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Backyard Authenticity: Urban Backyard Food Production as the New Agrarian Ethics of Authenticity in Practice

Eric Reiff
University of Colorado at Boulder, eareiff@gmail.com

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BACKYARD AUTHENTICITY: URBAN BACKYARD FOOD PRODUCTION AS THE NEW AGRARIAN ETHICS OF AUTHENTICITY IN PRACTICE

by

ERIC REIFF

B.A., Hanover College, 1996
M.A., University of Denver, 2007

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Backyard Authenticity: Urban Backyard Food Production as the New Agrarian Ethics of Authenticity in Practice

Written by Eric Reiff

Has been approved for the Department of Geography

__________________________
Mara J. Goldman

__________________________
Emily T. Yeh

Date: ______________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Abstract

Reiff, Eric (Ph.D. Geography)

Backyard Authenticity: Urban Backyard Food Production as the New Agrarian Ethics of Authenticity in Practice

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Mara J. Goldman

The goal of this dissertation is to critically examine urban backyard food (UBF) production as a set of practices and discourses. Until this dissertation, most thinking on UBF production has been reflected in popular literature that often touts UBF production as a necessary and practical step to mitigate personal health, food justice, and environmental sustainability concerns over food systems. I found that UBF producers tend to parse the world into inauthentic techno-urban-industrial modernity and anti-modern, ‘natural’, or authentic people, things, and relationships. I use UBF producers’ practices and the meanings and purposes they instill in those practices to reveal how different people understand how society is ordered, and what UBF producers would like to change about that ordering.

The ethnographic data that I collected in the Denver metropolitan area from 2013 to 2015 shows that UBF producers are grappling with an historically reoccurring concern for finding the right way to be (authentic) in the world. This ethos offers a rebuttal of modernity through its antagonism toward contemporary techno-industrial food provisioning. At the center of this is an ethics based on a moral ontology of nature or what New Agrarians call using “nature as measure.” I find that UBF producers want to use their practices and discourses to create, revive, or emphasize what they conceive as moral or authentic forms of value, labor, and products. They tend to do this by conflating nature as
measure with nostalgia for pre-WWII agriculture, a nostalgia based on a culturally situated rather than transcendent nature. I argue that in the process of trying to reproduce pre-WWII agrarian experiences, UBF producers may be reviving and perpetuating a narrative in which white European male dominated agriculture is held up as the pinnacle of authenticity and morality.
Acknowledgements

I want to thank my Committee Chair Dr. Mara Goldman as well as committee members Drs. Elizabeth Dunn, Emily Yeh, and Jill Harrison for their critical insights during my proposal defense. They helped point me in useful and productive directions at the beginning of the research process. This dissertation would not be what it is without their insights. I also want to thank them and Dr. Brenda Parker for their advice at my dissertation defense on how to revise this dissertation in preparation for publication and their ideas on where to take my research next. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Bill Travis even though he was not part of my dissertation committee beyond the proposal defense. If he had not put his faith in me when I applied to the University of Colorado at Boulder Geography program in 2010 the last six years would have looked very different for my family.

And, it is to my wife and three daughters that I owe the most gratitude. My oldest child was three when I began working on my PhD and she is now almost ten. As far as my children are concerned I have been a graduate student for all of their lives. I am indebted to my children Mathilda, Ursula, and Beatrix and my wife Erica for their patience, support, and encouragement as I went through this process. They helped me stay the course whenever I felt lost in the weeds. This dissertation is as much theirs as it is mine.
Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... v
Contents .............................................................................................................................................. vi
Tables ................................................................................................................................................ x
Figures ............................................................................................................................................... xi
Definitions ........................................................................................................................................... xii

Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 1
  Problem statement .............................................................................................................................. 4
  Research questions............................................................................................................................ 6
  Broader social context ....................................................................................................................... 6
  Summary of literature that substantiates the study ............................................................................ 7
    Urban agriculture ............................................................................................................................. 7
    Other forms of alternative agriculture ......................................................................................... 10
  Urban backyard food production: history and influence ................................................................. 13
  Contribution to scholarship ............................................................................................................ 21
  Research setting .............................................................................................................................. 21
  Methods of data collection and analysis ....................................................................................... 24
    Researcher's positionality .............................................................................................................. 25
    Participant observation ............................................................................................................... 29
    Semi-structured interviews ......................................................................................................... 31
    Discourse analysis ...................................................................................................................... 32
  Organization of the dissertation ...................................................................................................... 34

Interlude 1: Snapshot of an interview ............................................................................................. 36

Interlude 2: Green ketchup and pizza ............................................................................................. 38
Chapter 1: Alienation and authenticity: A conceptual and theoretical framework for UBF production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marxist conceptualizations of alienation</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Products</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The (in)authenticity of labels: an ethical diversion</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalism, technology, urban-industrial ordering and the metabolic rift</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological approaches to modernity and alienation</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foucauldian discourse analysis</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-production of nature</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching for authenticity</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three concepts of authenticity</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marx</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existentialism (and Heidegger)</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foucault</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morality and a transcendent ethics of authenticity</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ethics of using nature as measure, or a moral ontology of nature</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 2: Values: UBF producers as New Agrarianism’s ethics of authenticity in practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Agrarianism: looking for authenticity in small family farms</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Use and a Culture of Care</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural norms and the economy</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Household: Subversive potential, source of care</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology and place(lessness)</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UBF Production, New Agrarianism in (focal) practice</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 3: Labor: the authenticity of measured control

Introduction

Labor, control, independence: concrete labor and the authentic self

Using concrete labor in UBF production to “feel alive” or get “back-to-the-basics”

Prepping for the apocalypse: “It’s not a hobby, it’s a post-apocalyptic life skill!”

Knowledge as power: becoming more authentic by building skills-based and generalist knowledge to survive the apocalypse

“Bud’s gotta go, mom!”: producing authentic children

Authenticity and the productive home economy

Nature as measure (or reflexive labor and the production of a moral ontology)

Getting in touch with nature: the metaphysical value of getting your hands dirty

Authentic time and place: Nature’s rhythm and the value of being there

Using labor to “help nature” or the production of “authentic” nature

Negotiating authenticity: “That’s when I knew I couldn’t be a farmer”

Conclusion

Chapter 4: Products: finding, creating, and circulating non-monetary values or why “backyard eggs just taste better”

Introduction

Conceptualizing the coproduction of authentic selves and products

Evaluating the authenticity of things

“Sort of so pretty”

Healthy products embed the authenticity of self into the authenticity of nature

Sensing authenticity

Congealed labor as social bond

Heirlooms: “natural” diversity as authentic

UBF production as the co-production of authentic places, people, and products
The authenticity of lawns and edible landscapes, a moral question................................. 166
Compost morals: the authenticity of re-, up-, and just plain cycling ............................... 171
Conclusion......................................................................................................................... 177

Chapter 5: Subjectivity and the self: the conduct of authenticity................................. 179

Introduction...................................................................................................................... 179

New Agrarianism and the conduct of authentic UBF producers ........................................ 181
Conflating definitions of authenticity ............................................................................. 181
Conducting authentic subjects ....................................................................................... 185
Novelty and UBF production .......................................................................................... 188
Authenticity and neoliberal governmentality .................................................................. 192
Enframing and selling authenticity .................................................................................. 195

The New Agrarian ethics of authenticity as cultural (re)production .................................. 199
Gingham style: nostalgia for grandma and gingham as punk authentic ....................... 199
The demographics of UBF production .......................................................................... 205
The New Agrarian ethics of authenticity and the production of cultural hegemony ......... 215

UBF production as focal practices .................................................................................. 218
Focal practices, mindful practices .................................................................................. 219

“Don’t be an Urban Homesteader Asshole,” toward being mindful of the cultural positionality of UBF production ................................................................................. 220

Ensuring that the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity is inclusive ............................... 223
Conclusion......................................................................................................................... 226

Conclusion......................................................................................................................... 228

References......................................................................................................................... 234
Tables

1. New Agrarian themes correspond to the motivations UBF producers offer for their practices ................................................................. 17
Figures

1. Denver county fair posters ................................................................. 89
2. Vegetable garden display at Denver Botanical Gardens in 2015 ............... 171
3. Collecting materials from which to construct his chicken coop ............. 176
4. Early twentieth century adornments inside of a Denver chicken coop .... 203
5. Meet the modern farmers .................................................................. 205
6. Farm cred, Does and Don’ts ............................................................... 217
7. “Don’t be an urban homesteader asshole” (Erica 2011) ......................... 220
Definitions

In this section I offer definitions for some of the more confusing, difficult to define, and novel terms that I use throughout this dissertation. These definitions are not meant to be authoritative or definitive, but rather are meant as a starting point and reference point for broader discussions of meaning and purpose in the UBF producer community.

*Urban backyard food producer*

An important aspect of excavating their personal narratives and the larger discourses framing their activities is to let them choose the terms they want to use to describe themselves. UBF producer is meant to be a generic term that describes the activities I am researching without implying more discursive meaning than is necessary. Many practitioners refer to themselves with discursively meaningful terms like urban homesteader, urban farmer, backyard farmer, though in many cases they had not thought to label themselves with a term until I asked. A large component of my data collection was to get research participants to think about and explain what they are doing and why using their own terms.

*Backyard*

I use the term backyard, to limit the scope of the project and focus analysis on this unique aspect of what is otherwise a quite varied landscape of alternative food provisioning practices. Backyard is a term used almost universally by my research participants and the popular UBF producing literature to refer to informal or small-scale urban food-producing activities whether they are happening in a backyard, front yard, side yard, or even on an apartment balcony. The term is used to limit my project to usually
informal activities that happen in residential private property settings rather than commercial operations or communal spaces—though these distinctions are sometimes hard to maintain.

*Agriculture*

*Agr-* is Latin for field and *-cultura* is Latin for to grow or cultivate. Agriculture therefore is the cultivation of fields. At the beginning of the Enlightenment, the meaning of culture was expanded to include the cultivation of the mind, soul, self, etc. The contemporary of culture refers to the beliefs, customs, and practices of a particular group of people at a particular place at a particular time. I argue throughout this dissertation that food provisioning is just as much about reproducing culture as it is about cultivating sustenance.

*Morality*

Morality is the judgment of what is right and what is wrong. A person’s morality or moral code is often thought of as emanating from within an individual—i.e. people are colloquially said to have a personal moral compass directing their actions. Morality is related to authenticity, demonstrated in Nietzsche’s argument that the authentic person lives by their own moral code (Nietzsche 1956).

*Ethics*

Ethics is a system of morals that tells someone what they ought to do. Ethics are morals in action and can be thought of as a system of socially agreed upon morals that everyone should abide by in order for a society to function. An ethics of authenticity tells members of a society that they ought to pursue authenticity.
Authenticity

In this dissertation authenticity is loosely defined as a response to the Enlightenment project and modernity—i.e. the capitalist mode of production and corresponding techno-urban-industrial reordering of society. The question of authenticity is born out of a Continental philosophy tradition that believes that techno-urban-industrial social ordering is inherently immoral and dehumanizing. This leads to an ethics of authenticity, which variably points to the isolated interior of the individual and to what is externally natural as the essence of authenticity. Because authenticity is based on both morality claims and concepts that are socially constructed like nature and self, what is authentic or not is dependent on one’s positionality. Authenticity is defined in greater detail in Chapter 1. Synonyms that UBF producers use to discuss authenticity include: natural, homemade, local, backyard, self-made, organic, real, raw, sustainable, fresh, using traditional methods.

Nature

Nature has several meanings that are sometimes distinct and sometimes overlapping. Raymond Williams offers three ways in which the word is used in Western literature: “(i) the essential quantity and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings” (Williams 1975). My research data and analysis rely mostly on the first and third of these meanings, but does so in different ways often substituting essence and authentic for nature or natural. The material world (iii) is also used to determine what is essential (i). This is problematic because definitions of nature are shot through with social meaning such that what appears as authentic or
essential to one person or group is not universal and timeless, but historically and culturally situated.

*Moral ontology of nature*

This is the belief that nature is the source of transcendent morality, rather than, for example, God’s commandments in Christianity or one’s personal will as Nietzsche argued. New Agrarians refer to this as using “nature as measure.” Working the land (farming) is considered the best way to come to know how one ought to comport themselves in the world.
Introduction

This project began to unfold in 2011 while searching for playhouse designs for my daughters. A Google search returned images of urban backyard chicken coops amid the images of playhouses I was after. Many of the images were of chicken coops in the Denver metro area. One of these images linked to the organization Denver Urban Homesteaders which gave a list of all the farm animals that residents are allowed to keep in their backyards in Denver: 2 pygmy or dwarf goats, 2 bee hives, and 8 hens or ducks. I convinced my family that a chicken coop was preferable to a playhouse. In procuring the chickens we entered a community of people around Denver who want to produce food in their backyards for many different reasons that either intentionally or unintentionally challenged dominant social framings and political economic structures of conventional food provisioning. I met urban, peri-urban, and rural dwellers interested in buying and selling various animals and produce. Individuals in this network of people have different goals and visions but share the common aim which is to change community perceptions and laws in order to expand food-producing practices in their urban backyards and their neighborhoods and the metro area in general.

The way a society provisions its food is reflective of how that society is organized, how people in that society relate to each other, and how that society metabolizes its environment. Until this dissertation there has been little focused, critical scholarly attention given to the growing phenomenon of people who want to produce food in their urban backyards in the U.S. Social scientists have either not addressed this phenomenon directly or included it in a broader analysis of alternative food or urban food landscapes.
Therefore, my primary goal with this dissertation is to develop a conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding backyard food production activities in the U.S. I found that people are producing food for themselves in urban backyards in a way that asserts a particular notion of authenticity that challenges modern conceptualizations of urban and rural space, what a residential yard should look like, how people should relate to their environment, and where and by whom food should be produced. Their activities are also framed by anxieties about the healthiness and sustainability of contemporary food systems and economic and non-economic values that are rooted in historical archetypes. I explore these tensions to understand who UBF producers are, what motivates them, and what their practices and discourses can tell us about contemporary society. I bring together structural and post-structural theories to examine UBF producers as producers of more than just food for sustenance—though they do this as well. I also explore how UBF producers’ activities and narratives influence society by challenging dichotomous categories and definitions such as nature-society, urban-rural, consumer-producer, leisure-labor. I investigate how these activities might be subversive toward hegemonic modern political economic and discursive structures. Finally, I look at the problematic implications of trying to locate authentic or morally proper food, places, and food provisioning practices in ideas of nature, because these are all necessarily enmeshed with cultural meaning. In their use of food production and consumption to critique techno-urban-industrial systems, UBF producers open a complicated space that can just as easily be oppressive as liberatory. On the one hand, while UBF producer discourses and practices open up space to critically consider techno-urban-industrial enframing of society, they potentially use this space to
simultaneously promote a narrow vision of authenticity and morality based on nostalgia for a white European male dominated pre-WWII agricultural America.

Fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted in the Denver metropolitan area from 2013 to 2015. I used a variety of ethnographic data collection tools, but relied primarily on semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I was able to interview practitioners, urban food production community leaders, and non-practitioners. I also collected data from popular literature and blogs about UBF production in order to identify any larger historical, community, regional or national discourses that might shape and be shaped by UBF production.

From my research and analysis, I conclude that UBF production is about more than food production. It is a complete discourse and subsequent set of signifying practices that are rooted in critiques of consumerism, techno-urban-industrial society, commodification, and desires for independence, control, and authenticity. I find that while UBF production has much in common with other alternative food provisioning and DIY discourses (e.g. the maker movement) it has its own unique critiques of and prescriptions for society. I find that while UBF producers’ practices have materially and discursively impacted practitioners and non-practitioners as well as conventional food provisioning systems keen on not losing customers, they do not overcome the structural political economic contradictions that motivate them and are inherent in modern capitalist society. However, I do conclude that UBF production has the potential to act as a focal practice through which people contemplate and produce values and relationships that are otherwise absent or are muted in modern society.
**Problem statement**

Morality, ethics, and authenticity tend to be pushed to the edges of critical conversations about capitalism and modernity (Taylor 1995). Instead the historical tendency has been to follow Marxist analysis toward a critical material structural analysis that offers little in the way of solutions other than a revolution that overthrows capitalism as the mode of production, which never materializes in practice. Many social theorists (e.g. Blomley 2007; Galt, Gray, and Hurley 2014; Gibson-Graham 1996; Marsden and Franklin 2013) have grappled with the critical dead-end that structural analysis leaves us with by realizing that capitalism is also an incomplete discourse that leaves a lot of non-capitalist or subversive interstitial spaces for people to form alternative social and economic relationships. Most importantly it opens up a space for the discussion of morality and authenticity, two interdependent concepts that drive people to decide how they should comport themselves in the world. How alternatives to capitalism come about and are sustained are both material and ideological. An overarching goal of this dissertation is to explore the importance of concepts like alienation and authenticity in UBF production as an alternative to techno-urban-industrial ordering.

The primary goal of this project is to develop a theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding UBF producers and their practices. On the surface, it appears illogical that people would need or want to produce food in the U.S. where 40% of food is thrown away (Gunders 2012) or where food is relatively inexpensive and more available than in other parts of the world. In this dissertation I look for reasons beyond sustenance that UBF producers give as motivations or justifications for their practices. Most of the literature on UBF production is non-academic and functions to support and spread UBF
production activities rather than critically examine them (e.g. Hayes 2010; Larusso 2015; Madigan 2009). This dissertation is meant to be a step toward bringing critical academic analysis to bear on a growing social phenomenon in the U.S. The existing literature on UBF production either fails to separate it from other forms of alternative food production; looks primarily at its practical potential (L. J. Mougeot 2000; Binns and Lynch 1998); criticizes it for not being more sensitive to its potential to exploit women and exclude non-whites (Guthman 2011); or as a Colorado State University (CSU) points out, is so difficult to account for that it isn’t part of the 2020 Sustainable Denver local food goals. All of this work is important, but does not offer a robust theoretical or conceptual framework for understanding UBF production practices. For this reason, in this work I combine an historical analysis with an analysis of current specific UBF producer narratives and practices to develop a theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding in a historical and contemporary discursive context who UBF producers are, what they are trying to accomplish with their practices, and what this can tell us about contemporary U.S. society and the contradictions inherent in it.

UBF producers present several puzzles: 1) Rather than try to change what they do not like about the world through their consumption choices, they are choosing to produce for themselves; how then, might their actions differ from consumption driven actions? 2) From a rational actor economic perspective they are making inefficient and risky decisions by producing their own food. Whereas commodified food is produced at economies of scale and a farmer assumes the risk of producing the food, UBF producers labor inefficiently in their non-wage labor time and take on the unnecessary risks of producing food. 3) They are choosing to produce in unconventional places, such as their urban backyards when
contemporary U.S. society has largely identified the yard, especially the urban yard, as a purely aesthetic place, relegating food production activities to rural landscapes. 4) UBF producers in the Denver area are mostly white, middle-class, and more often than not are the primary persons responsible for their home economy. What is limiting UBF producer activities to these groups of people? 5) To what extent can UBF producer practices and narratives be considered intentionally and unintentionally subversive, toward what exactly can they be considered so, and with what effects? 6) What conceptual and theoretical frameworks explain UBF producers?

**Research questions**

- What kinds of people produce food in urban spaces?
- What motivates people to produce food in their urban backyards in the Denver metropolitan area?
- In what ways does urban backyard food production shape practitioners’ identities and social relationships and in what ways does it represent the identities and social relations that they want?
- How is urban food production used as a medium for contesting and reinforcing dominant discourses and what alternatives does it offer?

**Broader social context**

As part of a growing phenomenon in the U.S. UBF producers have material and discursive impacts on their neighborhoods and cities as their practices and narratives borrow from and contribute to alternative food provisioning discourses like localism and organics, as well as point out concerns with urban-industrial social ordering. Urban plant
nurseries are selling chicks, homesteading magazines are sold at urban grocery store check-out lanes, cities are rewriting zoning laws to allow food-producing animals in backyards, and urbanites all over the U.S. are replacing lawns with gardens. Framing these unconventional urban food-producing practices are values which included moral themes that have been well articulated in agrarian philosophy\(^1\). Discovering why people nostalgically look to a more than 200-year-old farmer archetype for direction when most Americans live in urban environments, why they want to be productive around their home, and why they want to physically labor at producing food, offers a window through which to identify and examine unresolved and new tensions in contemporary U.S. society. This also allows us to understand to what degree, if any, UBF producers are affecting society at large as a countercultural movement.

**Summary of literature that substantiates the study**

*Urban agriculture*

Most academic literature on urban agriculture has only indirectly been concerned with UBF production in the First World, but nevertheless offers a good starting point for thinking about UBF producers in Denver. For the most part this literature is focused on the potential of various kinds of urban agriculture to create job opportunities, build communities, and produce food security for cities’ poor (Dubbeling, Zeeuw, and Veenhuizen 2011; L. J. A. Mougeot 2006; L. J. A. Mougeot 2005; Veenhuizen 2006). This

\(^1\) By agrarianism I mean the utopian philosophy that Thomas Jefferson is given credit for establishing. Generally, he argued and his intellectual descendants continue to argue that small-scale, quasi-subsistence agrarian economies are more stable and therefore more democratic than industrial societies.
literature also considers whether urban agriculture, as an already existing survival strategy in many Third World cities, should be promoted more widely as an urban economic development strategy (L. J. A. Mougeot 1999; Binns and Lynch, 1998; Lado 1990; L. J. A. Mougeot 2006; Prain, Lee-Smith, and Karanja 2010), but such practical considerations do not sufficiently address important material and cultural implications of UBF practices.

Some urban agricultural analysis has looked at the implications of urban agriculture beyond the practical goals of job creation and food security. Hovorka (2006) examines how urban agriculture empowers women in Gaborone, Botswana. She finds that unlike in rural areas, women can own land and compete in urban agricultural production on equal terms with male farmers. In Gaborone there is an urban demand for chickens that women are uniquely positioned to meet precisely because of their domestic responsibilities that in rural areas prevent them from participating in chicken production. Because their chicken operations are usually small and near their households they can use municipal water, their own labor and their proximity to the urban markets to compete with male dominated rural and peri-urban agriculture. In this case urban agriculture offers women a space in which they can access the existing market for chickens because cultural norms of land tenure do not dominate gender roles in the city. The ability of women to sell chickens in Gaborone is therefore not about creating new systems of food production and distribution or gender equality in land tenure. Rather it shows how urban spaces disrupt agrarian cultural norms as populations move to urban environments.

Others have looked at the roles of community gardening in teaching democratic principles (Levkoe 2013) and creating communities of care that do not cede definitions of property to neoliberal governmentality (Blomley 2007). Such observations of urban
agriculture point to how the production of food is about much more than just producing food. It is also about the production of particular types of people and social relationships (Mintz 1997). In both Levkoe’s and Blomley’s work, community farming is revealed as a way to challenge neoliberal subjectivity, a subjectivity which argues that people act on individual interests in a market place rather than through communal interests that value care and consensus.

Mares and Peña also understand urban food production as much more than the production of food. They see it as a means for place-making through which people create or recreate their cultural identities through food production and consumption. In both Los Angeles and Seattle, they observe immigrants reproducing their cultural norms and practices symbolically and physically through the production of place and food. Their case studies reveal that urban political economy is not just “top-down neo-liberal governmentality and its managerial spatial imperatives” (Mares and Pena 2010, 253). Rather, they argue that “the struggles toward alternative use of space through place-making practices that promote self-reliance, community, and autonomy constitute spatial practices that are both counterhegemonic and revealing of unplanned-for outcomes and uses” (Mares & Pena, 2010, 253). Like Blomley (2007) they argue that place-making practices demonstrate that individuals are in part the products of cultural discourses that promote forms of value that are not captured through conventional economic terms like price and efficiency. Fealty to cultural norms, histories, ideologies, and non-economic forms of value generated through unconventional food production and consumption are just as important as the nutrition that is produced.
More recently academics (Parker and Morrow, forthcoming) have begun to bring critical theory to bear on the homesteading movement which is implicated in the growth in numbers of people who want to produce food in their backyards as well as engage in other self-sufficiency focused practices. This movement aims to reestablish a productive domestic economy, but fails to address how this movement affects genders differently. Specifically, how women are disproportionately impacted by the added moral responsibilities of making baby food, canning, caring for chickens, and gardening in addition to their other domestic obligations.

*Other forms of alternative agriculture*

Analysis of other forms of alternative food and agriculture show the importance of cultural history and discourses in the production and consumption of food. For example, Mares and Peña (2011) argue for a deeper understanding of what locally produced food means. In Seattle they interviewed a white mother who tried to buy local food whenever she could find it. For this woman and her hegemonic white cultural narrative, idealized Jeffersonian yeoman farmers produce authentic local food. Because of this mother’s own culturally biased assumptions about what a local producer should be, she overlooks native forms of local food provisioning that are far older than the white Jeffersonian farmer ideal she imagines. Mares and Peña find that Native American food provisioning and small family farm food provisioning are also often in conflict. The mother’s fixation on bucolic family farms as the source of local food provisioning means that by shopping for her version of local, she reproduces a narrative about food provisioning that perpetuates the U.S.’s history of displacing and denigrating Native American cultural practices and beliefs as well as rights to land and resources. This example demonstrates how alternative food systems’
narratives can overlook other possible alternatives and perpetuate exclusionary, often racist, power dynamics. It also implicates cultural discourses as unavoidable aspects of food provisioning and agriculture.

This narrow focus on seeking better food quality and justice in idealized yeoman farmers also inserts the romantic ideal of the independent family farmer in places where they never existed, or at least not in great numbers, like in California. California never had a strong family farm system like the Midwest or Eastern U.S. Instead large-scale industrial farms have dominated California since white settlers arrived. Imagining idealized notions of local or small-scale food production in the history of a place like California distracts from the realities and injustices of the existing industrial food production system (Guthman 2004). Instead of challenging the industrial food system that has been in place for over a century, alternative food systems act as parallel food systems in which privileged people can choose to buy food that aligns with their values while everyone else is left to buy industrially produced food—with its unreformed environmental, labor, and food accessibility injustices (Friedmann 2005).

Romantic ideals like the yeoman farmer play a role in the visions of many alternative food movements including UBF production. Latching onto this Jeffersonian ideal of independence, self-sufficiency, and hard work many UBF producers refer to themselves as urban homesteaders or farmers. UBF production is unlikely to let people completely circumvent conventional food systems, and may simply offer a distraction from confronting structural problems embedded in conventional food systems. Producing eggs in a backyard may let a producer feel like she is eating ethically while the rest of her store bought food is still coming from an unreformed late capitalist industrial food system. But it also may serve
as a focal practice that produces moments of mindfulness that can be translated into incremental discursive changes.

The continued reference to the yeoman farmer in alternative food systems and conventional food marketing exemplifies how the differing historical and cultural experiences of people are elided. By assuming that there are specific and universal reasons to desire particular foods, practitioners and activists disparage other cultural, historical, class, gendered, and racial knowledges. This is not to say that all peoples lack a desire to be healthy or just, but rather that food, its acquisition, and its preparation are enmeshed in cultures differently. For example, even though farmers’ markets exist all over the world, in the U.S. they tend to be formed as white space through the actions of white people at the market (Slocum 2007). Who comes to the market, what is offered at the market, the types of interactions occurring at the market, and the location of the market all reference the white narrative of what a farmers’ market should be. Similarly, Guthman (2011) observes, through her students’ journals, how alternative food is perceived by non-whites. She argues that to assume all people value organic vegetables or working in the soil to grow food ignores the very different experiences, motivations, and historical memories of disparate peoples. So for instance, from the middle class white perspective it seems obvious and just to educate black urban youth about food by giving them the opportunity to work the soil on a local cooperative farm. From the black perspective this could echo an undesirable slave history, especially if the farm owners or managers are white and the black youth are not paid for their labor (Guthman 2011).

To reconcile the homogeneity and whiteness of local food movements Mares and Peña (2011) argue for slower and deeper understandings of local food provisioning.
Meanwhile DuPuis, Harrison, and Goodman (2011) argue for more reflexive food provisioning systems in general; systems that allow many forms of food provisioning to coexist without preferring or striving for any one system in particular. Through critically and reflexively thinking about all food systems, it may become possible to create heterogeneous alternative and conventional food systems which are just and inclusive because they make space for all peoples’ histories, cultures, and races to be expressed through food.

As one of many forms of alternative food, UBF production and in particular gardening, have a storied past. Slaves in the U.S. used gardening as a way to survive the conditions of slavery and build a sense of self. In the late 1800’s and again during WWI and WWII, victory or war gardens became a way to support national interests. At other times it has been fashionable to keep a country estate with gardens or to try to correct the immorality of poor urban dwellers by having them grow food (Smithsonian Institute Gardens 2014). Themes of independence, morality, land ownership, community, and control over nature run through this history and show how gardening is necessarily understood differently by different people at different points in history. Just as gardens of the past tell stories about the time, culture, and the people living then, contemporary UBF production can tell us about our own temporally and culturally situated concerns and social relations.

*Urban backyard food production: history and influence*

Growing food in urban backyards is not a new phenomenon in the U.S. In the past gardening has been encouraged for instrumental and agrarian ideological reasons. Historically the U.S. government has promoted victory gardens in all backyards in order to
divert more commercial foods to the military during times of war (Smithsonian Institute Gardens 2014; Striffler 2005). At other times UBF production has been encouraged as an antidote for the unnatural and morally corrupting influences of urban space or as a means to combat poverty (Smithsonian Institute Gardens 2014). In most if not all instances, the motivation for promoting UBF production was rooted in the philosophical and popular agrarian belief that small farmers or those who produce their own food are superior to urban industrial consumers or that farming activities ameliorate problems stemming from urban and industrial ordering and metabolism of the material world. Instrumental reasons for UBF production, like promoting victory gardens during times of war to free up industrially produced food for military mobilization, reiterate the Jeffersonian belief that urban industrial citizens are problematically dependent on the industrial food system and that a person who is food independent is a better citizen. Rather than importing food or increasing industrial output of food, citizens are asked to shoulder the burden of food production. When food production has been encouraged in urban slums or deployed to reform the indigent, the motivation has been to provide an antidote to the perceived immorality of urban-industrial life. According to this narrative, growing food teaches a practical skill that leads to economic independence or instills a morality (especially a work ethic) that urban industrial life is perceived as inherently lacking (Murphy 2010).

The growth of UBF production in the U.S. after WWII is rooted less in these types of government interventions but rather in populist reactions to agricultural changes in the United States as well as the counterculture and environmental movements of the 1960 and 1970’s. Part resistance to the alienating effects of urban-industrial social ordering on workers and part concern for environmental sustainability, elements of society pushed
back against urban-industrial food provisioning in different ways. Some people began to produce organic foods as representative of a pre-industrial agricultural production model (e.g. Cascadian Farms), while others sought to buy these non-industrially produced foods. In between the producers and the consumers exists a subset of people whose lives are still ordered by the urban-industrial production-consumption model, but who still try to produce some of their own food. It is in this breach between the spheres of production and consumption (K. Marx and Engels 1978a) that UBF producers activities reside.

Several consumer movements have developed since the early days of organic foods to try to ameliorate the impacts of industrial food production—such as the loss of genetic diversity in food systems, the commercial and industrial efforts to replace the home-cooked family meal with industrially prepared meals, environmental degradation resulting from industrial food production’s chemical inputs and reliance on petroleum to produce and ship food, and industrial food contamination. The Slow Food movement aims to use the meal to focus eaters’ attention on the New Agrarian themes of conviviality, unique local foods over homogeneous, industrially produced foods; and taste over nutrition (Petrini 2004). The Farm-to-Table and Community Supported Agriculture movements’ aim to reconnect consumers directly to local farmers as members of a small(er)-scale community. Through the Locavore movement consumers try to limit their diet to locally grown food—or as some term it food ‘produced in their foodshed’—echoing the hydrological concept of a watershed (Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson 1996). By trying to consume local foods, Locavores are also trying to ensure that their food is not burdened by excessive carbon-tainted food miles (miles the food travels from production to consumption), that local farmers are integrated into and being supported by the local economy, and that as
consumers they can trust that their food sources are safe and reliable. Farmers’ markets have also undergone a resurgence. In 2013 there were 8,144 farmers markets in the U.S. up from 5,000 in 2008 (AgriNews 2013) in the U.S. driven partly by a desire to eat fresh foods and partly by a desire to eat local foods. Community, conviviality, environmental sustainability, distrust of industrial ordering and technological enframing, and recognition and celebration of place as measures of authenticity and morality surface frequently in popular and philosophical agrarianism and underpin alternative food provisioning practices. Table 1 shows how New Agrarian moral and authenticity themes correspond to UBF producer practices.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Agrarian Theme</th>
<th>UBF producer practices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>caring</td>
<td>educate children, resist inappropriate treatment of food animals, resist GMOs, and support ecosystem integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good use (land ethic)</td>
<td>lawn transformed into food production space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nature as measure</td>
<td>permaculture design, eating organics and non-GMO, compost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stewardship</td>
<td>worry about ecosystem integrity and what the Earth will look like for future generations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skeptical of technology and experts</td>
<td>value hand-made and DIY products more than conventional products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>holistic, integrated, generalist, upcycling</td>
<td>composting, home/work reunion, DIY, make things like coops out of ‘trash’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>praxis</td>
<td>producing food in the yard, is often more meaningful than the consumption of the end product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>small, local, intimacy, conviviality</td>
<td>producing at the scale of the urban backyard, sharing with neighbors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heterogeneous</td>
<td>practice intercropping, plant heirloom varieties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-sufficiency</td>
<td>growing food for self and family, preserving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>productive home economy</td>
<td>preserving, selling and giving away produce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desire intimacy with food</td>
<td>distrust or do not like the segmented opaqueness of industrial commodity chains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aesthetic and qualitative value</td>
<td>displaying pre-WWII farming décor, valuing heritage breeds over commercial breeds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: New Agrarian themes and corresponding UBF producer motivations for their practices.

UBF production is part of this milieu of alternative food provisioning practices, and while it shares many of the concerns and goals of other types of alternative food provisioning it is unique in its focus on producing for oneself, family, or neighbors. The concerns and practices of UBF producers have spread across the country and have had meaningful impacts on media, commerce, developers, and city laws. The growth of UBF production has spurred a number of publications that articulate the New Agrarian criticisms, practices, and aesthetics. Most of these publications combine agrarian images, stories, and how-to guidance to people who want to put agrarianism into practice. Many of
them emulate *Mother Earth News*, which claims to be “the most popular and longest-running sustainable-lifestyle magazine” (*Mother Earth News (about)* 2015). *Mother Earth News* instructs readers how to make changes in their lives aimed at DIY independence, community, wise-use, and stewardship of the environment. Recently, many new specialty publications of the same vein have come into existence to service people who want to grow their own food, particularly in urban spaces.

At both Sprouts and Whole Foods upscale supermarkets in Denver, consumers can find *Modern Farmer* a glossy publication with articles and advertisements that address subjects related to “farm, food, and life” (*Modern Farmer (about)* 2015). Its articles aim to identify and examine post- and pre-industrial food cultures through popular agrarian aesthetics and morality. It uses highly polished photos and articles to inform people about alternative farming efforts going on in different parts of the world, while offering some how-to information (it answers questions like “Which: A Goat Guide” (Parks 2013). It also offers consumers who cannot or do not want to grow their own food access to the agrarian authenticity aesthetic without getting their hands dirty. Other publications with names like *Urban Farm – Sustainable City Living*, and websites like *Backyard Farmer* have different takes on the same concerns. Other publications focus on more specific topics like *Backyard Chickens* and *www.mypetchicken.com*. The overarching goal of these publications is to provide readers with access to popular agrarian discourses, aesthetics, community, and knowledge.
Commerce has also been affected by the implementation of New Agrarian\(^2\) practices. There is at least the impression among many of my long-time gardening research participants, that seed companies run out of seed earlier in the growing season than they did a few years ago because the demand for seed has increased—especially organic and heirloom seed. In step with Denver's revised zoning laws that allow people to keep bees and chickens in their yards and subsequent demand for those animals, City Floral, a greenhouse in Denver, started selling ducks and chickens in 2013 and as of 2015 started selling beekeeping supplies for urban dwellers. City Floral's person in charge of the beekeeping supplies informed me that selling chicks, feed and other necessities for poultry husbandry has been profitable for them and they believe selling beekeeping supplies will be as well (City Floral employee, Personal communication, July 9, 2015). Classes for how to keep chickens, bees, goats; how to preserve food; how to garden with permaculture design principles are common in the Denver area with courses offered by various entrepreneurs. Costco now sells chicken coops and even William-Sonoma's catalogue and website added "Agrarian" sections in 2013 that hawk high-end beehives, chicken coops, and various equipment for more affluent gardeners (Mark 2013). Perhaps most telling is the recent evolution of Wardle Feed in Wheatridge, Colorado west of Denver. It is a long established feed store in the Denver metro area, which has been rapidly adapting to these new urban agricultural trends. In the last three years they have begun holding monthly 'chicken swaps', beekeeping and chicken husbandry classes, and selling products that cater to its growing clientele of UBF producers including bees, chickens, rabbits, and even milk goats.

\(^2\) New Agrarianism builds on Jeffersonian agrarian themes, but updates them with more contemporary concerns over the inauthenticity of modern technologies and new social movement environmental and food justice concerns.
All of these examples show that commerce is adapting to provide services and products for people who want to produce food for themselves in urban landscapes.

Developers and municipal codes are also adapting to the current growth of urban agrarian practices. In the Stapleton neighborhood, a large redevelopment project on the site of the former Stapleton airport in Denver, developers have been designing and marketing their housing additions as garden-ready. Another developer in the Denver area created the term agroburbia\(^3\) for his developments, which incorporate low density housing around a communal farm operated by a hired farm manager with the produce going to the residents. Meanwhile, urban zoning laws in the Denver metro area (as well as around the country) have been revisited and often revised to allow for food production activities in residential yards. Denver changed its codes in 2010 (Navratil 2011) with the large Denver metro area cities of Aurora and Lakewood following suit in 2014 (Mitchell 2014; Meyer 2013). Food safety laws, initially designed for large corporations operating at industrial economies-of-scale are also being amended with cottage food laws. These laws allow backyard producers to sell some of their produce and lightly processed foods to others without undergoing expensive licensing and inspections. Colorado passed a cottage food law in 2012 and municipalities around the Denver metro area have been amending their municipal health codes to accommodate the demand for these local, producer-to-consumer transactions (Murray 2014). These practices and popular discourses are not new and have been much articulated and promoted by New Agrarian philosophy.

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\(^3\) Agroburbia is an urban development and design concept being implemented in residential development projects around the Denver area. It integrates backyard farms and community farms (often with a paid farm manager) into housing developments with the expressed goals of reducing homeowners’ carbon footprints and making homeowners more self-sufficient (The TSR Group 2014).
Contribution to scholarship

In explaining what motivates UBF producers, this dissertation contributes to several areas of scholarship, including the utility and limits of traditional Marxist political economy. I add to the alternative or subversive economy literature of such thinkers as Gibson-Graham by critically examining UBF production as an example of their theory of already existing non-capitalist economic structures and their liberatory potential (Gibson-Graham 1996). My observations allowed me to see that there is more motivating UBF producers than just material concerns. Instead I argue that UBF producers are best understood when they are considered as part of a long ideological tradition that uses authenticity and morality to identify correct behavior (Taylor 1995). Finally, I add to the literature on place-making (Mares and Pena 2010), food provisioning as cultural expression (Mintz 1985; Feagan 2007; Thompson 2010) morality, and authenticity (Taylor 1995) by bringing them together with my data to show how these concepts in practice are inherently fraught with Foucauldian power structures (Foucault 1995; Pickett 1996; Foucault 1989). I argue that in practice these power structures can be both subversive and oppressive. I find that in line with Borgmann (Borgmann 2006) and Thompson (Thompson 2010), UBF producers’ practices and discourses are usually best thought of as focal practices that allow critical contemplation of what they do not like about society and what they consider correct or desired behavior.

Research setting

Denver, Colorado and the surrounding communities have strong alternative food networks consisting of several community supported agriculture businesses, many food justice enterprises, farmers’ markets, community gardens, agrourbia developments, clubs,
and for-profit enterprises supporting backyard food-producing activities. One of Denver’s twelve sustainability goals for 2020 aims to increase the amount of locally produced and processed foods consumed by Denverites to 20% of overall food consumed (Denver Office of Sustainability 2015). With over 2.9 million people (Udall 2014) spread over 6 counties and more than 40 cities and towns the metropolitan area allows me to compare and contrast the different ways in which UBF production practices have permeated and been accepted (or rejected) at the individual and community level and how individuals and communities variably react to the discourses and practices of backyard farming.

Paradoxically the urban core of Denver, with its limited space, has some of the most accommodating backyard food production regulations in the metropolitan area, allowing more practices in smaller areas than even some of the more rural counties adjacent to it. In addition, there are many efforts to include or associate UBF production activities as part of new residential developments. The Stapleton neighborhood in Denver is home to The Urban Farm where Denverites can cultivate large gardens on rented spaces and keep animals not sanctioned for backyards such as horses and roosters. Both the Conservatory Green subdevelopment of the Stapleton neighborhood in Denver (Patane 2013) and the Solterra development in Lakewood (Blevins 2009) have embraced backyard and communal urban food production as core design concepts for their residential developments. Meanwhile at the other extreme, the City of Northglenn has an explicit ban on the keeping of any farm animals (Northglenn 1973) and some housing developments within Stapleton have covenants to prevent the production of food in yards (Vaccarelli 2013).

The Denver metro area is also home to at least four chicken swaps, which function as a meeting place for people wanting to sell or buy small animals and horticulture
products. It is also a place where peri-urban, suburban, and urban food producers can meet to buy and sell goods. The chicken swaps happen monthly and proved a productive place to observe UBF producers and interview them about their practices. There are also a chicken coop tour and an Urban Homestead tour that take place annually which have provided a chance to observe and interview hundreds of practitioners. The Denver Botanical Gardens in the Summer of 2015 had an edible plant display in an overt attempt to connect with the rising interest in growing food in the city.

Furthermore, the CSU Denver Agricultural Extension office (through which I volunteer as a Master Gardener) receives a lot inquiries about how to grow food plants. The interest in growing has extended into preserving foods to the point that the Extension Office was, as of the summer of 2015, putting into place a program to educate people about how to properly process food for storage—one of the original purposes of land grant university extension offices. It is also working along with the City of Denver to help Denver meet its 2020 goal of locally sourcing 20% of food eaten in Denver (Sustainability 2015). While many of these initiatives do not directly inform on UBF producers, they do help map out the social climate in which UBF producers are operating and how this material and discursive landscape is both shaping and shaped by UBF producers.

UBF production practices are under constant renegotiation as food-producing practices are reintroduced into urban spaces around Denver after more than half a century of absence. Denver itself is currently working on rewriting its rules governing food-producing animals that it started implementing in 2010 (Denver Animal Control Officer, Personal correspondence, May 27, 2015) while Colorado has expanded the scope of its cottage food laws (Murray 2014) so that people can sell lightly processed food items as
private individuals from their homes. Given the current and relatively recent nationwide push to return food production practices to cities as well as highly public, dynamic, and ongoing discussions about UBF production across so many contiguous communities, the Denver metropolitan area has been a dynamic and multifaceted research site for answering this project’s research questions.

**Methods of data collection and analysis**

I conducted research over a fifteen-month period from June 2014 through November 2015 though in writing this dissertation I reflected on my entire three plus years as an UBF producer. I used a suite of qualitative methods relying heavily on participant and non-participant observation of UBF production activities throughout the summer and fall months, when food producers are most active. Data collection included 14 planned semi-structured interviews lasting up to two hours each and 41 interviews that occurred for shorter durations lasting from 5-30 minutes at UBF producer events. I interviewed UBF production community leaders, UBF producers and non-practitioners who are exposed to UBF production activities (e.g. neighbors of UBF producers). I also documented and analyzed my personal interactions with my neighbors in my capacity as an UBF producer. I relied heavily on this ethnographic data collection, but I also conducted discourse analysis of newspaper articles, posters and advertisements for urban food production events, as well as webpages and web forums related to UBF producers’ activities in the Denver metropolitan area.

I initially created and distributed a survey in person to 54 people at UBF producer events around the Denver metro area to explore UBF production practices. The survey was useful for understanding the scope of some UBF producers’ activities and their
demographics. However, I stopped surveying early on in the project as I found interviews and participant and non-participant observation data collection methods offered a more open-ended means of collecting nuanced data with which to answer my research questions. In other words, just letting people talk about why they wanted to produce their own food, proved to be more fruitful than limiting them to answering prepared questions. I did, however, continue to use the survey questions as a guide for the semi-structured interviews.

Relevant data from participant observation, interviews, and focus groups was transcribed and coded. I analyzed news articles, zoning laws, advertisements, signs, literature and narratives around UBF producer events like county fairs, chicken swaps, coop/homestead tours, and other such events. I also looked at the blog postings and other Internet sites that practitioners used to publicly document their practices. In 2015 I trained for 60 hours and then volunteered for 50 hours as a Colorado Master Gardener through Colorado State University’s Denver extension office. This role allowed me to observe the importance of food-producing activities to the Denver Extension office, other Master Gardener Volunteers, and to the general public that approached the Master Gardener Q&A booth at the Cherry Creek and City Park farmers’ markets in Denver. I identified key concepts and themes in my data to triangulate answers to my research questions.

Researcher’s positionality

As an ethnographic researcher I am compelled to disclose the ways in which my objectivity is challenged. I am an UBF producer in Denver with personal connections to the rest of the metropolitan food-producing community. In the Fall of 2011 I learned that Denver was in the process of making it easier for people to keep food-producing animals in
their backyard. I had no previous experience husbanding food-producing animals and little experience gardening, but the prospect of keeping a flock of chickens and growing some vegetables, as an experiential learning tool for my two (now three) young daughters was appealing. Over the following couple of years, we began keeping meat rabbits, bees, milk goats, quail, and turkeys in our backyard and moved our vegetable garden to a 600 (now 1200) square foot patch of our front yard. The goal of this has continued to be to provide my daughters with experiential educational opportunities as well as feed my compulsion for creative physical work. As I increased my involvement in urban food production events in the Denver area, I found myself trying to understand why people (including myself!) were deciding to produce food in their backyards at this point in time.

I found being an educated, white, graduate student, middle class father with young children and a construction company to be assets in accessing and understanding the Denver area food-producing community. Most of the people that are part of the current, popular urban food production movement in Denver are also white, middle class and college educated. Almost all practitioners that I interviewed expressed interest in my project to the point of enthusiasm. Political beliefs, race, and gender have not presented an obvious problem in engaging with the larger urban food-producing community, though they do open up interesting lines of analysis. I have been able to productively interview Spanish speaking gang affiliates (identified by their facial tattoos), self-identified libertarians trying to make a profit from urban backyard farming, liberal not-for-profit organizers using urban food production as a means of promoting food justice, my neighbors who are a mix of mostly black families with multigenerational ties to the
neighborhood and young white recently arrived couples who like to talk about what I am doing in my yard.

For instance, there is a black woman in her 60’s who comes by my house at least once a year to get some green tomatoes. She asks me questions about my garden while she reminisces about growing up on a farm in the U.S. South and especially how much she wishes grocery stores sold green tomatoes. Both women and men have been eager to talk to me about their and my food-producing activities. I also have an ongoing conflict with a white, 30-something, male neighbor about my “farm animals” and landscape choices degrading his quality of life. He has called the city to report my activities twice affording me the opportunity to talk with inspectors from Denver Animal Control, Denver Environmental Quality, and Denver Neighborhood Inspection Services about not only my ongoing conflict, but also about UBF production conflicts in Denver in general. In sum, my positionality has been an asset in accessing research participants during my research and has afforded me an experiential background through which to understand the UBF production community.

Two of the most useful aspects of my positionality have been my becoming a Master Gardener and my children. As a Master Gardener volunteer I worked 62 hours at informational booths at farmer’s markets in Denver over the last two years as well as 12 hours working at the Colorado Master Gardener and Denver Botanical Garden’s plant sales. This allowed me to interact with a great number of gardeners or people interested in gardening, the majority of whom also expressed fealty toward UBF producers’ ideals and wanted to learn how to successfully grow their own food. However, I am keenly aware that Denver Master Gardeners are mostly white and that most of the patrons of the farmer’s
markets at which I volunteered were also white, challenging me to find a more culturally and racially diverse pool of research participants.

My children proved to be an asset in gaining me access to UBF producer’s. One of the key characteristics of UBF producers is that they tend to be in charge of their home economy including childrearing. I believe that because I perform roughly half of our family’s domestic labor including childrearing, I could speak a common language with others who were motivated to produced food because of their children. Bringing my children with me to the Denver County Fair, to chicken swaps, and sometimes to semi-formal interviews gave me an ice-breaker for conversations about what UBF producers are doing and why. Most of my research participants, like myself, were interested in UBF producing for what it offers our children as far as education and health. This commonality probably gave me access to a larger number of research participants and definitely greater ease of access to my research participants’ narratives.

While my positionality has given me easy and widespread access to much of the urban food production community that I was observing, this has not made every aspect of the larger multicultural UBF producing community visible or clear. I have had to be critical of the limitations of my positionality and make an effort to connect with those aspects of or participants in UBF production that are emanating from cultures other than my own—the one that dominates the UBF production discursive space around Denver and the U.S. I also have had to be mindful of practices that are intentionally clandestine—i.e. illegal practices like backyard butchering, and keeping roosters or pigs.
**Participant observation**

As both a researcher and active member of the Denver metropolitan urban farming community I also acted as both a participant and non-participant observer. Participant observation is the primary method that I used to ethnographically explore this project’s themes and questions. The depth of observer participation ranged from passive-participation where the observer engages very little with her research subjects to complete participation where the observer becomes so involved with the subjects and her activities that she may lose the ability to critically distinguish between herself and her subjects as far as her research is concerned (DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland 1998). My goal has been to maintain a level of participant observation that allows me to engage with the food-producing community as both a member and as a critical researcher. More specifically, on the surface it may appear that because I produce food in my backyard that I subscribe to or am sympathetic with the narratives that UBF producers use to justify and promote their practices. I have, however, strived to remain circumspect and highly critical of my own activities and motivations just as I have been critical of others. I am for instance critical of the often made assumption that growing food in one’s own yard is inherently healthier or reduces the number of trips to the grocery store. Few have concerned themselves with the real possibility that their yards might be contaminated with lead or chemicals from past activities or that even an entire yard of food-producing activities is not enough to significantly curtail an urban family’s reliance on grocery stores. Holding the narratives that UBF producers use to explain themselves up to the realities and limitations of what they are actually doing and who is doing it is how I have maintained a critical and reflexive position as a participant observer.
In order to explore and collect data as a participant observer I brought animals to chicken swaps to sell, took courses in urban food production from various not-for-profit and for-profit organizations, and attended a variety of club meetings and events. I belong to the Colorado Poultry Association, the Denver Bee Club and volunteer as a Colorado Master Gardener through the Colorado State University Denver extension office. Also, I participated in or attended 5 annual chicken coop and urban homesteading tours in the Denver metro area in 2013, 2014, and 2015 as well as the Denver County Fair in 2013, 2014, and 2015. Participating in these clubs and events put me in contact with hundreds of urban food producers. Admittedly, this type of sampling likely left out a lot people not wanting to draw attention to their activities. Participant observation in these different alternative food provisioning organizations and events enabled me to see how UBF producers are actually producing and consuming food as well as the relationships and types of materialities these practices are creating.

At these events I engaged people to talk about why they want to produce food for themselves in their backyards. I documented the narratives that they use to rationalize their activities with a particular interest in how they use labor, value, products, and their own culturally situated identities to explain their food-producing activities. For instance, people in my preliminary study talked about backyard eggs tasting better and that producing food in their backyard makes them feel more alive after working all day at a desk job. I asked questions and made observations that helped answer my research questions. I used my observations to understand how social values and material relations are being constructed and reconstructed around UBF production.
Participant observation allowed me to actually see what people are doing rather than trusting them to honestly or accurately fill out surveys or answer *ex situ* interview questions. I have found through data collection techniques like surveys and interviews that participants are more likely to project the narrative they are trying to produce or what they think I want to hear. I also know from visiting UBF producing operations that some food producers are not operating within the law. I have observed numerous examples of this. Some UBF producers are selling eggs and unpasteurized milk from their backyards though this continues to be in violation of current health codes—depending on the city. Many are also keeping animals that are not permitted even under their community’s revised zoning codes. For example, an active duty marine in Aurora bought his third goat for his backyard from me even though goats are not allowed in Aurora backyards (he believed he was getting away with his deviant behavior because his neighbors were mostly immigrants from agrarian economies). Several beekeepers in Denver keep more hives than the two that are permitted under current zoning regulations. Some people in Denver even keep miniature pigs though they are not permitted on residential property in the city. These types of deviant activities would be difficult to capture in formal interviews or surveys so it was important to access these people and their food production operations by building trust over time as a fellow participant. Notes from my observations and informal interviews were kept in a field journal and analyzed using an Excel spreadsheet.

*Semi-structured interviews*

I also used semi-structured interviews to collect data. The questions I used to guide the interviews were similar to the survey questions that I used in the summer of 2013. This helped me define who UBF producers are, what their practices are, how they justify their
practices, and the meanings they give to their practices and products. I found the questions worked better in an interview format where I could press the interviewees to expand on their answers and I could observe communications that are absent in written words—i.e. pauses and emotion. Interviewees were selected to represent a variety of communities, practices, and motivations for backyard farming. Whenever possible these interviews were held in the backyards of participants in order to visually understand their practices and better compare their practices with other urban backyard farmers. These interviews were audio recorded and notes kept in a field journal.

I interviewed seven UBF production community leaders at length about food-producing practices in general. Leaders including the owner of Denver Urban Homesteaders, the founder of the Denver Bee Club, the president of Living Systems Institute, a suburban 4-H leader, the organizers of the Denver County Fair, and an individual who has been key in promoting urban farming and cottage food law reform and is on the Denver Mayor’s Sustainability Council. As urban agriculture community leaders they represent and can reflect on a variety of motivations for urban farming. During data collection and analysis, I have remained critical of these leaders’ visions for UBF production, since they are promoters of it. Interviews were recorded and the relevant portions transcribed.

**Discourse analysis**

Since UBF producers are operating in national and regional discursive contexts, I also analyzed visual and textual information that promotes or explains urban farming in general and backyard food production specifically. I compared my participant and non-participant observations against the popular UBF production discourse as it is presented in
newspapers, magazines, and websites. I compared the motivations for urban farming expressed in the larger regional and national discourses against the personal motivations expressed by my research subjects. My goal was to observe and understand how food production and consumption discourses affect and are affected by the everyday practices of UBF producers. In other words, I looked at how the subjectifying forces of larger conventional and alternative food discourses interact with assertions of authenticity and morality by UBF producers.

Excavating and understanding their motivations and practices is a complicated task involving a myriad of discourses operating at different scales. For this dissertation I examined the extent to which national and regional scale food and agriculture narratives promote growing one’s own food in urban backyards. I then listened to my research participants to see how they reproduced and personalized these narratives. The intent of this analysis is to understand to what degree UBF producers were superficially acting out a popular narrative—essentially consuming a narrative—and to what degree they have personalized these narratives or developed their own.

This dissertation uses structural and post-structural approaches to develop conceptual and theoretical frameworks to explain UBF producer’s narratives and practices. First, I use Marx’s critique of political economy to understand many of UBF producers’ concerns over conventional food production. This structural analysis understands UBF producers as determined by and reacting to various forms of alienation resulting from the capitalist mode of production. This analysis is useful for understanding which social structures make UBF producers feel anxious, alienated, and often apocalyptically fearful about conventional food provisioning. However, Marxist analysis does not explain why UBF
producers try to produce their own food to resolve the structural problems they perceive. Why, for instance, are they nostalgic for pre-WWII food production practices? Put another way, why are UBF producers looking backward and to individual actions for solutions instead of moving forward through Marx’s historical materialist model toward a communist mode of production? Discourse analysis allows me to augment Marx’s economistic model of the world to also look at ideologies, narratives, and signifying practices that guide individual and collective discourses and practices. This combined analysis allows for a richer understanding of what is motivating UBF producers and helps to explain the seemingly anachronistic agrarian, or back-to-the-land, visions they have for food provisioning and society in general.

Organization of the dissertation

Chapter 1 of this dissertation theorizes UBF production as a counter discourse that is concerned with how to be authentic or comport oneself morally in light of the hegemonic and alienating material and ideological relations of contemporary techno-urban-industrial society. In Chapter 2 I argue that UBF production is the New Agrarianism ethics of authenticity in practice by demonstrating that their discourses, in particular the values that underpin their narratives are highly congruent. In Chapter 3 I show how labor is used by UBF producers as a means for creating authentic selves or what they believe are subversively independent or self-sufficient selves. In the second half of Chapter 3 I examine how UBF producers use their food-producing labor to develop a reflexive relationship with the material world or what New Agrarians refer to as using nature as measure. In Chapter 4 I look at how using nature as measure for moral correctness draws products and production, including the production of nature, into questions of authenticity. Their
products represent production practices and utopian ideals, circulating both as symbols of authenticity and containers of non-economic meanings and purposes. In Chapter 5 I use the work of the previous four chapters to show that there is a complicated tension between authenticity and hegemony. Looking for what is inherently natural and authentic in historical narratives and culturally specific symbols risks delegitimizing other methods of food provisioning and authenticity. I caution that a point of concern for the UBF producing community is that they remain critically mindful of how they might be reproducing cultural hegemony while they work to ameliorate their concerns about techno-urban-industrial enframing through UBF production focal practices.
Interlude 1: Snapshot of an interview

It was July when I arrived in Northeast Denver at a research participant’s house. I had talked with her at a few chicken swaps, sold her a couple of chickens, and we had both competed in different events at the Denver County Fair two years in a row. The day had not gotten hot yet and there was plenty of shade for us to retreat to on her patio as the day approached noon. It was summer and her children were home on break from school, while I managed to leave my girls at home for this interview so I could better focus. My interviewee’s husband stopped to say hello before he went off to work. The backyard was clearly her endeavor, which she saw as part of her domestic responsibilities. I was there to get a tour of her backyard and to discuss strategies for fly mitigation around chicken coops. The flies were already getting bothersome as we toured the backyard and then sat down to talk more.

The backyard was typical of what I had seen in other food-producing backyards including my own. Everything in the yard had a purpose and a story that fed into a utopian narrative explaining the type of person she wanted to be, the kind of children she wanted to raise, and the type of society in which she wanted to live. She was proud that all of her chickens were heritage breeds, or the types of chickens found more commonly on small farms up until the advent of industrial chicken farming techniques after WWII. The carrots that her kids had let go to seed from the previous year were a point of pride. They demonstrated that her children were taking an interest in experimenting with growing their own food. This was clearly a goal of her food-producing practices. The berry bushes along the fence were another important point of pride because they provided a basic ingredient to the jellies and jams that she made.
Even the remaining bit of lawn adjacent to her patio, which was quite lush and well-tended, was full of meaning as well as consternation. As with many others in the UBF producer community, including myself, to her a lawn was something to be excused because it represented thoughtless conformity to a social ideal that is often implicated in wasted labor, water, and potentially food-producing land. But, at the same time, her lawn was important to her as a place where her children could play and summer cook-outs could take place. In this way she demonstrated how UBF producers have turned the seemingly innocuous backyard into a place for contemplation as well and production.

We never solved either of our fly problems that day or since. But, her neighbor was raised on a farm and didn’t seem to mind the flies and actually enjoyed the sometimes loud noises from the flock just a few feet from her window. By comparison my neighbor who was raised in Denver and not on a farm does not find anything about flies or food-producing practices in my backyard in general to be acceptable or desirable. In this way, what is proper or authentic about a person, landscape, food product or practice plays out not only in backyards but between neighbors and communities.
Interlude 2: Green ketchup and pizza

Two of the primary reasons we produce food in our yard are that we want our kids to know where their food comes from and because we want to teach them to eat foods that are not industrially processed. One day in late October 2015 we had about ten gallons of ripe tomatoes and five gallons of green tomatoes from our garden with which we needed to do something. We also had popping corn to shuck, potatoes to dig up, and amaranth to separate from its plant and dry.

The ripe tomatoes went through a food mill to make tomato sauce. My older girls love to take turns cranking the handle and smashing the tomatoes through the intake hole of the mill. After a few hours of milling, vacuum sealing, and storing tomatoes in the freezer I cleaned up. Then we moved on to the corn though their enthusiasm for food processing was definitely waning. We shucked while we watched TV.

Next up was the amaranth. Amaranth is an approximately six foot tall plant with edible leaves and plumes of small flowers producing a small pseudo grain. It took about two hours for my oldest daughter (who I think was only interested in helping because this was something she had never done before) and I to separate the grain from five plants. Either we were inefficient at this process or there is a better way to do it than the way I chose. I’m not sure my daughter will want to help again partly because the process was so tedious and partly because she has an irrational fear of the earwigs that hide by the dozens in the plumes.

Then on to the green tomatoes. In the previous days, I had already pickled a dozen quarts, so I decided to make green ketchup out of what was left. After stirring through
three hour long episodes of The Walking Dead I had reduced about two gallons of green tomatoes to about two cups of iridescent green ketchup—a year later zombies still make me think of green ketchup. I generally hope for more than two cups of a condiment for 3 hours of semi-active labor, but as with learning most new skills I consoled myself knowing that I had learned a new skill rather than opining over inefficiently spent labor power.

I started this day out with the goal of learning some new food preservation techniques along with my daughters and preserving some of the fruits of our summer labor for winter. While we did learn a few things, especially that our small scale techniques were very time consuming, we missed being outside on a warm and sunny fall day. About half way through the work I put my daughters in front of the TV so I could move through the tasks faster. By 5:30 that evening I was beyond tired and irritable having been over the hot (yet delicious smelling) stove or at least in the kitchen most of the day. The kitchen was a mess, the kids were very hungry, and I was not in the mood to start cooking something for dinner. Somewhat ironically, in spite of working all day to learn food preservation techniques to save some of our produce for winter, we ordered pizza that evening and had it delivered. We saved digging potatoes for another day.
Chapter 1: Alienation and authenticity: A conceptual and theoretical framework for UBF production

Agriculture is now a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same thing as blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs. (Heidegger 2008, 320)

Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is. (Camus 1956, 11)

Introduction

In this chapter I lay out a conceptual and theoretical framework that I will deploy in subsequent chapters to answer my research questions. At the center of this framework is a tension over what it means to be authentic in a modern techno-urban-industrial society. This tension and even the basic question of what it means to be authentic arises from both modern material and ideological structures that have unmoored or alienated moderns (people living in contemporary techno-urban-industrial society) from their means of production as well as any overt and universally recognized transcendent moral order. Without an externally imposed position in society, modern society members are imagined to be free to be authors of their own lives—i.e. conduct their lives according to some personally derived moral script. However, this freedom is illusory, causing moderns to feel further alienated rather than free to be authentic.

In the transition to industrial society laborers were set free from their Christian, feudal material and ideological relationships and social structures and entered into new capitalist relationships and social structures in which the worker was freed in a double sense: freed from Christian feudal hierarchy and free to sell their labor to the owners of the means of production in order to meet their daily needs (K. Marx and Engels 1978a). Marx
and Engels also offer a detailed structural materialist explanation of how this change alienates workers from their labor and from nature in the sense that nature is the raw material needed to labor. The result is that workers’ ability to direct their labor, their *species being*, became alienated from them as both their labor and the materials on which to perform that labor were transformed into commodities. These commodities are then used to create exchange value.

For Marx, ideologies are little more than a way to control the exploited classes by getting them to support the system that is exploiting them. However, Marx’s dismissal of ideology as merely a means of oppression has meant that his analysis of capitalism does not let us see the full depth of people’s struggles with the capitalist mode of production and techno-urban-industrial society more generally. Ideologies can also function as frameworks for resistance against the hegemony of the capitalist system. It is ideological discourses that naturalize capitalism to appear to be the only option for economic organization (Foucault 2008). For example, famously Margaret Thatcher said, “there is no alternative (to economic liberalism)” (Berlinski 2008) in a clear effort to stop people from thinking about alternatives to her neoliberal agenda. Exposing capitalism as one of many incomplete and competing discourses that govern how people function in the world has not resulted in its demise. Instead, other modes of production and discourses are constantly at work in the spaces where capitalism is silent or has not included or has adversely impacted peoples (Gibson-Graham 1996).

In addition to changing labor relations, capitalism unmoored people from social relationships that had previously directed their lives. In particular, capitalism’s techno-urban-industrial means of production directed society to view people and their
environment instrumentally (i.e. Marx, commodities; Heidegger, standing-reserve; Westman (1977), ecosystem services), rather than as multidimensional human beings or things with more than instrumental values. “Freed” to face the forces of capitalism alone, individuals are on the surface left with the choice of being (inauthentic) subjects of modernity or to try to search inside themselves for moral bearings. Exploited by the capitalist relations of production and valued as an instrument of production rather than as a full human being, people are alienated both ideologically and materially.

Uncritically accepting techno-urban-industrial modernity is understood by many thinkers to be inauthentic—where authenticity is understood loosely as being true to oneself (Ollman 1976). Rather than overcome the material and ideological alienation wrought by modernity, this quest for authenticity (Taylor 1995) further atomizes individuals thereby retrenching the alienation it is supposed to ameliorate. In spite of being social beings, humans are told that to be authentic they need to shun any externally imposed systems or structures that direct their behavior (Taylor 1995). Moral values, even though they imply a social relationship, had to come from within the authentic individual. This tension has left many moderns absurdly searching for both an authenticity of orientation and an authenticity of content within themselves (Taylor 1995). That is, they conflate an individual’s critical consciousness with the individual's capacity to produce original works.

Since WWII, modernity's alienating structures and ideologies have intensified their impacts on the environment. Moderns have become increasingly concerned about how their society metabolizes the environment through food provisioning, leading to intensified concerns about food safety, security, and sovereignty. In light of these perceived and often
real existential threats what constitutes the good and authentic life have increasingly been rooted in how societies and individuals relate to their environment. For these critics of modern techno-urban-industrial society the environment became an agent-transcendent order from which authentic or “natural” and therefore moral values should be derived. This can be seen in the higher value that is placed on nature perceived to be untouched by humans and on products that are viewed as natural because they are relatively less processed than other products. That nature should be used as the source of morality has also been expressed as the need to use “nature as measure” (Jackson 2011), or as Leopold coined it, “a land ethic” (Leopold 1990) to guide human behavior. But, the authenticity of the self-made or self-sufficient individual was not replaced. Rather, it was blended with this new social movement’s call to use nature as the moral measure for action. The moral person, then, is the person who is both self-made and finds moral guidance in nature. This creates an unresolved tension in which UBF producers find themselves as they try to look simultaneously inside themselves and to nature for authenticity and moral bearing.

Contemporary alternative food movements began developing in the 1970's in large part as a response to the rapid transformation of the U.S. economy after WWII to a society increasing shaped by techno-urban-industrial ordering. These movements tied concerns over personal health and environmental sustainability to the inauthenticity of modern techno-industrial food provisioning practices in two respects. First, they claimed that techno-industrial food cannot be authentic, for as commodities these foods are by definition valuable only for their monetary or exchange value or an abstract use value—for example an egg’s abstract use value may be as part of a recipe or as the next generation of chickens. Second, people who consume commodities lack authenticity because they are
metabolizing the world through a techno-urban-industrial medium that prevents them from directly engaging with the world. Because their metabolism of the world happens through this techno-urban-industrial medium, they have no real moral basis from which to make ethical decisions as they pertain to one’s place in the world. The goal of UBF production as part of the larger array of alternative food movements is to carve out a space in the larger techno-urban-industrial society in which they can produce their own food and thereby authentic selves, households, relationships, etc. The authenticity of the self-made person remains, but is in tension with the ethical imperative that moral people work with rather than against environmental systems or “nature.”

**Marxist conceptualizations of alienation**

Marx’s critique of political economy offers a structural materialist approach to understanding why moderns feel alienated. Here I look at how laborers and consumers are alienated from labor and each other when labor and its products are commodified.

**Labor**

According to Marx (1977) under the capitalist mode of production, society is functionally divided into a capitalist class that controls the means of production and a laboring class which must sell its labor to earn money to meet their social reproductive needs. Capitalists use their ownership of the means of production to exploit laborers, who are compelled to sell their labor to have access to the means of production. Capitalists pay laborers less than the actual value of their labor and keep this surplus value for upgrading or expanding their means of production or as profit. Labor is treated as a commodity and the work that laborers do is valued in terms of its exchange value, which is represented as a
monetary value. In other words, the laborer’s labor power is valued for its capacity to earn money for herself and her employer rather than for producing something specifically useful. Marx calls labor valued for its exchange value abstract labor and the labor that is put to some specifically useful ends concrete labor (K. Marx 1977).

The abstract value of labor is a problem, because the ability to work purposefully at creating something is, Marx and Engels argue, essential to the species being of humans (1964). This assertion posits that to be fully human a laborer must have control over what is being produced and that her labor is valued for the specific use value it produces rather than abstractly for its exchange value. Selling labor for a wage reduces the value of a human (as one who thoughtfully labors) to a monetary equivalent and strips them of their ability to direct their own labor force to produced use values. Exploited and alienated from their labor, which the capitalist mode of production values as a surplus value generating commodity, Marx predicts that this worker class will revolt and reestablish control over the means of production (K. Marx and Engels 1978b). With reestablished control over the means of production workers would no longer have to sell their labor to the capitalist class, because they would now control the means of production. They could then again become fulfilled humans by performing concrete labor and producing specific use values rather than performing abstract labor to produce exchange values for someone else.

I will demonstrate later through my data that UBF producers are not organizing as an exploited class bent on overthrowing capitalism. Instead they are of a relatively privileged subsection of the working class that does not need to produce food and does not necessarily envision a post-capitalist society, though most anticipate capitalist induced crises. Instead they retreat as households or individuals to their backyards and through
concrete labor produce food, but food that is infused with a myriad of ideological values. Marx’s theories do not anticipate these activities as he is concerned with the capitalist mode of production in a historical context and what will replace it.

A relatively small group of people moving toward self-sufficiency modeled on an anachronistic agrarian economy does not make sense in Marx’s theory in which societies move teleologically toward communism. Through Marx’s historical materialism, retreating to one’s yard to produce food only makes sense as a socially reproductive necessity or as a materially unnecessary bourgeois leisure activity. Either way, with the capitalist mode of production still in place, workers remain alienated from the means of production and the ability to control their own labor power beyond selling it to the capitalists. The alienation of the laborer from her labor also has implications for products and consumers. In the remaining chapters I will argue that UBF producers are in part reacting to the alienation that they experience from performing abstract labor outside of the home and in part preparing for future capitalist induced crises.

Products

Marx’s (K. Marx 1977) theory of labor value also helps explain how the laborer and their labor are hidden from the consumer. The consumer never really knows the authenticity of the products (where, how, and by whom the products are produced) they are purchasing. This motivates some people to produce food for themselves. As a worker labors abstractly at producing commodities, her labor becomes congealed in the commodities she produces. Since she sold her labor to the capitalist, she does not own her labor or the product she produced. When these commodities are purchased, the laborer’s labor is congealed in the product, but there is no relationship between the laborer and the
consumer of the product beyond exchange and use value. Interpersonal social relations do not survive the capitalist mode of production. Instead any social connections that might have existed in previous modes of production are severed leaving producers and consumers connected primarily through exchange values (K. Marx and Engels 1978a).

To explain why consumers have little control over production under the capitalist mode of production, Marx offers us the concept of a sphere of production and a sphere of consumption (K. Marx 1977). They are distinct spheres in which the sphere of production is hidden from consumers and determines what happens in the sphere of consumption. The sphere of production is intentionally obscured by the capitalists so that laborers (and the environment) can be exploited without public scrutiny. Capitalists are constantly trying to keep the sphere of production under their control. Evidence of this is not hard to find. Several agricultural states in the U.S. have put forth benignly named “right-to-farm” laws (Rumley 2015). These laws try to prevent anyone from covertly documenting the activities of a production or processing facility. The validity of these laws is still being contested in the U.S. court system, but demonstrates the capitalist desire to have absolute control over what, including information, is allowed to move out of the sphere of production and into the sphere of consumption.

The (in)authenticity of labels: an ethical diversion

One way that this alienation has been problematically addressed is through labeling schemes (e.g. fair-trade, organics), which attempt to connect consumers to products’ origins. The labels circulate alongside the products with the intent of adding material origins, and other qualities back to the commodity that the capitalist mode of production severed by design. Many of the critics (Buck, Getz, and Guthman 1997; Guthman 2004;
Guthman 2007; Mutersbaugh 2002) of labeling schemes argue that labels do nothing to reform the capitalist system and the alienation it causes. Products are still treated as commodities and consumers have to rely on third parties or the producers themselves for the information contained in the label. The label functions as a way for capitalists to charge a premium for commodities and generate more surplus value. For the consumers it reduces values like health, fair treatment of laborers, environmental sustainability, and morality to something that is purchased by those who can afford it. In other words, the values people express through their consumption choices come after the products have already been reduced to their exchange value. Labels that claim to represent non-economic values are themselves treated as commodities (Mutersbaugh 2002) and subsequently trucked for their exchange value. Any values that consumers believe to be expressed through consumption choices have no fundamental impact on the capitalist mode of production from a Marxist perspective.

These labeling schemes that purport to offer transparency and value-laden choices can actually have negative social impacts. They can become another way to exploit agricultural producers for profit (Mutersbaugh 2002; Mutersbaugh 2005; Lyon, Bezaury, and Mutersbaugh 2010; Allen and Kovach 2000; Baird and Quastel 2011). They also create a two-tiered system of consumers in which those with wealth and information can consume ethically, while others are left to consume from an unreformed conventional food system. Friedman (2005) calls these groups of consumers the Whole Foods class and the Walmart class. The conclusion is that ethical consumption offers new means to exploit labor, make the capitalist mode of production appear ethically concerned when it inherently is not, and it exacerbates the stratification of social classes and gender inequality
Thus, consumption choices, even when intended to be ethical, do nothing to change the underlying capitalist relations that caused the alienation to begin with and can create new and exacerbate existing modes of exploitation.

UBF producers' social anxieties and utopian visions challenge the notion that commodities or the labor that produces them can ever be rejoined or made authentic by labels. My research participants clearly feel that there is more to having their anxieties addressed and visions realized than changing their purchasing patterns. They are instead deciding at least in part to produce for themselves. Like Guthman (2004) who says she buys organically labeled foods even as she is critical of organics, my research participants buy foods that are labeled organic, local, or non-GMO just as they continue to express their dissatisfaction with this option through their UBF producer discourses and practices.

**Capitalism, technology, urban-industrial ordering and the metabolic rift**

Marx argued that the capitalist mode of production was necessary for industrializing and innovating (K. Marx and Engels 1978c), but that eventually the relations of production would change so that laborers would again control the industrial means of production ushering in a new mode of production, communism. With the rise of the new social movements in the 1970’s, concerns began to turn from labor-capital relations to the impacts techno-urban-industrially organized society was having on the environment. With this turn, the traditional Marxist labor versus capitalist tensions morphed into concerns about the impacts of the means of production on health and environmental sustainability.

Like O’Connor (1988) I make a distinction in my analysis between capitalism as the mode of production and the various means of production—I am mostly concerned here with technology, urbanization, and industrialization. This is valuable because most of my
research participants implicitly or explicitly make this distinction. That is, their concerns about techno-industrial food production would not go away if the means of production were controlled communally rather than privately. For example, industrial communism as Marx envisioned it or as it was implemented in the Soviet Union or China would not resolve their concerns (Berry 1996). In other words, the contemporary means of production, regardless of the mode of production, are undermining the environmental foundations of society.

My observations back this up. No one I talked with was concerned about or even eluded to free markets or the capitalist mode of production as the motivation for producing food in their backyard. Instead they were more likely to be concerned with the means of production—the use of pesticides, GMOs, and the miles the food traveled. As a result, what I observed was a push by many UBF producers to work within the capitalist system even while they used unconventional production methods. Exemplary of this are those associated with Feed Denver, whose expressed mission is to empower people in the existing local formal economy with the ability to make a living or supplement their income selling backyard produce. Similarly, most UBF producers I spoke with were excited about Colorado’s cottage food laws, which make it easier to sell some produce without expensive health department inspections. Consistently the concern for UBF producers is not with capitalism as a mode of production but as a means of production.

Marxists have defined and discussed the unsustainable impacts of the means of production on the environment as a metabolic rift (Foster 1999; Harvey 1996; Smith 2008; Swyngedouw 2006) also referred to as the second contradiction of capitalism (O’Connor 1988). Foster coined the term metabolic rift working from Marx’s acknowledgement of an
“irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism” (2000). In light of the post-WWII development, wide-spread use, and the negative impacts of technologies such as synthetic pesticides (Carson 2002; Bookchin 1974) and nuclear power (Perrow 1999), industry and technology were recast as dangerous to the longevity of the planet and humans as a species regardless of the mode of production.

It is during this period that popular and philosophical agrarianism in the U.S. (discussed in detail in Chapter 2) took on a health and environmental sustainability tone coinciding with and ultimately framing burgeoning concerns about freshness, food origins, healthiness of food, and environmentally sustainable production practices (Waters 2001; Petrini 2004; Pollan 2007). I look at UBF producers in this context and find that for them the relations of production are often eclipsed by their concerns with the metabolic rift caused by the means of production with its potentially life threatening technologies and long, opaque commodity chains that represent a loss of control for UBF producers and encourage their feelings of alienation and apocalyptic fears.

I found not knowing or not trusting from where their food comes to be a primary motivator for UBF producers’ discourses and practices. They feel existentially antagonized by a techno-industrial food system that they find to be too risky. They feel that this industrial food system offers them at best food that is tainted with preservatives, food coloring, residual pesticides, and genetic tampering. At its worst it is poison both in its over processing and the environmental impacts that industrial farming has. My research participants generally felt that they did not have enough information about, control over, or trust in contemporary industrial food systems and therefore found the ideal of self-
sufficiency to at least draw attention to these feelings of alienation, and many felt UBF producer practices and discourses helped ameliorate their concerns to some degree.

_Ideological approaches to modernity and alienation_

Modern material and ideological structures create an instrumentalist ontology in which people and their environment are valued abstractly as a means to some other ends rather than as an ends in and of themselves (Taylor 1995). As atomized instruments of modern society, individuals are ideologically, in addition to structurally, prevented from referring to social relations and their environment as authentic sources of moral guidance. Modernity leaves individuals to search inside themselves or struggle alone in the world searching for authenticity, thus reinforcing modernity’s atomizing or alienating tendencies (Taylor 1995). However, decisions about what is valuable or right and wrong cannot exist in a vacuum and individuals must exist in reference to the external world (Camus 1989; Golomb 1995).

While many of the anxieties that motivate UBF producers can be explained by Marx’s material analysis of capitalism, I turn to discourse analysis for an ideological and thus deeper understanding of what motivates UBF producer practices. I take the position that to understand how a set of material relations becomes normalized we must first understand the ideology that makes those material relations appear moral or inevitable. Marx, for instance, would dismiss my research subjects’ behaviors as bourgeois distractions from the material relations of society. With a social constructionist approach, I can entertain the possibility that individual UBF producers’ fetishizing of non-economic meanings and values as authentic can be subversive rather than just a distraction from revolutionary progress. Stopping at Marx would leave a lacuna in my analysis as UBF
producers understand their individual or familial—rather than class—practices and meaning as ways to (re)construct relationships and disseminate values that modern society has dissolved, obscured, or strained through the techno-urban-industrial ordering of society.

Discourse analysis gives me both a conceptual framework through which to approach UBF production activities from the perspective that knowledge comes to people not just though language, but also through symbols, ideologies and narratives that are collectively referred to as a discourse (Foucault 1972). Symbols, like a backyard egg or heirloom tomatoes, are the material objects that allow us to continually create and circulate meaning in the world. Throughout the rest of this dissertation I will be looking at products as symbols of often non-economic values that circulate as reference points and containers of authentic value for UBF production discourses and practices.

Discourses are also made up of ideologies such as the neoliberal belief that the state should have a limited role in people’s lives and the economy (Foucault 2008) or the belief that an agrarian society is preferable to a techno-urban-industrial society. These ideologies underpin what is considered by practitioners to be authentic values. Symbols and ideologies are then organized and communicated through a narrative or story that people can collectively refer to as the way the world is or should be. Analyzing my interview data as discourse allows me to connect these personal narratives to each other and to the agrarian narratives in popular culture and New Agrarian philosophy.

Foucauldian discourse analysis

Foucault understands contemporary people as the overdetermined subjects of institutional discourses rather than having some internal essence (Foucault 1990a;
Foucault 1988; Foucault 2001). He argues that knowledge and power are so intertwined that they cannot be separated, referring to them as power-knowledge (Rabinow 1984; Foucault 1990b). Historically Foucauldian power-knowledge came into existence once the self was set free. This freedom is a necessary condition for multiple, often contradictory, institutional discourses (Foucault described them as existing in a discursive field) to make truth claims and exert power over and through individuals. The self is the confluence of these discourses from which the individual has limited freedom to diverge, especially in this form of power's contemporary disciplinary manifestation (Pickett 1996; Foucault 1995). In a discursive field some discourses outcompete other discourses by becoming the accepted norm. When a person tries to offer up or adhere to an alternative discourse they are deemed a deviant and disciplined by institutions to return to what is considered normal behavior (Rabinow 1984; Foucault 1990b; Foucault 1995). Foucault's theory of the self has been criticized for not leaving room for individual agency, but Foucault does argue that individuals have some agency. He argues that at the most basic level a person can develop a critical awareness of the institutional discourses that frame who she is, even if she can never fully escape the influence of those discourses (Pickett 1996).

I found a great example of this in working with my students. Capitalist discourses are so entrenched in my students that semester after semester one of the most difficult things to reveal to them is that market based solutions are not always the only solutions, let alone the best solutions, to socio-environmental puzzles. Capitalist ideologies and narratives so dominate the institutional discourses that shape who my students are, that my students cannot see capitalism as one of many possibilities. They accept its particular institutional truths as the truth. To them markets are simply the way the social-natural
world is or should be organized. This is not surprising as capitalist discourses are disseminated by a myriad of institutions through signifying practices that make capitalism appear inevitable and foreclose on my students’ ability to recognize alternative comportments toward the world.

From Foucault’s perspective the reason that it is so important for my students to learn to be critical of institutional discourses and how they deploy power, is because for Foucault being able to critique or analyze discourses opens up the possibility for political action (Pickett 1996). However, these types of actions are in constant tension with capitalist discourses. Neither I nor my students can escape the subtle and persistent power of these capitalist discourses. When we return to normal behaviors like provisioning food, shelter, clothing, or paying for our education, we are forced to work within institutional frameworks that discipline us to be capitalist subjects trading labor for money in order to meet our social reproductive needs.

Through a Foucauldian analysis, the freedom that one might have to be a self-made person in the Nietzschean sense is not possible. Foucault’s analysis shows that people do not have an essential self, therefore it is absurd to try to look to an essential self for authenticity. But, just because one is overdetermined does not mean that she is completely constrained in her ability to act subversively. Even if these deviant acts are temporary and do not lead to change they are important at the very least because they critique institutional discourses by showing where they come from and how they utilize power (Nealon 1984).

UBF producer discourses and practices, like my students and I in the example above, cannot exist beyond the power and influence of the scores of institutional discourses that
overdetermine our lives. Keeping a few chickens has not, for instance, provided my family much materially beyond $2 eggs, chores, and conflicts with our downwind neighbor. My wife and I still have to work at wage-labor to buy groceries among other things and are still compelled to teach our kids how to be frugal and conscientious consumers. However, keeping chickens for eggs etc. does allow us to bring dominant institutional discourses into critical focus, which opens space of political action.

Co-production of nature

While Foucault’s focus is primarily to understand the self as an overdetermined subject of institutional discourses, other social constructionists have looked at the material world (nature) as similarly produced. These theorists (e.g. Castree and Braun 1998; Cronon 1996; Demeritt 2002) expose epistemologies of nature as historically and culturally variable, but also argue that nature and society are implicated in each other’s creation—i.e. nature and society are coproduced (e.g. Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw, 2006; Loftus 2012; Smith 2008). Once epistemologies of nature are understood as institutional discourses, they can be deconstructed to expose how they came about, to whose advantage and disadvantage, and what other knowledges or alternative discourses may have been obscured or suppressed. Thus what otherwise appears to most people as natural in the sense of being timeless and void of social influence, can be revealed as historically and culturally situated and evolving as society and the material world evolve. For instance, discourse analysis allows me to ask why heirloom varieties of plants and food-producing animals are perceived by my research participants as more natural than industrially produced food. It also allows me to ask why “natural” food is considered to be more authentic or real than industrially produced food. And then, I can ask why natural,
authentic, and real have increasingly become key concepts for considering moral choices. Identifying the power and relationships between normalized and subversive or critical discourses is one of the primary analytical approaches of this dissertation.

With this approach I can identify spaces for individual and collective subversive behavior. In these spaces it is possible to renegotiate what nature and by proxy authenticity are, either through subversive discourses or practices. But, many counter discourses and subversive behaviors that resist techno-urban-industrial social ordering using nature as a moral reference, including UBF producers, fail to acknowledge nature and society as coproduced. As a coproduction, neither society nor nature are independent of one another nor static well-springs of morality. Nature and society constantly shape each other. Looking for essential or inherently moral qualities in the material world means that individuals and societies are constantly at risk of falsely seeing the material world as static, when in actuality it is intertwined with their culture’s unique vision of nature. Imagining that nature is acultural and therefore apolitical does not make it acultural or apolitical. Instead what tends to happen is a hegemonic culture puts forth its cultural and political vision of nature and then normalizes or naturalizes that vision so that the culture and politics that formed that discourse are concealed. This encourages people to point to culturally specific morals and values as essential and inflexible because they are believed to have emanated from beyond the pale of cultural history and norms.

Cronon (1996) analyzes the concept of wilderness to argue that with wilderness and by proxy nature uncritically imagined as ‘out there,’ untouched by human activities, the world becomes divided into three places—work, home, and wilderness or nature. Work is equated with wage-labor activities, the home is the site of social reproductive labor,
nature as wilderness is a site of recreation and spiritual renewal. Cronon and others (Cronon 1996b) have detailed how the Western understanding of nature is just one of many ways of comporting ourselves in the world, and that adherence to them has material implications for the further co-production of nature and society.

Cronon (1996) argues that the contemporary Western notion of wilderness as the purest form of nature enables people to denigrate or do violence to the people that live in places designated as wilderness or work directly with nature such as foresters (White 1996), petroleum extractors, and farming operations that use contemporary technology and industrial practices. The contemporary Western conceptualization of wilderness is that it is untouched by humans, so humans have set about depopulating and fencing off areas to create wilderness. Work is reduced to something that happens away from nature. This is alienating because work and human existence in general require that people metabolize nature (Smith 2008; Foster 2000; Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 2006). Therefore, Cronon and others (Cronon 1996) have argued that when nature is valued and respected as “out there”, we stop seeing it at home. This allows us to do things like spray pesticides around our homes, while we absurdly remain concerned with protecting wilderness areas from the same activities from which we are failing to protect ourselves, children, and society in general (Robbins 2007).

Cronon’s analysis does more than offer an example of how a social constructionist conceptual framework can be deployed to expose the constructedness of nature. He also offers us a way of conceptualizing how modern social discourses and the behaviors they encourage alienate people from the natural world. Taking the modern concept of wilderness to its logical moral and ethical conclusion, Cronon (1996) shows that the only
way to preserve wilderness, as it is conceptualized today, is for people to kill themselves. In light of this absurd conclusion, both Cronon and Robbins argue that in order to create a more socially just and environmentally sustainable society, society and nature need to be reconceptualized as mutually constitutive. The Western concept of wilderness alienates society both materially and discursively from that upon which it is materially dependent.

I will show in the following chapters how UBF producers challenge this separation of nature and society through their practices and discourses when they turn their urban backyards into food-producing spaces and grow their own food. UBF producers are intentionally and unintentionally using food production in their urban backyards to try to reconcile the antagonistic dynamic that contemporary techno-urban-industrial means of production have created between humans and their environment. This reconciliation reaches specifically toward the material world and how people metabolize it for a moral anchor point and ethical framework through which to conduct oneself. In other words, UBF producers are promoting a counterhegemonic ethical notion of authenticity as derived not from one’s inner nature, but from a more intimate and mindful metabolism of their environment.

I use the social construction of nature approach to conceptualize how UBF producers try to challenge institutional truths through their practices and discourses, but also how UBF producers can problematically “naturalize” their particular version of truth as the truth, because it is rooted in nature as distinct from society. They challenge conventional truths that maintain modern techno-urban-industrial social ordering such as that food production takes place in rural space, that lawns should be ornamental rather than food-producing spaces, or that food-producing animals do not belong in urban
backyards. It is these institutional norms that UBF producers are challenging through their discourses and practices. But in the process of seeking authenticity of their selves in relation to nature, they do not see that their views are steeped in cultural traditions, most notably holding up the white, male yeoman farmer of the 18th century as an authentic ideal for how people ought to engage with the world.

**Searching for authenticity**

Concern for authenticity arose in response to the alienating material and ideological effects of modernity that I have been discussing. Authenticity is usually defined in the negative, or rather in reference to what it is not. This is why authenticity tends to be the domain and focus of movements that seek to push back against the hegemonic status quo—i.e. identifying what it means to be an authentic Native American, woman, hipster, punk rocker, farmer, etc. Furthermore, to tell someone how to be authentic undermines the ethic of authenticity as it is usually understood in societies dominated by post-Enlightenment rationality—to be authentic is to be “true to yourself” (Taylor 1995; Golomb 1995). An authentic person therefore would not be an individual who is unconsciously the subject of modern techno-urban-industrial society, nor by extension is this type of authenticity found in the mass produced commodities of modern consumer culture. What authenticity is, how it can be accessed, and why one should (or not) desire it are questions that continue to be explored and debated in social theory, popular cultural, and through individual living.

In this section I want to begin to work out, in general terms, how UBF producers, and by proxy how many aspects of the alternative food movement, deploy authenticity to evaluate and produce not only themselves, but the world in which they live. They define authenticity not only in isolated reference to some internal essence, but also use a
particular, anti-modern, ethical framework that problematically tries to use “nature as measure” for creating authentic moral values and behaviors. This reliance on or reference to nature has two important consequences. By giving people an external or transcendent reference for determining authenticity, it rehabilitates the concept of authenticity of self from the absurd dead end that mid-twentieth century existentialism drove it. Second, bringing the material world into the authenticity calculus permits and encourages the evaluation of things as authentic.

*Three concepts of authenticity*

In this section I look at three prominent definitions of authenticity that either are deployed by UBF producers or are useful in conceptualizing their discourses and potential to be subversive.

*Marx*

For Marx (Ollman 1976; K. Marx and Engels 1978c) alienation is overcome by becoming critically aware of one’s class position. For Marx, ideologies are used by ruling elites to justify why there is material inequality and to get those being exploited to support the system that is exploiting them. Buying into the ruling elites’ ideologies leads to what Marx calls false consciousness or what I am calling inauthenticity. To be authentic one needs to develop a class consciousness—that is a consciousness that understands the historical and political economic context for one’s social and material situation as part of a political economic class. To be authentic one has to cut through these ideologies and critically examine the material relations of the classes. Developing this class consciousness,
for Marx, is key to moving society teleologically from the capitalist mode of production to the communist (K. Marx and Engels 1978c).

This definition of authenticity, or self-realization, is useful in explaining some of the behaviors and discourses of UBF food producers as it “does not entail being at one with an unchanging human nature, but is about the realization of agent-immanent and agent-transcendent aspects through non-alienated labor and social interaction” (Varga 2011). However, while Marx’s version of authenticity acknowledges that the self is not essential and authenticity must be agent-transcendent, it forecloses on the possibility of individuals or groups smaller than classes to generate authentic subversive ideologies or alternative discourses.

Existentialism (and Heidegger)

Already in the mid-18th century Kierkegaard (Westphal 2010; Golomb 1995) was concerned with what he calls the massification of society through which people are increasingly guided by inauthentic secular influences like advertising and consumer culture. More specifically, he believed that the massification of society was undermining the moral ontology offered by Christianity. He argued, therefore, that authenticity of self must come from having a direct, personal, and internal struggle with God. The referent point for this struggle was not the material world or Christian doctrine, but rather the moral virtues found through the process of contemplating God personally and directly. This concern and understanding of authenticity is threaded through the lineage of existential philosophers into the twentieth century. Nietzsche (Nietzsche 1956; Golomb 1995) built on Kierkegaard’s ideas of authenticity, but argued that looking to religion or any other reference point outside of oneself for authenticity actually led to inauthenticity. For
Nietzsche God was dead in the sense that religion’s control over industrializing society’s moral comportment was lost or slipping away. In the vacuum he argued that the individual had to rise above society and make up her own moral system based on what she found inside herself (Nietzsche 1961; Nietzsche 1974).

Camus (1989) takes this to its absurd conclusion demonstrating that the purely self-referent person runs the risk of being condemned by society as a pariah. With the absurdist conclusion of a completely self-referential moral framework, existentialism’s essentialist ethics of authenticity becomes unhelpful in explaining UBF producers on its own. However, this absurd tension of being an overdetermined social being looking for an isolated and essential self continues to underpin questions of authenticity in contemporary society including UBF producers. This is something that UBF producers try to temper through their creation of a common ethical imperative that holds “nature as measure.”

Heidegger, through his lifelong exploration of what Being means also wrestled with authenticity in a way that is reflective of authenticity as it is understood by UBF producers. He saw modern technologies and urbanization turning the authentic individual into the inauthentic One (Heidegger 1996), or idealized subject of society. The authentic self and world are concealed from the One. The One can be most readily found in urban spaces where the individual has a more difficult time avoiding the influences of the They—the conforming masses. The One experiences the world enframed and distorted by technology such that the world appears as what he calls standing-reserve or instrumental material rather than for what it really is. That is, we can only realize something for what it really (ontologically) is by fully engaging with it personally, in situ or in its “natural” place and time, before it is experienced as standing-reserve. For Heidegger, the authentic individual
works in the world with minimal modern technology to obscure the individual’s relations with the world as it is (Heidegger 2008).

For Heidegger the authentic individual is exemplified by a peasant farmer or a craftsman who works more intimately or directly with the world and thereby realizes its essence and her own through these interactions. To be authentic one must hold onto feelings of anxiety and boredom, for it is in those moments that one is shaken loose from the influences of the They and exposed to one’s essence or authentic self—which he calls Dasein (Heidegger 1996). To achieve authenticity, Heidegger argued for a return to an agrarian society and a circumspect adoption of modern technologies (Heidegger 2008). These themes and ideas about authenticity in the face of modernity also underpin the thinking of my research subjects who similarly subscribe to an agrarian centered ethical framework that they believe allows them to be more authentic by permitting them to engage with the world more authentically.

*Foucault*

For Foucault the self has no essence to be realized (Rabinow 1984; Foucault 1990b). The first step to being authentic is realizing that one is overdetermined by a multitude of institutional discourses that discipline individuals to align their actions and beliefs to the ideologies held by those discourses (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988). Authenticity for Foucault is a critical self-awareness of how institutional discourses overdetermine one’s own self. In other words, the authentic self cannot be accessed by looking to one’s essential self. Rather, authenticity has to be realized within and in reference to institutional power structures (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988; Foucault 1982; Foucault 1989).
Morality and a transcendent ethics of authenticity

Contemporary Western society is founded on a “web of mutually reinforcing ideological beliefs and social arrangements” (Taylor 1995) which make claims about what is right and proper while at the same time dismissing morality and ethics as relative concepts that do not hold truth. The effect is to close off discussions of ethics and morality as inappropriate, while simultaneously promoting moral claims that value individualism. Taylor (Taylor 1995) offers a path for rehabilitating an ethics of authenticity by offering a more nuanced and transcendent conceptualization of authenticity. For Taylor, modernity is problematic because it encourages individualism and instrumental reason, which result in feelings of political powerlessness. Individualism is both the notion that the individual is significant in her own right and that each individual has the potential to express this unique or authentic self through the creation of original content. To understand this, imagine that one might consider The Beatles to be a more authentic band than The Monkey’s, because, unlike The Monkeys, The Beatles wrote their own music and played their own instruments. His understanding of the role of instrumental reason in modern society is not substantially different from those of the other theorists discussed above, where people and their material surroundings are understood as reduced to inauthentic consuming masses, commodified labor, standing reserve or many other terms that conceptualize the inauthentic self in modern society against which the authentic self must struggle.

Taylor builds from previous theories of authenticity, some of which I mention above, but makes an important distinction. He distinguishes between the authenticity of orientation and content. “Authenticity is clearly self-referential: this has to be my
orientation. But this doesn’t mean that on another level the content must be self-referential: that my goals must express or fulfill my desires or aspirations, as against something that stands beyond these” (Taylor 1995, 82). By making this distinction, his theory of authenticity recognizes that one can be authentic or critical and self-aware in their comportment, but does not have to retreat completely from the world to find their authentic self and that the content of authenticity does not have to be in opposition to modernity. His concept aims to open a space through which we can engage with the techno-industrial-urban socio-natural world that is understood as inauthentic without losing one’s potential to be authentic. As we see with the previously discussed theories of authenticity, the authentic self arises from self-awareness and mindful intent.

This tension between content and orientation is not just important in rehabilitating the ethic of authenticity. It is also useful in interpreting the authenticity in which UBF producers immerse themselves. For instance, if authenticity is defined as the antithesis of modern techno-industrial-urban social ordering, then one could logically conclude that to be authentic would require that one drop out of society and become a self-sufficient hermit or homesteading pioneer living “off the grid.” This type of self-sufficiency led authenticity does exist in the ideologies and narratives of UBF producers, but it is tempered by an external referent—a referent that is used to legitimize understandings of what is proper or authentic comportment. For UBF producers this referent is usually nature.

Instrumental reason works with individuality to atomize people and encourage conflict between people and their environment. For analytical purposes Taylor divides people into those who have faith in modern technology to solve social problems and those who look on the coming of technological civilization as a kind of unmitigated decline. We have lost the contact with the earth and its rhythms that our
ancestors had. We have lost contact with ourselves, and our own natural being, and are driven by an imperative of domination that condemns us to ceaseless battle against nature both within and around us. (Taylor 1995, 94)

My research participants generally fall into this latter category and are largely reflective of those distrusting of modern technology. Taylor takes issue with both of these extreme positions.

The above definition of those opposed to modern society is noteworthy because of how well it defines the UBF producers’ moral and ethical narratives. First, authenticity is defined in contradistinction to modernity and the alienating effects of its instrumental comportment. In other words, these critics of modern technology exist as a countercultural movement with its own counter discourse. Second, my research subjects also understand modern techno-urban-industrial social ordering as in conflict with nature and that this conflict existentially threatens them and all life on Earth. Third, authenticity in this counter discourse looks to nature not just for material resources, but also as a reference for moral and ethical bearing. What is important about this overlap is that UBF producers are linked to larger countercultural discourses that try to map out how to ameliorate what they see as the ethical and moral shortcomings of modern techno-industrial-urban society’s “massification” and instrumental reason. Their particular version of authentic reimagines the authentic individual as one who is self-made but with respect to natural relationships and processes.

Taylor finds that “a lot, both institutionally and ideologically, is going for atomism and instrumentalism” (103), but that they can only thrive in a moral milieu that permits and cultivates them. In other words, the knockers and the boosters of authenticity and technology are missing a more important point—that modernity makes ethical and moral
claims by promoting individualism and instrumental reason which enable the exploitation of people and their environment. Bringing morality and ethics into mindful discussion gives individuals access to many points of resistance through which they challenge the hegemonic atomist/instrumentalist institutional discourses that frames their lives. In subsequent chapters, I will show that it is into this question of what an ethics of authenticity looks like that UBF producers, not without problems, insert themselves as they refer to nature for an authentic moral ontology.

*The ethics of using nature as measure, or a moral ontology of nature*

UBF producers do not just subscribe to an ethics of authenticity based on individual orientation. They blend it with an ecological awareness that looks to nature for guidance to determine proper behavior and right from wrong. This marriage of the authenticity of self and nature is fraught with often contradictory tensions that I will show throughout this project do not get resolved, but are nevertheless productive. In this particular tension the individual looks inside herself for ethical and moral guidance, while looking to ecological systems for correct behavior. On the one extreme, as I discussed above, the individual is pointed in the direction of absolute relativism, while at the other extreme the individual is pointed in an ecocentric direction where the individual is secondary to ecological concerns. In the next chapter I will show these two ethical and moral ontologies, anthropocentric and ecocentric, resolve into a transcendental agrarian ideal of the small family farm.

This second extreme opens up another moral and ethical dilemma about authenticity. The notion that the individual’s authenticity should be found either in one’s natural self or nature as distinct from society is problematic for three reasons that I take up most directly in Chapter 5. First, Foucault demonstrated that there is no internal human
nature or essence distinct from social influence. Second, the non-social world—i.e. nature as out there and untouched by humans—has not existed beyond social influence during modern times. Third, the concept of nature is shot through with culture and therefore ethics systems based on nature are inherently political even though many believe them to be apolitical. Imagining nature as beyond politics permits unchecked acts of violence against selves, others, and the environment (Cronon 1996b; Bookchin 1987; Zimmerman 2008).

This apolitical belief in nature has several further implications. Other sources of authenticity are judged to be inauthentic. Whether one is a white male or a black female, a middle class European or a Central American refugee the ontological orientation is supposed to be the same. This hides different inherited and lived social histories and sources of structural inequality and likely reinforces them (e.g. Kosek 2006; Schroeder 1997; White 1996). I will show in Chapter 2 and 5 how finding authenticity in reference to nature is problematic when that vision of nature and proper socio-natural interactions is derived from specific cultural and historical ideals for authentic behavior.

Using nature as a reference for ethics and morals without first having a discussion of what nature is, risks normalizing and promoting hegemonic and exploitive concepts of nature. I will show later through my data how, when the social and hence political aspects of nature are not acknowledged, a moral ontology of nature can move uncritically from being a personal reference point for determining right from wrong to a rigid moralistic framework that ignores other people’s understandings of nature and authenticity or evaluates them as inauthentic.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have brought together various concepts and theories to develop a framework through which to understand UBF production as part of a long, unresolved struggle with the alienating effects of modernity and what it subsequently means to be authentic. UBF producers are directly challenging what they perceive as the inauthenticity of food produced through and people working in a techno-urban-industrial social ordering. An existential ethics of authenticity which problematically encourages people to look to their inner nature for moral direction has merged with a moral ontology of (external) nature creating additional and unresolved tensions around the objective of realizing one’s authentic self. I will show in Chapter 4 how this internal, yet transcendent ethical framework extends questions of authenticity out to things and relationships around these things as symbols of authenticity.

This tension between looking for authenticity in one’s internal nature and external nature manifests in some contradictory narratives and behaviors such as “urban homesteading.” The idea that external nature has an essence from which to draw a universal moral framework is just as problematic as relying on some internal essence. For if we agree that individuals are overdetermined subjects of institutional discourses, there is no internal, non-transcendent essence to access. Similarly, if nature is not essential then it also cannot provide a transcendent essence to which to refer. Nature is an institutional discourse that is overdetermined by the decisions of people within a society who conceptualize it. Looking to nature as a universal reference betrays the goal of rooting a moral ontology of authenticity in something essential.
Chapter 2: Values: UBF producers as New Agrarianism’s ethics of authenticity in practice

The pastoral ideal has been incorporated in a powerful metaphor of contradiction—a way of ordering meaning and value that clarifies our situation today. (L. Marx 2000, 4)

Their heightened sensitivity to the onset of the new industrial power can only be explained by the hold upon their minds of the pastoral ideal, not as conceived by Virgil, but as it had been adapted, since the age of discovery, to New World circumstances. (L. Marx 2000, 33)

Introduction

Retreating to rural, agricultural living to counteract the perceived immorality and inauthenticity of contemporary urban life is not new. Tuan (1990) observed that back-to-the-land movements have existed at least since ancient Rome, where citizens left urban life for what they perceived of as a morally superior agrarian life. More recently, as I showed in the previous chapter, alienation caused by modern urban-industrial alienation has fueled renewed thinking about the morality and authenticity of an agrarian lifestyle. It is against this backdrop of concerns about modern techno-urban-industrial social ordering that a particular type of back-to-the-land thinking, Jeffersonian agrarianism, came into being as a philosophy with a land centered ethics.

At about the time of the founding of the U.S., Jefferson argued that an agrarian economy based on an archetypal independent family farmer would result in a more democratic society than an urban industrial economy (Jefferson 2006). Even though the U.S. has become 80% urban (United States Census Bureau 2010) with only 1.4% of the population engaged in food production activities (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015), the idea that independent farmers and rural living represent authentic American values has persisted as both an adaptable philosophy and as a popular discourse. In this chapter I
make the case that UBF producers can be understood as part of a larger countercultural movement that deploys agrarian discourses and practices to make morality and authenticity claims about individuals, things, and social relationships.

In this chapter I show how agrarianism has changed over time to represent the particular concerns, in particular feelings of alienation, experienced by elements of American society at different times. But, over time the basic claim that productively engaging with the land leads to more moral and authentic selves remains a common theme for agrarianism in the U.S. For over 200 years agrarianism in the U.S. has argued that urban industrial spaces are corrupting and that they hollow out cultures by treating people and the land as commodity inputs (Twelve Southerners 1977), and most recently that only through a land ethic (Leopold 1990) that is based on ecocentrically valuing or working land can society truly become sustainable. I argue based on my observations that UBF producers are a modern manifestation of this philosophy. Though only two of my research participants said they familiar with Wendell Berry or Aldo Leopold—two of the more widely read land ethic or agrarian thinkers—their philosophies clearly articulate the individual and popular discourses I found through my ethnographic research. That agrarian philosophical social critiques and utopian visions track so well with the personal narratives and practices of UBF producers reveals how entrenched New Agrarianism is as major force shaping popular American cultural identity discourses.

The relationship between agrarian philosophy and the personal narratives and practices of UBF producers is not direct, which is why few of my research participants had heard of these thinkers. Instead I find that it is disseminated through popular discourses, like media, commercial marketing, political discourse, laws, and interpersonal
relationships. In this chapter I find that agrarian ideals have been important to the American cultural identity since its inception as a nation, highlight a few recent iterations of agrarianism to demonstrate how it evolves to address cultural concerns at different times and in different places, and then show how agrarianism evolved to take on an ethics of authenticity that uses nature, as they define it, as a moral reference. I also connect my research participants’ narratives and practices to New Agrarianism through my observations and discourse analysis of magazines like Modern Farmer, Internet resources like homesteading blogs and Mother Earth News, UBF producing community leader narratives, marketing, and other movements, like Slow Food or Localism, within the larger alternative food movement.

U.S. Agrarianism: looking for authenticity in small family farms

As a social or political philosophy, agrarianism in the U.S. has changed over time, but its primary tenet has remained constant: small-scale agricultural life is superior to or allows society to be more authentic than urban industrial life. The specific reasons small-scale family farmers are perceived of as more authentic than industrialized farmers have changed over time as U.S. demographics and social concerns have changed. Thomas Jefferson, considered the patriarch of agrarianism (Thompson 2010), developed his argument in favor of an agrarian society at a time when most U.S. citizens were still involved in agricultural production and at a time when the United States was developing its identity. He argued that farmers make better citizens because they are self-sufficient, attached to and invested in a particular place, and dispersed over the landscape (Jefferson 2006). This, he argued, made them less dependent on others and more difficult to control. By contrast urban industrial citizens, who by virtue of being wage-laborers, are attached to
highly mobile jobs, concentrated in centers of power, and precariously dependent on the urban-industrial system to provide life's necessities. Jefferson promoted an agrarian economy overwhelmingly for practical social reasons, not because farming promoted a respect for land *per se*.

Agrarianism found a new voice with the Nashville agrarians in the 1930's—the decade after half of the U.S. population had become urbanized (Bureau 1995). Their version of agrarianism was motivated by their desire to defend Southern plantation culture from urban-industrial reordering. They argued, notably as white men, that the urban-industrial ordering of society eclipsed the possibility of Southerners to live aesthetically rich lives (Twelve Southerners 1977)—i.e. it undermined white, male dominated plantation culture. Urban-industrial ordering precluded the continuation of their particular agrarian culture by encouraging populations to reorganize their lives around consumption, efficiency, and profit, while denigrating labor as an end in and of itself and making leisure the goal of life. They felt that their cultural discourses based on multigenerational caring, self-sufficiency, stewardship of the land, balance of leisure and work, and non-monetary means of valuing was about to become extinct (Twelve Southerners 1977). These men were using agrarianism to defend rural Southern social structures and practices against the inauthentic or homogenized urban-industrial social relations that industrialization promotes. That the cultural ideologies and practices they were defending were aristocratic, exclusively Christian, sexist, and based on a racist form of slavery was and is extremely problematic. However, in spite of these problems, their version of agrarianism demonstrates the continuity from Jefferson's agrarianism through Nashville agrarianism to present day. Urban-industrial social ordering is perceived as inauthentic because it
undermines family cohesion, disintegrates communities, homogenizes cultures, and also that it unsustainably and therefore immorally treats land as a commodity input. In other words, they felt the alienating effects of modern urban-industrial (re)ordering and argued that Southern plantation culture was more authentic because it grew out of a multigenerational connection to a particular piece of land.

One pertinent and more recent example of how strongly independent family farms are entrenched in popular American cultural narratives came in 1985 when the first Farm Aid concert was held. Its intent was to raise awareness of the plight of farmers who were overextended on their mortgages and losing their farms for a variety of reasons including U.S. domestic farm policies that encouraged consolidation, decreasing commodity and real estate prices, and geopolitical events like the U.S. embargo prohibiting grain sales to the U.S.S.R. over its invasion of Afghanistan (Harl 1990).

Germaine to this dissertation is that when Jefferson’s yeoman farmer ideal appeared to be in distress in 1985, there was a popular outpouring of sympathy and an urgent desire to support them. Farm Aid makes little sense in light of the industrial system of agriculture based on economies-of-scale and consolidation that exists in reality and has been promoted and sustained by U.S. agricultural policy since the 1970’s (Fitzgerald 2003). It makes more sense when we understand the family farm as part of the American identity narrative where the loss of family farms is equated to the loss of something essential to an authentic American identity. There is in this a tension between the industrial farm policies and practices that exist in reality and the yeoman farmer ideal that exists as an American identity narrative. Farm Aid has continued though to 2015 with the mission of “promoting a strong and resilient family farm system of agriculture” (Farm Aid 2015).
Amidst the environmentalist and back-to-the-land counterculture movements of the 1960’s-70’s U.S. agrarianism took on an environmental sustainability tone, but an environmental tone that promoted “good” use rather than protection from use (Berry 1996, 78). Parts of society were increasing alarmed by the environmental impacts of Green Revolution technologies like industrial pesticides as well as water and air pollution, and soil erosion. As a result of these concerns the U.S. government began to take a role in managing environmental pollution—e.g. Clean Air Act, Water Pollution Control Act, National Environmental Policy Act. From the perspective of New Agrarianism this was ironic because at the same time federal policies were trying to protect the environment from the negative impacts of techno-urban-industrial enframing, different policies continued to encourage the consolidation and techno-industrial reordering of farming and food processing. The result was the hollowing out of the agrarian culture that New Agrarians argue is needed to ensure “good” use of the land. Fewer people were needed on fewer farms resulting in rural to urban migration and the decline of rural towns and culture (Lyson and Falk 1993). Now the vast majority of Americans are urbanites dominated by the techno-urban-industrial institutional discourses and material relations making it difficult to see how Jeffersonian agrarianism has any contemporary relevance or what it might look like in a thoroughly modern society where few people have a personal connection with producing food.

**Good Use and a Culture of Care**

New Agrarians argue that modern societies need to move toward a guiding ethic that results in good use of the land (and by proxy the entire material environment) in order to resolve social and environmental problems wrought by techno-urban-industrial
enframing. “The problem . . . is that we have yet to understand what good use means, and for whom—farmers included—and that to suggest we can suddenly put aside our penchant for domination and exploitation because it is the right thing to do seems untenable” (Major 2011, 49). For New Agrarians the way to discover good use is through care and fostering a culture of care (e.g. Berry 1996; Major 2011; Thompson 2010; Wirzba 2003). More specifically, good use comes from combining care with productively working land. New Agrarians argue that if we “are going to learn a different way of being and acting in the world” (Major 2011, 58) then care for oneself, family, community, and the world around us is critically important.

The New Agrarians imagine a culture of care rooted in “responsibility, community, harmony, balance, ‘respect for the land’s long-term fertility,’ and an unwillingness to fragment the human condition” (Freyfogle xxi); motivations which are lost in the narrow techno-urban-industrial economic vision of modern society. More specifically New Agrarians are interested in everyday practices that allow people to contest what they find wrong in modern society by opening up subversive spaces for caring about each other and the longevity of the land upon which everyone is dependent. For New Agrarians, being able to care about the world as more than use value or exchange value and to put things to good use does not require a centralized class revolution. Instead, for New Agrarianism the locus of change is decentralized and diffuse: found in the mindful, personal or familial, quotidian practices that bring into focus what Heidegger calls the technological enframing of modern urban-industrial society or what I have expanded to techno-urban-industrial enframing. They believe this awareness can lead to alternative discourses and practices that have the
potential to strengthen communities and promote stewardship of the land rather than the exploitation and degradation of selves and the environment.

This is exemplified by the Living Systems Institute in Golden, Colorado, which is focused on making self-sufficiency and environmental stewardship a practical reality. Their model imagines self-sufficiency at the scale of the neighborhood. They argue that it is at the scale of the neighborhood that food provisioning systems find a point at which they maximize resiliency and productive capacity, while minimizing the environmental impacts of production processes.

Less formally, UBF producers are more likely to simply share excess produce with their neighbors or ideas and strategies for overcoming problems, creating communities organically rather than intentionally. I have been on both the giving and receiving end of excess plant starts. My tomatillo starts last year were a gift from a friend in West Denver while many of my neighbors are growing tomatoes this year from starts I planted in my basement in March and gifted to them in June. How to manage smells, flies, and noise is a perineal problem that I and many others with food-producing animals share. Several of us have at different times shared our experiences with different mitigation strategies. Usually we come away from our conversations without practical solutions, but more importantly we come away knowing that we are not alone in our struggles and conflicts. Thus it is through attempts to produce our own food, usually to be more self-sufficient, that UBF producers end up creating communities of, at least as far as UBF production practices goes, independently productive people rather than wage-laborers expressing themselves through purchasing power.
New Agrarians argue that the good use and caring that they find in their archetypal small family farmer still exists in practice at the margins of contemporary urban-industrial society and more importantly in the ideologies that people hold and narratives that they tell themselves about how they should comport themselves. New Agrarians find that “the attitudes and values of traditional agriculture still survive in our time and are supported by the experience of our time” (Berry 1996, 193). One can refer to any number of recent popular publications or alternative food movements for evidence that some people are trying to perpetuate and access idyllic or transcendental notions of pre-industrial agriculture and its perceived as morally superior environmental and social relationships—i.e. Slow Food, Farm-to-Table movements, Michael Pollan’s book *Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2007), Barbra Kingsolver’s book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2008), and the dozens of periodicals dedicated to agrarian ideals and practices (e.g. *Modern Farmer, Mother Earth News, Hobby Farms*). New Agrarians and the popular cultural narratives that promote and want to put New Agrarian ideals into practice, understand that urban-industrial societies are unlikely to become nations dominated by small farmers, but find that “even if most of us will never farm beyond the backyard garden plot, the story of farming that lives in the rural idyll serves as a way to pass along our moral and political commitments” (Thompson 2010, 165).

On the 2014 coop tour I met a psychiatrist while I toured the gardens and chicken coop around his large older home in Denver. Though he was not familiar with any of the more popular agrarian thinkers that I asked my interviewees about, he held beliefs in line with Thompson and the New Agrarians more generally. He told me that he believed that
there are moral lessons to be found in and passed on by agrarian practices. After I asked him why his grandmother farmed in the city he replied with pride and reverence,

She was raised that way. She was a poor farm girl from Lithuania . . . She did everything. She made wine, she made bread every week. You know, it was so cool to experience that, we feel, I feel that a little bit—mostly in terms of the chickens. Something really good happens when you live with the land . . . instead of the yard we have lots of vegetables and fruits. We get up and we pick berries and squash and there is asparagus. (Julian, Personal communication, October 4, 2014)

There is more than one important and overlapping narrative in his recounting of his grandmother such as the celebration of a hard working immigrant relative. But, more germane to my project his story was infused with the narrative that pre-industrial agrarian cultural practices are moral. Whether using the word “cool” or “good”, he was communicating that something morally good comes from self-sufficient agricultural practices. He was telling me that he believed living with the land and having a productive home economy offered a moral ontology or a resource for determining what constitutes “good” or moral living. Seeming to channel Thompson’s belief that a small garden plot may be enough to pass on agrarian morals and political commitments, Julian says that he feels like keeping a few chickens (and a few vegetable plants) is enough to allow him to have those “cool” (authentic) feelings that he had when his grandmother was alive and farming in the city. In subsequent chapters I continue to use my research data to articulate these stories of farming and moral and political commitments, which cultural narratives they represent, and how they function in a complex field of competing discourses.

Using care to pursue the “good” life through pre-industrial agriculture was evident in my data in many ways. Care presented itself most prominently through environmental sustainability concerns, but also as care for one’s own health, care for one’s family, care for those without access to unprocessed or minimally processed food (or food at all!), care
about the genetic diversity and general resiliency of food provisioning practices, and care for the well-being of food-producing animals. Notably missing from this list is a concern for farm laborers, which never came up in any of my field observations and rarely in the popular literature that I surveyed. Whenever I asked UBF producers what motives them to produce their own food, it always came back to a concern they had about the industrial food system. Pursuing alternative food provisioning in all its forms, but especially autonomous backyard production, was viewed as a pursuit of a more ethical world through good use.

Exemplifying this culture of care and good use is an almost universal distain of lawns. Lawns are viewed as symbols of ignorance and moral failing. In the previous quote from Julian, notice that immediately after he says “something really good happens when you live with the land” he illustrates his point by denigrating lawns as not good. Every UBF producer that I visited was proud that they had eliminated “wasteful” or “unproductive” lawns with food production operations. If they still had some lawn, they dismissed it as only a partial moral failing because “it is the place where we grill out on the 4th of July” or the place where “we put out the slip-n-slide for the kids.” Even I am guilty of defending my remaining lawn as a place for my kids to play in the summer. My research participants believe that lawns are not productive spaces, in spite of the reality that they can function as noise and carbon sinks, rainwater and soil retainers, and often play an important role in U.S. cultural discourses (Grampp 2008). I found that UBF producers tend to believe that the “water” and space used by irrigated lawns is immoral. The belief is that if a person cared (in the right way) they would put their land to good use (food production) and not expose themselves to a moral failure (lawn production).
One organization sponsored a “Bee Safe” program that uses bees, and the vague understanding that many people have that bee populations have been in decline, to get individual households to pledge to not use chemicals in their yards. In this way care is not just something that people do on their own property, but it becomes a way to get people who do not care about the impacts of industrial pesticides to care, and it gives agency to those that might not otherwise feel like they have any. Their end goal is to preserve pollinator and ultimately food provisioning integrity through care and good use, or in this case no use of pesticides. The key to this program is that it teaches people that they have some agency over their techno-urban-industrial lives and that critically thinking about the impacts of techno-urban-industrial enframing opens up the possibility for political action.

Another interviewee and her husband were both UBF producers and offered courses on personal food production. The classes were open to all, but they told me that the most of the course participants were financially poor and that the goal of the courses was to teach members of the community confidence in their capabilities as a human by teaching them how to produce food for themselves. They also believe producing food in backyards or interstitial urban spaces would help people in nearby neighborhoods, without close grocery stores, be more independent of a food system the interviewees felt was unhealthy, environmentally harmful, and had disenfranchised these people by placing grocery stores beyond walking distance.

*Cultural norms and the economy*

Wendell Berry, as a key New Agrarian voice, argues that the current urban-industrial ordering of society offers people two basic motivations in life: “make money and maximize entertainment” (Berry 2001, 67). As a result of these limited motivations he
concludes that industrialism is an economy before it is a culture, while agrarianism argues that the culture and its economic ordering should come into existence at the same time (Berry 2001). He maintains that being able to consider culture at the same time as, rather than after, economic concerns affords people the space through which they can respect future generations and their survivability. In contrast, capitalism and urban-industrial ordering discounts future generations by exploiting resources for short-term profits or to fuel unsustainable (and often unnecessary) consumption. These concerns about the alienation experienced through modern urban-industrial ordering manifest themselves in a quest for authenticity that liberates the self from being objectified by modernity by using one’s essential nature and external nature (as in not society) as measures of authenticity.

New Agrarians argue that industrial agriculture is inherently environmentally unsustainable and that techno-urban-industrial society in general does not have the type of comportment toward the environment necessary for people to become practicing stewards of the environment and thereby realize their authentic selves as people existentially tied to their material surroundings. Berry (1996, 2001) contends that the care and good use that are essential for environmental sustainability are impossible through industrial ordering because, people, places, and products are separated from their particular multidimensional histories. Without these histories, care and thus stewardship and good use of land is difficult if not impossible to determine or put into practice. Therefore, New Agrarians extend this argument to claim that environmental groups, technologies, and legislation efforts that do not try to undermine this techno-industrial comportment toward the environment are doomed to fail in the long run because they perpetuate the basic structures that cause the problems they are supposed to resolve (Thompson 2010). New
Agrarians insist that the industrial organization of society, and specifically industrial agriculture, needs to be rejected and replaced with organizing principles that allow people to be stewards of the land rather than exploiters and passive consumers (Berry 1996).

In popular U.S. cultural discourse the understanding of food provisioning as simultaneously a cultural and economic concern is evident in many places. As I already mentioned, Farm Aid has been putting on concerts over the last 30 years to draw attention to how political economic forces in U.S. farming continue to undermine the remaining small family farms and hollow out agrarian culture. While Farm Aid represents many American’s concerns for the last vestiges of an idealized family farm culture that they want to exist, publications like *Mother Earth News* continue to offer self-sufficiency alternatives to industrial production and consumption with articles like *Rural Jobs: Make a Living in Your Rural Community or from a Homestead Business* (Hansen 2016). These types of articles serve multiple purposes: they offer a way to make money where there may not otherwise be jobs, offer an alternative to industrially produced food, and offer a way for rural peoples to maintain or develop a connection to the agricultural production practices that they understand as essential to rural life.

The importance of putting the cultural beliefs and practices of food production before capitalist economic concerns is evident all the way from rural sites of production through popular culture to urban backyards. Industrial agriculture is understood in general as a source of problems. Large agro firms, usually represented by Monsanto for my research participants, are venomously demonized as unethical and driven by inherently immoral capitalist structures—though my research subjects do not specifically call them capitalist structures. Large-scale industrial farmers are held as inauthentic regardless of
the political economic relations that forced them to "sell-out" and scale up to begin with. They are viewed as having traded a culture of care for a culture of profit, or for putting economic concerns before cultural concerns. Their visions of what small-scale farmer cultural practices and beliefs should look like remain central to their narrative of how a farmer should farm. One interviewee summed up the complicated understanding the UBF producers that I interviewed had of rural farmers that farm for income.

OK and so here you have these big farmers and really they aren't concerned about the earth although they work it. Their earth to them is the industry, it is the factory. And if that earth can produce more potatoes and if its, um, it might cost me more because I buy the whatever from Monsanto but if it produces more, this year, I don't care about next year, you know all I care about is how many dollars I can bring in ... and it's just like a factory. It's like what I can use this earth for ... and it's very naïve and very short sighted ... but it's all about the profit. And I think there are a lot of farmers like that. (Clementine, Personal communication, June 14, 2015)

To Clementine, the culture, or meanings and purposes that are expressed through agricultural production, take priority over what are viewed as immoral, profit driven, and shortsighted production methods dictated by the capitalist mode of production's drive to maximize surplus capital through efficiency and its techno-urban-industrial enframing.

*The Household: Subversive potential, source of care*

New Agrarians argue that the U.S. household is a site where meaning and purpose, and thus cultural beliefs and practices, are generated. They argue that the productive household is under constant pressure by techno-urban-industrial enframing. This pressure tries to redefine the household as a place where leisure time should be maximized and housework minimized through the consumption of techno-industrially produced goods and services. For the New Agrarians the mid-twentieth century move away from productive home economies was the harbinger of contemporary feelings of alienation, inauthenticity,
and immorality. “Motivated no longer by practical needs, but by loneliness and fear, women began to identify themselves by what they bought rather than by what they did . . . Thus housewifery, once a complex discipline acknowledged to be one of the bases of culture and economy, was reduced to the exercise of purchasing power” (Berry 1996, 114–15). Berry argues that urban-industrial ordering encourages homemakers (predominately women to this day) to buy labor saving technologies and products in order to maximize convenience and leisure time at home, a situation that they argue transformed homemakers from authentic producers into inauthentic consumers who do not have the proper moral reference point, an intimate relationship with the land, for expressing care or realizing “good use.” At the same time New Agrarians lament the disintegration of the productive home economy. They point to the home economy as the site where the techno-urban-industrial reordering can be challenged and where human potential and environmentally sustainable practices can be developed (Freyfogle 2001; Wirzba 2003).

Agrarians make many claims about the inauthentic or alienating pressures of techno-urban-industrial social ordering on the household. With the shift toward consumption, for instance, children became financial liabilities, rather than productive assets in a home economy (Berry 1996). Therefore, it should be no surprise that techno-urban-industrial metabolism requires both foreign and domestic rural migration to maintain or grow urban populations and industrial work forces. The convenience and free time that are the goals of urban industrial society have also met with some resistance and psychosis.

Resistance can be seen in something as simple as a cake mix. Infamously, Betty Crocker changed its just-add-water cake recipes so that housewives could add eggs to the
mixture. Being able to add the eggs and the water to an industrially produced cake mix gave housewives a compromise between industrial convenience and the feeling that one has actually produced something (Marks 2007). Trading their productive role in the home economy for that of consumer also infamously led to a type of psychosis for women who had their productive role at home undermined by urban-industrial conveniences, while still culturally hindered from meaningful employment outside the home. The emptiness left by the transformation from a productive home economy to a consumer based economy was filled with the anti-anxiety prescription Valium that was so common it was referred to as ‘mommy’s little helpers.’ An industrial cure for an industrial problem.

This struggle to define what an authentic or proper home economy should look like continues on many fronts with the household (still usually managed by women) continuing to play a defining role in U.S. cultural narratives. Some homemakers have decided to homeschool their children, or make every meal for their family from scratch, while others have decided to move outside of the home, into the backyard to produce food. In the pop culture book *Homeward bound: Why women are embracing the New Domesticity* (2013), the journalist Emily Matchar theorizes that women are drawn to the idea of a productive home economy as a form of rebellion against contemporary techno-urban-industrial society brought on by their disillusionment with careerism. She believes women retreat to the productive home to find fulfillment and to rebel against shallow or inauthentic techno-urban-industrial social structures.

This story of the productive home economy as a site of rebellion or subversive action against societal conventions was echoed by the many women and men that I interviewed. Upon reflection, I believe that I was also motivated to try to create a
productive home economy as a form of (often exhausting) subversion against societal conventions. By homeschooling, cooking meals from scratch, or growing food for home consumption there is an overt or unspoken effort to reestablish the home as a productive place that can generate authenticity in the forms of productive practices and products that have culturally significant meanings and purposes that let one feel like they are creating an authentic and moral home economy.

The notion that the productive home economy was seen as a form of oppression in the twentieth century and now is seen as a site of rebellion is symptomatic of normative cultural shifts over the last 100 years. Whereas in the past the productive home economy was an existential necessity, today the productive home economy has been replaced by the consumption of contemporary conveniences. Today's contemporary homemaker has the luxury of picking à la carte and at leisure what she wants to incorporate into her productive home economy, or even if she wants to have a productive home economy. I hold out as an my second interlude before Chapter 1 as an example. I never had to grow and process tomatoes, potatoes, amaranth, etc. I chose to grow and process these things primarily for their ideological value, though I was also interested in the health aspects of having at least some food over winter that was not industrially processed. The productive practices and products that make up an agrarian home economy therefore look more like subversive expressions of self, authenticity, or utopian cultural values than necessities. This is visually captured on two of the Denver County Fair's posters which visualize how tradition is being reimagined as subversion or what I refer to as a gingham punk authentic (see Figure 1).
Figure 1: Denver county fair posters. The Denver County Fair is a display of New Agrarianism values in practice. The first fair was in 2011, and because Denver is a city/county, it has had to be innovative to balance the spirit of what people expect of a rural county fair with the urban realities of Denver. This is reflective of the situation in which people trying to have a productive home economy have found themselves. The Denver County Fair does not look back on agricultural tradition simply with longing nostalgia or as essential to Denver’s identity. Rather the fair aims to be a public display of domestic production, especially UBF production, as subversive practices. This intent is summed up visually by their posters from 2013 and 2014 in which images of young women combine traditional county fair aesthetics with tattoos and the Denver skyline. They represent countercultural discourses that imagine the traditions and practices of grandma’s or great-grandma’s generation as rebellious or authentic.

**Technology and place(lessness)**

New Agrarians argue that the technology that accompanies urban-industrial society’s obsession with labor saving efforts has a defocusing effect on users that prevents them from fully engaging in and thus caring about the place where they physically are. These technological distractions preclude their user’s ability to focus on and thus care about the place they are at any one moment (Berry 1996; Berry 2001). Their concerns are exemplified by smartphone technology. Smartphones have become integral to many lives around the world where they are purported to increase convenience and productivity. However, the smartphone also allows individuals to be virtually engaged anywhere,
preventing them from fully engaging where they physically are at any given moment. The practical problems that this causes are material enough that some states in the U.S. have banned certain types of cellphone use while driving, while in China the city of Chongqing has designated pedestrian lanes for those using cellphones and those who are not (Benedictus 2014). Put another way, cellular phone and now smartphone technology exemplify how modern technologies allow and encourage people to so disengage from the place that they are actually in, that laws have been enacted to protect society from distracted users.

Smartphones have also proved to be distractions during meal times. A person at a family dinner using her smartphone might be texting friends, looking at social media sites, reading about melting polar ice caps, checking work email, or planning a vacation in Yellowstone National Park and never fully engage with her family, her food, or even the faraway places with which and far away people with whom she was virtually engaged. New Agrarians would argue that technology is interfering with her and her family’s opportunity to use the dinner event to make real or authentic connections with each other and their world. For UBF producers this translates into a lifestyle that never engages with a place to the degree that a user of these technologies feels the existential connections that come from working directly and reflexively with the land as place bound nature. Similarly, having food produced far away and shipped to a store where it is purchased as a commodity does not allow the individual to engage with the producers or the full dimensionality of the product which includes its history and place of origin.

New Agrarians find this type of cognitive placelessness to be key to understanding why people do not sustainably interact with their environment and why they experience
anxiety about their place in society and the healthiness of modern techno-industrial food provisioning (Major 2011; Thompson 2010). There are few practices in urban industrial society that directly tie people productively to a place over long time horizons, which New Agrarians argue, is necessary for acting as a steward of nature or community member rather than as an exploiter or a less than mindful consumer. People are constantly separated from the implications of their consumption patterns and social relations by technology and the compressed physical and cognitive distances that it creates. A consumer may know that their counterseasonal broccoli was grown in Mexico, but they have little hope of knowing who grew it, how it was grown, when it was grown, or how it was transported—unless they choose to trust labeling systems, which as I argued in the previous chapter many, epitomized by UBF producers, do not.

Industrial commodity chains are felt by New Agrarians and UBF producers as too segmented and opaque. New Agrarians argue that only by overcoming the placelessness encouraged by techno-urban-industrial enframings of the world can society even have a chance at environmental and food justice or realizing the moral virtues of good use that they believe come from using nature as measure. For them this happens best through small family farms working with technologies that do not inhibit a farmer’s presence of place or mindfulness of her land. New Agrarians believe that small family farmers’ comportment toward the land and its future usability leads to rootedness, stronger communities, and environmentally sustainable decisions resulting from existential concerns about the land one is farming—what Aldo Leopold called a land ethic (Leopold 1990). This thinking has saturated alternative food movement discourses, popular food literature, and played a central role in the narratives of the vast majority of my research participants.
It is not a new phenomenon that consumers are interested in using food to connect to place, but what is new is that it is no longer enough to consume foods that are simply prepared in the authentic style of some place or that originated in some particular place. Many consumers’ understandings of what is authentic have changed. Food movements like Slow Food and Locavorism argue that to access the essence of food it should be grown, prepared, and eaten in a particular place. In other words, food that has traveled from its place of origin is as inauthentic for them as food that has been industrially grown or overly processed. This belief is almost universal among my research participants, one interviewee told me “I’m not a brewer yet, but I do make cheese. That’s my slow food.” He was proud not only that he made cheese, but that it was made with milk from his backyard, in his kitchen, and eaten in his dining room. Place, in particular his home as a site of hyperlocalism, was key in making his cheese valuable.

People I spoke with in my capacity as a CSU Master Gardener information booth volunteer universally made the assumption that local food is better than food produced non-locally. Getting them to unpack why local is better usually got responses like local food has a smaller carbon footprint than conventional food, that it was going to taste better, or that they could better know (i.e. trust) the farmer. Regardless of the reasons given, they almost always spoke with a tone of pride for the place where they lived and where their food was grown. This happened regardless of the scale at which they were thinking: Colorado, the Front Range, Denver, or their neighborhood. They were associating something essential in their identity as an authentic or moral person with the production of place. Specifically, they were using food production and consumption, similar to the Slow Food movement, to produce a sense of place.
For instance, I listened to two Master Gardeners one day try to one up each other as far as who had the more local food—though I doubt they would have admitted it. One women said that she got some produce at the farmers’ market from a farm on the Western Slope of Colorado, while another, clearly trying to one up her, said that she always bought from a particular farm in Longmont, along the Front Range and much closer to Denver. The implication was that somehow the food produced closer to the point of consumption was better. This type of one-upmanship played out over and over in my observations. The more something was not just of a particular place, but rather of the place where these people lived and worked and consumed it, the more preferable the food. One logical conclusion from this line of reasoning is that food produced in a backyard by the end consumer is the best possible food, hence one of the motivations for UBF production.

This belief that local food is inherently better is not limited, at least from my ethnographic observations, to any one particular group of people. No matter the race, gender, or class I observed a general belief that local food is better than industrially produced and distributed food, because of its connection to place. I observed this thinking in both conversations about my food-producing practices with my predominately black and Hispanic neighbors and at two Northeast Denver food shares, where local fruits and vegetables are donated and distributed to attendees.

Epitomized by UBF producers, the alternative food movement has come to believe that food that is of their place is better for them as moral and authentic people. They blame technology for creating long alienating commodity chains that they believe produce inauthentic foods (“tasteless” and “mealy” California tomatoes tainted by transportation miles or worse) that prevent people from being moral and in control of what they eat. They
want food that is of *their* place, because they believe this food to be more authentic than conventional, commodified or placeless food. For instance, Colorado peaches are a much desired item at Front Range farmers’ markets just as Colorado seed potatoes are the preferred choice for Colorado gardeners. Peaches and potatoes from other locales may give the same results, but it’s the local varieties that people want. The people I interviewed wanted to eat food that was produced locally or in their foodshed (Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson 1996). They felt like food that is produced locally added value to not only to the product, but also added moral value to their identity. Eating local food, for them, encourages a more resilient local food system, increases their personal control over the quality of the food, and it reduces their personal environmental footprint that they would otherwise feel guilty about if their food was produced industrially and shipped over long distances. They work place into food provisioning such that food production, rather than a lawn, makes a backyard a moral space, while at the same time food that is produced and consumed in a place is considered authentic. In other words, to be authentic, place and food are necessarily co-constitutive. In addition, people feel that their selves are more authentic because they are rooted in a place and metabolizing that place.

UBF producers take the value of localism to what I believe is its obvious conclusion. To be authentic in the twentieth century existential sense, a person should be self-made. Autonomous food production is a way of expressing authenticity of self as an independent self. But, growing food also has another aspect, that the authentic person is rooted in place and experiences that place personally, intentionally, and mindfully. UBF producers use their practices to work toward personal independence, but also to construct what they believe are authentic relationships between their self and inherently authentic “nature.”
Being, or at least feeling authentic, means experiencing the multidimensionality of place rather than its flattened representation as techno-urban-industrially enframed commodities.

The focus on metabolizing place to experience it intimately and fully has led many interested in alternative food provisioning, especially UBF producers, to value hyperlocalism as the most authentic way of being and metabolizing the world. This focus on the neighborhood scale and smaller for food provisioning encourages people to produce for themselves, and possibly neighbors. But, even these scales are not ethical enough for some UBF producers, who believe that the scale of production should also consider microclimates in their production practices. This type of thinking is codified in permaculture, a set of design principles that aim to create sustainable and self-sufficient agricultural ecosystems, which was repeatedly invoked by my research participants as their guiding principles for gardening and landscaping. Intentionally or coincidently these principles are integrated into popular UBF producing discourses, and provide much of the “nature as measure” moral guidance that UBF producers are trying to put in to practice.

Place therefore is not understood by UBF producers as a static container of meaning, but as dynamic and circumspect interactions between producer, consumer, products, and place. So it is not just the material qualities of a place that inform evaluations of authenticity, but also the technology used and activities done in that place. Seeming to channel Heidegger’s (2008) and the New Agrarian’s concerns with technology (Freyfogle

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4 Probably produced in one’s own yard and definitely not outside of their neighborhood.

5 Microclimate for UBF producers and gardeners tend to take into consideration each individual tree and structure on their property. In the most extreme example I observed one gardener trying to figure out the microclimates on a 2-foot-tall by 3-foot-wide pile of dirt upon which she was growing herbs.
UBF producers are circumspect about the technology that they bring to bear as consumers and producers in their place (backyard, household) of production and consumption. They want their interactions with place to be personal and are generally suspicious of bringing any modern technologies (e.g. GMOs, pesticides, and even machinery) to bear on the places around their home as food producers. As a result, a common struggle for UBF producers is whether to use a rototiller in their gardens or vaccines and antibiotics on their food-producing animals. Instead they want to produce food in a more “organic” or “natural” way—or simply put, what they believe is moral and authentic.

UBF producers tend to believe that modern technologies interfere with their ability to properly or authentically metabolize their environment, viewing the technologies used in contemporary food production as environmentally destructive, unsustainable, and poisonous. However, what they consider to be good and bad technologies are variable and highly selective often using the lack of a motor, plastics, or electronics; precedence for its use before approximately WWII; and the approval of others in their community as gauges for a technology’s acceptability. They also judge the appropriateness of a technology based on their ability to control its effects, a technology’s impacts on nature as they conceptualize nature, and a technology’s compatibility with the agrarian aesthetics that frequently inform their activities.

**UBF Production, New Agrarianism in (focal) practice**

Contemporary UBF production is rooted in this persistent, pervasive, and adaptive anti-urban, and since the industrial revolution, anti-techno-industrial-urban counter discourse. However, whereas in previous iterations agricultural modes of being stood in contrast to
urban-techno-industrial modes, since WWII farms have been reorganized in the image of high-tech industry (Fitzgerald 2003). As a result, rural agricultural landscapes have been depopulated, leaving what is left of rural culture looking like modern urban consumer culture. The political economic and cultural barriers to becoming a small family farmer are great, evidenced by the average age of a farmer being over 57 today (National Agricultural Library 2016). Most people in the U.S. are at least one generation removed from being farmers, do not have access to startup capital such as land, and must face government policies that favor large-scale producers. With all of these barriers to being a family farmer the relevance of agrarianism to modern society is drawn into question.

New Agrarians have struggled with how to explain the relevance of their philosophy as more than anachronistic, white, patriarchal, reactionary nostalgia. Put another way, they have to grapple with the question: how is agrarianism relevant in the contemporary U.S. when less than 2% of the population works in agriculture, most people live in urban environments, and most people would be unlikely to disavow the modern conveniences and progressive modern ideas upon which contemporary society is built, in order to work the land with their family in a small community setting? New Agrarians have tackled this problem acknowledging that the practical limitations of contemporary techno-urban-industrial society are real, but that this does not preclude the yeoman farmer from acting as an idealized archetype for making decisions in a thoroughly modern world. The way that they are relevant then is not in offering a completely different society, but rather one that is contemplative and circumspect by occasionally accessing New Agrarian ethics through signifying practices.
For the New Agrarian David Orr, “the largest barrier to New Agrarianism . . . is . . .
that vast gap that separates sound agrarian culture from the daily lives most of us now live. Agrarianism simply doesn’t compute with the experiences of people whose lives are shaped by malls, highways, television, and cyberspace” (Orr 2001, 97–98). Orr is confounded by how to reconcile the stark divisions he sees between what he believes is an authentic and morally superior rural-agrarian past and the immoral urban-industrial life that is now the norm. Because talking about the relevance of New Agrarianism in the abstract leads to these sorts of hypothetical conundrums, I chose to instead collect ethnographic research data to let UBF producers demonstrate if and how they actually do understand and implement New Agrarian ideals into their otherwise modern lives.

My ethnographic research into UBF production in the Denver metropolitan area in 2014-15 suggests that modern techno-urban-industrial social discourses and practices are flexible and porous, leaving space for UBF producers to behave and think subversively or circumspectly about the authenticity of their modern lives. My research participants use their New Agrarian ethical framework not to be revolutionary in the sense of replacing modernity with an anachronistic and nostalgic agrarian economy, but rather to bring techno-urban-industrial enframing, which they find to be inauthentic and immoral into critical focus. Put another way, UBF producers use New Agrarian narratives and practices to realize what they believe are their authentic selves by thoughtfully and critically metabolizing that world through food provisioning. They use many ways to open up space for critically thinking about and subversively acting against the disciplining power of the material relations and dominant discourses that underpin the contemporary experience of life in the U.S.
New Agrarianism’s discourse of authenticity is put into practice in many ways: though the Slow Food, Farm-to-Table, and Locavore movements; a contemporary nationwide farmer’s market renaissance; a national obsession with food freshness, healthiness, origins, and authenticity; and a drive to produce food in urban spaces. I found that UBF producers espouse the same critiques of urban-industrial society as New Agrarianism. They also support and try to put into practice many of the prescriptions argued for by agrarianism, albeit in small ways and in places that philosophical New Agrarians have had trouble conceptualizing (e.g. Orr, 2001). Specifically, they work to create productive home economies through home food production and processing in addition to making agrarian informed lifestyle and consumption choices. These different counterhegemonic practices and discourses function not as a complete upending of capitalism or urban-techno-industrial society, but instead offer the space within which individuals can critically think about the moral and ethical implications of their being and to evaluate the morality and authenticity of their lives and their social and material relationships.

“Although agrarianism proposes that everyone has agrarian responsibilities, it does not propose that everybody should be a farmer or that we do not need cities” (Berry 2001, 74). Instead, Thompson, building on Borgmann (Borgmann 2006), argues that “the deeper philosophical meaning of agrarian ideals can be articulated when farming and what Borgmann also calls ‘the culture of the table’ are understood as focal practices, as established habits of living that impart broader meaning and purpose to people’s lives” (Thompson 2010, 111). Focal practices are practices that require a person to engage in the moment: to actively engage with the world, rather than passively consuming it as part of the inauthentic techno-urban-industrial metabolism of the land as historyless and placeless
commodities. A focal practice is something that requires that someone or some intimate group (e.g. family) intentionally make an effort to do something that technology would otherwise take care of for them or at least make much easier so that they do not have to thoughtfully engage with it. Thompson defines "focal practices as established habits of living that impart broader meaning and purpose to people’s lives" (Thompson 2010, 111). For Thompson mindfulness is roughly analogous to Heidegger’s Dasein or moments of metaphysical contemplation that have been taken up variably by the existential philosophers discussed in the previous chapter. Furthermore, focal practices that involve other people (like the home cooked family dinner) facilitate stronger communities as people actively engage in the world together.

Thompson recognizes that Borgmann’s "culture of the table" has a lot in common with the Slow Food movement (Campisi 2013) and ethics that popular food writers like Michael Pollen (2007) are trying to promote. “The culture of the table leads to new understandings of seasonality and can bring a richer understanding of place through knowledge of local foods” (Thompson 2010, 121). Provisioning food for the table resolves into a culture of the table in which we care about what we are procuring for the table. “Some might go so far as to grow it themselves, while others might develop personal relationships with farmers or grocers” (Thompson 2010, 136). From these focal practices comes a sense of caring, which New Agrarians and in particular Berry find lacking in urban-industrial society. Being bothered with an activity allows people, at least in specific movements, to connect their actions to their actions’ effects. Conceptually, focal practices reorient people away from segmented and ephemeral engagement with the world through technology toward practices that they can and want to be bothered doing. As a result of this
purposeful engagement, caring individuals are believed to be better positioned to reach their full human potential by being carefully and thoughtfully engaged with themselves, their communities, and surroundings.

The Slow Food movement represents a focal practice and another way to think about authenticity. The Slow Food movement offers a popular culture version of how New Agrarian ideals are instilled in the everyday practices of people who are not farming or even growing their own food (Campisi 2013). It claims that authenticity is found in rejecting the placelessness and the counterseasonal availability of industrially produced foods by eating food from the place where one physically is. Furthermore, it promotes taking time to prepare meals and eat them in convivial circumstances that reinforce personal connections with both the food and each other (Petrini 2004). It is in the selection of the ingredients and the production of the meal that the meal preparers engage with the world and are afforded the opportunity to discover the authenticity of a place through preparing and eating food that is produced there. They can discover their own authentic selves by engaging with these ingredients to produce a meal that expresses the individual’s creative potential, expresses non-economic values and relationships, and connects people to places—preferably to those in which they are physically at any one moment. The conviviality that the Slow Food movement wants to find in the creation and sharing of the meal hints at something more than the authenticity of self or things. It hints at values and social relations that capitalism and the techno-urban-industrial ordering of contemporary society have suppressed and degraded.

To illustrate the difference, think about how one might feel about eating carryout food over her keyboard verses a family dinner made at home. The distraction of the
computer prevents the meal from being more than fuel. For most people the carryout dinner is only as valuable as the money spent to purchase it and perhaps time saved in not having to prepare it. As a result, when you are full, disposing of the balance of the meal is only a question of wasted money. By comparison the dinner that the family or some member in the family makes is more likely to be more than just fuel. The preparers had to plan the meal, get provisions for the meal, prepare the meal, set the table, eat the meal in the company of family, clear the table, and clean-up the kitchen. All of the components of the family meal are congealed in the carryout meal, but we do not see them and glide unappreciatively past the effort that went into making the meal. It is little more than fuel for our body. Meanwhile the family meal builds relationships through its production and engaged consumption. Whereas a tip to the restaurant staff passively acknowledges your appreciation for the carryout meal, the home cooked meal is more likely to result in conviviality between the preparers and eaters and between the eaters and the eaten. In this way the desired relationships found in the archetype of the small family farmer as the steward of the land can be realized through everyday signifying practices that link people to place and each other through thoughtful engagement with the histories and relationships of producers, products, and consumers (Thompson 2010; Major 2011; Freyfogle 2001).

As focal practices, discourses and practices like Slow Food do not offer a revolution in the mode of production or a panacea for mitigating the social and environmental impacts of modern food production and consumption. Instead, the concept of a focal practice allows us to see their practices as a partial and temporary contemplative discursive space that can give individuals and small groups access to the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity. In the
rest of my dissertation I will discuss UBF production activities as counterhegemonic focal or signifying practices that are meant to offer a way of generating authenticity. The hope of New Agrarians and popular movements within the larger countercultural alternative food movements is that these moments of contemplation developed through practices that are unintelligible to or contrary to modernity will translate into individual and collective political action.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that my research participants and New Agrarians see similar causal connections between techno-urban-industrial enframing and feelings of alienation, inauthenticity, and immorality. I have strived to accomplish four tasks here. I first showed that UBF producers are not new or novel, rather that they are only the most recent iteration of a long tradition of back-to-the-lander movements and more specifically of Jeffersonian agrarianism and its philosophical inheritors. I showed how agrarianism has been flexible, adapting to contemporary social and now environmental concerns. Therefore, agrarianism at any point in time should be looked at as an expression of a culture’s concerns about contemporary social ordering. Second, I showed how a New Agrarianism incorporates an ethics of authenticity in relation to nature. This is problematic because nature (of the self or external to the self) is a socially constructed concept and therefore malleable and power laden. This means that nature is not the same across cultures, times, or between persons at the same time in the same culture. This makes nature an extremely problematic reference point. Third, I showed how New Agrarian themes emphasize the importance of self-directed concrete labor that is unfiltered by technological interference in the production of authenticity and morality. This manifests
itself for many in the resurrection of a productive home economy working toward self-sufficiency as an expression of independence, which is often understood as being authentic. Finally, knowing that it is highly unlikely that most moderns would ever want or be able to be become the archetypal yeoman farmer, Thompson proposes that agrarian ideals can be accessed through focal practices.

The concept of the focal practice serves two purposes important to this dissertation. First, it makes agrarian ethics intelligible and potentially relevant in an otherwise thoroughly techno-urban-industrial society. Second, it allows me to make sense of UBF producer practices as more than a fad or bourgeoisie leisure activities. Focal practices and the symbolic products they produce allow UBF producers to feel authentic in the sense of being mindful or in measured control of themselves and their relationships.
Chapter 3: Labor: the authenticity of measured control

Agrarians are attempting to realize a world in which work brings with it some sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, in which workers are able to both see what they do and understand how such production affects the community. (Major 2011, 90)

It's fulfilling, you know, it’s really cool to be able to do that [use a scythe to cut grass], you know, to use that land and the grass and not have to go buy it and give it to the goats. (Gabby, Personal communication, June 21, 2015)

Introduction

My research participants along with popular agrarian discourses concur with the New Agrarian belief that laboring at personal food production leads to a type of independence that allows them to feel real or authentic. Performing agricultural labor in their backyards is seen as a way of overcoming the alienation they feel from performing abstract labor, as a way to circumvent the industrial food system that they do not trust, and as part of their social reproductive responsibilities. More specifically they explain their desire to perform concrete food-producing labor in terms of independence, ethics, authenticity, aesthetics, as a means of control over their lives, subversion, and as a way to productively, yet sustainably, engage with nature as they understand it. UBF producers offer these differing reasons for producing food in their backyards, which when taken together, can be interpreted as collective dissatisfaction with how industrial society commands and values their labor and structures their social reproduction activities.

Feeling alienated from their labor is a common reason given by UBF producers for why they want to produce food in their backyards. My data reveal that the drive to perform agricultural labor comes from a common feeling of alienation or inauthenticity, but these feelings manifest in different ways. For some UBF producers, usually males in their role as breadwinners, the attraction of producing food in their backyards comes from the lack of
satisfaction that they feel working at abstract or wage labor. They especially feel alienated from jobs that require them to spend their day laboring through a contemporary technological medium like computer terminals. These feelings of alienation are not just manifested in the performance of abstract labor, but also in the products that represent abstract congealed industrial labor. Essentially the vast majority of UBF producers feel somewhat alienated by contemporary techno-industrial production and how it presents itself in contemporary consumer culture discourses. They express their concerns almost universally through apocalyptic narratives that involve the collapse of techno-urban-industrial society, especially food systems. Feeling both under threat by a loss of control in their lives and distrust of the techno-industrial food system’s long term viability, they set about developing skills and creating a productive home economy that they feel will make them and their ability to get food more resilient. Just as important to them is the ideological notion that developing post-apocalyptic life skills makes them more authentic because these skills allow them to feel in control of their food sources. It also makes them feel independent and therefore authentic to deal directly with nature as a food producer rather than have their interactions with the material world mediated by industrial technologies.

The second half of this chapter looks at the importance of agricultural labor in developing a moral ontology of nature, land ethic, or ethical system that uses reflexive laboring with nature to develop an ecocentric, and thus authentic, ethic. I also sometimes refer to this as the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity. Many UBF producers believe that there is something inherently authentic about performing agricultural labor. In part, as I show in the first half of the chapter this is because backyard food-producing labor is generally concrete labor, which for many is enough to make it more authentic than wage-
labor. But, UBF producing labor is also understood as authentic labor because it allows a practitioner to work directly with nature and develop a personal relationship with a particular piece of land rather than land as a commodity or commodity input. Their belief is that using nature productively around the home leads to stewardship of nature or caring for nature that is not only ecocentrically ethical, but also results in more authentic selves, families, and communities. The idea that nature provides some moral referent that should be accessed through agricultural labor is expressed through the idea that getting one’s hands dirty is good, but also through the belief that agricultural labor that respects nature’s rhythms and in situ dimensionality is authentic and ethical while industrial labor that tries to treat nature or the land as industrial commodity inputs and outputs is inauthentic and unethical. Caring for the land is believed to be essential to a care of self, and authentic people are understood to be people who circumspectly coproduce themselves and nature by laboring on a particular piece of land to meet their personal needs.

**Labor, control, independence: concrete labor and the authentic self**

In this section I use my collected data to argue that UBF producers are frequently motivated to produce their own food as a reaction to working at abstract or wage labor that they feel alienates them from their labor power, the products of their labor, and the “real” or “natural” world. These feelings of alienation are compounded by the means of production that direct labor to interact with the world through contemporary technologies (i.e. working at a computer terminal). As a result of these feelings they work toward creating an agrarian mode of being for themselves in their leisure time by producing food for themselves. In other words, for most, agrarian backyard visions are meant to be practices that allow them to “feel alive” or more authentic than techno-urban-industrial
enframing will allow. More authentic because they feel in command of their own labor and because that labor is not as mediated by contemporary technologies like what they experience in their jobs or through commodity food chains. The rest of this section looks at the importance of concrete labor for authenticity, the apocalypse narratives UBF producers use to justify and motivate themselves to learn post-apocalyptic food production skills and create a productive home economy centered on food production.

*Using concrete labor in UBF production to “feel alive” or get “back-to-the-basics”*

My research participants generally saw their backyard food production activities as an antidote to the alienation that they feel from working at abstract labor mediated by contemporary technologies. A poignant example came to me early on in my research from an interviewee whose husband started working in an office in downtown Denver after graduating from law school. His job demanded many hours at a desk performing abstract labor in the Marxist sense, but also abstract in the sense that he was not engaging in the “real (or natural or authentic) world.” His interactions with the material world happened through technologies such as computers, climate control systems, the legal system, and commuting on highways in enclosed vehicles. To ameliorate these feelings of alienation and inauthenticity he and his wife kept chickens. She told me that the chickens and their garden gave him a way to reconnect to what he perceived as the real-world outside of work, or as I am theorizing in this dissertation, to find a way to feel authentic while still being engaged in abstract labor.

Simply keeping the chickens offered him a way to access the authenticity he sought in the “real” world outside of his wage labor. The effort he was putting into taking care of the chickens or getting his hands dirty was most likely minimal as healthy chickens require
little active care. But, even if all he did was collect eggs once a day or spend a few minutes in the garden in the evening, this appears to be enough for him to feel connected to the “real” world, the world of concrete labor performed without the intervention or obfuscation of authentic relationships by modern modes of being.

This same justification for UBF producer practices was given by the wife of an accountant who said, “rather than being a bean counter when he comes home, this [build coop] is the kind of stuff he would do” (Scarlet, Personal communication, October 10, 2014) and by a web designer who said, ”I grew up on a farm in Oregon, this [pointing at chickens] is my respite after sitting in front of computers all day” (Matthew, Personal communication, October 10, 2014). In all of these cases what may appear at first glance as a leisurely diversion is actually, at least partly, explained by feelings of dissatisfaction with abstract labor. In particular, these three examples are of married, white men who labor at computer terminals in office buildings where they feel disconnected from something more real or authentic—something that they try to gain through food production activities. It is noteworthy that for many people these activities are not meant to replace or even subvert techno-urban-industrial enframing, but rather offer a break or practice to help them reclaim their identity after abstractly laboring all day. In other words, they see their activities as focal practices that use agrarian activities to ameliorate the inauthenticity they feel from abstract labor that inserts modern technologies between them and nature.

Other interviewees felt that food production labor allowed them to be more authentic by giving them control, not just over their labor as concrete labor, but as labor used to control what they and their families ate—or how they metabolized nature. They justify their activities with comments like “we needed to get back-to-the-basics” (Personal
communication, August 14, 2015) by which Melinda meant producing food in a productive home economy. As a full-time homemaker she had become concerned with what her children were consuming and as a result she had researched first the effect of hydraulic fracturing on water systems and then conventional food systems. Because of her research she decided that her family should take control of their food sources by selectively purchasing and autonomously producing and processing their own foods. Getting “back-to-the-basics” for her was becoming a food producer not only because it gave her control over the food her family ate, but also because for her this type of personal production allowed her to focus on what she found to be important. “Basics” for her was a synonym for what is real, essential, natural, or authentic. Getting back-to-the-basics meant being more authentic by bringing her labor to bear reflexively in the production of edible backyard nature.

Another interviewee, and fellow Master Gardener, told me that she grew food because it made her “feel more in control over her life” (Laura, Personal communication, July 15, 2015). Control is important because it allows her to define who she is through her production practices and to define the type of nature her personal food provisioning practices produce. If she could not grow it herself she at least wanted to know the farmer, again, so she could feel in control of how she was metabolizing nature. For her this intimate and productive relationship with nature made her feel in control over part of her otherwise thoroughly techno-urban-industrial life and thus more authentic.

Using backyard food-producing labor as a form of personal control or independence from hegemonic techno-industrial conventions aligns closely with an ethics of authenticity that tells people to look inside themselves for what is essential and therefore authentic. Going back-to-the-basics, feeling in control or closer to nature are ways of expressing that
the techno-urban-industrial reality is inauthentic and being uncritically engaged in this reality makes a self inauthentic. Taking control of one’s labor and using it to grow food, something that everyone is existentially dependent on and directly affects what kinds of nature are produced, makes them feel more authentic. For many the perceived dissonance between techno-urban-industrial society and what they consider is natural, real, or authentic is so great that they feel they must grow food to prepare for an apocalypse by developing food production skills as survival skills.

Prepping for the apocalypse: “It’s not a hobby, it's a post-apocalyptic life skill!”

Almost every person that I interviewed for this project directly or indirectly justified their UBF production practices or appreciation of these practices with an apocalyptic narrative. These narratives also inform what they do and the identities they are trying to create for themselves. Because they believe there is an imminent or ongoing apocalypse wrought by techno-industrial food provisioning, they feel that they must ameliorate their personal dependence on techno-industrial food and for practical reasons develop skills to survive “when the [food] trucks stop coming” or can no longer deliver a safe product. To avert or survive this apocalypse they feel they must get control of themselves by developing food-producing skills so they have the potential to be self-sufficient.

Even when an UBF producer thought of food production as a hobby, it was not simply a diversion, rather they wrapped their “hobby” in the belief that they were getting ready for or were ready for some apocalyptic event in which their survival would depend upon their ability to produce use values through a personal, productive relationship with nature. Each apocalyptic vision follows a script that describes the modern food system as too consolidated and dependent on long fragile commodity chains underpinned by fossil
fuels to be sustainable. They also presented a general distrust of conventional food products which they considered to be toxic to consumers, unable to keep up with population growth, and they hold the industrial food system responsible for environmental degradation that will eventually undercut the environmental foundations upon which modern society depends. They use the weight of these concerns to determine that industrial food provisioning and their dependence on it to be immoral and growing one’s own food to be both moral and more authentic than commodity consumption.

An example of how these apocalyptic beliefs motivated UBF practices and subsequently shaped these practitioner’s identities as food producers can be found in the perennial issue of what is in the industrially produced milk, meat, and eggs people are consuming. The UBF producers who participated in my project were keenly aware, in particular, of how meat and milk are produced, having gleaned information from popular media, reading blogs, and through local classes and events. A representative example comes from a former high school teacher, who is now a fulltime homemaker with two small children. She was concerned about what was in industrially produced milk. She did not want to give “contaminated” industrially produced milk to her children. She researched where she could buy raw (synonymous for her and most UBF producers with natural or authentic) goats milk locally and she now drives over 30 miles to get raw goats milk for her family and pays a premium for it. In her particular case her pursuit of raw milk was a direct response to her belief that industrial food is a threat to her family’s well-being.

Her research into industrial food systems motivated her in other ways. It led her to question the safety of industrial meat and she subsequently acquired dual-purpose (meat and egg) chickens and developed a plan to get meat rabbits. Her initial concerns over milk
safety also drove her to convert her front yard into a vegetable garden, plant a fruit tree, and begin processing (through fermentation) some of her own food. She still held out having her own dairy goats as the best solution to her fear of industrial milk production, but she was working within her own personal temporal and spatial constraints—i.e. pre-school aged children and she wasn’t ready to give her limited backyard space over to goats.

Her long-term plan was to move her family to a rural area and increase her family’s self-sufficiency. For her, the apocalypse was now, and looking at farm land in north central Wyoming upon which to become a self-sustaining subsistence farmer was considered by her to be the logical and best response. Her actual response, as was the response of most UBF producers who had similar bucolic dreams of self-sufficiency, was to blend the conveniences and ubiquity of techno-urban-industrial life with this eventual goal of self-sufficiency. What she was doing in practice was using her utopian agrarian visions to articulate her moral and ethical beliefs. Her autonomous urban food production practices became part of her critical awareness of techno-urban-industrial enframing. While her beliefs and practices on one level meant to combat her apocalyptic fears, they were on another level functioning as focal practices.

Access to food is another apocalyptic fear that many of my interviewees talked about in terms of poor, or unreliable food distribution in the form of urban food deserts. One UBF producer, who also taught classes about how to produce one’s own food, thinks there are many aspects of autonomous production that ameliorate food access problems saying, "you can grow your own food, and that has so many beneficial aspects. It is an economic aspect, it is a mental health aspect, and it is a health aspect" (Clementine, Personal communication, June 14, 2015). This statement is representative of how UBF
producers feel about food production as a practical solution to unequal access to food. In the mind of Clementine and other research participants who addressed the issue of food deserts in the course of semi-structured interviews and informal observations, growing one’s own food possibly offers a better solution than trying to make the industrial food system more equitable. The perception is that independence and self-sufficiency lead to more authentic people—authentic because they are critically aware and politically active in subverting their dependence on inauthentic consumerism. The authentic person, for them, avoids being abused by the industrial food system by not relying on it in the first place. To the UBF producer, this combination of being self-sufficient and reproducing the means of production makes a person more authentic and therefore resilient in the face of an apocalyptic techno-urban-industrial landscape.

Another apocalyptic concern of my research participants is that the conventional food system or modernity in general might collapse due to some exogenous shock to what they see as an unnecessarily fragile food system. A CSU horticultural agent expressed these concerns asking rhetorically, "what happens if gas prices go back up or we try and mitigate climate change somehow or worst case scenario the trucks stop coming to the grocery store? … How do we have that infrastructure to be a resilient Colorado" (Markus, Personal communication, June 23, 2015). When I asked him how this fit into the 2020 Sustainability Goals of the Denver Office of Sustainability, he told me that UBF production is too diffuse and private to account for at the scale of Denver let alone the entire State that he referred to in his scenario. He said that the Denver Office of Sustainability needs to be able to measure progress in meeting its sustainability goal of having 20% of Denver’s food sourced from the State of Colorado (Sustainability 2015) and that UBF production would not be
part of this calculus. Nevertheless, he and other members of the sustainability council
continued to link UBF production to the larger vision of becoming more food self-sufficient
as a city, a region, and a state to avoid apocalyptic food shortages. His comments are
valuable to my argument because they show that the value of independence in food
provisioning is so pervasive, it is not just the goal of individuals, but of those charged with
preparing a large American city and state for the future. UBF production is in other words
increasingly enmeshed in hegemonic institutional discourses. I address the implications of
this in Chapter 5.

The issue with petroleum reliance that Markus brought up was deployed in many of
the apocalyptic narratives of my participants. This is best exemplified by another
community leader, Mike, who manages his own not-for-profit dedicated to exploring how
to get people to produce foods at a neighborhood scale using their backyards. They try to
do this by “working with rather than against natural systems” (Mike, Personal
communication, July 7, 2015). Part of his organization’s narrative about why society needs
to change is based on the “Transition Movement,” an international movement trying to
envision a post-petroleum economy. Mike, like Markus, is concerned about the over
dependence of society on oil to produce and distribute food. The solution for Mike, like
Markus, is to produce locally; but, Mike’s primary focus is linking backyard production
together at a neighborhood scale where the end consumers are in control of food
production as the production of sustainable nature and are therefore more resilient
because they “produce for sufficiency rather than for profit” (Mike, Personal
communication, July 7, 2015) in a hyperlocal food economy.
Many UBF producers and community leaders continue to dwell on the neo-Malthusian lament over the Earth’s carrying capacity and overpopulation. Illustrative of these concerns Markus told me that,

Me personally, it’s like there’s like so much fiction around it you go from Ishmael to Thoreau, to you know The Hunger Games and things like that. But, you kind of look at the kind of long-term trends ... how we are in this exponential growth of population and the limits and carrying capacity and stuff like that ... I do kind of worry that maybe not in my lifetime, but maybe in my kids’ lifetime, that it’s going to be Mad Max time ... (Markus, Personal communication, June 23, 2015)

There are several revealing components embedded in Markus’ concern over carrying capacity. First, the neo-Malthusian narrative of the “population bomb” persists and motivates people to want to do something to prepare for scarcity due to overpopulation (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2009). It also demonstrates the effect that popular culture, notably dystopian fiction, has on people’s framing of their lives, who they are, and how they should comport themselves. Mitigating or preparing for these apocalyptic scenarios so dominates many peoples’ vision of the future that they want to prepare for it by becoming self-sufficient food producers or otherwise less dependent on the trucks that may stop coming.

Notably everyone I interviewed felt that the existential threats embedded in the inauthentic contemporary means of production had to be ameliorated in some way. Learning how to produce sustainable nature by developing the skills to produce their own food appeared to be a rational decision.

As Markus said, “how can we build in systems that can gracefully get us down and decelerate our eventual collapse?” (Personal communication, June 23, 2015). His answer is of course local food systems that incorporate UBF production. Mike, concurs with this perspective saying “we can produce food to get independence from the [techno-industrial] system, ... or to protect yourself from a collapse in the food system” (Personal
communication, July 7, 2015). The point I want to make here is that UBF production has become part of sustainability narratives through post-apocalyptic survival scenarios to such a degree that they have infiltrated institutional discourses like those surrounding Sustainable Denver 2020. They shape not only what individuals do, but how problems and solutions are framed for entire communities, even if only a limited number of people are trying to put these ideologies into practice. Essentially, UBF production as hyperlocal food provisioning has become a key component of the institutional discourses in the Denver area for what a survivable future should look like. This shows the continued power of the pastoral ideal resonating through New Agrarianism, popular cultural discourses, and personal narratives, influencing who people think they are, what nature is, and how they should interface.

A final major apocalyptic concern is the diffuse belief that the Earth’s ability to sustain life is compromised by how the means of production metabolizes nature. In Marxist terms, they are concerned with the second contradiction of capitalism or that the means of production are undermining the ability of humans to continue to reproduce the means of production (O’Connor 1988; L. Marx 2000). This concern, evident in New Agrarianism, was the original concern of the organic food movement before organics also came to be governed by the industrial means of production (Guthman 2004), and is a driving concern of a number of food movements including localism, Slow Food, and Farm-to-table, and UBF production. In all of these alternative food movements there is the belief that sustainable and hence moral food production should work with nature or natural systems rather than work against them. Treating land like a factory floor where inputs come in as commodities and outputs leave as commodities and waste, rather than treating all the parts as mutually
constituted components of a closed-loop (self-contained) system is what UBF producers articulate in their counter discourses as the central problem with contemporary society. The UBF producer narrative argues that natural systems should be understood as sustainable systems or systems that are tempered by and respectful of that system’s ability to reproduce its means of production. Linear production systems that they believe work against nature by mining the soil, rather than working within the sustainable limits of land are considered unnatural and unsustainable and therefore inauthentic and immoral.

Mike addressed this in the most succinct terms when he said of his organization, “we are looking at it in terms of how are we going to support 9 billion people on the planet? And if you are tearing down the [natural] systems you then have less and less to work with, which is what we do in industrial agriculture” (Personal communication, June 23, 2015). Mike uses this apocalyptic concern to define what society should look like, how people should relate to each other and the land, and what kind of nature people should produce, if they want a healthy or survivable future. He, like most UBF producers, intend their actions to be subversive by shaping future social relations and people’s identities so that they reflect a New Agrarian ethic of authenticity which leads to “good use” by using “nature as measure.”

Reciting these apocalyptic concerns should be looked at as an essential signifying practice in the discourses that motivate UBF producer practices and shape UBF producer’s identities as well as what is understood as valuable and ethical for society at large. The pervasiveness of UBF producer/New Agrarian apocalyptic concerns in society at large is evidenced by their reiteration by nearly every person that participated in this project whether they produced food or not and in popular discourses that I examined for this
research project. These apocalyptic scenarios frame a critique of techno-urban-industrial society that argues that its means of production are unsustainable and therefore unethical and existentially threaten individual and collective futures. Retelling or dwelling on these survival narratives shapes practitioner’s and non-practitioner’s values and practices alike because these scenarios, as Marcus demonstrated, are enmeshed in our popular culture and institutional discourses.

Using apocalyptic distrust of the industrial food system to justify the importance of having autonomous food production for existential survivability is a theme that cut across races, genders, and socioeconomic classes in my data. I interviewed a full-time professional landscape gardener who tended several vegetable plots in Boulder for clients. She said of one her ultra-wealthy clients who hired others to produce food on her land, "she wants it [her food-producing operation] for the ideal and she’s like . . . totally into this apocalyptic thing, like, hard core . . .” (Natalie, Personal communication, August 8, 2015). In several instances I interviewed the non-white, primarily black or Hispanic neighbors of UBF producers, and they too all thought that it was important to grow one’s own food in part because the conventional food system was selling “poisonous” products or because they did not trust the resilience of the industrial food system. Even though these interviewees were not producing food for themselves, they felt it was a desirable activity. This is something that I discuss more in Chapter 5 as the result of a complex field of institutional discourses and realities of material relations.

*Knowledge as power: becoming more authentic by building skills-based and generalist knowledge to survive the apocalypse*

Knowledge is something that no one can take from you. It’s the eternal wealth that will help you thrive in a Post-Collapse world . . . (“10 Skills ” 2010)
10 Skills needed to thrive in a post-collapse world

1. Organic gardening and seed saving
2. Food processing and preservation
3. Hunting, fishing, and gathering
4. Animal husbandry
5. Construction
6. Alternative energy and fuels
7. Water purification
8. Basic first aid and natural medicine
9. Mechanics
10. Soap and candle making (2010)

Most UBF producers are unique in the alternative food movement in that they take the ideologies of the alternative food movement underpinned by a New Agrarian ethics of authenticity to their logical and extreme conclusion. UBF producers are not just pursuing the knowledge or capacity to make choices between commodities, but are specifically interested in developing the skills to produce food for themselves. My research participants value practical, generalist knowledge because they believe it makes them more resilient against the apocalyptic scenarios discussed in the previous section and because it makes them more independent or self-sufficient which they consider important aspects of their ethics of authenticity. They find being able to produce their own food allows them to be authentic byaffording them independence and allowing them to intimately metabolize nature for themselves rather than consume immoral techno-urban-industrial products made by someone else.

Every interview that was done at an UBF producer’s house involved a tour of their backyard in which they inevitably highlighted the skills that they had been developing and the practical knowledge that they had acquired as a result of producing food in their backyard. In general, they liked to explain how, through research and trial and error, they had converted their purely aesthetic or conventional backyard (a.k.a. lawn), the “hell-strip”
between sidewalks and curbs, unused land, or even apartment porches into food-producing spaces. But, this pride also extended to more generalist knowledge that they had acquired by producing food. These generalist skills were dominated by construction and food processing skills such as building a chicken coop, implementing sustainable design concepts (usually gleaned from permaculture design principles), building raised beds, keeping bees, kidding goats, butchering chickens, and fermenting and canning food.

Over the three years (2013-15) that I went on the Denver Urban Homesteader’s Chicken Coop Tour and Denver Botanical Garden’s Homestead Tour I observed that most of the people who showed off their chicken coops were really proud of their ability to build a coop and keep their chickens healthy. The actual food or products that they got at the end of the day (i.e. eggs) were only a small part of what they got out of producing food. I interviewed a young single woman, Diana, and her father in October of 2014. She had made a coop together as a bonding experience. It was Diana’s house and the only backyard food production practice she was involved with was keeping her flock in her newly built chicken coop. She was still in a honeymoon phase that many new UBF producers go through when they start to learn practical skills like building functional structures, keeping food-producing animals, or putting out a garden for the first time. These “honeymooners” are proud and expressive of every minute detail of what they have done and learned. This pride was not just in the finished products, but in the development and display of newfound or developed capabilities. These new skills give them confidence in themselves to direct their own labor toward a concrete goal or a capability that they previously found mysterious and intimidating.
I read this feeling of liberation or development of self-confidence as a realization that they were not completely dependent on consumerism and that they are on their way to ameliorating the feelings of alienation that they have from wage labor or that they might be able to survive “if the trucks stop coming.” By proving to themselves that they could build a coop, tend to chickens, and then eat products they produced themselves, they believe they have started traveling down a path toward self-sufficiency and control over their lives and how they metabolize their surroundings. By repeating this narrative and acting out its signifying practices they are helping to reproduce the belief that an authentic person is a person who can demonstrate that they are not completely dependent techno-urban-industrial discourses and practices. Simply put, they feel that commanding their own labor with the goal of becoming self-sufficient and expanding their “life-skills” they become more authentic as people than if they were to purchase the food that the techno-industrial food system offers them in a store.

This theme that autonomous food production builds more resilient and confident selves and thus authentic selves was consistent among UBF producers. This theme was expressed by research participants such as Athena telling a focus group why she was attending homesteading classes. “[I’m] picking up the skills I need so I don't end up wondering, what am I going to do now” (Personal communication, June 21, 2015)? Athena was telling us in general terms that building a chicken coop, learning to care for goats, and growing vegetables made her feel in control and resilient and that she was living a more authentic life or one in contrast to the consumerism that underpins contemporary techno-urban-industrial society.
The control and morality that Athena was trying to find by acquiring skills that made her less dependent on industrial food systems, were being developed in intentional contrast to techno-urban-industrial enframing. Athena said, "I don't want to buy stuff from the store, because it's gross" (Personal communication, June 21, 2015). Though they are her particular words they could have been spoken by any of my research participants including most of those who did not grow any of their own food. “Gross” was a simple term for an otherwise complicated evaluation of industrial food systems as morally objectionable because of how they treat animals and the environment, that industrially produced foods are “gross” because they are heavily processed and therefore not natural or really food, and simply because she and others in this group agreed that the quality of the food is bad to the point of being undeserving of the name milk, eggs, or even food.

In another interview, Matilde wove together food-producing labor, knowledge-power, and the moral belief that the more “natural” something is the better it is to explain how she combines her labor with her consumption patterns to get the best food she can for her family. Matilde told me:

I don't know what the deal is with the Miller Farms, they always have that deal, fill your bag for like ten bucks deal. Are they growing all of that? Like, it just sometimes feels like I'm at Sprouts . . . I go out to Berry Patch Farms a lot and we pick our own out there, but I also really like their store. When I'm low on eggs that's where I get my eggs from . . . they have grass-fed beef, and pastured chicken, and their own dried popcorn and stuff, which I think is so awesome! (Personal communication, July 31, 2015)

In this telling example Matilde passes a moral judgment on industrially produced food being sold at Sprouts and casts suspicion on the authenticity of Miller Farms local produce. She also places food, in which she and her family have a hand in its production, in this case through harvesting, as better or more authentic than food they did not have a hand in
producing. But, in a pinch she is willing to buy eggs and other products she is not producing herself as long as she feels in control of what she is buying. Control is represented by her belief that the food was produced in accordance with her moral code that holds grass-fed, pastured, and farm-to-table as superior. Her feelings of control are predicated on trust, her ability to verify the authenticity of what she is buying, and by the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity that encourages her to value autonomously produced food the most, locally produced food less so, and industrially produced the least.

It is not just UBF producers who find industrially produced food to be morally objectionable and inauthentic and food grown by oneself to be a morally desirable and authentic. I was able to inquire about or directly interview both interviewee’s neighbors and my own neighbors about their impressions of UBF production practices. Whether they were my Nigerian, Jamaican, or Latino neighbors or white neighbors from New York City or rural Illinois, or black neighbors from the U.S. South or Denver, they felt that it was “good” to be productively connected to the land through concrete labor unfettered by industrial ordering and technology. In all situations in which someone held a favorable opinion of UBF production they approved of UBF production because self-sufficiency is desirable, modern food systems are unsustainable, and/or they were attracted to the novelty or agrarian aesthetic provided by autonomous food production practices.

“Bud’s gotta go, mom!”: producing authentic children

UBF producers are also motivated by the belief that children need to be instilled with intimate knowledge of how food is grown in order to make children better, or more authentic individuals and resilient citizens. In this way they echo Jefferson’s belief that self-sufficient farmers make better citizens in a democracy and the New Agrarian ethics of
authenticity that believes an authentic individual, for environmental sustainability reasons, must live reflexively with the land. This discourse is more than a popular fringe or philosophical discourse. It is an ever more popular institutional discourse exemplified by a key representative on the Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council. He said:

we have a real obligation, I think to help both our children learn and touch and be with food so they know how to grow it, how to prepare it. What we do know is that if we can get our kids gardening early, they tend to garden later, and what comes with that is a much enhanced rate of eating fresh fruits and vegetables, of cooking at home, of doing exactly those things that are shown to reduce diet related chronic diseases. I also think we have an important role in engaging our next generation . . . folks who are really trying to learn some of the basic horticultural skills to apply in their own backyard food production, that are growing food for the purpose of selling or distributing it to others. (Joe, Presentation to Denver Colorado Master Gardeners, November 6, 2015)

His observations and conclusions show how the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity, as it promotes the authenticity of growing one’s own food, is translated into practical health and ultimately economic growth concerns in an effort to make them intelligible to other institutional discourses—especially capitalist discourses. But, the way that he proposes to address these concerns is not with more industrial regulation or new technologies or scientific research as tends to be case with techno-urban-industrial enframed solutions. Instead, he proposes what the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity proposes, that people have a “moral obligation” to realize their ties to the land through material practices in order to develop and internalize values which will help them ameliorate the unhealthy and unsustainable physical manifestations of techno-urban-industrial enframed food provisioning. Authentic citizens for them are those who challenge the overwhelming dominance of techno-industrial food through the development of skills for producing authentic nature and relationships with nature as food.
In a group discussion Gabby, an urban raw milk dairy farmer, reiterated the value of exposing kids to food production practices saying food production is “so good for kids, you know whether they embrace it or not, to be exposed to it” (Personal communication, June 21, 2015). In the same discussion Amelia gave a variant of a story almost any UBF producer, including myself, could tell to explain why some people want to expose kids to agricultural production practices, practices from which their parents and grandparents’ generations had been freed. She said, “you get some kids who look at my goats and ask, ‘Are those cows?’ No those are not cows. I know its black and white with spots, but it’s not a cow” (Personal communication, July 14, 2015). In both of these discussant’s minds, it is a moral failure that these children did not know the difference between a cow and goat or do not have exposure to food production activities. It is a point of pride for UBF producer parents that their kids have a “real” or authentic understanding of where food comes from as well as the skills necessary to produce food if they must. Not knowing where food is coming from or even better how to produce it for themselves, undermines a child’s potential to make moral decisions or be authentic.

Another example of the mainstreaming of autonomous food production and the intrinsic value of exposing children to autonomous food production practices is Michelle Obama’s White House garden, the first since Eleanor Roosevelt’s victory garden, replete with honeybee hives. The White House has made a public spectacle out of preparing meals with their garden’s produce and has even had their chefs brew beer using the honey from the White House hives. The White House also hosts school tours and harvesting events in their kitchen garden in an effort to educate children and their parents to be more thoughtful about their health and how it relates to the foods they eat (Office of the First
Lady 2015; The White House 2009). The bees that they keep extend the food production lessons beyond the link they are trying to make between food and health. Incorporating pollinators helps them to link healthy food to healthy pollinators as an integral part of a healthy or authentic food production system.

The White House's public display of their UBF production practices is meant to promote a New Agrarian ethics of authenticity based on at least partial self-sufficiency with an emphasis on (hyper)localism. That the Obamas are not doing the labor themselves has not detracted from their influence in getting others to think about producing their own food. That these practices are happening in such a public forum communicates to anyone looking to the White House for direction, that autonomous food production is something that they should consider, as even the First Family of the U.S. feels ethically obligated to grow their own food and to challenge the inauthenticity of techno-industrial food production, practices that the White House, like other UBF producers, believes will result in changing or at least challenging techno-industrial food provisioning discourses.

The influence of the Obama's messages and examples extends far beyond a few Washington D.C. classrooms and even beyond children. For example, host on a chicken coop tour told me: "I was actually scared [to produce food in my yard], but that was about the time when Michael Obama moved into the White House and she made herself a big garden there . . . I figured the time has come" (Matthew, Personal communication, October 10, 2014).

Many schools in the Denver metro area have also taken it upon themselves to add farm-to-school gardens to their facilities with one school, the Denver Green School ("Denver Green School" 2016), partnering with an adjacent CSA to produce food that can be
used at the school. Students work in the garden as part of the school’s environmental sustainability focused curriculum. Meanwhile, my daughters’ school in a downtown Denver high-rise, encircled by concrete and asphalt, found educating children on food production so important that it is the thematic focus of all first grade classes. They learn about pollination, plant and garden animal life-cycles, and visit several farms and gardens (including mine) on field trips where the kids learn how food production works by “getting their hands dirty” planting or harvesting vegetables. The message is communicated by both of these schools and several others in Denver with farm-to-school gardens is clear, that the techno-industrial food system is “bad” and locally produced, organic, heirloom food is “good.” To be authentic one must be an environmentally ethical person and a moral and healthy person. Therefore, to produce authentic children the schools should teach students to be thoughtful of the foods they eat and probably they should grow some of this food for themselves. As a result of having gone through this first grade curriculum my daughters refuse to eat at McDonald’s, even though it used to be their favorite place to eat. The New Agrarian ethics of authenticity would applaud their feelings about McDonald’s as those of a critically aware or an authentic self.

This plays out in much the same way at the scale of households with parents relishing with pride that their children have intimate farming knowledge that other children do not have. One interviewee told me that her family was getting ready to process a rooster. With clear pride she recounted how her four-year-old son had named all the chickens, but was enthusiastically ok with slaughtering and eating them. She told me that after a rooster named Bud started crowing her son said, "Bud’s gotta go mom . . . We’ll just get another one" (Melinda, Personal communication, August 14, 2015). She finished
recounting the story beaming with the idea that her children were getting something that other kids at school were not getting—a practical and personal education on how food is produced. This exposure makes many UBF producing parents feel like they are fulfilling a moral and ethical obligation to make authentic children by helping their children develop an intimate relationship to their food. Self-sufficiency and a practical awareness of how one is existentially tied to the land, again, are characteristic of an authentic person.

*Authenticity and the productive home economy*

This moral obligation to teach kids how food is grown manifests itself for many as an obligation to create a productive home economy. Productive home economies not only fulfill an obligation to give skills to children that will enable them to be more authentic, but also function as an intentionally counterhegemonic or subversive set of practices that make homes and homemakers more authentic. I found this desire for a home economy to be congruent with New Agrarianism’s philosophical and increasingly mainstream belief that society from parents to schools to governments have a moral obligation to educate children to be critical of where their food comes from or even better how to produce it for themselves. My research participants and scores of blogs (e.g. The Chicken Mama, Better Hens and Gardens, Reformation Acres) promote a productive home economy that resists techno-urban-industrial enframing by producing for itself. As my research participants often put it, they are pursuing “living a simpler life” or “getting back-to-the-basics.” As a manifestation of agrarian nostalgia and resistance of the alienation that they believe results from contemporary consumer society, they view the productive home economy as more authentic and moral than a household which uncritically acquiesces in contemporary consumer culture beliefs and practices.
Melinda articulated how UBF producers come to idealize and desire a productive home economy as a form of resistance and authenticity. She said she looked at food politics, policies, corporations, and

closer at farmers and what was happening to them. I mean everything just started to just come together for us and sort of transforming a little bit more how we ate. I mean we never really ate bad, but we were trying to start . . . [to] do more at home. Making bread, yogurts, beer . . . just learning to be more dependent on ourselves. (Melinda, Personal communication, August 14, 2015)

For Melinda, like many others, their interest in producing food in their backyard starts when they read a Michael Pollen book, watch a documentary critical of techno-industrial food systems, or in her case worrying about the impact of hydraulic fracturing on her children’s water. People like Melinda internalize and expand on these initial instances in which they start developing a critical awareness of the techno-industrial food system. They feel something is wrong with letting this system have so much control over what they metabolize as food. They feel like the products of this system are existentially threatening to their selves and their households as a reflection of their selves. To varying degrees, they see the solution as producing for themselves. This makes them feel both more in control and more authentic.

The more that can be produced at home, whether it’s clothing, home remodeling, or food production and processing, the more one does oneself the more self-reliant and thus authentic one is. Artisanal production for personal or hyperlocal consumption is considered to be morally superior to consuming from the opaque commodity chains of industrially produced goods. Control over one’s personal and familial food provisioning mixes with a moral belief that producing food as part of a productive home economy is
preferable to provisioning from the techno-industrial system. The productive home economy represents a place where households can express their authentic selves through independence, care, and a subversive comportment toward conventional discourses that are all elements of their particular version of an ethics of authenticity. By producing the means of their existence they believe that they are in control of the production of themselves, their family, and their relationship to others.

**Nature as measure (or reflexive labor and the production of a moral ontology)**

The second major way that I observed labor factoring into UBF production narratives was in its role in creating a moral ontology of nature. As small-scale or subsistence farmers, UBF producers believe that they would be better positioned to become more authentic people, people who develop morally appropriate understandings of their place in the world by working directly with nature. This strong belief that intimately working with nature to produce food to sustain oneself physically also results in people who make good moral decisions is threaded through New Agrarianism and popular food literature into the narratives told by the UBF producers that I interviewed. They believe that nature is authentic and contemporary productions of techno-urban industrial nature are inauthentic. They are made inauthentic by the social relationships that result from techno-urban-industrial enframing. They hold that co-producing themselves and nature by laboring at hyperlocal autonomous food production will organically lead them to use nature to make moral decisions and thus to an authentic, because its rooted in nature, set of values.

Exemplary of how important food production is in the narratives of UBF producers in the Denver metro area was an exchange I had with Matilde:
Matilde: When you get into the kind of homesteading and you get into working with animals, it just totally kind of changes you, who you are and what you do, you know, what the choices you make . . . I would not have pictured myself doing this like 15 years ago . . . it’s really pretty life changing don’t you think?

Interviewer: Your values change?

Matilde: Yes! I’m never inside anymore.

(Matilde, Personal communication, July 31, 2015)

In this exchange Matilde reveals how important personally producing food is for the development of authentic moral values for UBF producers. In this particular case she was using the word homesteading to identify her productive home economy as more than just gardening or chicken husbandry. For her it was a lifestyle change to a more authentic set of relationships with the material world and resulting moral values and authentic interpersonal relationships.

For her, food-producing practices led to positive life-changing experiences that in the rest of our interview she revealed as a change toward being more in touch with how she and her family are metabolizing the world. Producing food made her more self-aware, critical of conventional food provisioning practices and thus a more authentic person. Upon prompting she excitedly agreed that her values had changed as a result of her practices. She summed up these values as “never being inside anymore,” which, based on the rest of the interview she was using as a euphemism for being thoughtful in her productive engagement with nature—where nature is understood as the wellspring of authenticity. Her life changing experience was feeling more authentic by resisting the inauthenticity of techno-industrial productions of nature that otherwise constantly reinforced her position as a subject of inauthentic enframing.

In my interview with Clementine, she linked capitalist techno-industrial material and discursive relationships to the inauthenticity and resulting immorality of
contemporary farmers. She said, "they are not really connected to that earth; they're only connected to that earth by what it can provide for them [as profit]" (Clementine, Personal communication, June 14, 2015). Having told me that she was not familiar with any New Agrarian authors, Clementine nevertheless went on to outline the general problem and resolution that New Agrarians and most other UBF producers give for their practices. They find that large-scale techno-industrial farming, done for profit (exchange value) rather than for sustenance (specific use value), facilitates a comportment toward nature that is based on self-destructive, short-sighted and thus immoral practices. The resolution for her, as it is for New Agrarians and other UBF producers, is to develop the right moral bearing of self in relationship to nature by producing food at a local or hyperlocal scale.

UBF producers also try to actively use their vision of nature in contrast to techno-urban-industrial enframing as a form of inspiration for how to behave. That is, they look to nature for what is “real” and try to model their behaviors on this reality in order to move closer toward being authentic. Mike summed up how this works by telling me that "our culture is based on moving things in the direction of sterility. But, if we are going to survive the end of industrialization then we are going to have to understand, we are going to have to really want a healthy system" (Personal communication, July 7, 2015). Throughout our conversation he constantly returned to this problem that techno-industrial enframing undermines nature. He argues that people need to be taught to look to nature and natural systems for moral inspiration and guidance for proper behavior.

For him proper behavior is found in the systems and loops of nature. Systems and loops, he argues, are closed and do not need exogenous inputs and do not generate waste. In his mind authentic nature does not need to mine other systems for inputs or externalize
its wastes like industrial food production does. Rather than viewing land as living systems in which production is going to take place, land is altered to resemble a factory floor. The land is sterilized of native organisms, inputs are brought to the field, and waste and products are harvested and moved into long commodity chains that take the products out of the local system or flood the environment with disruptive and destructive waste. Like most promoters or practitioners of UBF production, closing production loops and eliminating the concept of “waste,” such that waste becomes another beneficial input into the next production cycle, makes this type of nature and those who labor to create it more authentic than those that perpetuate “unnatural” industrial production and consumption practices.

Getting in touch with nature: the metaphysical value of getting your hands dirty

As a value, the importance of getting your hands dirty is of paramount importance to New Agrarians, popular agrarian discourse, and the majority of my research participants. New Agrarians hold the personal act of producing food up as how one produces both authentic products and selves. Popular discourses also celebrate getting dirty through producing food as the activity of morally righteous people. One Colorado State University Extension Office leader expressed the value of getting one’s hands dirty saying,

Collin: What we have seen is that people have started to gain a very tactile appreciation for their food system. I don’t know how many of you have had a chance to clean a fresh egg, but when you clean that fresh egg and you cook with the fresh egg, you get a new appreciation of where our meat comes from. The same is true for having dwarf dairy goats and having the opportunity to milk them, maybe to make cheese . . . and many of you can certainly understand the importance of touching a carrot, washing a carrot, and what that means particularly for a child, or for someone who hasn’t ever realized what a broccoli plant looks like.
Audience collectively and affirmatively responded: “Uh, huh.”
(Collin, Presentation to Denver Master Gardeners, November 6, 2015)

His words are underpinned by an assumption with which the entire audience of Master Gardeners collectively agreed with—that the knowledge of where food comes from is good. And furthermore, that the best way to discover or impart this appreciation is by growing one’s own food—by getting one’s hands dirty in the act of producing food. In the array of values that my research participants expressed, the importance of getting their hands dirty surfaced frequently. The process of getting one’s hands dirty is not only a value in itself but it is the process through which a person will develop a proper moral bearing. Through this moral ontology of dirty hands, or intimately working with nature, moral values that are lost in techno-urban-industrial enframing are supposed to become apparent.

My participants also expressed strong feelings about the importance of getting their hands dirty growing food because it results in desirable feelings such as feeling relaxed or more intimately connected with the world than they otherwise feel as subjects of techno-urban-industrial enframing. While there is some evidence that there are biochemical reasons for these feelings (Matthews and Jenks 2013), I am concerned here with the discursive reasons that working soil is considered an important practice. In other words, working in a garden is relaxing in part because a practitioner wants it to be or because the discourses that they subscribe to tells them that it is. In numerous interviews people told me something similar to, ”I like getting my hands dirty, it’s kind of my shrink. It puts you back in the basics” (Jethro, Personal communication, June 14, 2015). In these explanations about why they garden, my interviewees are trying to give a naturalistic reason for their practices. Getting their hands dirty while producing food makes them feel like they are accessing something more basic, natural, or authentic, in the sense that they are connecting
with the world in a way they feel is more real than if they interacted with it through techno-industrial enframing. That getting hands dirty functions as a “shrink” or form of therapy for them reinforces the general claim that techno-urban-industrial society is inauthentic or unnatural to the point that it is causing psychological problems. Getting “back-to-nature” is the way UBF producers believe they can become authentic selves. Getting back to nature is a way of ameliorating and for some UBF producers subverting immoral and inauthentic techno-urban-industrial discourses.

The practical value of knowing how to produce one’s own food and the therapeutic value that these practices are supposed to have are desirable end goals for UBF producers, but these practices are also meant to lead to more authentic selves. One interviewee told me that in addition to getting her outside more and giving her yard *raison d'être* (both inherently good things for her), her food production activities have also encouraged her to become a better person, because she is being critical rather than accepting of techno-urban-industrial discourses and practices. Her food production practices resulted in raw produce that she felt compelled to cook—something else she valued as a moral practice and which gardening facilitated. For her and most UBF producers, producing their own food provides them with the material and discursive motivation to be real, “healthier,” “in touch with nature,” or authentic. In other words, producing food autonomously results not only in healthy or moral food, but also in authentic values and ultimately selves that arise from these practices.

*Authentic time and place: Nature’s rhythm and the value of being there*

Another way that my research participants measured authenticity was by how closely someone lived or labored with regard to “nature’s rhythms.” In their
minds, the farmer who planted and harvested according to seasons or the dairy farmer who schedules her days around milking is more authentic than the techno-industrial laborer whose labor is enframed by the unnatural temporal demands of machines and industrial organization. As one of my research participants put it, UBF production happens according to “nature's rhythm,” which is very different from contemporary society’s techno-urban-industrial rhythms. A person who gets up to milk a goat every morning or decides not to take a vacation because they feel compelled to put out or harvest a garden when it is ready, is deemed to be more authentic than a person who consumes counterseasonal produce and ultra-pasteurized industrially produced milk without ever having to respond to the natural cycles in which those products were produced. UBF producers put a tremendous amount of value on one’s capacity to live according to what they see as nature’s authentic temporal dimensions.

This tension between industrial and agrarian time influences what food production activities someone is willing to participate in and which are even possible. In terms of this dissertation UBF producers see a continuum of authenticity along which authenticity is determined by how closely someone labor’s according to nature’s rhythms as determined by the lifecycle needs of the plants and animals they produce. The standard against which many UBF producers measured their willingness to live by nature’s authentic rhythms was their willingness and ability to mold their lives around milking goats. Being able to make oneself available to milk every day at the same time is an impossible prospect for most people that I interviewed. They feared having to be tied to the cycle of milking, which they realized would interfere with their ability to live according to techno-industrial time. The
people who did make time to milk goats usually were homemakers or worked from home or had a job that gave them the temporal flexibility to be available to milk the goats.

Those who did milk goats affirmed that milking was indeed difficult because it worked counter to the techno-urban-industrial ordering of the hegemonic world around them. Gabby who managed a small raw milk dairy in Lakewood, Colorado explained that she thought, “goats are very good teachers of life’s lessons . . . Especially when you do the milking thing . . . I think just the commitment, and the relationship you form with milking animals is pretty special . . . I mean you know, it’s pretty intense” (Personal communication, June 21, 2015). By saying that keeping milk goats is a commitment she is reacting to the reality that the milking has to be done every day and that dairy animals prefer to have this done at the same time everyday regardless of weekends and holidays. She also tells us that it is “special,” alluding to its being unusual in contemporary U.S. culture to tie oneself to the rhythms of nature. Finally, by saying that milking is a “good teacher of life’s lessons,” she is saying that she believes that having to milk an animal teaches something important. From the theoretical framework that I have been developing in this dissertation, that lesson is that people are more authentic when they understand and respect nature’s rhythms. The practice of milking goats every day, seven days a week, all year around is how this lesson is learned. So again, authentic people are those who reflexively produce food and in the process produce their authentic selves. Through this production and subsequent metabolism of what is produced, UBF producers are supposed to develop a morality based on intimate interactions with nature and this is believed to make them more authentic.

Of course, most people cannot or will not for various reasons be able to acquire milk goats and set about milking them to “learn life’s lessons.” Instead, what I found is that
keeping milk goats was held out by most UBF producers as the most authentic activity in which an UBF producer could be involved and to which she should aspire—short of moving to a rural farm and becoming completely self-sufficient. However, each individual has to determine how to balance their desire for authenticity with the realities of living in techno-urban-industrial society and the trade-offs begin when an UBF producer decides to produce food in the city rather than in a rural setting. UBF producers who did not have goats held it out as an ultimate goal or felt like they had to make excuses for why they could not milk goats every day.

The difficulty in balancing industrial and agrarian time went beyond the extreme case of milking. In general, producing one’s own food can take a lot of time and is a frequent reason given by people who like the idea of producing their own food, but do not. It is also a reason given by UBF producers to excuse themselves from not getting everything done that they think they should. For instance, many UBF producers expressed guilt because they were not keeping weeds pulled in their garden, had not cleaned their chicken coops as often as they felt they should, or even felt that they could do a better job managing their compost if they were not trying to balance their agrarian desires with their life’s techno-urban-industrial demands. An UBF producer told me somewhat tongue and cheek that "someone said ‘how do you get everything done that you do?’ I don’t clean or do laundry. That’s the sacrifice” (Personal communication, July 31, 2015). Balancing the demands of these two temporal rhythms, even for someone not bound to labor outside the home, meant negotiation and sacrifice, leaving some things undone.
Using labor to “help nature” or the production of “authentic” nature

A problematic phrase that came up consistently in my observations and interviews is that many backyard food producers feel like their practices are “helping nature.” By helping nature, they mean that they want to (re)produce the authentic nature that they imagine should exist or existed before techno-urban-industrial society adversely affected it. This phrase was deployed in a myriad of situations exemplified by the reasons given for urban beekeeping and the value they assigned to heritage breeds and varieties. Almost without variation when I asked an urban beekeeper why she keeps bees she explained that bees are in trouble from a number of human threats, that this is bad for food diversity, and that she believes by keeping bees that she is “saving the bees” and the plant species that depend on those bees for pollination. I pressed interviewees like her to explain exactly what is harming the bees and why they think keeping bees in the city is saving them. Not surprisingly most people had only a vague idea of why honey bee populations are declining, usually making a general reference to colony collapse disorder. They viewed the bees as an indicator species for the coming collapse of ecological systems, especially food systems, due to techno-urban-industrial food production processes that want to reorder nature without regard to the ecological process that make the food production possible—namely pesticide use and monocropping.

The idea of “helping nature” is emblematic of the problem of using nature as a reference for moral behavior. It is problematic 1) because as I argued in Chapter 1 the definition of nature is culturally situated, yet my research participants consistently assumed that nature is an apolitical and universally understood concept. 2) Helping is also a subjective term that makes several assumptions about society’s relationship with the
material world, including assuming a separate and paternalistic existence of society over nature, one in which society needs to help material nature realize its authentic nature! The problem with defining nature and in what ways it needs to be “helped,” if at all, come to a fine point when we consider that the bees that these beekeepers want to help are imported European honey bees (*Apis mellifera*). So, a species that exists in the Americas because it was imported for the production of food crops that were also often imported to the Americas (i.e. almonds) has become a symbol of society’s impact on nature in general.

Either because they do not know, or because they do not care that *Apis mellifera* is imported, their belief that it needs to be saved or helped ignores other ways of looking at the nature they find under threat. First, honey bees are just one pollinator species of thousands in North America and to fixate on one bee species perpetuates rather than mitigates society’s dependence on monocultures—a single species that is being “saved” is also the species that is being used by industrial agriculture to produced food. It is also somewhat ironic that there is evidence that native bee populations, which are better at pollinating native plants and are also under threat from the techno-industrial production of nature, recover when *Apis mellifera* populations decrease (Whitney 2015). UBF producers as beekeepers believe that they are helping nature by keeping bees, even if both the notions of “nature” and “helping” are political and their implementation might not coincide with scientifically understood relationships, ecological history, or even with other people’s understanding of honey bee ecology.

*Negotiating authenticity: “That’s when I knew I couldn’t be a farmer”*

New Agrarian philosophy, popular agrarian discourse, and many UBF producers as New Agrarians in practice do not usually, though there are exceptions, imagine that they
could or should become subsistence farmers who completely shun contemporary
technology and the techno-urban-industrial ordering of society. The majority understand
that whatever food-producing activities with which they may become involved, these
activities will have to happen in tension with, and have to be resolved against, techno-
urban-industrial enframing. That is, they realize that their UBF production activities will
never be more than at best moments of reflection or activities that let them critically
contemplate their authenticity as an otherwise overdetermined subject of techno-urban-
industrial discourses. Nevertheless, UBF producers continue to imagine an evaluative
continuum of authenticity through which the more of her own food that a person can
produce and do it in a way that disavows modern technology the more authentic that
person is.

Matilde provides an excellent example of how an UBF producer negotiates between
living in a world dominated by techno-urban-industrial enframing and the New Agrarian
ethics of authenticity that tells her the most moral people are those that emulate pre-WWII
subsistence farmers.

Matilde: . . . I am not a farmer. I don’t have it in me. I like to live in the city. I
like to walk up to the bars. I’m very much a city girl.
Interviewer: So why do all of this then?
Matilde: I just like it, and this is manageable for me. Some friends of mine
started doing it like this and then said ’we are going to buy a farm, you
know we are going to do it, we are going to farm’. I don’t have that in me.
Especially in a year when you lose all your plums and you’re like, if this
was my job, this is freaking heart breaking. Or, like days when I get one
egg from 12 chickens and I think what if I was doing this as a job, like, this
is really, really hard work and I feel like it has really given me a lot more
respect for where our food comes [from].
(Matilde, Personal communication, July 31, 2015)

The UBF producers whom I spoke with, who had been producing some food for a few years,
like Matilde, had come to realize that their dreams of a New Agrarian ethics of authenticity
will always be at best aspirational. They realize that even if they could, they are not willing to forgo all the conveniences of the society that they grew up in and that most everyone around them continues to live in. Furthermore, they realize that taking the leap of scaling up their food production activities to become self-sufficient would require more labor and risk than they are willing to assume. Their practices become points of targeted resistance or political action against the inauthenticity they see in the contemporary world. These practices allow them to critically evaluate their own authenticity, while developing a practical appreciation for their personal relationship and role in the production of nature.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has made the case that UBF producers, as New Agrarians in practice, value and try to deploy personal food production labor as essential to reflexively discovering and creating authenticity as they coproduce themselves and the material world. In the first part of the chapter I showed how laboring to produce food for oneself permits people to feel more in control of their lives as it allows them to feel self-sufficient and independent. This independence through self-sufficiency lets people imagine that they are or could be existentially independent of techno-industrial food production, which they find threatening to their personal health and the health of the environment.

In the second part of the chapter I explored how UBF producers use food-producing labor to develop and realize a moral ontology of nature. That is, they believe that by being thoughtful while producing and eating backyard produce, they can coproduce authentic selves and authentic nature. UBF producers believe that through their practices they are discovering what moral values are by producing authentic nature, because they are tempering their labor with what they believe are natural or authentic processes. This is in
contrast to techno-industrial food provisioning that they believe fights against, rather than works with nature. As they produce food they feel that the attention they pay to natural processes also makes their selves authentic. For them the authenticity of nature and those who command their own labor with respect to the rules of this nature stand in stark contrast to the inauthenticity of techno-urban-industrial society which they believe ignores the rules of and denigrates nature.

In practice, UBF producers' labor continues to be simultaneously defined in contrast to and constrained by techno-urban-industrial enframing. As a result, UBF produces can never completely actualize the authentic life that they hold out as ideal. Caught in this tension they understand their practices as at best a contrasting reprieve from or subversion of their lives as subjects of techno-urban-industrial ordering. They use backyard food production to gain control over their labor as concrete labor, to use their labor to develop a productive home economy in part because practical skills are seen as a way to ameliorate their apocalyptic fears, and in order to tend to social reproductive responsibilities including the health and education of their children. No one I observed or interviewed is producing food in their backyards out of caloric necessity or even because they cannot access raw produce. They are laboring because it makes them feel real, in touch with nature, healthy, in control, ethical or in a word, authentic. Even if they love the idea of having a fully functioning subsistence farm, they weigh the reality of it against their other wage-labor supported obligations like paying property taxes, student loans, etc. In the end, in spite of all the moral and practical reasons given for producing one's own food it is an activity of those with leisure time and who can support their practices with wage-labor. The people who tend to want to produce food have the time to do what they do or
they scale back or stop producing food altogether. UBF producing practices are therefore never more than moments in which labor is used to contemplate enframing and authenticity.

By producing food for themselves they are using their concrete labor to develop a counter discursive moment through which they try to accomplish at least three things. First, their practices open discursive space in which the values and norms of techno-industrial food production can be critically reimagined. Second, this critical space allows them to act subversively toward generally accepted social structures and norms. Finally, because they are struggling to be more thoughtful and reflexive about their place in their world, they feel they are better positioned to be authentic people.
Chapter 4: Products: finding, creating, and circulating non-monetary values or why “backyard eggs just taste better”

Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. (Taylor 1995, 40)

If I am right that an image of inert matter helps animate our current practice of aggressively wasteful and planet-endangering consumption, then a materiality experienced as a lively force with agentic capacity could animate a more ecologically sustainable public. (Bennett 2010, 51)

**Introduction**

UBF producers as New Agrarians in practice weave the material world into their calculus of authenticity. More specifically, when an ethics of authenticity is deployed, what an individual produces or how she metabolizes the world becomes symbolic both of the authenticity of the self and the product. In this chapter I consider food, structures that facilitate the production of food, places, and landscapes as products that are evaluated as authentic by UBF producers. The producer, the product, and the production process are all tied together in a coproduction of authenticity.

Products have exchange and use value but they can also be containers for other meanings and values. As I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, attempts have been made to add these values back to commodities through marketing and certifications, but many have found the resulting labels to be no less alienating and unsatisfying. As a subgroup of those who do not find labels enough to assuage their feelings of alienation or inauthenticity, UBF producers use their labor to congeal moral values, affection, and place in products which are then consumed by the producers or transferred to other people with these non-monetary values intact. The values that these uncommodified products
represent are believed to be more authentic and result in more authentic relationships than techno-industrially enframed products and relationships.

UBF producers strive to circulate their value laden products both within a family and between friends and neighbors as a way to build community and relationships. Some participants framed the value of UBF products in terms of social relationships, but many more expressed the value of their products in terms of better taste or quality by claiming them to be more natural or respectful of nature. They use these non-monetary values such as taste, food safety (trust), and intimate knowledge about how something was produced as practical ways to establish authenticity.

The backyard eggs taste better for them for several different but related reasons such as, because “you know the chicken and how it was treated,” what it ate, and that it was “produced in your or your neighbor’s backyard.” In simple terms products that are produced and circulated within a family or between friends and neighbors hold on to more of their identifying qualities which allow UBF producers and consumers to weave their own identities into their products’ multidimensional histories to produce the types of natures, places, landscapes and selves that they believe to be authentic, authentic because they represent nature and therefore offer a physical manifestation of resistance or subversion of the techno-urban-industrial means of production.

The participants in my project for the most part use or gift their produce as a means of building a productive home economy and community relationships that commodity consumption has otherwise suppressed or severed. The few who are selling their produce, still are trying to capitalize on the value added by the intimate social relationships congealed in their products. Their products are valued not only for use value, but for the
“true cost of labor,” place where they were produced, and the personal connection to the producer which provides the transparency that keeps available production knowledge, trust, and a sense of control over one’s food. The products become objects for relationship building. Neighbors and friends come together over the gifting of food products, while those buying UBF products similarly build relationships with producers in their community.

**Conceptualizing the coproduction of authentic selves and products**

Marx’s analysis of the capitalist mode of production (K. Marx 1977) offers one way to conceptualize the authenticity of products. Through capitalist production, products are disassociated from their producer and knowledge of how such products were produced. Products travel as commodities unmoored from the peculiarities of their origin, produced and valued for their monetary equivalency. As they travel they effectively lose their uniqueness as a particular thing with a multidimensional history. Distance disassociates them from their place of origin beyond a country of origin label. Even their use value becomes eclipsed by their monetary value. As I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, many attempts have been made to reconnect commodities with their unique qualities by labeling them as from somewhere, produced with a certain kind of material or process, and produced by someone in particular. But, marketing and labels do nothing to ameliorate the structural estrangement that has already occurred due to the capitalist relations of production and the techno-industrial means of production. It is in the realization of this estrangement that UBF producers and much of society are driven to evaluate techno-industrial production and products as inauthentic and production process and products that can overcome this estrangement as authentic and moral.
Heidegger (1996) offers another useful way to think about the authenticity of things. For Heidegger, things, like people, have a relational essence that is obscured by technological enframing. For instance, technology can make things placeless by effectively compressing time and space. Examples of this are everywhere. Counterseasonal grapes come from Chile to the U.S. when they are not in season in the U.S. If one has access to the Internet and credit she can order just about anything through an e-commerce business and have it delivered to her doorstep in a few days if not hours. The point Heidegger makes, and one that is strongly echoed by my research data and New Agrarianism in general, is that the dimensionality of things is flattened by technology such that things appear to us as representations of things rather than as peculiar multidimensional things bound by seasonality, lifecycles, distance, or to place. Thus industrial technology encourages us to evaluate apples in a grocery store by how closely they look like or represent an ideal techno-industrial apple rather than a particular piece of fruit revealing itself through blemishes, irregular shapes, seasonality, or even taste. Through techno-industrial enframing one does not truly experience a particular apple, but rather an apple as a representation of an ideal—ideals that were created by and for the techno-industrial production of commodities. In this case a more authentic apple for Heidegger, popular and philosophical agrarianism, and UBF producers would be the blemished and wormy apple picked from a front yard tree—an apple that represents more than the inauthentic industrial ideal.

There is evidence that Heidegger’s way of understanding the authenticity of products is how many people in industrialized societies have come to understand products. Things that are hand-crafted (even better if it is made by indigenous people or using pre-
industrial techniques—e.g. hand thrown and painted pottery), custom made (e.g. houses, some Etsy products), locally made (e.g. farmers markets, Colorado Proud products), are valued as more authentic than products that are industrially produced in unknown or faraway places and that circulate as commodities. The value of products for people concerned with authenticity increases when contemporary technology, especially industrial technology is removed from the production and distribution processes and things are allowed to express their multidimensionality as a particular product.

However, it is not possible in this conceptualization of authenticity to simply consume something that is intrinsically authentic. Instead, the authenticity of products is coproduced along with the authenticity of selves and production of authentic relationships, landscapes, metabolic processes, and places. In this ethics of authenticity that considers the authenticity of self in relation to the material world, products become authentic because of who produced them, how they were produced, why they were produced; but also the for the authentic relationships, places, and landscape that they believe have also been produced. The product is never authentic in isolation, but as part of a circumspect and reflexive process of producing oneself as the authentic producer of an authentic material world. It is through this reflexive productive engagement with the world, that a person is imagined to realize a product’s authenticity and experience one’s own authenticity as being-in-the-world (Heidegger 2008)—i.e. a person contemplatively and creatively engaged in the world.

**Evaluating the authenticity of things**

This section looks at the different ways UBF producers evaluate authenticity of products.
“Sort of so pretty”

The following statement provides several reasons for how products become circulating symbols of meaning that get wrapped up in the authenticity of self, how that authenticity is assessed, and how that assessment takes place as an act of resistance or subversion against conventional products. Matilde told me,

Matilde: I have the kids, and we are real foodies, you know we cook everything from scratch. I like farmers’ markets . . . But I feel like 90% of them are kind of bullshit.
Interviewer: In what way?
Matilde: When you see stuff with stickers on it. When you see produce that is sort of so pretty . . . I do always buy my honey [there]. When it [the market] ends up being soap, or soup and bean mixes and things, I’m kind of like, I’m just here for some vegetables.
Interviewer: You don’t need the value added?
Matilde: Yeah, I feel like it’s hard to find the raw produce.
(Personal communication, July 31, 2015).

Her words demonstrate how UBF production discourses assess the authenticity of things.

Being too pretty echoes Heidegger concern that the contemporary means of production have created the expectation that products should conform to a standard. This idealized techno-industrial standard is supposed to represent what an apple should be. From the perspective of UBF producers like Matilde, the apple is inauthentic precisely because it represents an abstraction rather than unique as she and others imagine something natural or authentic should be. UBF producers, like Matilde, find this techno-industrially imposed standard of authenticity to be itself inauthentic and as such a threat to her and her family’s authenticity as a “foodies.”
Putting labels on a product is another sign for Matilde, whose reaction is representative of UBF producers, that something is the product of the techno-industrial system and therefore inauthentic. Labels for UBF producers are the mark of a commodity that has been estranged from any of its meanings beyond exchange and use value and the suspect information that the commodity producers put on their labels. In her mind an authentic product does not need to have a physical label attached to it. Its authenticity should be obvious because one has a relationship with the producer and intimate knowledge of the production processes. Furthermore, an authentic product should be of the place where it is purchased. Labels signal that a product probably came from a techno-industrial production process that occurred far away from the point of purchase. The label’s purpose, to provide information about the authenticity of the product, has the opposite effect. It tells the consumer not that the product is authentically of a place, quality, or variety, but rather that it is the unnatural product of the techno-industrial food system that values industrial standards over the true authenticity of a “natural” product.

This logic means that the most authentic products are those produced by the end consumer who has control over the production process. Working from the concepts and theories laid out in the first chapter, a product is most authentic when it is produced by concrete labor that has a particular use value in mind, not when it is plucked out of the circulation of exchange values and put to use. The application of abstract techno-industrial
labor in the processing of a product makes a product less valuable for both material and ideological reasons. Less valuable to the point that they are actually considered a threat to their identity as “foodies.” They become more authentic metabolizers of the world when they care about how their food is produced and processed and they feel even more authentic when they “make it from scratch.”

Based on these evaluations of authenticity of self in relationship to products it is logical that Matilde told me authentic products for her are unprocessed or minimally processed. Any type of processing done to a product is considered to make it less raw, less natural, and therefore less authentic. This is logical in her mind and in the New Agrarian conceptualization of authenticity I am putting forth here, because authenticity is a coproduction of self, thing, place, and nature. To buy things that are already processed means she and her family as “foodies” have fewer opportunities to realize their authenticity.

*Healthy products embed the authenticity of self into the authenticity of nature*

UBF producers conflate concepts of health, nature and authenticity in a myriad of ways to grapple with becoming authentic selves in relation to the world. Exploring how they use these concepts reveals how people operationally resolve the tension between simultaneously looking at internal and external nature for direction when some discourses insist on holding them apart. To do this UBF producers imagine their authentic self as
necessarily a physically healthy self. That self cannot be healthy, unless it is able to metabolize nature as “raw,” “organic,” “all-natural,” etc. Healthy/natural products become symbolic and physical manifestations of (authentic) selves, relationships, landscapes, and places.

One community leader explained this relationship between the products of the industrial food system and individuals in this way: "Because the industrial food system is producing such a poor product, and such a toxic product, impacting the environment in such horrendous way, um, that growing your own food in a clean environment is a way to protect your health and improve your nutrition" (Mike, Personal communication, July 7, 2015). Like UBF producers in general he makes a link between the health of the environment and the health of individuals. “Protecting your health” was expressed as more than just an individual’s personal health. Instead it was also about protecting one’s ability to be authentic by producing healthy products, including a clean environment. For him this should be done by personally taking control of the production of food. To acquiesce in the consumption of industrially produced foods is to existentially betray one’s potential to be ideologically authentic and the material foundations upon which that authentic self depends.

An almost ubiquitous claim by eaters of backyard eggs is that backyard eggs are more natural and thus healthier than industrially produced eggs. An interviewee told me that whenever she eats store bought (industrially produced) eggs she would find herself “running to the bathroom” with diarrhea. She said for a while she stopped eating eggs altogether until she tried some of her neighbor’s backyard eggs. She claims eating her neighbor’s eggs does not make her run to the bathroom. This led her to conclude that there
is “something wrong” with the store-bought eggs. I pressed her for more information and she told me that it did not matter the variety of eggs from store, they all made her sick. She said she went as far as to call several egg companies to find what they were feeding the chickens or doing to the eggs that would make her sick. She said she never was able to figure it out. She just knows that backyard eggs do not make her sick and industrially produced eggs do.

Her experiences with eggs confirmed her general belief that industrial food was unnatural and by extension the entire industrial food system was perceived as producing unnatural or toxic products. Her solution was to seek out products that were produced such that she could know how it was done and by whom. Even though she never found the specific cause of her adverse egg reactions, her experience justified her narrative that in general techno-industrial production is a threat to her health and that the backyard food is not.

*Sensing authenticity*

Senses are another way that the authenticity of products is assessed by UBF producers. Senses are used in two ways. UBF producers use sensory information to evaluate the quality and authenticity of products as products. UBF producers also believe that through the process of using their senses to critically experience and evaluate food as authentic or not, they are being authentic themselves. But, the material world that they experience is filtered through the naturalistic ideologies of authenticity that they hold to be true. This means that their senses do not simply provide objective data to them, but rather are also used by the UBF producers to affirm their beliefs, especially their belief that the sensory quality of a real, natural or authentic food product is dependent on it being
produced in a non-industrial way. An apple in part tastes and looks good because it meets
their definition of authentic. It is not just authentic because it tastes and looks good.

Emblematic of how UBF producers use senses to establish the authenticity of their
food is a conversation in which I overheard a woman tell another that, "they taste so much
better, actually have taste to them," to which the second responded "I miss my bright
orange eggs" (Personal observation, June 20, 2015). For them, like most UBF producers and
the consumers of their backyard eggs, taste and color are important in establishing the
authenticity of eggs. They believe that backyard chicken yolks are bigger, brighter, tastier
and therefore are healthier, more natural, and more authentic than the “sick,” "pale,” store-
bought eggs of the techno-industrial food system, because they were produced in a
backyard. Rather than just simply evaluating store and backyard sourced eggs, they are
using their sense to affirm their belief that the differences between industrially and
backyard produced eggs can be sensed. Tasty, bright eggs taste and look better in large part
because they meet these women’s definition of authentic, they are not authentic just
because they taste and look better.

Milk was often evaluated as more authentic if it was raw (unpasteurized), and even
more authentic if it was the product of one’s own backyard goats. Both homogenized milk
and even cows themselves (unless they are a heritage breed) are viewed as inauthentic
because they are products of the techno-industrial food system. UBF producers and many
consumers of milk believe not only that unpasteurized or raw milk tastes better, but that
goats’ milk in particular is the most authentic. The reason that drinking autonomously
produced goats’ milk is considered more authentic than industrially produced cows’ milk is
not just because it tastes better or that it is healthier, but because people believe it tastes
better because they believe it is more natural. They believe this because they are working from a narrative that holds that something is more authentic if it was produced hyperlocally at a small-scale. Milking one’s own goat makes the milker and the milk more authentic. They conflate authenticity with positive sensory experiences to the point that their beliefs, at least in part, determine what they sense.

A number of people I interviewed about goats’ milk went to great lengths to procure raw (unpasteurized) goats milk when they could not produce it for themselves. I met one young white woman on a chicken coop tour who had recently moved to Denver. She had a young child that she was homeschooling because she thought she could do a better job educating her child than formal schools. They were on the coop tour to get ideas for designing a coop as part of her daughter’s “hands-on,” “experiential” education. She had previously lived in Washington D.C. and giddily and with a lot of pride told me that she used to take a bus to Virginia each week to get raw goats’ milk, which was illegal to sell in Washington D.C. She and a few other people that were sitting with us talked about how much better raw goat milk was. They agreed it was creamier, it tasted better, you could trust that it was not full of hormones and antibiotics, etc. In my conversation with her she made it abundantly clear that the act of smuggling raw milk was just as important as the material, mostly health, qualities of this raw milk. Smuggling the milk was an expression of her critical awareness of conventional institutional discourses that hold pasteurized milk as safe. Her act of smuggling raw milk can be interpreted as a focal practice that reinforced her critical awareness of techno-urban-industrial enframing. For this interviewee the subversive practice of getting the milk was clearly just as, if not more, important than the health or sensory benefits.
When one raw goats’ milk dairy did not have milk available, her clients were “like oh my God I can’t find it anywhere” (Gabby, Personal communication, June 21, 2015)! Not being able to get the milk whenever they wanted meant that they had to temporarily curtail the production of their own authenticity through raw goat milk consumption. They did not want to return to techno-industrial milk that has been homogenized and “unnaturally” extracted from animals by machines that enframe the cows as parts of an industrial process. The effect of consuming techno-industrial milk in their minds is a return to consuming an inauthentic product that will simultaneously degrade the authenticity of their selves. They lost their subversive positionality by having to return to the inauthentic products of industry to sustain themselves.

Senses, or at least reference to their senses, give them a way to avoid having to express their beliefs in terms of abstract ideologies and narratives. Senses act as proxies for their beliefs allowing them to use taste, smell, visual preference, etc. to express those beliefs. They say things like, "I've had really, really terrible over-processed goat's milk and I've had good fresh goats’ milk" (Andrew, Personal observation, June 25, 2015). Clearly there are many reasons why “over-processed” (ultra-pasteurized) milk could taste good or bad, just as there are many possible reasons for raw (“fresh”) goats milk to taste bad. But, like many of my interviewees, she is at least in part working from a preconceived causal link between bad taste and techno-industrial production and good taste and non-techno-industrial production.

Perhaps the most telling example of how taste is determined by or reflects ideologies came from an interviewee who had bought property with peach trees on it. He said the first year he got peaches from the tree they were hard and bitter, but they were the
best peaches he ever eaten because they came from his tree. He so believed that authentic products are produced hyperlocally and autonomously and that authentic products must be good, that his beliefs overrode his senses. He laughed at how ridiculous this was. He knew the peaches did not taste good or have a good consistency, but, because they had all the ideological qualities to be authentic he was willing to overlook their material inadequacies.

*Congealed labor as social bond*

Another way that backyard food products produce authenticity for UBF producers is by representing who produced a product and how that product was produced. Techno-industrial labor that is congealed in a product at one end of opaque and often long commodity supply chains loses its dimensionality or ability to symbolically connect consumer and producer by the time it reaches the point of consumption. Backyard food products and other local products have a greater chance to hold onto more than this abstract congealed labor. The labor that is congealed in the products instead has the possibility to circulate intimately such that the producer can use the products as expressions of love, neighborliness, conviviality in order to construct non-monetary relationships. In other words, UBF producers are motivated to produce food by sharing their congealed labor with others and UBF products are valued by consumers often precisely because they are symbols of a relationship with a specific someone’s labor. People value consuming the congealed labor of someone they feel intimately connected to as a way to deepen those connections.

A lot of UBF producers produce more than they can eat or preserve. Usually their surplus products are gifted to friends and neighbors and offer a way for them to connect
with those neighbors that both parties can find meaningful. A common interview question I asked was what do you do with your surplus products and the responses were usually: donate them to a food bank, gift them to family and friends or in the words of one UBF producer “we trade with our neighbors, you know, just kinda gives you [a sense of] community . . .” (Laura, Personal communication, July 15, 2015). This sense of community is based on sharing, but specifically sharing the products of one’s personal labor rather than something that has been purchased as a monetary equivalence. One of the main reasons given by UBF producers for having a garden is so they could share with their neighbors and friends. It is the element of sharing the fruits of one’s own labor, done specifically for the purpose of sharing that congealed labor to build non-monetary relationships, that drives some people to apply their labor to producing food.

I also have a lot of personal experience as a backyard food producer sharing surplus products with neighbors. My family had more food coming out of our garden than we could eat in the Summer of 2015. So my children and I put the food in a stroller on several occasions and went door-to-door on our block giving away produce. In the process we met many people we had not met in the previous seven years of living in our house, but we also started relationships with them through the gifting. Whereas we didn’t know some of our neighbors before we started gifting food, let alone have relationships with them, now everyone on our block knows who we are, our names, and when they see us they wave and smile—not something that happened before we brought them food. One particular neighbor went from driving past my house and ignoring my casual waves before I gave him some produce, to now stopping his car, rolling down his window, and asking me by name how my family is and what we have growing or have planned for our garden. The products,
because they have the application of a specific someone’s labor to them, create a value that is difficult or nearly impossible to capture and maintain through commodity chains or even the gifting of commodities. To get this affect value the production and consumption has to happen on a more intimate scale, one that can create and maintain intimate relationships.

*Heirlooms: “natural” diversity as authentic*

The UBF producers that I interviewed and observed, in addition to the popular discourses that they wrap their practices in, express a moral obligation for authentic producers and consumers to seek out heirloom varieties because they represent a tradition of cultivation that is not techno-industrial and therefore inherently more inauthentic according to their New Agrarian values. Heirlooms by definition are valuable objects that stay in a family over several generations or agricultural varieties that stand in contrast to the varieties developed for and used in industrial agriculture. For my interviewees and popular agrarian literature, heirlooms are better than contemporary industrially used varieties because heirlooms represent socio-natural relations as they believe they ought to exist and because they link UBF producers to historicized and nostalgic pre-industrial food production practices of the productive home economies that they believe their grandparents might have had. By identifying varieties as heirlooms, products take on the value of something that was both historically important and for which the current generation is morally obligated to maintain as well as something that is subversive in its negative relationship to inauthentic techno-industrial products. As New Agrarians in practice, UBF producers use the idea of heirloom products to further refine how a producer, product, and consumer can all be made more authentic.
My research participants were keenly aware that modern food production has focused on a limited set of varieties to produce at economies of scale, which they believe has resulted in the loss of genetic diversity in their food systems, making the food system less resilient and making those dependent on that system unnecessarily vulnerable. Worse in the minds of UBF producers are GMOs that they believe will further degrade all food systems’ resilience as well as threaten to contaminate the natural systems that society depends on, including their own bodies. The belief that these products contribute to the vulnerability of food systems drives the reoccurring justification that many give for producing food in their backyards—that they fear an apocalyptic crash of the industrial food system and the contamination of their bodies and environment.

In their narratives, growing heirloom varieties protects diversity and connects UBF producers to what they perceive of as more authentic modes of being, making them believe they are themselves more authentic. Heirlooms symbolize a direct link to the idealized small family farmer upon which UBF producers tend to model their own behavior and discourse. Playing on these beliefs and promoting them, seed company catalogues gush with stories about how, where, and by whom seed varieties were first developed or discovered (e.g. Baker Creek and All Good Things Organic catalogues). Here is an example from Baker Creek for *Patisson Panache Vert et Blanc* squash:

*Patisson Panache Vert et Blanc* squash is also known as 'Variegated Scallop, Green and White' squash and was listed by Vilmorin, a famous French seed house, in the 1800s as one of the varieties being grown at the time.

Squash were first cultivated in the Americas and brought to Europe by explorers returning with their discoveries. They have been documented as a part of human culture for thousands of years. Different domestication dates and events are
recognized within the squash family, resulting in the difference between species groups like winter squash and summer squash.\(^6\)

Notice how the origin and history and not the taste, ease of growing, or yields are the important factors expressed in this description. This type of information was extremely important to some of my participants. But, they took heirlooms as authentic a step further by wanting to insert themselves and their relationships into the origin story of their heirloom plants and food-producing animals. They beamed with pride when they could trace the lineage of their plant’s origins as seeds, cuttings or transplants back to an acquaintance’s garden, especially their mother’s or grandmother’s gardens. The result is that knowing a product’s history is valuable, but that product is even more valuable if a person can insert themselves into its history.

The popular author Barbra Kingsolver, who identifies strongly with the New Agrarian movement (evidenced by her penning of the forward to *The Essential Agrarianism Reader* (Wirzba 2003) and through her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (Kingsolver 2008) shows how this nexus of philosophical and popular New Agrarianism uses ideological symbols like heirlooms to produce and disseminate a New Agrarian ethics of authenticity. She writes, "heirloom vegetables are irresistible, not just for the poetry in their names but because these titles stand for real stories . . . Just the sound of the word ‘heirloom’ brings on a warm, snuggly, bespectacled grandmother knitting socks and baking pies kind of feeling” (Kingsolver 2008, 46–47). These two sentences are both rich and succinct in how they exemplify what I observed in my research. They show not only how Kingsolver, but my research participants and philosophical and popular agrarians value products with

histories. It also shows how they produce and value romantic and nostalgic images of grandma’s pre-industrialized time on the farm as a productive homemaker. What I find the most illuminating about how Kingsolver describes heirloom varieties is that she uncritically mixes transcendental interpretations of her feelings with her goals and experiences. Her writing both channels and promotes these beliefs which were repeated frequently in my observations.

Many commercial seed companies prominently advertise their seed as non-GMO and usually organic and direct their marketing to small-scale producers, especially backyard food producers and small-scale market gardeners. My data reveal that UBF producers prefer seed companies that sell the products that fit this anti-techno-industrial definition of authenticity. UBF producers evaluate companies on their commitment to delivering products that are unique and rare. Products that were historically important and valuable for economic reasons are now being “rediscovered” and valued because they represent an alternative to the products of the techno-industrial food system. In this way seed companies are reacting to and promoting the belief that techno-industrial products are inauthentic and that authentic people produced and consume heirlooms. In practice seed companies pledge that their seeds are non-GMO and organic, but what they are really communicating is that their seeds are authentic because they are not contaminated by contemporary technology and industrial processing. Rounding out their agrarian image of heirlooms, UBF producers prefer to buy their heirloom seed from small family owned seed companies.

For UBF producers, heirloom varieties function as symbols of authenticity connecting authentic people to each other and their vision of produced, yet authentic
nature. UBF produces desire heirlooms because they represent more natural products which they conflate with personal and environmental health. They filter any material realities of heirlooms through their vision of the historicized and romanticized agrarian vision that they want to reproduce. Heirlooms help gird the subversive ideology that UBF producers deploy as a counterhegemonic form of resistance against what they see as a discursively and materially impoverished and potentially self-destructive techno-industrial food system.

**UBF production as the co-production of authentic places, people, and products**

Tying place, people, and products together to make all three more authentic is not unique to UBF producers. As a consumer one might buy olive oil just because you need it. But the person who values authenticity might pay more for olive oil that is produced in Greece because that is where they believe the best or most authentic olive oil comes from. The oil and the place become part of a larger authenticity narrative that ties the product and place to each other. People insert themselves into this authenticity narrative as producers and consumers of authentic products and through those products to places. The Greek producers are authentic Greeks because they produce an authentically Greek product in Greece. The consumers of the olive oil can feel that the moussaka that they made is more authentic because they are using Greek olive oil to make a Greek food. In this way the authenticity of products, people, and places are co-produced. Products circulate between producers and consumers as symbols of authenticity.

The Slow Food and Localism movements take this interdependence of products, people and place in the production of authenticity to one of its logical conclusions. For these movements the most authentic products are eaten in the places where they are
produced. Authentic people seek out the cuisine of the place where they physically are, not from places to which contemporary technology and industrial production and distribution can connect them. The consumer and the producer occupy the same place and the product is authentic not just because it was of and produced in a place, but because it was also consumed in that place.

UBF producers as I have been detailing take this line of thinking to an even more extreme conclusion. For them authenticity results not only by collapsing the places of production and consumption, into each other, but also the role of consumer and producer. UBF producers find they simultaneously maximize their own authenticity, the authenticity of a product, and the place where they live by growing and eating their own food from their backyard. Authenticity of place, self, and product in their ethics of authenticity are co-produced.

The authenticity of lawns and edible landscapes, a moral question

Lawns are viewed by UBF producers as immoral because they use resources like water and land to produce something that is viewed as not native, not natural, symbolic of techno-urban-industrialization, and it does not result in an existentially useful product. Edible landscapes on the other hand are understood as authentic because they represent pre-industrial agricultural and home landscaping that UBF producers hold as more authentic. These landscapes become external expressions of an UBF producer’s ability not only to be an authentic producer as I discussed in the previous chapter, but are also symbolic expressions of an UBF producer’s authenticity and morality. Replacing a lawn with an edible landscape allows UBF producers to demonstrate that they are independent both in the sense of going against norms and reducing their dependency on an inauthentic,
unhealthy, and unethical techno-industrial food system. Lawns in their minds are the immoral manifestations of contemporary society that can, and for some UBF producers should, be resisted or subverted by producing edible landscapes.

The best articulation of these moral judgments was already explored in Chapter 2 in a different context. In that example the leader of a backyard tour felt that he had to make excuses for keeping a small patch of lawn on his property. The rest had been converted to support food production. He, like many other UBF producers that I interviewed, including myself, felt compelled both to keep some lawn and to make excuses for it. In his case it was a place to grill out in the summer, for others it was mandated by their HOA, and in most cases practitioners felt compelled to keep a lawn as a place for children to play. The justifications were all, without exception, confessions that their lawn represented a moral shortcoming to them with which they were uncomfortable. By keeping a lawn, they had fallen short of being truly authentic as their New Agrarian ethics of authenticity defines it.

Looked at it in the other direction, by making excuses for the moral failure of having a lawn they were also telling me that their food-producing landscape was morally valuable. Riffing on why she kept her garden and why she thought people should keep gardens, Lisa conflated what she believes is the therapeutic value of being productive with the authenticity of a produced and productive nature. She said, “its therapy having a garden, it gives you some reason to go out in the yard. Otherwise you just stay in your house and your yard is just another thing you don’t know what to do with. So many people are like that” (Personal communication, July 15, 2015). The produced landscape and the products produced in that landscape are morally good because they give purpose to an individual as the producer. In the terms of this dissertation the coproduction of place, product and
person gives UBF producers a means of coping with and possibly subverting the inauthenticity of hegemonic techno-urban industrial enframing. All but quoting Heidegger, she ends by dismissing the uncritical masses who do not grow food in their yard as a focal practice.

In one more example, Melinda, who was in the process of transforming her lawn into a food-producing space, repeated the belief that food-producing landscapes are morally better than purely aesthetic landscapes. In the process of touring her yard she explained that “this is a great tree, but I want a fruit tree” (Personal communication, August 14, 2015). The fruit tree would produce an edible product and by association those products would make her feel more authentic because she would have been implicated in the production of that fruit and the production of a moral (food-producing) space. Because she lives in Denver at the edge of the plains, a mature tree of just about any kind is generally considered a valuable tree, she felt compelled to keep it even though in her mind to have the most authentic yard it should produce fruit.

That these interviewees would fall short of being the authentic person or produce the authentic landscape that they value in their New Agrarian discourses stands to reason. They are operating under a Western ethics of authenticity that has and continues under the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity to identify authenticity as a position of resistance against discursive norms. What my research participants are doing by explaining why they keep a lawn in spite of their New Agrarian values is negotiating a personally comfortable middle ground where they can continue to function contemporary society, while at the same time pursuing their utopian New Agrarian visions.
Matilde explains how she reconciles the pressure to live up to New Agrarian ethics of authenticity, while at the same time living as a functioning member of contemporary society. She told me, "it’s been important to me to keep the integrity of keeping it, a real garden, and somewhere that is lovely to entertain, but its then like that dual purpose [changing tone to fake anger and looking at ‘dual-purpose’ chicken] ... as I watch her eat the currents off my bush” (Personal communication, July 31, 2015). Matilde was clearly aware of the balancing act she and all UBF producers discursively and materially perform as they try to implement the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity in their backyards while simultaneously functioning in a world enframed by technology, industry, urban landscapes. She clearly believed that a food-producing landscape would make her more authentic, but she had to find a balance that worked for her between fulfilling her moral obligation to produce a productive landscape and the need for an aesthetic place of leisure. She was working out for herself the conundrum of how to function within social norms, while at the same time resisting these norms.

It is not just UBF producers that find food-producing landscapes to be desirable, rather I found evidence that many people who do not grow their own food also found food-producing landscapes aesthetically valuable precisely because they produce food. One interviewee told me that she was working in her front yard garden one day and a neighbor came by and said, “you know every time we walk across your yard we say we’re going through the Alice and Wonderland garden’ and I thought oh it’s all worth it” (Personal communication July 31, 2015).

This type positive feedback story was repeated by many of my interviewees, but where I was able to really hear what people thought about UBF production is while I
tended to my own front yard garden. The vast majority of people who walked by my garden while I was out there wanted to know about it, and thought it was a great idea with many expressing that they really enjoyed watching the garden grow over the summer. Many made excuses for why their vegetable gardens were small or non-existent while discussing how ambitious my garden is. That they needed to make excuses and the context in which the excuses were made, demonstrated that they found small or non-existent efforts at making an edible landscape to be moral shortcomings, that they feel also make their yards and by proxy themselves seem less than adequate.

On other occasions people wanted to purchase products from my garden. I asked them why they wanted my produce when they could have easily gotten it from the store. They variably valued the food because it was from a personal garden, because it was grown in their neighborhood, because it reminded them of their parent’s garden in Mexico, Kenya, or Nigeria, reminded them of growing up in the rural U.S. South, and because it obviously had to be healthier than store bought food. All of these reasons for wanting to eat my produce were underpinned by exclamations of how beautiful our front yard garden was and how beautiful the produce was, even though our gardens have never been more than hastily assembled and marginally tended to. Asking them what they found so beautiful led universally to their valuing productive landscapes as aesthetically and ethically pleasing.

This value appears to be held widely or is at least being disseminated widely as the Denver Botanical Garden in 2015 devoted a strikingly large space to a display of food-producing plants and bee hives. They did not just display food-producing plants as parts of other displays or as they might be planted on modern industrial commodity farm. Instead

7 They also organize an annual Denver area urban homesteading tour.
they were planted in beds that were meant to resemble 18th or early 19th century cottage or small farm gardens. To elicit this affect they went so far as to use bamboo for a rustic effect on their trellises and “primitive” woven beehives. They clearly were working from this UBF producer/New Agrarian script that holds these pre-industrial food-producing landscapes as valuable.

![Vegetable garden display at Denver Botanical Gardens in 2015. The gardens are part of a citywide initiative to get people to learn to produce their own food. The gardens are laid out to invoke a pre-industrial cottage or small farm garden. The photo the right displays an older technology for keeping bees, a woven basket. Photo credit: Eric Reiff.](image)

**Compost morals: the authenticity of re-, up-, and just plain cycling**

UBF producer discourses value products that are produced sustainably. When they understand something as being produced sustainably they mean that a product was made such that natural processes were utilized to determine proper behavior, especially with regard to production processes. By proper they mean behavior that is both ethical and authentic. Nature for them is what is real or uncontaminated by techno-urban-industrial enframing. Aligning one’s behavior with these natural processes means that one is behaving authentically and thereby realizing and expressing one’s authentic self as
someone who produces and consumes real or natural products. This moral ontology of nature sits at the center of their New Agrarian ethics of authenticity and products that most closely reflect their vision of nature.

One of my interviewees has made figuring out practical ways that small urban and suburban backyard food producers can deploy a moral ontology of nature his most recent career. In telling me the underpinning ethos of his institute he explained:

The way nature does it, she produces abundance with no cost and no waste, and the way she does that is she produces everything she needs as part of the process itself, so there is no cost. And by using every product in a subsequent process there is no waste. If you close your production loops you are eliminating your costs and if you integrate your production processes, you are eliminating your wastes. And, when you are operating a system like that you can build resources into the system cycle over cycle (Mike, Personal communication, July 7, 2015).

Mike is expressing an almost universal motivation for and ethos of UBF producers’ activities, that authentic products are the result of natural processes where nature is defined as a closed production loop. Producing through industrial production lines that mine resources in one place, transport those resources over long distances to production facilities, transport the resulting commodities to sites of consumption, and produce waste at the site of production and consumption are all concepts that they abhor. They find these concepts to be the result of techno-urban-industrial comportment that wants and tries to straighten nature’s closed-loop production processes to resemble industrial production lines. To be a natural and authentic product something should be produced without exogenous inputs and outputs. Because of these conceptual limitations, authentic products are products that should
be produced in a landscape that was itself produced to meet their criteria of authentic nature being a closed loop system.

Their conceptualization of natural processes and desire to emulate them makes UBF producers want to control production process as much as possible so they can make sure they are maximizing their own authenticity by maximizing the authenticity of the products, including landscapes that they produce and/or metabolize. For them the best way to control processes and maintain closed loops is to produce for themselves. If they have to bring inputs into their closed loop backyard production system, they believe they should do so in a way that respects natural processes as much as possible. This includes whenever one inevitably must buy products that cannot be or are not made in the closed-loop backyard system.

The most common ways that UBF producers put this idea of closed loop systems into practice is by using upcycled waste to build their means of production and by composting their organic waste such that they believe they are emulating natural process. Composting is the most common way that people try to put this idea of nature's closed loops into practice partly because it’s easy to do and because it clearly reflects the ethics of authentic that they believe will make them and their landscapes authentic. Everyone I interviewed or observed had some sort of compost station at their house. These compost stations are practical and symbolic manifestations of their efforts to live reflexively with nature by creating closed loop systems. This makes sense if we break down how the composting works. The UBF producers take organic waste that has been produced around the home, which in a linear system would be sent to a landfill via trash collection services, uses the metabolic processes of microorganisms living in the immediate environment to
transform the waste into soil, and then uses the soil to produce food. While there are practical reasons for making one’s own soil from one’s own waste, for the purposes of this dissertation I want to focus on compost as a symbol of natural or authentic processes. By composting, the composter feels more authentic because they believe they are living with rather than against nature’s closed loop systems. The compost as a product is even more authentic when it is made by the end user rather than brought in from some other place. The landscape around the home and the home economy itself become more authentic because they are using “waste.” Finally, the food produced in this soil becomes more authentic because it was produced using compost made on site. In these ways compost functions as a symbol of authenticity. The practice of composting allows people to focus on how they live. It gives them a practical moment of contemplation through which they feel aware of themselves and how they connect to “nature.” It also allows them to use this practice to contemplate their authenticity as overdetermined techno-urban-industrial subjects.

Chicken coops are available everywhere from local Denver feed stores, to Costco, and even Williams and Sonoma. While buying these coops is an easy way for some people to quickly get started producing eggs in their backyard many UBF producers shun this practice because for them buying an already made coop is little different than buying store bought eggs. The coop is inauthentic because it has been produced by the inauthentic techno-urban-industrial system that they are trying to antagonize and this means they have betrayed their moral ontology in the first instance by starting their practices as consumers, rather than producers trying to emulate the natural process they believe are authentic.
In an effort to put their closed-loop moral ontology into practice Mike told me that at his institute, "we don’t order our chicken coops through the mail. We like to make them as efficiently as possible with available materials and with repurposed materials whenever possible" (Mike, Personal communication, July 7, 2015). That they make their own coops and that they use materials that do not have to be purchased new if they can avoid it, reaffirm and express their world view at several points. They are authentic because they believe they are harmonizing their production practices with nature. The coop is made authentic because it represents the producers’ efforts at putting their beliefs into practice. Finally, the chicken and the eggs are made more authentic because they were not produced in store bought coops.

Jethro told me in an interview that “the politics behind my style [of raised bed building] is that we use lumber out of the alleyway . . . Sometimes I spend more gas, than if I would have just gone to Home Depot, but I like the idea of repurposing the stuff” (Jethro, Personal communication, June 14, 2015). So for him repurposing, or upcycling things that have been set out as trash by other people is an expressly political act that puts his critical consciousness into practice. He never said that he preferred a closed loop system as Mike did, but he did consider upcycling to be moral, because it got him closer to the goal of living sustainably or in harmony with nature and therefore living authentically. He was keenly aware of the irony that he was inefficiently spending his time and money and non-renewable resources in the production of his garden beds. But, he was able to see past the irony and to isolate the collecting of discarded materials and building garden beds as an important focal practice.
A final example of upcycling is found in a coop on display at the Denver Urban Homesteader’s 2014 Coop Tour. It was at a rental house and made entirely of materials found in alleys around Denver. He did all of his collecting with a bike and trailer. To many this may look like an incredibly novel, eccentric, and inefficient use of time, but there is more going on here than just the production of a coop to house laying hens. Instead, by rejecting cars in favor of bicycles, transportation became a focal practice and a political statement for him that was aimed at helping him and those that knew him critically reflect on modes transportation. He wanted to show that he was an ethical person, because he was trying to live sustainably or with in nature’s limits. He was expressing the view that authentic processes do not generate waste or need inputs brought in through long commodity chains. He was held up that year as a model for the Denver UBF producing community because of the extreme lengths he was willing to go to in order to live by the moral ontology embedded in the heart of the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity—live with nature not against it.

Figure 3: Collecting materials from which to construct his chicken coop. Photo credit: James Bertini.
Conclusion

This chapter has argued that UBF producers use products to produce, symbolize, and circulate authenticity. I have understood products to be landscapes, places, things, in addition to people themselves. UBF producers take an ideology from the alternative food movement, that authentic food is made and consumed in the same place, to an extreme conclusion. UBF producers reason that authentic food is not just produced and consumed in a particular place, but that the most authentic food is produced by the consumer herself in a way that authentic selves and relationships are also coproduced with regard to what she believes is natural. In this way UBF producers do not see consumers as becoming authentic by simply consuming authentic things. Instead they believe that the authenticity of things, selves, landscapes, and places result from individuals critically considering themselves and techno-urban-industrial enframing by emulating or checking their behaviors against natural processes.

They use their products to produce not only authentic things and selves, but relationships with neighbors, friends, and family members. They believe that because they grew and ate or gifted their own food products at a hyperlocal scale that their products can retain a multidimensionality or intimate character of being a particular product, it retains the knowledge of who produced it and where and how it was produced. Authenticity results for UBF producers when these congealed relationships between thing, producer and place can be clearly and personally known such that the product can be valued for more than its exchange value. As more than exchange value things can circulate as symbols of counter discursive meaning that can establish relationships between people, places, and things that techno-industrial enframing and the commodities it produces cannot.
They measure this authenticity on a personally derived scale in which each person decides which products they can and will produce and which they will acquiesce to consume from elsewhere. What is important to the UBF producers is that they are being proactive in producing their authentic selves both materially and discursively, even if they are only making partial and targeted efforts. More important than the material utility of food products are the meanings imparted through the products. The valuing, producing, trading, gifting, and consuming of foods as symbols of the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity make UBF producers feel more moral and authentic. I have concluded in several places in this chapter that specific UBF producers’ practices and beliefs should be considered focal practices sometimes intended to be political acts.
Chapter 5: Subjectivity and the self: the conduct of authenticity

The deeper philosophical meaning of agrarian ideals can be articulated when farming and what Borgmann calls “the culture of the table” are understood as focal practices, as the established habits of living that impart broader meaning and purpose to people’s lives. (Thompson 2010, 111)

Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem. (Foucault 1991, 388)

Introduction

Up until this point I have been theorizing UBF producer’s discourses and practices as the most recent iteration of ancient, utopian, and reactionary beliefs and practices that hold working intimately with the land as essential to being a moral and authentic person. I have tried to conceptualize and understand them against their own standards for authenticity and put those standards in the context of Western existential and New Agrarian philosophy that have held that technology, industry, and urbanization lead to immoral and inauthentic behaviors, selves, products, and landscapes. I am now going to draw critical attention to some of the problematic inconsistencies or awkward tensions in their discourses and practices that I have already gestured to in the previous chapters. I want to explore what it means for my research questions and any claims of authenticity by UBF producers when we recognize UBF producers as subjects of multiple competing discourses.

I divide this chapter into three sections. First, I explore how New Agrarianism is one of many discourses that UBF producers use to comport themselves in the world. I show
that UBF producers are able to understand their selves and their practices as authentic and 
moral by conflating very different definitions of authenticity which is facilitated by their 
assumptions that the concept of nature and food provisioning practices are apolitical and 
acultural. In the latter half of the first section I look at ways in which UBF producers 
struggle to navigate being the subjects of conflicting discourses and how this offers 
awkward and stressful outcomes.

In the second section I examine how UBF producers as New Agrarians in practice 
use selective nostalgia for a particular point in a particular culture’s past to justify their 
beliefs and actions. I then argue that their nostalgic narratives and signifying practices 
should be critically examined as the reproduction of a particular discourse that risks 
delegitimizing other notions of morality and authenticity that do not conform to their 
culturally situated narrative. As evidence I look at why the UBF producer community that I 
observed is predominately white, middle-class and why UBF production is usually 
practiced as part of the feminized role of homemaker. In the last part of this section I argue 
that UBF producers as New Agrarians focus on subverting techno-urban-industrialization 
by seeking out what they believe is inherently natural, moral, or authentic. But, since the 
concepts of nature, morality, and authenticity are deeply cultural as are food provisioning 
practices, I conclude that UBF production is just as much about producing a culture’s 
utopian vison in contrast to techno-urban-industrial enframing as it is about developing 
practical solutions to modern food provisioning puzzles (i.e. food deserts, food scares, 
healthy eating).

Finally, in light of my conclusion that UBF production is largely about connecting 
with a revisionist narrative about America’s agricultural past, I explore ways in which it
might better achieve its broader social goals and become more accessible to more people. To do this I first argue that UBF production practices should be understood as focal practices. As such they can be seen both as moments of the kind of mindfulness that is at the center of most definitions of authenticity and as moments where cultural purpose and meaning are produced. I then look at examples which demonstrate how UBF producers through their mindfulness can become more aware of how culturally situated their utopian discourses and practices are. Finally, I explore how UBF producers might be a vanguard of change they want to be.

*New Agrarianism and the conduct of authentic UBF producers*

Here I look at how UBF producers as New Agrarians in practice become subjects of multiple discourses and how they navigate their conflicting narratives, ideals, and signifying practices.

*Conflating definitions of authenticity*

The UBF producers that I interviewed and observed seemed unaware that they simultaneously deployed two theoretically incongruent ethics of authenticity. Through one definition they believed that authenticity and moral behavior are derived relationally through an existentially purposeful, intimate, and co-productive relationship between people as food producers and their environment. They said things like, “[producing food] changes your values [for the better]” or “keeping [dairy] goats teaches you important lessons about life.” When they were thinking with this definition they were arguing that getting in touch with nature’s rhythm and getting your hands dirty result in authentic and moral people and relationships. It does not really matter whether or not this line of
reasoning could ever in practice result in the type of universally applicable utopian relationships they think it could, because this ethics of authenticity quickly and ubiquitously becomes confused or fully replaced with another concept of authenticity. This second concept of authenticity holds that a culturally specific archetypal small scale yeoman farmer represents a set of practices and beliefs that are more moral and authentic than others. UBF producers therefore find themselves simultaneously confronted with one narrative that suggests anyone can discover and develop authenticity by producing food, while at the same time they are confronted with an archetypal pre-WWII; small-scale; American; white, male dominated rural farm culture as the model of authenticity and morality.

On the surface it appears that New Agrarian discourses’ historicized and nostalgic cultural symbols, like the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer, are innocuous archetypes to articulate and signpost a course of action for developing a moral framework through which authenticity can be produced. However, New Agrarian discourses are not just using cultural symbols to direct their practitioners to an agrarian utopia. These discourses also open up space that encourages people to look nostalgically to times when they believe their desired way of life was the norm rather than under threat from techno-urban-industrial enframing. In other words, New Agrarian discourses also function to reproduce cultural narratives where the ethics of authenticity of nature is conflated with an authenticity of white male dominated pre-WWII American agriculture.

Many in the UBF producer community I observed readily mixed nostalgia with an essentialized concept of nature to justify their practices. Sometimes the cultural significance of growing food was found in the use of historical decorations such as those in
Figure 4 below. At other times, it was people making a fetish of heritage breeds and heirloom seeds, because such breeds connect the producer to the past and represent a time before techno-urban-industrial enframing began to threaten the world. It is a past UBF producer’s use as a gauge for their own authenticity. At other times I listened as people reached back to childhood memories or stories they heard about their parents or grandparents living authentic and moral lives on farms without indoor plumbing or electronic distractions, children hunting and trapping in winter and working hard in the fields at other times. These narratives help to ground people to their cultural history and give them inspiration. So even when people were not trying to be nostalgic for an agrarian past, they still found it useful to reach back to pre-WWII agriculture for inspiration and guidance.

So, on one hand they see nature as timelessly authentic and moral, while on the other hand they imagine this authenticity and morality existing in their culture’s past. The danger I want to point out is that finding morality and authenticity in this narrow and revisionist version of white, male dominated agriculture risks alienating and delegitimizing those with other cultural histories not to mention those that simply do not agree that morality and authenticity are only or best found through producing food. It appears that UBF producers’ deployment of what they believe to be an apolitical definition of authenticity (a personally realized process of becoming authentic through the coproduction of edible nature and a productive self) allows them to also believe and assert that their culturally derived ideologies and signifying practices are essentially authentic and moral.
This confusion between freely working out a moral ontology for oneself by working to produce food and having it imposed as a set of culturally specific narratives, ideals, and values is key to understanding why UBF production and the alternative food movement in general are chastised for perpetuating cultural, racial, and gendered hegemony and why UBF producers tend to be overwhelmingly white and middle class (Mares and Pena 2011; Guthman 2011; Guthman 2004; DuPuis, Harrison, and Goodman 2011; Parker and Morrow, forthcoming). In other words, what I observed was a discursive field in which people have to try to navigate being the subjects of culturally situated discourses about agriculture, farming, nature, and technology, which are being presented and reproduced as acultural, and inherently authentic and moral.

Even as the New Agrarian discourses that UBF producers subscribe to claim that individual wills and practices should follow a land ethic, because they believe that nature is an apolitical source of moral guidance, I show below what they achieve in practice is reproducing the legitimacy of their cultural understandings of land or nature, health, and food provisioning over others. Depoliticizing nature is the first step in a process through which UBF producers who aim to subvert techno-urban-industrial enframing, also reproduce culturally specific utopian agrarian ideals. When we realize that UBF producer food provisioning practices are also reproducing cultural beliefs, and not about accessing acultural and apolitical nature, a few important questions come into the light. First, whose culture(s) are UBF producers reproducing? Second, what are the implications of this for different ethnic, socio-economic, gendered, and racial groups?
**Conducting authentic subjects**

Throughout this dissertation I have been trying to understand the historical, economic, and cultural motivations for UBF producers to subscribe to and reproduce New Agrarian narratives, ideologies, and signifying practices. Yet I have not considered how their culturally situated agrarian discourses interact with or ignore other discourses concerning nature, food provisioning, morality, and authenticity. I take my analytical queue from Mares and Peña's (2011) observation that people have culturally situated notions of what local food provisioning should look like, which can blind them to other already existing alternatives. I want to understand to what degree the UBF producers that I observed were naturalizing or passing off as apolitical their culturally situated agrarian discourses.

Foucault demonstrated that individuals subscribe to discourses and subsequently bring their conduct in line with these discourses (Foucault 1990b; Foucault 2008). This is what I observed UBF producers doing when they explained the moral and ethical virtues of New Agrarian narratives, ideologies, and signifying practices. As subjects of these New Agrarian discourses, UBF producers conducted themselves according to New Agrarianism's ethics of authenticity—using a culturally situated nature as measure modeled on a historicized and romanticized vision of an agrarian economy. Authentic for UBF producers is not simply the abstract expression of self with which nineteenth and twentieth century existential philosophy struggled, but an expression of self inextricably connected to and dependent on a vision of nature that they believe to be the source of authenticity and morality.
The key here is that once a person accepts an institutional discourse as fact they conduct themselves accordingly. One effect is that this delegitimizes or pushes other discourses into the background. In practice UBF producers do not and simply cannot construct authentic selves that are reflexively engaged with essential or asocial nature. What they are doing is subscribing (almost always uncritically) to a culturally derived script that tells them in specific detail how authentic people conduct themselves in that culture and what they should value (see Chapter 2). Therefore, working from Foucault, one way that we can understand UBF producers is that they believe they are liberating themselves from being the inauthentic subjects of techno-urban-industrial enframing by seeking out the truth that they believe is found in agrarian discourses (Foucault 1972). The possibility of finding some essential form of authentic self as was sought by Continental existential philosophers or in reference to nature or the land does not seem possible. UBF producers, like everyone else, seem to be unable to untangle the web of discourses that tell people how to conduct themselves.

That UBF producers are subjects being conducted rather than individuals finding liberation also helps to explain why so many UBF producers feel burdened by UBF production practices, become disillusioned with their practices, and/or scale back their practices. Feeling compelled to emulate an agrarian subsistence life while continuing to participate as a functioning subject of contemporary techno-urban-industrial discourses creates a central, and complicated tension within UBF producer discourses. What they find in practice is that it is all but impossible to be a small family farmer with a self-sufficient home economy and function in contemporary society. The reason that people scale back their UBF producer practices is because they are conducting themselves according to
discourses that fundamentally work at cross-purposes. Counter discourses, like those offered by New Agrarianism can only be squeezed into the spaces that techno-urban-industrial enframing allow—i.e. leisure time. This is why UBF production appears to be the domain of the privileged or leisure class.

Evidence for how UBF producers try to conduct themselves according to multiple conflicting discursive demands and how this leaves them feeling burdened, over-wrought, and guilty are everywhere in my data, but one interviewee articulated it the best by telling me that she felt like she was always failing at being an UBF producer. She explained that most of her UBF producer work is cleaning up after the chickens and she feels like their coop is never clean enough. She also told me, "I know I should do a better job with my compost." Neither sentiment was the result of developing a moral ontology of nature. Instead, she was feeling the pressure of a cultural expectation that she was imposing on herself. She was trying to conduct herself not just to realize an ontology of nature, but to conduct herself according to a very particular cultural script of what nature is and how nature’s authenticity is accessed and that she should be more attentive to these backyard practices than she has time for.

In my first interview for this project, I spoke with a fellow classmate about why she kept chickens. In our conversation I asked why she wanted to keep chickens as well as why she thought other people wanted to keep chickens. She succinctly put both the appeal and limitation of agrarian antidotes in terms of rhythms. On one hand she said people wanted to get closer to nature while on the other hand they had to live according to the techno-industrial rhythms that dominates American society. She was in effect telling me that there were agrarian and industrial discourses that were not fully compatible, but instead had to
be negotiated. Because of the predominance of techno-urban-industrial rhythms in her life she could not imagine having to milk goats every day and not too long after our interview she had to give up her chickens to pursue her career.

I find myself in a similar predicament. As my time as a graduate student draws to a close I will be forced to seek employment that will most likely require I be somewhere other than my home for most of each week. I know that I will not be able to keep up with weeding, milking, cleaning animal enclosures (natural rhythm) and the demands of a “nine-to-five” job (industrial rhythm). This tension between trying to conduct myself according to the temporal organization of two incongruent discourses will lead first to guilt for not weeding enough and not cleaning up after the animals enough. I already have these feelings and I am home most of the time. After the guilt sets in I will have to make practical sacrifices as a result of needing to adhere more to techno-industrial time, like getting rid of the goats and maybe converting at least some of my vegetable garden back to lawn.

**Novelty and UBF production**

The Marxist perspective fleshed out in Chapter 1 would suggest that this type of individualized action, as opposed to class action, leads to false consciousness or the understanding by UBF producers that their beliefs and practices will ameliorate political economic problems caused by capitalist class relations (K. Marx 1977). Put another way, I have had to consider that UBF production is in part or whole a novelty or passing trend of a limited group of privileged people with little potential for contesting the techno-urban-industrial enframing they want to resist. I address this concern because my data would seem to support this critique.
Upon reflection I realized that even I, as a critical researcher, was initially driven in large part to start keeping chickens because it was more novel than building a tree house—in addition to several other reasons that I have discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. The relative novelty of it, made me feel like I was doing something authentic in the sense of bring rebellious and original—I was keeping chickens in the city after all! The novelty of producing food in urban backyards was also what drove my neighbors to want to stop and talk to me about my garden. The novelty of keeping chickens, goats or keeping a garden has, in popular discourse, merged with the valuing of agrarian landscapes as more authentic, to make most people I observed, UBF producers and not, curious about and approving of UBF production practices. The practices are novel because most people do not have experience producing food and if they do they probably have not done it in a city before. Most UBF produces are attracted by the double novelty of producing food perhaps for the first time in addition to producing their version of an agrarian landscape in an urban space.

I did observe a pattern in which the novelty of UBF producing wore off for some individuals and for the UBF producing community as a whole. For instance, the number of people attending the Denver Urban Homesteader’s chicken coop tour has been dropping year over year for at least the last three years. When I asked the organizer why this was, he said he believed that people were becoming less interested in chicken coops as spectacles to tour because coops were becoming so common in Denver and the UBF production movement was maturing such that how-to books, blogs, and websites could replace a day of driving around looking at people’s backyards. Coops are becoming so common that people do not feel compelled to pay for a ticket to see them. Put more simply, the novelty of
coops has worn off in Denver after about five years both because coops have become more commonplace as has knowledge about urban chicken husbandry—e.g. through web pages like www.mypetchicken.com.

I found through informal conversations during the coop tours I participated in for this project that the people hosting and on the tours tended to be new to the UBF production practices and were eager to share what they had built or were actively collecting design ideas. Very few touring or presenting for the coop tours I observed had been trying to produce food in their backyard for more than two years. Engagement in the community like the extent of one’s practices appears to be in large part a function of novelty. As the novelty wears off, UBF producers withdraw from the community and/or many scale back their practices in their backyards as well.

I observed UBF producers, including myself, going through what I will call an arc of participation over my several years of involvement in the UBF producer community around the Denver area. The arc starts with getting some chickens, a bee hive, or planting a few vegetables and then quickly escalates into more activities and responsibilities than they can handle given their positionality as techno-urban-industrial subjects with obligations that do not permit the realization of their agrarian visions. They then reduce the scope of their practices and often their involvement in the UBF producer community wanes. For example, my wife has told me that the scale of our food production activities was becoming overwhelming to the point she did not want to participate anymore. During interviews at chicken swaps others told me things like “I used to keep bees” or “we did the rabbit thing a while back” indicating that they had matured on this arc of participation such that they no
longer felt some things were possible or worth the effort. Another way to look at it is that the novelty had worn off.

However, as appealing as dismissing UBF production as a novelty might be, I want to argue that there is much more going on here than a few privileged people choosing to pursue novel hobbies. I want to posit that this same evidence that frames UBF production practices as a trend or novelty to be taken lightly also reveals UBF producers as discursive subjects who conduct themselves to become UBF producers. To dismiss UBF producers for the apparent novelty of their chosen practices is to miss the equally plausible explanation that they feel compelled to pursue a New Agrarian vision of authenticity. For instance, standing in line at Sprouts Grocery store in downtown Denver one is confronted with magazines touting healthy food and living along with copies of Modern Farmer magazine. Instead of an arc of participation as a function of novelty, I believe what I observed was that UBF producers are compelled to their beliefs and practices as part of being an authentic member of their culture’s authenticity narratives. This means that rather than dismissing UBF producer practices as inconsequential middle class leisure activities or false consciousness as Marxist would hold, we should look at them as the signifying practices of cultural discourses that push them to their practices.

UBF production is tangled in this culturally situated ethics of authenticity that saddles its subjects with the imperative that authentic people produce food. UBF producers begin producing food in their backyards, and before long they feel the pressure of simultaneously being the subjects of discourses that are fundamentally at odds with each other. As they try to conduct themselves according to the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity they can never fully escape being the subjects of techno-urban-industrial
discourses. Their aspirations for producing authenticity through food production wane leaving them sometimes feeling guilty and inauthentic, making excuses for why they had to scale back, or exhausted if they continue trying to make their agrarian dreams come true. In other words, by challenging techno-urban-industrial enframing with another discourse they at best become the subjects of contradictory discourses who maybe have to order out pizza because they spent all day preserving food!

**Authenticity and neoliberal governmentality**

UBF producers conduct themselves according to more than two discourses which further complicates an UBF producer’s ability to put New Agrarian prescriptions into practice. In this section I am concerned with UBF producers’ focus on contesting the means of production and how it potentially ignores and tacitly supports the relations of production that birthed and perpetuate the very means of production and apocalyptic feelings of alienation that they want to contest—i.e. neoliberalism as a virulent form of the capitalist mode of production. By producing food for themselves and their families in efforts to be more self-sufficient, UBF producers’ beliefs and practices converge with neoliberal discourse and its proponents’ efforts to transfer ever more social reproductive responsibility from the state and formal economy to individuals and their informal and home economies.

In their fear of techno-urban-industrial enframing UBF producers submit themselves sometimes inadvertently and sometimes intentionally to the idea that the state should play no, or at least a more limited role, in health and food safety, health of the environment, education of children and so on. By taking on these responsibilities for themselves in their backyard, UBF producers are in effect legitimizing the neoliberal
agenda to shrink the welfare state by transferring welfare responsibilities to individuals.

UBF producers’ efforts to mitigate food scares, obesity, food deserts, environmental injustice, and create more resilient selves through their home economies is directed at the means of production rather than the capitalist mode of production. What is presented as a quest for authenticity in contrast to techno-urban-industrial enframing looks more like individuals conducting themselves as neoliberal subjects when we look at their practices in relation to the mode of production—capitalism.

The convergence of UBF producers’ self-sufficiency narratives and neoliberal steps to dismantle the welfare state is even more complicated when we look at what each wants in practice. Whereas neoliberalism imagines individual responsibility happening in the choices that people make in the formal marketplace, UBF producers take individuals being responsible for themselves to a more radical and rather un-neoliberal conclusion. UBF producers tend to believe that to care for themselves means striving to withdraw from the formal food economy as much as they can, all the while trying to create non-economic values that are not visible to neoliberal discourse or work against its goal of governance through market efficiency based on price or exchange value.

What we have then is a positive feedback loop in which neoliberalism degrades social cohesion in all sorts of ways by deferring to markets for governance. Failing to see neoliberalism as a driver of their anxieties, UBF producers focus on confronting the problems caused by techno-urban-industrial enframing. Their efforts to mitigate techno-urban-industrial enframing end up partially realizing the neoliberal dream of taking responsibility for themselves, but rather than doing this in the marketplace as homo
UBF producers fetishize dropping completely out of formal markets in order to produce non-economic values. All of these complicated interactions are happening as a result of individuals having to navigate a field of overlapping and conflicting discourses to conduct themselves in particular ways.

For example, some UBF producers have had their yards inspected by city government officials and one interviewee had her very small raw goat milk dairy inspected by her local health and zoning departments. Whereas one response for UBF producers and this small-scale urban dairy farmer might be to celebrate that the government still wants to regulate health and safety of its citizens, UBF producers almost always reject government oversight in favor of less, not more regulation. The backyard raw milk producer said about her practices in relation to government regulation, "it’s definitely like a statement, a political statement, to keep doing it even when it is hard . . . Don’t let the government, you know, the zoning police get you down" (Maeve, Personal communication, June 21, 2015). This attitude is common among my interviewees and though I do not believe that many of them would explicitly support a neoliberal food-producing agenda, their fixation on personal or more often familial independence and self-sufficiency makes them strange and partial bedfellows with neoliberalism. Strange because it is the organization of society according to neoliberal ideology that partially explains UBF producer’s anxieties and feelings of alienation. Partial, because UBF producer ideologies only occasionally overlap with neoliberal ideologies.

Neoliberal governance from this perspective has become a self-fulfilling prophecy making those who might otherwise support a welfare state discursively abandon at least

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8 A fanciful term that assumes humans are rational actors motivated by maximizing utility which results in efficient transactions in the market.
parts of it to try to become self-sufficient. In this way UBF producers in their effort to mitigate their exposure to the techno-urban-industrial means of production intensify their conduct as neoliberal subjects by turning their backs on the conventional food provisioning system. This is a move that leaves those without the ability or desire to produce their own food to confront the unreformed techno-urban-industrial food system UBF producers are trying to escape. What appears on the surface as a gesture toward New Agrarian authenticity through the care of self, family, the environment, and the deepening of community relationships through the reflexive production of place is upon deeper analysis their tacit support of neoliberal governance—a source of many of their fears and complaints. So, rather than simply being subversive toward techno-industrial-enframing, UBF producers are also supporting neoliberalism by giving up (at least rhetorically) on formal food systems and striving for self-sufficiency.

*Enframing and selling authenticity*

I now want to analyze two observations to demonstrate how UBF producers in practice navigate being the subjects of both techno-urban-industrial capitalist discourses and UBF producer counter discourses. I do this because what they actually do in practice can be confusing and appear disingenuous unless we consider that UBF producers’ practices are the messy result of UBF producers being the overdetermined subjects of multiple often conflicting discursive masters. What these observations show is that UBF production in practice is best understood as a personal, punctuated, and never complete struggle to realize an ethics of authenticity while never fully escaping the discourses that enframe the inauthentic world that they want to subvert or ameliorate.
I discussed in Chapter 2 how the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity that underpins UBF production discourses is suspicious of modern technologies. This philosophy finds that modern technologies lead to the homogenization of products and the treatment of people and their environment as placeless commodities valued only for exchange and use values. In light of this it is revealing that one of the primary ways that UBF producer discourses are disseminated is through modern communication systems that allow like-minded people to interact over long distances to create epistemic communities of UBF producers. One would expect given the importance of place-making for UBF producers along with their distrust of the functional space-time compression that has resulted in ever more opaque and complicated commodity chains that UBF producers would look to themselves, their experiences, and their immediate physically present community for guidance and inspiration in their pursuit of a New Agrarian ethics of authenticity.

While my research participants do in part look to their immediate physical surroundings for inspiration, they rely heavily on information provided through the Internet. In particular, they refer to the thousands of homesteader blogs and YouTube for inspiration, how-to guidance, and to document and advertise their own pursuit of an authentic life. In practice, UBF producers are spread around the Denver metro area such that they need some way to find each other. Technology like blogs, webpages, FaceBook and Meetup create a virtual space in which people can exchange ideas, get inspired, and compare their own progress toward an agrarian utopia against what others are doing. I get on average seven emails a week from the Great Denver Urban Homesteader’s Meetup group advertising such classes as whole pig butchering, soap making, and crop mobs—which function like an eighteenth-century community barn raising but for planting and
harvesting. Even in trying to get back-to-the-land, people are still going through technology to get there. Internet communications both facilitate techno-urban-industrial enframing by ignoring the constraints and therefore the unique qualities of physical place and act as a source of do-it-yourself empowerment for mitigating the imminent apocalypse that they believe inauthentic techno-urban-industrial enframing is creating.

It is hard to imagine how UBF production could have become disseminated so quickly and so widely as it has, but for its spreading through the very types of technologies that sever or prevent the creation of more place-bound or local connections and suppress the importance of the presence or mindfulness of place. While it may appear on the surface that UBF producers are being insincere in their pursuit of their New Agrarian visions of authenticity, the situation appears more complicated once we consider that they must navigate the world they have to live in while striving to create the utopian world they claim to want. What looks like insincerity is actually the messy result of injecting an anachronistic agrarian vision into contemporary techno-industrial-urban society. It looks messy because people continue to use smartphones, drive cars, go to 40 hour a week jobs, live in the city, while they make momentary efforts to realize a New Agrarian ethics of authenticity that is not enframed by technology and industry.

Potentially more problematic for realizing New Agrarian discourses in practice is that many UBF producers have begun to put a price on the authenticity they produce in their backyards by commodifying the same values they find lacking in commodities and that they try to produce through their practices. The price people are willing to pay for these values can be high. One friend of mine was willing to drive 40 miles to an ex-urban farm each week to buy eggs for one dollar each, because she could see with her own eyes
that the chickens were not abused and more generally that the farm conformed to her ideal of what a farm should be. This move to commodify these New Agrarian backyard values has been underscored and facilitated by the implementation of cottage food laws in Colorado at the state and local levels over the last several years which permit the sale of some home grown and lightly processed foods.

There are a lot of complicated and personal reasons for why any one UBF producer would want to commodify their products, but in each case what I saw was subjects trying to navigate conflicting discourses. In general, the UBF producers who sold their products and the people who bought them are concerned both with pursuing a New Agrarian ethics of authenticity and how to make sense of this ethics through the capitalist ideologies that enframe most of the rest of their lives. They do this in two steps. In the first step they see what they produce as having unique non-economic value. In the second part of the movement they are compelled by the neoliberal discourses, which most of society accepts or is forced to confront, to commodify these non-economic values by giving them an exchange value. To make sense of what they are doing then is to realize that they are trying to resist the inauthenticity of contemporary techno-urban-industrial capitalist society, while at the same time they are trying to reconcile their practices within the discourses that organize much of American political economic life. They are compelled to work within neoliberal discourses even as they resist them. It is not that they are disingenuous in their commodification of non-economic values, but rather it is that they are under the influence of conflicting discourses.

An illuminating example of how this works came from an entrepreneurial UBF production community leader who promotes UBF production as empowering and
necessary for Denver’s long-term future. When I asked her how she would define a farmer she said that to call yourself a farmer you have to sell your produce, otherwise you are just a gardener (Ann, Personal communication, June 6, 2015), which from her tone and facial expressions was an inefficient use of time because it did not generate surplus capital or profit. In effect she was trying to square the New Agrarian vision of farming in the city with the discursive reality with which she and most contemporary subjects of capitalist techno-urban-industrial discourses grew up. That is, they primarily and subconsciously enframe the world as exchange values and they tend to come back to these types of valuations even when they are trying to subvert them. Ann like any other UBF producer is compelled by one discourse to seek out or produce non-economic values and simultaneously compelled by another discourse to turn those values into exchange values.

**The New Agrarian ethics of authenticity as cultural (re)production**

In this section I look at different ways that UBF production uses the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity to reproduce culture in addition to contesting techno-urban-industrial enframing.

*Gingham style: nostalgia for grandma and gingham as punk authentic*

Now that I have explored New Agrarian philosophy as a culturally situated institutional discourse that girds UBF production rather than as an apolitical discourse that allows practitioners to access essential truths and thereby inherently moral behavior, I want to look at the importance of nostalgia in this discourse. In particular, I want to look at how the presence of nostalgia in UBF production discourses reveals and reinforces the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity as a product of cultural situated symbols and narratives. In
their fear of and frustration with contemporary techno-urban-industrial enframing, UBF produces explore feelings of nostalgia for a “simpler” or more authentic time that they imagine existed before post-WWII techno-urban-industrial enframing. I have already shown in Chapter 2 that these types of back-to-the-land movements that look to agrarian lifestyles are not new. Rather, they are part of a long tradition going back to at least to ancient Rome where they have been a way to reject the perceived immorality of urban spaces and more recently technology and industrialization (Heidegger 2008; Tuan 1990; Smithsonian Institute Gardens 2014).

As I showed earlier, authenticity of self in Western cultures like the U.S. is embedded with the notion that authentic selves should be original. I have been arguing that New Agrarianism wants to temper the absurd demands that this places on individuals, not by connecting them back to God or nobility, but by having them reference nature as transcendent truth. When an historical period like the eighteenth-century family farm or symbols like Jefferson’s yeoman farmer are used to invoke the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity, New Agrarianism not only opens space for nostalgia, but encourages it. This discursive space demands originality, living with rather than against nature, and that all of this happens while contemplating what is perceived as more authentic historical times. As a result of these tensions, I observed UBF producers asserting themselves as contemporary punks by ironically modeling their discourse and behavior on how they believe their agrarian ancestors may have lived. I say ironic because even though UBF producers present their practices and ideas as subversive, progressive, and leading to a possible future utopia, they do this by looking back to previous generations. I observed them looking selectively into their cultural past to develop an ethics of authenticity based on how they believe their
ancestors would have provisioned food rather than simply looking at the natural world as it is. As a result, the supposedly apolitical moral ontology of nature that they deploy to justify their practices as inherently authentic begins to look more like culturally situated reproduction or a regressive defense of culture rather than progressive solutions to the dangers UBF producers perceive of in techno-urban-industrial enframing. This is why Twelve Southerners’ (Twelve Southerners 1977) arguments appear so troublesome. They do not just critique techno-urban-industrial enframing, but do it from the perspective that it threatens the power they derive from waning and controversial cultural practices, beliefs, power structures, and aesthetics.

Denver County Fair posters put a fine point on UBF producers’ deployment of culturally specific nostalgic symbols in their discourses. Looking again at Figure 1 there are two posters that show a young white woman either in overalls or a summer dress invoking white North American farm fashion from the early part of the twentieth century. The subjects of these posters are holding either a pie or a basket of produce invoking images of county fairs of the same historical time period. However, the subjects themselves have tattoos, piercings, and other stylistic traits that invoke a rebellious punk aesthetic, the kind of originality demanded by the contemporary American ethics of authenticity (Taylor 1995). One poster even offers a contemporary white North American feminist statement when it shows a young white woman in overalls that would have been considered men’s attire in the historical period the poster is trying to invoke. The posters pull from and combine two versions of authenticity, both deeply cultural. One version they pull from is punk authenticity that celebrates antiestablishment individual expressions and the other nostalgia for the perceived simplicity of mid-twentieth century agrarian life. The results are
posters full of intentionally ironic symbols in which historical and culturally specific agrarian values are reimagined to be contemporary subversive values. The result is that a culturally specific grandma and gingham history is repackaged as a contemporary punk authentic expression of self.

UBF producers make visually and discursively vibrant products that play on this nostalgia for early to mid-twentieth century U.S. agrarian life. Exemplary of this, an acquaintance of mine started a preserves company called Modern Gingham. She sources all of her edible production materials from Colorado as a gesture toward localism which she uses to differentiate her product. Her company name and her products’ production histories both play on nostalgia by referencing grandma’s authentic homemade preserves. The name, the packaging, and the production practices suggest that these products are meant to invoke culturally significant feelings, be environmentally ethical and moral, and produce a sense of place by being created from Colorado inputs.

New Agrarian thinking would hold her production practices up as a model of authenticity—such as sourcing locally, making preserves in small batches, and even that she chose to make preserves rather than some other product. The word Gingham in her company name, intentionally invokes nostalgia, but this nostalgia is not meant to be reactionary. Instead, seeing “Gingham” along with the word “Modern” in the name suggests that the preserves are appealing to nostalgia but making it contemporarily accessible and progressive. Put another way, Modern Gingham’s business model is to insert itself into a particular culturally situated agrarian discourse that promotes mid-twentieth century Midwestern agrarian culture as authentic, commodifying authentic values, and selling the product and the narratives that goes with it for a profit.
To further illustrate how UBF production ends up being more about cultural reproduction than an ethics of authenticity in relation to nature look at Figure 4, a photo I took of a coop on a coop tour in South Denver. It exemplifies a tendency among most of the UBF producers I observed. The family had not only built their coop out of upcycled materials, spoke of their practices in terms of health, environmental sustainability, self-sufficiency, and sharing, they also adorned their operation with symbols and advertisements from early twentieth century U.S. agriculture. In addition, they spoke nostalgically for how their parents and grandparents produced food for themselves. There were clearly aspects of their ancestor’s lives that they found to be more authentic than their own because these ancestors produced their own food. Therefore, to be more authentic they were trying to emulate these ancestor’s lives.

Figure 4: Early twentieth century adornments inside of a Denver chicken coop. Photo credit: Eric Reiff, 2014.
Another example that shows how UBF production discourses can take on a moralistic cultural tone is in Figure 5. In this figure a former professional Irish surfer explains how he was compelled to give up surfing and return to Ireland to become a heritage breed pig farmer. He says he was compelled to become a farmer because he felt guilty about his carbon-heavy lifestyle and wanted to “give something back to the planet” (Haranci 2014, 65). It just so happens that giving back to the planet meant returning to his country of origin, the occupation of his parents, and focusing on the production of historically important breeds. Again it is hard to see how a New Agrarian ethics of authenticity can be apolitical or acultural when its signifying practices reproduce particular cultural beliefs and practices. They are therefore not simply living according to a land ethic, but doing this through a cultural prism that believes the way things used to be were more authentic and moral. Rather than just developing a land ethic they are getting “back-to-the-land,” where “back” implies returning to some past that was better.
Figure 5: Meet the modern farmers. The following page describes the profession Irish surfer in the photo: “After several years of globetrotting he started to feel guilty about his self-serving, carbon-heavy lifestyle, and—despite the fact that his parents told him to be anything but a farmer—he missed farming. ‘I chased around the world after waves for 10 years, but about three years ago I felt the need to start growing my own food,’ he says. ‘I couldn’t continue to live the pro surfing dream and not give more back to the planet’” (Haranci, 2014, p. 65). Scanned from page 65 of issue 6, Fall 2014 *Modern Farmer* magazine.

**The demographics of UBF production**

My research and data reveal that the concerns and values of UBF producers that I laid out at the beginning of this dissertation are widely held in American society, but that practitioners tend to meet particular demographic specifications. I found that New Agrarian values are primarily put into practice and celebrated by white, middle class, homemakers suggesting that these values are representations of their particular cultural
values. I will offer evidence that other demographics in the Denver metro area respect and desire the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity, but are not as radical in its implementation—i.e. likely to be an UBF producer. As I discuss the demographic breakdown of UBF producers I will point out how different demographic positionalities understand and experience UBF production discourses in order to demonstrate that UBF production is a cultural reproductive activity, rather than simply a universally applicable metaphysical philosophy.

The category of middle class captures a group of people who are wealthy enough to have property, leisure time, education, and disposable income to participate in UBF production activities. Those with more than middle class means tend to not do the labor themselves but instead buy what they believe is authentic food produced by someone else somewhere else or pay for the labor to have their version of authentic food produced for them on their property. Meanwhile lower class individuals lack the resources to produce their own food and most importantly they lack access to or were not part of the discursive networks that are disseminating UBF producing narratives and ideologies.

One of my interviewees worked for an all-female landscaping firm. She told me that many of their clients were interested in having a vegetable garden or at least having some food-producing plants in their landscaping. She said very few of these people knew what was growing in their gardens, how to care for the plants, or ever bothered to personally harvest the food that was being produced there. Instead they expected a box of produce to be left on their door step by the landscaping crew after they worked in their gardens once or twice a week. Clearly something is compelling them to value having food-producing plants around their houses, but the other values like working personally at producing food
to develop a land ethic are functionally absent, if they were ever even considered of value by the homeowners. They purchase the aesthetics of the New Agrarianism, but the personal, reflexive relationship with nature that New Agrarians believe is essential for authenticity and moral behavior is obscured and lost to these upper-class individuals.

As an example, one of this interviewee’s extremely wealthy clients was very concerned about making her estate self-sufficient to survive the coming agricultural apocalypse, but was not interested in doing any of the physical work herself. She hired fulltime and contract labor to do all of her food production. She appears to be managing more of a plantation than a small family farm. This makes her version of authenticity look very different than the one promoted by New Agrarianism. She knew everything that was going on with the food-producing activities around her house, but she never physically interacted with the food until it was prepared for her by her personal chef. She reimagined New Agrarianism through her position of wealth so that she did not feel compelled to labor herself. Though there are many potential lines of inquiry that could be opened here about the role of wealth and capitalist relations on the authenticity of the individual, what is most germane to this dissertation is that her class makes her ethics of authenticity different from the middle class vision of authenticity shared by New Agrarians and the majority of UBF producers.

Less wealthy people are often amazed, yet approving, when they learn that people can keep food-producing animals in their backyards or grow food in their front yards. From my observations, it seems never to occur to them that they could produce their own food

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9 She appears to be oblivious to the irony that UBF producer apocalyptic scenarios are often rooted in fear of how the world’s large agro firms have reshaped agricultural production. Her husband is an executive at one of these firms and it is from where her wealth comes.
until they see neighbors growing food. Yet, even though they almost always appreciate and agree with the ideals of UBF production, very few start growing their own food for at least these three reasons: lack of access to capital, lack of leisure time, and most importantly their socio-economic class does not promote or reward learning and implementing UBF production practices. Put more simply, they do not believe they have the resources to produce their own food, but more importantly there is little or no peer encouragement to conduct them to such practices. Those who did try to produce their own food had to reach out and immerse themselves in the cultural identity discourses of another socio-economic class and often another race.

One of my elderly black neighbors lives in subsidized housing. Her recently retired son and his wife spend a lot of time at her house. I took them some surplus produce one autumn day in 2015. The son and his wife talked with me for about 30 minutes about how they could not believe that you could grow food in your front yard in Denver. They told me that seeing what I had done inspired them to want to grow some tomato and some melon plants in the mother’s front yard. The couple lived in an apartment. The wife said it was important to know how to grow your own food so that you could survive the inevitable collapse of our economic and environmental systems. She was essentially saying that people should grow their own food because of the second contradiction of capitalism. Though they said they were inspired and had shared concerns with the UBF producers that I observed, they still have not started producing food for themselves.

Though I have personally only had conflicts with my one white neighbor, one interviewee has an older, female, black neighbor who has repeatedly called the city reporting that she had sheep (they were goats) in her backyard among other things. I asked
why she thought this woman kept calling the city about her food-producing activities. She said it was because she was white suggesting that UBF producing activities done by black people may have been ok with this neighbor, but not by the white people invading her rapidly gentrifying neighborhood.

Another way that blacks and immigrants become involved in autonomous food production activities is through organizations that want to mitigate urban food deserts and empower people excluded or taken advantage of by the formal economy by teaching them how to produce food for themselves. There is a common institutional perspective among these organizations that it is absurd for poor and/or minority individuals to continue to depend on the industrial food system that has provided them with insufficient and unhealthy food-like sustenance (e.g. The Growhaus and the East Colfax Food Coop). All of the people that I spoke to at these organizations were young, white and working within the New Agrarian UBF producer discourses that I have already outlined. Almost all of the targets of their work were black, Hispanic, immigrant and on rare occasions poor and white.

Through these organizations, privileged white UBF producing practices and discursive spaces are understood as helping people gain more control over food provisioning. However, there are two other dimensions to their “helping” that go disturbingly unnoticed by most practitioners. First, food provisioning is inherently cultural and second these organizations that promote UBF production are developed and run by relatively privileged white Americans. Therefore, there is the danger that institutions that promote UBF production can take on a troubling colonial dynamic in which privileged white people formulate a solution based on their own cultural perspective and then set out
convincing poor, non-white people, and/or immigrants to subscribe to their culturally situated solution. This problem in the alternative food movement is not new nor has it gone unnoticed (e.g. see Guthman, 2011).

Based on my observations it was likely that any non-whites participating in UBF production practices were also originally from outside of the U.S. My observations of these immigrants and their presence at UBF production events, in particular chicken swaps, allowed me to witness how UBF production practices can be actively shaped by practitioners to reflect specific cultural ideologies. In the most obvious example a leader in the Denver UBF production community told me that when they (immigrants who did not share his views) find out about a chicken swap they “ruin” it. He told me that they come to swaps to haggle for cheap meat rather than for the “right” reasons. This was a tension that vendors all felt as I said above, but he was actively policing these people out of the swap and trying to advertise the swap in ways to not attract them. He believed that their practices degraded peoples’ experiences, specifically, white, middle class people trying to realize a particular set of New Agrarian signifying practices.

At the chicken swap in the town of Brighton, you cannot avoid flyers telling attendees that they cannot dispatch or slaughter animals on the premises, again a message clearly aimed not at the white UBF producers who are attending the swaps for the “right” reasons, but rather at immigrants who detract from the proper and desired New Agrarian experience. These active efforts to control and produce a particular type of cultural space at these swaps and defend it against those from other cultures\textsuperscript{10} whose behaviors might make the swaps something else, demonstrate again that the UBF production community that I

\textsuperscript{10} In two hours at one swap I heard Arabic, Russian, Chinese (dialect unknown), Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese and other languages I could not identify.
observed around the Denver area was primarily about fulfilling a class, race, and ethnocentrically situated utopian vision of authenticity.

In trying to produce a particular type of food-producing space in light of other competing visions of what UBF production spaces should be like, the Denver UBF production community demonstrated that their goal is not purely to get people to develop their own moral ontology of the land by reflexively producing food in their backyards. Instead there is an overarching, yet diffuse goal to produce a particular type of agriculture through culturally specific signifying practices and values. They are so focused on combating the techno-urban-industrial enframing that they lose sight of or never see that UBF producing discourses emanate from particular cultural histories, ideologies, and signifying practices. Not being critically aware of their cultural situatedness closes the discursive space necessary for heterogeneous (DuPuis, Harrison, and Goodman 2011) or “local, slow, and deep food systems” (Mares and Pena 2011). People from other cultures who are not willing to become subjects of these culturally situated UBF producer discourses are looked at as undesirables and a threat because through often conflicting signifying practices they are trying to produce a different culture.

In the introduction I referred to work done by Mares and Peña (Mares and Pena 2010) on the role of food in place-making for Mexican immigrants in California and Washington. According to Mares and Peña’s analysis, autonomous food production activities for these immigrants is about place-making. Their research participants’ place-making activities were about reproducing their culture through agriculture. This affirms the conclusions at which I have been driving. First, this supports my observation that food production is necessarily about cultural reproduction as well as material sustenance.
Second, that I mostly observed white, middle class UBF producers in the Denver community does not mean that other demographic categories do not also have their own UBF production methods predicated on their own positionality. What it means is that the community I observed is functionally (and sometimes intentionally!) excluding or pushing to the margins other (agri)cultures which do not submit to the culturally situated norms of white, middle class New Agrarian visions.

To most non-U.S. citizens that I observed, the chicken swap was understood to be a meat market which allowed them access to fresh, whole, and often cheap animals. Their interest in UBF production at a base level was the same as the whites; they wanted to access or produce authentic food, selves, and places. What is different in the meaning of their practices was that those born in the U.S. and primarily white felt that these immigrants were not being authentic in the sense of putting into practice New Agrarian values. As I pointed out in Chapter 2 and 3 these are not the moral ontology of nature values that New Agrarians believe emanate from working reflexively with the environment, but a set of cultural values that are held as inherently authentic because they are believed to come from an apolitical concept of nature. The absence of diversity in the Denver area UBF production community should be attributed to the community’s cultural positionality and difficulty making space for other ways of food provisioning. Other UBF producer communities were present, but when these non-white or immigrant UBF producers did have to interact with the more mainstream UBF producer community that is the focus of this dissertation they were forced to code switch or be viewed as an outsider.

Gender roles within the UBF production community also reveal how it is predominately about reproducing cultural authenticity rather than some abstract notion of
nature as authentic. First, what I observed was not so much that women were disproportionately drawn to or impacted by UBF producers’ discourses because they were women. Rather UBF production practices were most often pursued by the person who filled the role of homemaker which in some families, including my own, is partially or fully filled by a male. That the role of homemaker is feminized is what makes women particularly susceptible to the ideology that to be an authentic homemaker the home must be productive. This authentic productive home includes many signifying practices of which growing food is often just one, but one that ties together the New Agrarian values discussed in Chapter 2 like family health, education, independence, and interfamilial conviviality.

Here is an example of how UBF production reinforces the gendered expectations of the roles of homemaker and breadwinner,

he [husband] doesn’t take-on, I mean he loved building the coop. That was a really fun project for him and he enjoys the chickens. I do all of the heavy lifting. I do the hard work and he doesn’t want to deal with maggots or buckets of poop or like that’s just not his bag. Yeah, but I think he enjoys it. He is happy that I do it, but I don’t know if he would do it if I didn’t do it (Matilde, Personal communication, July 31, 2015).

It is the still feminized role of homemaker that primarily feels compelled to New Agrarian practices, rather than the husband who happens to be in the masculinized role of breadwinner. Other roles can appreciate and find value in UBF production, but they do not feel as compelled to autonomously produce food as homemakers. I found that the more that a white, middle class person’s identity is bound up in the reproductive responsibilities of the home the more he or she feels compelled to produce food. The more a white, middle class person’s identity is expressed through earning money and purchasing exchange values, the less compelled he or she is to produce their own food.
Because New Agrarian values expressly confront techno-urban-industrial enframing in the home economy (Berry 1996; Thompson 2010), homemakers are forced to navigate a complex field of often conflicting discourses. It is a space in which past values such as having a productive home economy are rehabilitated as progressive and liberating. Whereas for much of the second half of the twentieth century women were reducing their household productivity for careers outside of the home, they are now going back to the household to find fulfillment (Matchar 2013). This repackaging has not necessarily liberated homemakers (Parker and Morrow, forthcoming) or necessarily turned the home into an apparatus for becoming authentic. Instead, it has opened new tensions in the household.

New Agrarian framing of UBF production creates a confused home space in which homemakers are forced to try to navigate the ethical imperative that they should be authentic in the sense of being liberated and in control. Yet, they are supposed to liberate themselves by modeling their productive home on regressive nineteenth and early twentieth century understandings of the home that overworked, uncompensated or at least underappreciated women, treating them as a second sex. That is, UBF producer households have to grapple with social and political economic forces that push women both to be productive outside the home and simultaneously expect them to be productive in the home. This could be one explanation for why the more robust UBF production operations that I observed all had one person at home full time or most of the time, including my own. They say producing food in their backyards “changed them for the better,” or “got them thinking about the world differently,” but they also have had to figure out how to balance their New Agrarian ethics of authenticity with the difficult to escape demands of techno-urban-
industrial enframing. The assumption by New Agrarians that a productive home economy is antagonistic toward techno-urban-industrial enframing may be true, but that antagonism comes at a cost to homemakers trying to model their home economy on those of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers.

*The New Agrarian ethics of authenticity and the production of cultural hegemony*

I observed over 29 immigrants and non-whites and interviewed 10 for between 5-30 minutes about what they thought of UBF producing practices. Their answers varied according to how long a person had been in the U.S., where they were from, their age, gender, past experiences with farming, etc. But they consistently circled back to the same fears and values presented in New Agrarian philosophy and put into practice by the mostly middle class white UBF producers I observed. At first glance this might seem to suggest that New Agrarianism has found a set of values upon which everyone can agree and because everyone seems to agree they must be universally valid, natural, and authentic. My analysis suggests a quite different dynamic, one in which cultural is propagated through a New Agrarian ethics of authenticity aesthetic that fails to make space for other ways of imagining authenticity through food provisioning.

The near universal approval for New Agrarian values and UBF producer practices that I observed was the result of one dominant culture’s ideas about nature, food, environmental ethics, and authenticity packaged up and disseminated as a countercultural discourse focused on ameliorating the evils of techno-urban-industrial enframing. I now want to show how the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity does this in practice.

First, New Agrarians depoliticize nature by failing to realize that it is a culturally situated social construction, allowing them to claim their version to be the essence of
authenticity. They are primed by popular discourse to seek out and celebrate things like “all natural ingredients” or to take morally purifying forays out into nature (Cronon 1996a). Nature is perceived as “out there” and untainted by the immorality of techno-urban-industrial enframing. This make New Agrarianism’s vision of nature appear untainted by culture and universally applicable. They then make the argument that the proper way to know this authentic nature is by emulating small (white, male dominated) American farms from Jefferson’s yeoman farmer through to WWII (Major 2011). By not acknowledging the presence of cultural ideologies in the framing of definitions of nature and ways of accessing its authenticity, a discourse that in light of my analysis is clearly culturally situated, is presented as a universally applicable alternative for food and environmental justice issues.

A point of confusion that enables UBF producers as New Agrarians in practice to appear as holding the keys to authenticity is that they both take advantage of and intensify many peoples’ focus on the means of production or the techno-urban-industrial enframing of the world as inherently alienating, environmentally unethical, and ultimately apocalyptic (Berry 2001; Heidegger 2008). This focus means that other discourses and the power dynamics that they generate are left out of view where practitioners do not have to think about the implications of UBF producer practices and discourses for different races, cultures, socioeconomic classes, genders, etc.

Evidence of this is everywhere in my data, but nowhere was it more clearly on display than in the promotion of a particular authentic modern farmer aesthetic, see Figure 6, “Farm Cred Do’s and Don’ts” from Modern Farmer magazine. In this rich image farmers are portrayed as male, they have to dress a certain way, drive a certain truck, have a particular type of dog, and are told not to smoke around their vegetables. In one seemingly
innocuous representation of what it means to be a farmer this figure has reproduced a culturally specific white, male, American ideal of authentic farmers that leaves no explicit space for women or non-whites to be authentic farmers. Rather than encourage readers to develop a land ethic by intimately working with the land, this image invokes as progressive a cultural, classist, gendered, ageist, and racial aesthetic. None of this was overtly part of the New Agrarian values laid out in Chapter 2, but it is nevertheless still present in practice.

Figure 6: Farm cred, Does and Don’ts, from Modern Farmer (Francis and Rothman 2013, 69). This image offers further evidence that UBF production is largely about authenticity as cultural reproduction rather than simply encouraging a land ethic. It offers no apologies or explanations for why both their image of an authentic farmer and an inauthentic farmer are of young, white, North American males. They also do not consider how their images propose a moralistic evaluation of farmers based on culturally specific aesthetics.
I feel compelled to acknowledge that on the pages following the Farm Cred Do’s and Don’ts there is a section about the face of modern farming around the world. The writers make an effort to showcase black and Hispanic American farmers as well as a women’s farmer collective in Japan, farmers in Africa, South America and the Irish surfer pictured above. On the surface it would appear that the magazine is an homage to the authenticity of all types of non-techno-industrial farmers, but I want to suggest that there is more going on here, which actually reinforces a middle class, Anglo-Saxon perspective to the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity. First, though anyone could purchase an online subscription to this magazine it is published in English and circulates physically in North America and the United Kingdom. This tells us that the multiethnic presentations in the articles are not meant to be consumed by the people the diverse peoples they show, rather they are for the English speaking, affluent, aspiring New Agrarians who are willing to part with $7.99 per issue to see other “authentic farmers.” The other cultures presented are therefore not really being included as discursive subjects of the magazines articles. They are being presented as exotic objectified others whose presence in the magazine serves a useful purpose. By placing UBF producers’ stories alongside stories from other cultures and places from around the world it gives UBF production as New Agrarianism in practice the appearance of being progressive and inclusive even as it speaks narrowly to a specific group’s rehabilitated cultural past.

UBF production as focal practices

In this section I argue that rather than an alternative lifestyle or replacement for modern techno-urban-industrial society, UBF producer practices should be thought of as focal practices.
In Chapter 2 I discussed how Thompson as a New Agrarian philosopher and Petrini as the founder of the Slow Food movement lament the loss of meaning and purpose in food provisioning and eating. They see the culture of the table, hearth, (agricultural) land etc. as sources of moral meaning and purpose that have been lost due modern capitalist techno-urban-industrial enframing. Borgmann (2006) more simply calls this a problem of moral commodification where commodification is understood as “transformations that reduce the richness of everyday life” (Thompson 2010, 113–14). Thompson agrees with Borgmann that “focal things and focal practices may be inefficient means for producing a simple thing . . . but they have a hidden value in the way their pursuit creates meaning and substance as a by-product” (2010, p. 114). Focal practices and focal things are meant to create and circulate meaning and the evidence I marshaled forth in Chapter 3 and 4 show how this is done by UBF producers in practice.

UBF production therefore is best looked at as a set of focal practices that generate this meaning and purpose. UBF producers are clearly going out of their way to make food provisioning more difficult than it has to be and they believe their troubles produce moral or authentic values. It would appear that UBF producers should celebrate that they have found the key to mitigating the concerns and fears they have about contemporary techno-urban-industrial society. Through focal practices, creating mindfulness by doing something the hard or laborious way, UBF producers can (re)create meanings and purposes lost through what Borgmann calls moral commodification. In other words, one does not have to completely shun techno-urban-industrial enframing to be authentic, rather one can do something like grow a tomato plant, eat home cooked meals with your family, milk a goat
every morning as ways to reveal and contemplate this enframing that we normally do not think about. It is in these moments of critical contemplation that they create room for political action as Foucault envisioned it (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988; Pickett 1996).

“Don’t be an Urban Homesteader Asshole,” toward being mindful of the cultural positionality of UBF production

Figure 7: “Don't be an urban homesteader asshole” (Erica 2011). This blog post shows that some in the UBF producer community are concerned about the moralistic fervor with which some UBF producers can push their discourses and practices.

I have shown how when UBF producer practices are ignorant of their cultural foundations their ethics of authenticity can become a moralistic list of culturally situated beliefs and practices that must be replicated to produce authenticity. In other words, their own morals, rooted in their own culture, are deployed as a lens for judging other peoples’ morality. From the perspective of a moralistic UBF producer, those who do not grow their own food, keep their own chickens, or milk their own goats are morally compromised and inauthentic. As Guthman laments, the alternative food movement in general is tainted by a racially charged culturally condescending attitude expressed in the phrase “if they only knew” (2011). Put more bluntly if they would only become more like us, they would make proper decisions. This cultural authenticity is generated by checking off the list of culturally
situated values that I detailed in Chapter 2. What we are left with are culturally situated discourses in which an ethical person should want to be authentic, to be authentic they should be original, originality is conflated with situated cultural beliefs, and what is deemed authentic in practice is the reproduction of a specific culture’s utopian visions. The blog post above suggests that some in the UBF producer community are critically aware that UBF producers can become so zealous about their UBF production discourses and practices that they are offensive. The blogger above is annoyed by the moralistic fervor with which some UBF producers evangelize their new found backyard authenticity and simultaneously congratulate themselves on being more moral than others.

In the course of my interviews I had my research participants reflect on the cultural situatedness of their discourses and practices by asking them why they thought UBF producers were mostly white and middle class. Most had clearly never given any thought to why their practices were dominated by affluent, educated, white people. Others seemed mildly annoyed or even shocked by the question, while still others simply could offer no opinion on the matter. The most revealing response that I got came from a white female entrepreneur whose organization explicitly tries to empower people by teaching them how to grow and sell their own food. When I suggested entire swaths of the Denver metro area could not grow their own food because they already worked multiple jobs, had to take care of children as single parents, did not have access to land, or because it was not part of their culture she was very irritated with my assessment and quickly dismissed the importance of these obstacles.

I want to suggest that if UBF producers and New Agrarians want to make their discourses and practices more inclusive, avoid being moralistic, and avoid uncritically
reproducing their culture’s dominance, UBF producers and New Agrarians in general need to take seriously Erica’s critique of their moralistic behavior. In this I concur with Mares and Peña (2011) when they conclude that for alternative food systems to achieve environmental and food justice alternative food systems must go deep as well as be local and slow. Deep means recognizing that there are as many ways to provision food and evaluate one’s morality or authenticity as there are cultures. Deep means making room for these other ways of being. To go deep the UBF producer community and the alternative food community in general need to recognize that their practices and discourses cannot be presented as the way to frame and access authenticity. UBF producers need to open up space for other situated knowledges by being mindful not just of techno-urban-industrial enframing, but also of the plurality of cultures existing in the same place (DuPuis, Harrison, and Goodman 2011).

One of my white, middle class, female interviewees offers an illuminating example of how UBF production works within and reproduces hegemonic cultural space. In an effort to ameliorate the moralistic pressures that emanate from UBF producers she said “gardening is like yoga, you have to find the posture that fits you. You shouldn’t have to fit the posture. You need balance” (Melinda, Personal communication, August 14, 2015). She is trying to alleviate the overzealous moralistic pressure to be a certain way and give gardeners permission to find their own (authentic) way. But, she does this using a yoga analogy. Yoga in the U.S. is overwhelmingly the domain of white, educated, and affluent women (Birdee et al. 2008). In her effort to make gardening discourses less moralistic and thereby more inclusive she invokes a clearly culturally situated analogy that reinscribes gardening as white, privileged, and feminized space. Becoming mindful of cultural
hegemony and making UBF production about more than cultural reproduction is clearly going to be a difficult task.

*Ensuring that the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity is inclusive*

Yet again we are faced with a quandary. UBF producers and much of the rest of the alternative food movement are the discursive domain of a dominant and privileged class, yet imagine that their discourses and practices are the vanguard of improving environmental and food justice for everyone. Can their ideas be made more universally accessible and relevant or are their practices destined to be little more than a leisure activity of privileged people who use it to ameliorate their apocalyptic concerns and work toward realizing their culturally situated definitions of authenticity? To address this, I want to think along with Slocum (2007), in her work illuminating farmer’s markets as the production of white space. Slocum points out that the farmers’ markets that she is observing do not have to be white space. She observes that farmers’ markets become white space through the racially coded performances that take place there and that these performances could be performed differently to create a more inclusive space.

Throughout this dissertation I have been detailing how UBF producers’ practices are unavoidably also culturally significant practices, which help affirm particular culturally situated beliefs. Slocum’s conclusions suggest that to realize the New Agrarian utopian vision, it needs more than simply UBF producers’ putting the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity into practice in their backyards and encouraging the spread of these practices to other yards. In addition, to critically thinking about and respond to the health and environmental impacts of techno-urban-industrial enframing they also need to be mindful
of the exclusionary barriers to alternative food that their practices create when they are not critically recognized as culturally situated.

Personal health, environmental justice, food security, and social reproduction in general are not the domain of one demographic group. They are the concerns of every group even if UBF production and other forms of alternative food provisioning make it appear as a privileged cultural space (Friedmann 2005). Therefore, taking my lead from Slocum, UBF production could be performed differently to make it more inclusive. To do this UBF production practices (as focal practices) need to be mindful not just of techno-urban-industrial enframing, but also of heterogeneous ways of imagining alternative food provisioning (DuPuis, Harrison, and Goodman 2011; Mares and Pena 2011) as well as morality and authenticity.

I found some evidence that this desire to be more inclusive is taking hold in the Denver area. The Growhaus operates in Denver’s Elyria-Swansea neighborhood. A paradigm for environmental injustice, Elyria-Swansea is the most polluted zip code in Colorado and is home to a large, poor Hispanic population. It is currently crisscrossed by surface rail lines and bisected by I-70, and home to the Denver Stockyards, a waste water treatment plant, a dogfood plant, and adjacent to a petroleum refinery. The Growhaus intentionally situated itself in this neighborhood for these reasons and because this neighborhood fits their criteria of a food desert. The Growhaus has implemented programs that are meant to increase access to unprocessed and local (even produced in Elyria-Swansea when possible) food for that neighborhood. Long-term the mostly young, white, educated not-for-profit management plans to turn over the facility to the neighborhood. Even though their ideas for their farmers’ market, food production facility, and community
outreach originated in the privileged cultural space that I have been discussing, they have worked to adapt their original idea for what the neighborhood needs to what the neighborhood wants and will support.

In its efforts to get more people to grow food in their backyards CSU’s Denver Extension office asked residents of Elyria-Swansea what would enable them to grow food. It turned out that the residents wanted to grow food and they knew how to grow food, but, quite understandably, these residents feared that their soil was contaminated. They did not need to be convinced of the value of the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity or even learn how to grow food. They just needed access to soil test kits, which CSU was able to provide (Joe, Personal communication, November 6, 2015). The largely white and well-educated extension office realized a common goal with this Hispanic immigrant community of growing food in backyards and facilitated the residents of Elyria-Swansea’s ability to grow that food, if they wanted to, and as they saw fit.

In a last example I want to reflect on Mo’ Betta Greens Garden Marketplace, a small farmers’ market in the Five Points neighborhood in Denver. This rapidly gentrifying neighborhood is the cultural home of Denver’s black population. Even though Mo’ Betta Greens is the child of a white female UBF producer who lives in the neighborhood, it is clear that its target audience is not the same as other farmers’ markets in Denver. When I visited the market it was situated outside the Denver Black History Library and featured a DJ playing loud Hip Hop music. When I spoke with the organizer of this market she told me that the purpose of the market was twofold: to provide a farmers’ market that was not scripted as white space and to provide a space through which UBF producers in the nearby neighborhoods could sell their excess produce.
The market organizer was clearly trying to create something other than the
privileged white cultural ideal that is reproduced at most other area farmers’ markets.
However, it did not necessarily make UBF production more culturally pluralistic.
Organizations like Mo’ Betta Greens need to continue to make sure their subversive
critique of techno-urban-industrial enframing includes a reflexive awareness of the cultural
situatedness inherent in the meanings and purposes they instill in their New Agrarian
projects. Only by being mindful of and subverting techno-urban-industrial enframing and
cultural hegemony can the boosters of UBF production and New Agrarianism create an
inclusive discourse that has a chance of reaching their broader environmental and food
justice goals.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I examined the implications of the cultural situatedness of the New
Agrarian ethics of authenticity for the UBF producer community that I observed for this
dissertation. I argued that the ideals in New Agrarianism compel its UBF producer subjects
to their practices. As discursive subjects UBF producers are not normally aware that their
conduct is conducted according to these discourses. Not seeing the cultural positionality of
the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity is further amplified by its failure to see nature and
food provisioning methods as deeply cultural and political. This enables UBF producers to
see their practices not only as universally intelligible and desirable, but also inherently
moral.

I showed how seeing UBF production as one discourse among many often
conflicting discourses that conduct UBF producers’ conduct allows us understand why UBF
production appears at first glance as a novelty. As a counter discourse, UBF production has
to compete with other discourses making UBF production practices look like partial and fleeting idealistic gestures, confusingly in support of neoliberalism or as the leisure activities of a privileged race and class. I argue that the more stridently one tries to implement UBF production practices into their lives, the more exhausted they become trying to balance both a contemporary techno-urban-industrial life and one counter to it.

Homemakers are led to believe that to be authentic they have to liberate themselves from techno-urban-industrial inauthenticity. To do this they need to resurrect a pre-WWII productive home economy. What these homemakers seem to not realize is that the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity that underpins UBF production is not just about authenticity in the sense of being independent or self-made, it is also working toward a culturally situated utopia using a historical model that worked women hard and compensated them little.

Finally, I entertained the idea of focal practices as a way to understand UBF productions’ role in contemporary society, but show that the meaning and purpose that focal practices are supposed to resurrect from the shadow of techno-urban-industrial enframing are also necessarily cultural and make moral claims. These moral claims frequently are turned into moralistic judgements of others, but there is evidence that some UBF producers see moralistic claims as offensive and counterproductive to UBF productions’ larger food and environmental justice goals. I argue in the end that to be authentic or subversive as UBF producers as New Agrarians in practice claim to want, they need to be mindful not just of techno-urban-industrial enframing, but also mindful of the cultural situatedness of their discourses and their position as subjects of these discourses.
Conclusion

The overarching goal of this dissertation has been to use ethnographic data to build a critical theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding UBF producers. I started my analysis by using a Marxist political economic approach, but ultimately showed its limitations in a society that values independence over collective action. I also contributed to the alternative economies literature with an example of an alternative economy that has the potential to be subversive even as it reproduces cultural ideologies and narratives. This is not surprising since I have shown that UBF producers discourses and practices are fraught with Foucauldian power structures. Finally, I revive concepts of morality and authenticity from twentieth century Continental philosophy, not to make claims about what is authentic or moral, but to show how these concepts continue to move through UBF producers’ discourses and practices in ways that legitimize and delegitimize different comportments of individuals and societies toward each other and toward their material world.

I conclude that UBF production is the most recent incarnation of ancient and cyclical back-to-the-land movements that use agriculture to provide meaning and purpose to their lives in light of the perceived immorality of urbanization. In the U.S., Thomas Jefferson expanded these morality concerns to the (industrial) capitalist mode of production arguing that an agrarian society is more stable and is better positioned to be democratic than an urban-industrial society. I showed how UBF producers are implicated in a modern variant of Jefferson’s agrarianism called New Agrarianism. New Agrarianism melds new social movement environmental concerns about the capitalist means of production or what I have called, expanding on Heidegger, techno-urban-industrial enframing. I also situate New
Agrarianism in nineteenth and twentieth century Continental philosophy’s existentialism movements which sought to find moral bearing in a world where pre-Enlightenment, externally imposed social orders had collapsed. This collapse unmoored society from these older social orders, namely Christianity, but without replacing these orders with other moral ontologies. I found that the common theme among ancient back-to-the-land movements, New Agrarianism (including UBF producers), and existentialism is that they are all concerned with being moral and authentic.

Before the Enlightenment project began, authenticity meant to follow eternally imposed directions usually descending from God through nobility to the average subject. Beginning with Kierkegaard, existentialists struggled to find a new mooring point for the authentic individual self. New Agrarians pull on these existential threads but try to root them in nature to develop a moral ontology of nature that they argue is best accessed through small-scale agriculture that uses nature as measure. Two potential problems with this ethics of authenticity are that nature is a socially constructed concept and agriculture is as much about reproducing culture as it is about producing sustenance. As New Agrarians in practice, the UBF producers that participated in my project demonstrated the limitations of both an internally derived or punk ethics of authenticity and the limitations of an ethics of authenticity rooted in nature and agriculture. UBF producers show that the New Agrarian definitions of authenticity may claim to be universally authentic and moral, but they are not. UBF producers, like the ancient Roman back-to-the-landers are making a subversive, yet regressive statement to antagonize the forces that they feel threaten their culture.
I began with four research questions that were designed to probe the social dimensions of UBF producers. The first question was, what kinds of people produce food in urban spaces? I found that most UBF producers are part of a particular demographic (white, middle class and usually engaged in the still feminized project of homemaking) in the Denver metropolitan area, I also presented evidence that suggests this is largely the case across the U.S. I found that even though most UBF producers are of a particular demographic in the U.S., most everyone I talked to had respect for and thought UBF production was a moral and desirable undertaking.

The second question was, what motivates people to produce food in their urban backyards in the Denver metropolitan area? I began answering this question by taking UBF producers at their word. They offered feelings of alienation and existential anxiety as reasons for their practices. They also conflated ideas of authenticity to develop a formula in which their authenticity as a unique individual comes from their ability to sustain themselves and their family. However, when we look at how clearly their utopian ideals draw from a revisionist perspective of one culture's past and that it is the inheritors of this cultural past that are the primary demographic implicated in UBF producer practices, we begin to see UBF production and New Agrarianism less as a panacea for techno-urban-industrial enframing, and more as people of a particular culture continuing to struggle to find post-Enlightenment moral bearing.

The third question was, in what ways does UBF production shape practitioners' identities and social relationships and in what ways does it represent the identities and social relations that they want? My research subjects expressed desires for food and environmental justice that they believe precipitate out of agrarian relationships with each
other and the material world. These agrarian relationships are meant to give meaning and purpose to people’s practices and lives in general. Given the role of nostalgia and historical and cultural revisionism in the meanings and purposes they instill in their UBF producer discourse and practices, I conclude that UBF producers are effectively trying to reproduce cultural authenticity rather than simply the authenticity of nature or of the original self. I contend that UBF producers are largely driven to grow food because it has become a signifying practice of what it means to be an authentic member of their culture. Though the mid-twentieth century agrarian nostalgia saturates UBF producer discourses and practices, this does not mean that their underlying apocalyptic concerns and utopian visions are not shared by other cultures.

My final question was, how is UBF production used as a medium for contesting and reinforcing dominate discourses and what alternatives does it offer? What I found was that UBF production and New Agrarianism in general do offer a culturally situated resistance to the moral commodification that they feel makes their lives not only less meaningful and less purposeful, but also makes them feel like they are precariously perched on the edge of a techno-urban-industrial apocalyptic abyss. When I started this project I was expecting to find that blurring ontological categories would expose weaknesses in the hegemony of the capitalist mode of production and techno-urban-industrial enframing. Instead of creating an inherently progressive subversive space, UBF producers’ blurring of ontological categories created an ambiguous space in which they sometimes contest and sometimes reproduce discourses. Primarily I found that definitions of authenticity were being blurred, and culturally specific conceptualizations of nature and food provisioning were being depicted as apolitical as well as universally intelligible and moral. In their focus on finding
meaning, purpose, morality, and survivability in nature and autonomous food provisioning, UBF producers fail to see the other discursive power structures that they are reproducing through their ideologies and narratives.

I want to make it clear that I am not disillusioned with nor do I want to disparage UBF producers and New Agrarians. I have nothing but respect and encouragement for anyone who wants to resist the numbing reduction of meaning and purpose to exchange and use values or to subvert the techno-urban-industrial enframing that transforms the world into what Heidegger called standing-reserve. As I write this conclusion I am expanding my already large garden and cannot deny my continued attraction to the idea of nature as purifying and nostalgia for my own Midwest German-American agrarian ancestry. But, I believe it is imperative to not forget that agriculture and nature are culturally situated concepts and therefore cannot provide the right way for accessing authenticity.

Therefore, if UBF producers are really after long-term food and environmental justice for everyone, they need to make space for and become comfortable with multiple culturally situated understandings of nature, authenticity, morality, and agriculture. In no way is UBF production ever simply a technical solution to a technical problem. It is an (agri)cultural solution to a cultural problem. Likewise, there is no essential, authentic nature that exists beyond the pale of society. Nature is conceptualized through a cultural lens. Therefore, we cannot simply declare nature as the source of authenticity and morality, nor one vision of agriculture to reveal it.

I argue that focal practices offer a reasonable conceptual space in which UBF production as the New Agrarian ethics of authenticity can have relevance in the lives of
contemporary techno-urban-industrial discursive subjects. By doing something in an antiquated fashion or “the hard way” the immorality and inauthenticity of techno-urban-industrial enframing can be illuminated and a space for political action opened. Through these intentionally intimate and place-bound activities, meaning and purpose that this enframing otherwise flattens can be (re)produced.

In order for the UBF producer community to achieve its broader food and environmental justice goals, the ones outside of their own backyards, they need to contemplate authenticity, morality, agriculture, and nature as culturally situated. By seeing meaning and purpose as well as morality and authenticity as culturally situated concepts, UBF producers and New Agrarians in general can more consciously refine and strengthen what these mean to them in the context of their culture. Expanding the targets of their counter discursive focal practices will also help them see that nature, agriculture, and authenticity are culturally relative terms. In turn this means that the UBF producer community that I observed and am a part of could make space for and legitimize other cultures’ understandings of these concepts.
References


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