages of 30-40 (although one blogger was 25 when she started her blog). The socio-economic class of the five 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. However, it should be noted that all five 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 influences 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. Each blog is described below:

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 a lot of topics related to homesteading, including sharing information, how-to guides, opinions, and personal narratives. The bloggers who run Root Simple are more political in their style of writing and engage with food justice activists/organizations more explicitly. That these bloggers are a husband and wife team also allows me to include a male-identified perspective on DIY food, and explore gendered relationships to food production. I refer to the bloggers at Root Simple as RS. 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 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 venturing into argument about food justice. Tenth Acre Farm also represents a Midwestern, suburban perspective. I refer to Tenth Acre Farm as TA.

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. I refer to Cold Antler Farm as CA.

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 garden 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 personal. She includes the most extensive blog content on canning and preserving. She is also the only blogger in my list who has children. When she does share personal perspectives and stories, they are often in relationship to her children. I refer to Northwest Edible Life as NE.

Blogging is both narrative that straddles the line between personal and public and a communicative act. J. Rak writes that, 'blogging [...] is about the act of writing one's self into existence for others to read and comment upon' (Rak, 2005: 176). Rak argues that blogging is identity formation, yet it cannot be defined as an internet diary. The act of blogging helps a person reaffirm their identity, but this identity formation happens in relationship to a community. This community, because it is read and commented upon, is interactive. A. 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' (Morrison, 2011: 37). In other words, blogs are not simply public in the sense of broadcasting to a wide audience; they work within networks to build audiences of like-minded people. This view of blogging as both public and private, identity-affirming and communal is important to my analyses of food blogs as consciousness-shifting. The bloggers are able to write their food consciousness into existence with the help of a network of community members.

Theoretical Framework

I use an ecowomanist theoretical framework to analyze the blog text. I explore the spiritual and everyday aspects of womanism that are specifically concerned with the well-being of the environment in relationship to the well-being of people. 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). (Maparyan, 2010: 422)

Maparyan's ecowomanism values care for the environment, which is connected to 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 a broader version of ecofeminism, which, according to C. 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' (Mallory, 2013: 176). Mallory blames patriarchal principles of domination, exploitation and control for 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, sees this caring work as a spiritual endeavor that imbues all parts of the environment with spirit.

Anzaldúa sees her human connection to the natural world as similarly spiritual, and thus, connections to the earth come through shifting consciousness. 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' (Anzaldúa, 2002: 540). To Anzaldúa, conocimiento, which she defines as the final stage of consciousness shifting, 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' (Anzaldúa, 2002: 558). By recognizing that humans and the earth are connected through spirit, womanist activists are motivated to take up the spiritual work of shifting their consciousness to more ecological consciousness, or more awareness about these spiritual connections to the planet. Once humans are able to recognize the spiritual connection 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' (Maparyan, 2012: 4).

Maparyan writes, 'There are two basic steps to performing miracles and changing the world: step one change yourself (the inner work); step two change the world (the outer work)' (Maparyan, 2012: 125). Maparyan's claims that changing the world, what I identify as social justice, starts with inner work: changing yourself. Maparyan then 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' (Maparyan, 2012: 129). In other words, the work to heal one's self and shift one's own consciousness toward contributing to global healing is a spiritual endeavor. This spiritual sustainability is central to Maparyan's definition of social justice. By cultivating a healed spirit that runs through everyone and everything, we can create enough positive energy to heal the planet. This claim influences my exploration of the bloggers' inner work.

Intentionality and Inner Work

The bloggers engage in food activism through a method of inner change. By focusing on self-care and healing through everyday practices that encourage more mindfulness the bloggers focus on self-change or shifting consciousness. The bloggers center the work of food production as a ritual that brings them closer to what they describe as a more 'authentic' life. Although they choose the potentially problematic term authentic to describe the personal benefits of homesteading, they use the term to mean finding a spiritual connection to the work of growing food in order to shift their inner consciousness.

The bloggers write about their personal journeys through food production as one of finding more awareness in their everyday 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 CA 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, 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 global and even cosmic communities.

The bloggers encourage readers to take up some food producing, whether growing, raising chickens or other animals, canning, or cooking fresh food more often. They encourage readers, however, to find how food producing can fit into their everyday lives. NE 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 NE, is not for readers to over extend 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 that it becomes an everyday practice, and perhaps increase their mindfulness.

I see the bloggers engaging with food in a way that emphasizes awareness of how food connects to every part of their lives and how their everyday actions connect them to every part of a food system. Thus, the bloggers often describe food production or homesteading as a lifestyle, which leads me to claim that homesteading is a kind of identity. The bloggers take up food-growing/homesteading practices that require a large portion of their time and leak into other parts of their lives. Thus, homesteader is a way for the bloggers to define who they are. Food production is folded into the everyday practices and everyday choices of a person who is being mindful about food. Importantly, though, the doing creates the being. Or, everyday, repetitive actions form a person's sense of identity. TA 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?'). By framing homesteading as a lifestyle, TA characterizes homesteading as a conscious effort toward being content in a place and working within that particular place toward a healed relationship with 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. CA also writes that 'Homesteading has made it into every corner of my life' ('hard cider!' 10/9/09). CA emphasizes how homesteading or food production is not held in the moments of working specifically with food; it saturates every part of her daily, lived experiences and her consciousness.

The inner work of evaluating and considering their relationships with food led the bloggers to more self-understanding. Additionally, 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. RS 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 just about producing food, it's also about changing relationships between food and personal wellness.

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 begin to think about the story of our food—how it was grown, what other parts of the system it touched. We may begin to think about it differently. The bloggers encourage their readers to use their home food production as a starting point to bring more awareness to everyday food, or other consumption choices. TA 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?'). TA's thinking represents a shift in how she thinks about her interactions with her food. By becoming more aware of the value and potential harm of each food choice, TA is shifting her food consciousness and encouraging her readers to do the same. The other bloggers also talk about how their goal is not to produce all of their own food, but, instead, situate home food production as one step in a shift in thinking about food. So the goal is not just production of food but mindful engagement with food through production. The bloggers are engaging in a consciousness shift similar to Rosemary Radford Ruether's 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' (Ruether, 1992: 4). Ruether's vision for a healed earth begins with shifting consciousness and is similar to 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' (Anzaldúa, 2002: 570). According to Anzaldúa, 'These everyday acts contain the sacred, lending meaning to your daily life' (Anzaldúa, 2002: 574). In other words, everyday acts that foster more awareness provide sacred opportunities to make more socially just choices.

RS connect to a spiritual approach to finding an ecological awareness that contributes to ecological healing. RS write that,

> We are all gardeners... Gardening, after all, is a universal metaphor, so the idea that 'we are all gardeners' appears with equal validly 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)

RS claim that gardening is used as a metaphor because of its universal benefits and its emphasis on positive or productive growth. RS 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.

Searching for 'Authenticity'

A sense of finding meaning in a life of connecting with nature and eating more consciously was often described 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 are referring to a few ideas: their beliefs that humans are 'supposed to' live close to nature (a belief that often

gets mixed up in connecting to 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). In this section, I explore how the bloggers both implicitly and explicitly value realness or authenticity and offer suggestions for potentially more healing ways to empower people to control their own material survival.

The bloggers both overtly name authenticity and describe authenticity in terms of 'realness,' purpose, or divine purpose—with statements along the lines of 'this is how humans were meant to live.' CA 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.' CA acknowledges how prevalent this sentiment is in homesteading communities. People in these communities believe that growing food and in other ways 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.' CA ultimately decides to ask her readers what *isn't* authentic, at an attempt to parse out what remains as authentic ('What isn't authentic?' 1/17/12). CA is unable to define authenticity except in terms of what it isn't, which shows that the term authenticity, especially when tasked with being applied to 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 allows the perpetuation of an industrial food system with which they often express their disagreement. CA cites this as one example of authenticity: 'To [some homesteaders, authenticity is] stripping the house of anything that may bring inklings of consumerism, materialism, or character-building shortcuts' ('what isn't authentic' 1/17/12). CA's comment about 'character-building shortcuts' applies to products and services of post-industrialization, like prepackaged food. RS describe a type of authenticity or 'realness' in terms of connecting to ancestral knowledge, or old ways of doing things. 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 Lawn Rebate Turn LA into a Gravel Moonscape?' 3/9/15). RS'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. TA also reminds readers that society has become lazy and ungrateful because of consumerism. 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').

TA seems to long for an era where resources like water didn't come so easily because she concludes that people were more grateful for their resources when they needed to work for them. This claim makes sense in the context of TA's blog, since, as I discussed in the previous section, TA links producing food yourself with finding this gratitude she feels is lacking from industrial food systems. In a later post TA 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 more authentic, according to TA, because it's what humans' primal ancestors did.

Although the bloggers value the time they spend blogging since it connects them to a larger community, they take up food production work because they value physical, material work for its realness. CA expresses her desire and satisfaction for working 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). While RS express their dismay at the popularity of online farming games:

> It is even suggested that the popularity of these 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)

RS disagree with the use of farming games to connect with a more pastoral life, not because they disagree with the goal, but rather because they disagree with the means. Based on the perspectives described in several of their blog posts (their valuing of pre-industrial skills, for example), RS 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. CA again expresses her longing for realness of physical food producing. 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, sheepherding, 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)

CA 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 where she does graphic design work for a catalogue is depressing. She describes office work as a 'farce' and farmwork as 'real work.' CA believes farmwork is real for several reasons based on my analysis from her wider blog: it is active and tangible (she works with her hands and engages her whole body with the materials of the farm); it 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 CA 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 CA with more meaning.

But despite her use of qualifiers like what makes 'real' work, CA 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). CA expressed her struggle to define herself in terms of farming and homesteading based on expectations to be self-sustaining, or to eschew modern inventions and technology that provide 'character-building shortcuts.' CA's comment is ultimately an attempt to hone in on the daily work of connecting with nature and producing food instead of relying on industrial food, without overlooking how the labor involved in homesteading is also about inner work.

Self-Care and Healing

The bloggers considered self-care as an important part of their food activism. They generally believed that in order to advocate for more just food choices, they needed to be well. Since homesteading takes some hard 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 in order to continue working to effectively grow food—something they considered of utmost importance. Furthermore, the bloggers often considered spending time outdoors on their homesteads as a form of self-care in itself. They considered their work close to nature as a form of healing the disconnections that a globalized world created. This healing is essential to their continued contribution to social justice activism.

The bloggers write on their own struggles finding the right balance in order to avoid overwork. TA explores the pressures people can put on themselves when they decide to take up homesteading. She writes,

> 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)

TA engages with the goals of homesteading in a way that balances work to be done to grow food and feeling pressure to be a perfect homesteader—or to produce everything yourself. CA 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)

CA, after her illness, must find a way to balance her physical duties to maintain her homestead and her own feelings of self-doubt. But, in order to continue to grow and raise her own food, she must be sure that she cares for herself.

Although the bloggers consciously consider how overwork can affect their stress and their physical health, they also credit eating more wholesome, less processed food as contributing to better health. Knowing that whole foods can contribute to better health guides their homesteading practice since it gives them a personal, important purpose to keep growing. TA writes about the ways food helped her feel more physically well: 'We healed our health by eating real food and educating ourselves at the same time by joining a CSA. And then we were able to get on with our lives by living in a way that we think adds value to the world' ('How I started Homesteading').

Self-care centers on an individual person; however, the bloggers see self-care as connected to their larger social justice work. In order to contribute positively to a more just world, the bloggers felt like they had to be in good health. TA writes about how healing her and her partner's health was a first step to their social justice work. She writes, 'Homesteading wasn't a goal, but it didn't just happen. It came out of Vince 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'). The bloggers throughout their texts describe their engagement with both self-work and explicitly state their belief that growing food is social justice work.

Homesteading that is 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. Although they at first felt grief and guilt for the way humans live and how it negatively affects other parts of the world, RS 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)

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

Discussion

The work of food justice activism, for the bloggers, centers inner change. This focus on inner-change as part of food justice work is significant because it makes private work public, which has the potential to value gendered work that usually takes place at home. Although shifting food consciousness is an essential first step to food justice activism, the bloggers root down in their own consciousness in order to reach out and affect different parts of the food system. Their inner work has an impact on others and the environment. Maparyan explains the value of 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 or social change. Spiritual practice *is* activism, because it changes energy of things and initiates a chain reaction eventuating in a transformed outcome. (Maparyan, 2012: 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 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 must be 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 their social justice activism. Without attention to inner-consciousness, their activist work would be incomplete. 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. (Hayes, 2010: 249)

The bloggers present their current phases of their journeys with food production as setting down roots. The next phase of their food justice journey may be to reach out through their branches to their communities.

Conclusion

This type of food activism reframes the limits we put on activism because they focus 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 get an insider look and develop a new perspective about issues that arise in a complex food system. Flores states this type of food activist 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 this positive practice similar to Flores 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, 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 importantly doing the 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 activism. They show that justice-conscious food decisions are ever-changing and often messy.

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