

# Back to the city: urban agriculture and the reimagining of agrarianism in Novella Carpenter’s *Farm City*

Shiuhhuah Serena Chou<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 22 June 2017  
© Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, Hungary 2017

**Abstract** In this essay, I examine how Novella Carpenter, while paying dutiful homage to the American agrarian ideal, diverges from dominant agrarian discourse’s rural-centricity when she (trans)plants both the practice and the art of cultivation to an inner-city abandoned lot. In her memoir *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer* (2009), Carpenter’s story of small family farming, indeed, evokes what Eric T. Freyfogle describes as an agrarian mode of life in which humans, as members of the land community, are “just as dependent as other life on the land’s fertility and just as shaped by its mysteries and possibilities” (Freyfogle, in: Freyfogle (ed) *The new agrarianism: land, culture, and the community of life*, Island Press, Washington, DC, 2001, p. xiii). Carpenter’s return to the city, however, marks a critical break from traditional understandings of agrarianism, challenging the city-country binary that has long been employed in the imagining of agrarianism. Farming in the city, like traditional agrarians she is attentive to the agencies of nonhuman entities and matters; unlike them, she moves beyond their rurality to reconfigure cities as agential bodies constantly in dynamic processes of becoming. In *Farm City*, her return from the land shifts the emphasis from the countryside to the city, evoking a “new agrarianism” that foregrounds both environmental stewardship and community-citizenship. The urban strain of Carpenter’s farming experience, I argue, not only brings to the fore the agronomic and spiritual potentialities of inner cities but forges a new ethical relation embracing humanity and history as active agents of the agrarian community.

**Keywords** Agrarianism · Urban farming · Novella Carpenter · *Farm City* · Back-to-the-land movement · Food literature

---

✉ Shiuhhuah Serena Chou  
sschou.sinica@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan

Novella Carpenter's exceptional fame and genius as a farmer has firmly been established by her whimsical revitalization of the American agrarian ideal. The unanimous praise that Carpenter has received over the years revolves around her adventures harvesting and cooking savory homegrown foods in the middle of a West Oakland ghetto where she and her husband built their home. Reviewers align Carpenter with Wendell Berry, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Julie Powell, Elizabeth Gilbert, E. B. White, and a diverse range of American writers who gained household popularity for their celebration of homestead idyllicism. Whether celebrating her back-to-the-land self-sufficiency (Pollan 2009; Smith 2009), edgy bourgeois locavorism (Garner 2009), or strong moral stand on the controversial DIY animal slaughter issue (Editorial Review 2009, p. 43), they eagerly ascribe to her a bundle of eclectic concepts and beliefs loosely tied together under the umbrella category "agrarianism."<sup>1</sup> As Carpenter's UC Berkeley mentor, best-selling food author Michael Pollan rightly observes, she "puts a whole new twist on the agrarian tradition in America" (Pollan 2009, n. p.). Applauding to Carpenter's "restaging of the agrarian American dream," critical readers enact Carpenter's migration back to the city as a symbolic gesture through which she, and they, reflect on the socio-environmental possibilities of agrarianism in twenty-first century America (Smith 2009, p. J1).

In this essay, I examine how Carpenter, while paying dutiful homage to the American agrarian ideal, diverges from dominant agrarian discourse's rural-centricity when she (trans)plants both the practice and the art of cultivation to an inner-city abandoned lot. In her memoir *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer* (2009), Carpenter's story of small family farming, indeed, evokes what Eric T. Freyfogle describes as an agrarian mode of life in which humans, as members of the land community, are "just as dependent as other life on the land's fertility and just as shaped by its mysteries and possibilities" (Freyfogle 2001, p. xiii). Carpenter's return to the city, however, marks a critical break from traditional understandings of agrarianism, challenging the city-country binary that has long been employed in the imagining of agrarianism. Farming in the city, like traditional agrarians, she is attentive to the agencies of nonhuman entities and matters; unlike them, she moves beyond their rurality to reconfigure cities as agential bodies constantly in dynamic processes of becoming. In *Farm City*, her return from the land shifts the emphasis from the countryside to the city, evoking what writer and activist Gary Paul Nabhan notes is an "agrarian ecology" (Nabhan 2016, p. 7) or what critics such as Freyfogle and writers such as David Walbert term a "new agrarianism" that foregrounds both environmental stewardship and community-citizenship (Freyfogle 2001, p. xv; Walbert 2002, n. p.). The urban strain of

<sup>1</sup> As Pollan puts it in his blurb to *Farm City*, Carpenter is an agrarian "going for a mind-meld of Fifty Cent and Wendell Barry, or an inner-city version of *The Egg and I*" (Pollan 2009, n. p.). In his review for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Paul A. Smith similarly notes that Carpenter "ruminat[es] on the soft, agrarian sentimentality found in 'Little House in the Big Woods'" (Smith 2009, p. J1). Dwight Garner of the *New York Times*, along this line, also accentuates Carpenter's agrarian experience "[I]iving off the land" while comparing her popular women food writers who have been known for their "[f]resh, fearless, [and edgy]" attributes (Garner 2009, p. C32). *Publishers Weekly* also writes that Carpenter consistently "draw[s] on her Idaho ranch roots" and "chronicles the animals' slaughter with grace and sensitivity, their cooking and consumption with a gastronome's passion" (Editorial Review 2009, p. 43).

Carpenter's farming experience, I argue, not only brings to the fore the agronomic and spiritual potentialities of inner cities but forges a new ethical relation embracing humanity and history as active agents of the agrarian community.

## Back from the land

Daughter of homesteading hippies of the 1970s, Novella Carpenter's migration from the land back to the city begins early on in her life when her mother realized that their self-sufficient, agrarian life on an Idaho ranch was lived always in "isolation, full of beauty—maybe—but mostly loneliness" (Carpenter 2009, p. 32). Along with the millions of North American back-to-the-land enthusiasts of the time, Carpenter's mother declared her anarchist vision to remake the "entire American society" a complete failure, admitting that "spinning wool or churning butter might be fun for a while, but eventually the conveniences of modern life—grocery stores, clothes driers—seemed pretty wonderful" (2009, p. 116). Leaving her semi-feral husband after their divorce in the late '70s, she, together with her two young daughters, Novella and Riana, relocated in a logging town near Seattle but kept her homesteading spirit alive through "heroic hippie farm action" stories (2009, p. 16). Growing up in the woods at a relatively young age, Novella Carpenter's memories in the woods are largely fabricated out of a mixture of adventurous farm tales that she heard from her mother, such as the meat-turkey's wild chase of Riana (2009, p. 15), and DIY information on "windmills, composting toilets, and other tools" that she obtained from the counterculture Bible, *The Whole Earth Catalog* (2009, pp. 106–107). Neither nostalgia nor practical knowledge, however, prevented her from abhorring the idealism of an agrarian rurality, nor from determining not to "make the same mistakes [her] parents made" (2009, p. 44). Like Riana, whose "ultimate reaction against hippie values" (2009, p. 112), according to her mother, has transformed her into "a materialist working for a high-end department store and driving an SUV" (2009, p. 112), Novella Carpenter left the "Emerald City" of Seattle for Oakland, the epitome of "urban decay" (2009, p. 10), repudiating her "hippie" affiliations (2009, pp. 19, 44, 69). She and her family's retreat from the land symbolizes the closing of a chapter of agrarian American history in which back-to-the-landers' vision of a decentralized economy based on self-sufficient, small-family farms remained an unfulfilled promise.

In *Farm City*, interestingly, Novella Carpenter's decision to pursue a career as an "urban farmer" after her family's resettlement in the city gestures toward a more radical understanding of back-to-the-landers' retreat from the countryside (Carpenter 2009, pp. 44, 47). Her migration to Seattle, and later Oakland, in other words, should not be dismissed hastily as a reactionary revolt against hippie farmers' faith in the redemptive power of rurality. Rather, Carpenter's country-to-city migration entails a rite of passage where she leaves behind the romantic parochialism of the 1970s back-to-the-landers to engage fully in the debates of American agrarian advocates concerning the role of agriculture in forging sustainable human–nonhuman relations.

Maintaining that the agrarian enterprise of her parents' generation in the wild is another "utopia" doomed to collapse (Carpenter 2009, p. 116), Carpenter readily embraces her desire for the "cultural delights of the city" (Carpenter 2009, p. 16) and the "faded art deco buildings," "dive bars," "citizenry," and the "down-and-out qualities" of Oakland (Carpenter 2009, p. 8). As former hippie Eleanor Agnew confesses in her memoir *Back from the Land* (2004), life on the ranch failed to live to up to the expectations of independent homesteaders and rural communes especially when optimistic nonconformists were struck by a sense of "isolation": isolation from family and friends (Agnew 2004, p. 33); modern conveniences and health facilities (Agnew 2004, p. 29); opportunities for a stable, self-sustaining farm economy (2004, p. 141); and even "culture" (Agnew 2004, p. 212) and "the vitality of urban areas" (Agnew 2004, p. 212). In addition to "rural isolation, drudgery, [and] lack of opportunity"—common factors that had driven various waves of American back-to-the-land agrarians out of their homesteads (Brown 2011, p. 123)—hippie farmers of the 1960s and 1970s were particularly instigated by "rising land prices, taxes, and medical costs—along with cheaper food" (Brown 2011, p. 226).<sup>2</sup> Carpenter's double identity as daughter of former back-to-the-landers and "urban farmer," however, underlines the urban legacies of hippie farmers, whose agrarian social reforms in cities and suburbs, unlike their secluded wilderness utopias, had deep and comprehensive impacts (Carpenter 2009, pp. 43, 47). For Carpenter, back-to-the-landers have consistently perceived the countryside as a virgin land safeguarded against global capitalism; for them, it is—an "uncultivated wilderness" filled with new socio-economic possibilities. Their withdrawal, in this sense, unravels a binary position that, in entrusting their anarchist visions to the countryside, deny cities their capacity to drive structural reforms.

Carpenter's migration back to the city exhibits her own, and many hippie farmers', impatience with the personal and political constraints of the rural primitivism of the back-to-the-land movements. Her voluntary position as an urban farmer, however, highlights American agrarians' persistent faith in land cultivation as a mode of dwelling and socio-environmental empowerment. In *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America* (2011), critic Dona Brown undertakes a long, on-going history of American back-to-the-land movements that never quite ends with these progressive, white, educated homesteaders' abandonment of their rural homes, as one might have imagined. On an optimistic note, he concludes and argues that the agrarian revolts of the '60s and '70s should never be perceived as "failures" since, most notably, the anti-capitalist and anti-materialist messages of the reformers have dramatically and forcefully been

<sup>2</sup> In *Back to the Land*, Brown identifies two waves of back-to-the-land movements in the US. The first back-to-the-land movement began in the 1890s with rapid industrialization and hence the shift of job opportunities to factories, and it culminated during World War I with the nation's economic struggle. The second back-to-the-land movement began with the rapid urbanization and the worship for technology during the New Deal and ends in the late 1970s. While both generations share a faith in a rural future, the first back-to-the-landers envisioned a return to "artisanal skill, personal autonomy, and household self-sufficiency" (Brown 2011, p. 5) and the second generation were characterized by it "decentralist, regionalist, sometimes nostalgic" impulses (Brown 2011, p. 7).

delivered to the world (Brown 2011, p. 226). In addition, many hippie famers and families, like their 1920s and 1950s predecessors who retired to the cities and suburbs, brought with them strains of agrarian values and practices that have mobilized institutional reforms from within the global, capitalist system that they so ferociously condemned. Brown writes, “[m]any back-to-the-landers of the 1960s and 1970s... long ago turned their efforts away from individual self-sufficiency and toward grassroots institutional change. In the process, they built a new infrastructure that would prove eminently serviceable when times changed once again” (Brown 2011, p. 235). The fact that Carpenter’s journey back from the land culminates with her return to farming after obtaining degrees in biology and English from the University of Washington in Seattle, and journalism from UC Berkeley, prompts further considerations of her urban farmer identity, tactics, impacts, and legacies in light of back-to-the-land agrarianism.

Early on in *Farm City*, Carpenter ferociously distinguishes herself, a “self-invented” Californian urban farmer (Carpenter 2009, p. 12), from her Vietnamese neighbor, Mr. Nguyen, and other Vietnamese, Italian, and ethnic American gardeners who she considers to be “natural urban farmer[s]” (Carpenter 2009, p. 64). Alluding to Antonio Gramsci’s notion of a proletarian “organic intellectual,” she draws on passages from Italian immigrant Angelo Pellegrini’s noted memoir *The Unprejudiced Palate* (1948) to underscore immigrant urban farmers’ deep affective and material ties with the foods they sow. She remarks,

“He subsidizes his fluctuating income by wringing from his environment all that it will yield. [...] Regardless of his means, he will garden his plot of ground because he knows the vital difference between cold storage or tinned peas and those plucked from the vine an hour before they are eaten. Furthermore, challenging the soil for its produce is in his bones; the pleasure of eating what he raises is inseparably fused with the pleasure of raising what he eats.” (Carpenter 2009, p. 64)

Carpenter laments her intellectual confinement by previous hegemonic orders, distinguishing herself from a natural, “organic” urban farmer, who, while cultivating chemical-free “organic” foods, participates in concrete civic reforms from within the socio-political system like a Gramscian “organic intellectual.” For Carpenter, she and the organic urban farmers are living contrasts in terms of their education attainment, and, hence, their relations to not only the laboring mass but the nonhuman organisms and materials of the complex agronomic ecosystem. Unlike Mr. Nguyen and other immigrant urban farmers who cultivate food not just for nourishment but as a “taste of home” and the land, she has no direct link to the economic structure of food production and remains aloof from the working class (Carpenter 2009, p. 64). As natural urban farmers, they embody the self-sufficient small family farming ideal of American agrarianism. Rather than defining their roles as farmers in relation to the ideology and the value of the privileged and the dominant, Mr. Nguyen and immigrant farmers foster an emotive bond that produces the aspiration for reform from within.

In *Farm City*, however, Carpenter fails to look beyond this differences between social origins to tease out what Gramsci notes as the abilities of an organic

intellectual to “[lead] the classes which are its allies, and dominat[e] those which are its enemies” (Gramsci 1971, p. 57). The revolutionary potential of these “organic” urban farmers-intellectuals, whose connections with the people are thought to be the catalyst for social and moral change, is overlooked in exchange for a simplistic “noble savage” fantasy. In Carpenter’s scheme for agrarian and food sovereignty, the agency and moral duty for social transformation is hence differed or attributed to bourgeois urban farmers like her, who remain distant from the laboring mass’s socio-political struggles.

Carpenter’s distance from the natural urban farmers shows how her identity as an urban farmer is intricately embedded within a rich and complex cultural and literary tradition of the return. Her rural-to-urban migration performs a double movement: while her return from the countryside with her family entails retreat and withdrawal from hippie homesteading utopias, her return to farming evinces a re-engagement with issues of social equity and community alliance. Both returns evince political aspirations and commitments rather than forms of play or escapism. Whether contextualized within the history of the back-to-the-land movement or the history of her family homesteading, Carpenter’s return to the city here invokes what Terry Gifford asserts is a “defining pastoral momentum of retreat and return” (Gifford 2014, p. 18) where she, the urban farmer, returns with “knowledge of human dilemmas played out in intimate contact with the [...] landscape” (Gifford 2014, p. 18). The withdrawal from the back-to-the-land visions of the hippies provide the critical distance necessarily for her later return and re-engagement with urban agriculture, as well as with food and agrarian justice movements. Most importantly, self-reflexivity has allowed her, an urban farmer, to trespass beyond back-to-the-landers’ and agrarians’ obsessions with the moral goodness and environmental soundness of rurality to explore the full socio-environmental potentialities of urban farming (as opposed to “rural” farming). In *Farm City*, she sanctions urban farming not so much as an urban surrogate or a transplant of (rural) farming practices and values, but as a new agrarian tactic that cultivates a distinct mode of food provisioning where cities, the ultimate human construct, is positioned at the loci of an experimental exploration of sustainable human–nonhuman relations.

Back in the inner city, Carpenter discovers community gardening, vacant lot farming, and other grassroots agrarian projects founded and sustained by urban farmers of hippie descent. Self-invented and self-made urban farmers, on the one hand, they attempt to balance the sense of independence and dignity achieved working the land with the conveniences of modern technology and urban life. On the other hand, they envision a society based on agrarian relations and community solidarity. For Carpenter and her fellow urban farmers, farming in the city fosters not only a more progressive, but a more pragmatic mode of social reform than hippie farmers’ secluded agrarian life on the ranch.

Through local food and farming coalitions, Carpenter and Willow provide “healthy food at low cost to people in the neighborhood” (Carpenter 2009, p. 43) as well as job opportunities and nutrition and health education for the disenfranchised (Carpenter 2009, p. 62). Upon visiting Willow’s food security nonprofit City Slicker Farm, Carpenter claims that Willow, the “ideal urban farmer” (Carpenter 2009, p. 60), “had long hair and wore boots, but [she] wouldn’t call her a hippie” because

“[s]he got shit done, it was obvious” (Carpenter 2009, p. 44). As Willow herself insists, “[u]nlike a rural farm, a secret place where only a few lucky people may visit, an urban farm makes what seems impossible possible” (Carpenter 2009, p. 62). Both Dona Brown’s comment that a healthy diet is the first step to personal autonomy and a decentralizing global system, and Carpenter’s and Willow’s contention that urban farmers are defined by their social concerns and the efficacy and vibrancy of their political activism shed light on the civic functioning of urban agriculture. For Carpenter, the city is a locale where she is given the freedom to cultivate not only food but environmental justice. The “urbanity” of urban farming, in this sense, serves not so much as a geographical indicator that specifies the locale in which she farms, but as a constitutive part of her attempt for social equity.

Although critical readers have been vague in pinpointing what constitutes Carpenter’s agrarian economy, they have been impatient in adverting that her urban farming education depicted in *Farm City* is characterized by a “twist” (Pollan 2009, n. p.)—a bold, progressive ambition, that unravels “the ethical and logistical ambiguities” embedded within the return-from-the-land movement (Smith 2009, p. J1). The concerted effort that subscribe Carpenter’s urban farming experience at Ghost Town to the discourse of agrarianism raises important questions regarding the role of urban agriculture in contemporary environmental discourse: in what ways is agrarianism a politically viable and relevant philosophy in the understanding of urban agriculture practices such as the community efforts of Carpenter and Willow? What exactly is this “twist” that has immediately mesmerized Carpenter’s readers and reviewers? Most importantly, how has Carpenter’s “twist” on conventional modes of agrarianism responded to the call of professor of Nutritional Science and Policy and editor of the *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture* William Lockeretz and many others for the urgency of “think[ing] creatively about the future of agriculture” (Lockeretz 1997, p. ix)?

In “Agrarian Ecology” (2016), Gary Paul Nabhan argues,

the New Agrarianism, which is emerging globally, is not restricted to the rural domain, nor is it necessarily a romantic desire to reenact social behaviors and mores associated with rural populaces in bygone eras. Instead, a New Agrarianism is emerging within urban as well as rural communities, and may indeed be *the* set of values and operating principles that can obliterate the rural–urban divide that, in many ways, characterized and crippled North American and European cultures during the second half of the twentieth century. (Nabhan 2016, p. 7)

Nabhan’s conception of new agrarianism here epitomizes agrarian concerns and struggles over the political relevancy of agrarianism—a set of socio-political values that revere rural-based small family farming economy as the loci of personal, community, and nation development—for the hyper-urbanized and capitalized American societies. More importantly, the obliteration of the rural–urban moral divide accentuated by Nabhan as the core of new agrarianism reflects a growing endeavor to retrieve cities’ agronomic, moral, and civic purposes.

In 2008, writer and farmer David Walbert's manifesto, "The Eightfold Agrarian Way," anticipated Nabhan's observations made eight years later. Walbert points out,

No philosophy can succeed if it applies only to a small minority within a society, and New Agrarianism is about deep, broad, long-term change. We live in a society that is majority urban, and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. New Agrarianism, creatively interpreted, could apply equally well to life in the city—to any life, in fact, that values connections with nature, with place, and with community. (Walbert 2008, n. p.)

The shift of critical attention to both the potentialities and the needs of the city indicate the ever soaring demographic growth in cities during the last decade. As the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations notes, humanity has now reached a historical intersection where over 50% of the world's population resides in urban settlements (United Nations 2014, p. 7). The emphasis of cities also illuminates an eco-materialist perspective in which the world is perceived as a matter "far from being a 'pure exterior'" and filled with "intermingling agencies and forces that persist and change over eons, producing new forms, bodies, and natures" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, p. 1). Sanctioning the material agencies of urban entities and matters, new agrarians reconfigure cities, like the countryside, as vibrant material beings in constant processes of becoming and generating an interconnected web of (biotic) community relations. Through urban farming, cities have become the future of environmental sustainability in new agrarian imagination.

While these new findings and perspectives seem to have "liberated" the city from its association with environmental and ethical barrenness, they call attention to how farming has been assigned the role of a social enterprise in American agrarian literature and culture. In "Past Visions of American Agriculture," history professor David B. Danbom contends that "agriculture is a social enterprise—significant primarily for the creation of families, communities, and a nation—and farmers are people whose particular values, traditions, and behaviors make them especially important to society" (Danbom 1997, p. 3). Since the Virginia colonies and Thomas Jefferson's Republican economic experiment, civic development and democracy advancement through agrarian virtues of self-reliance, courage, and moral integrity have been ingrained in American cultural and political imagination as inherent merits of farming.<sup>3</sup> Despite that, the agrarian notion of self-reliance also connotes a rugged individualism and American exceptionalism, urbanity, for new agrarians, has comes to forge a distinct ethical "newness" that eventually serves as "the twist" to the experience and the ideal of American agrarianism. The idea that socio-political commitment is an ingrained value of farming, however, encourages us to return to Carpenter's conception of urban farming to further ponder the validity of critics' expansive celebration of civic participation as the distinct virtue that

<sup>3</sup> Business entrepreneurship is a competing farm image of small-family farm economy deeply entrenched in the American psyche. For in-depth discussions of these two competing forces of American agriculture, see, most notably, Paul B. Thompson's *The Spirit of the Soil: Agriculture and Environmental Ethics* (1995, pp. 47–71), and David B. Danbom's "Past Visions of American Agriculture" in *Visions of American Agriculture* (1997, pp. 3–16).



distinguishes urban farming from back-to-the-land farming and new agrarianism, from agrarianism.

As Eric T. Freyfogle reminds us, “[a]grarian comes from the Latin word *agrarius*, ‘pertaining to land,’ and it is the land—as place, home, and living community—that anchors the agrarian scale of values” (Freyfogle 2001, p. xiii). Agrarianism, in underlining interconnectedness, bears close resemblance to the philosophy of New Agrarianism, which also views “human life as a part of nature and believes that human and natural processes should be integrated” (Walbert 2008, n. p.).

Bemoaning the fact that her farm never entertains some “bucolic fantasy” (Carpenter 2009, p. 21), Carpenter similarly maintains,

These piles were sort of like an ecosystem—a complete community of living organisms and the nonliving materials of their surroundings. Some individuals added to the growing mass, bottom-feeders harvested from the pile, and sometimes the items broke down into dust of their own accord. In this ecosystem, Bill and I played the role of bottom-feeders. (Carpenter 2009, p. 27)

Carpenter’s urban farm is relevant to both agrarianism’s and new agrarianism’s recognition of the unbroken link between humans and the nonhuman entities and matters. By locating cities at the focal point of contemporary food production and consumption system, she and (new) agrarians have redirected critical attention to both the agency and moral responsibilities of human beings in the food production system. However, if the agentic powers of the humans and the city, as Carpenter and critics and writers disclose, are readily embedded within the agrarianism’s principle of interconnectedness, the urbanity of “urban agriculture” appears an unwarranted and redundant modifier. Though entrusted with a new mission, urban farming has come to bear the marks of the traditional American agrarian ideal, one in which farmers cultivate both the human and the nonhuman community through an interconnected relation with the environment. Carpenter’s preoccupation with the differences among “real farmer[s]” (Carpenter 2009, pp. 55, 205, 242), “natural urban farmer[s]” (Carpenter 2009, p. 64), and “ideal urban farmer[s]” (Carpenter 2009, p. 60) suggests a shift of analytical focus from the meaning and possibility of the city to that of farming in agrarian discourse.

## Back in the city

Any careful reader of *Farm City* notices that the city, in addition to offering Carpenter the cultural diversity and the conveniences of modern technology that she enjoys, opens the opportunity for a more creative rethinking of the role of farming and the epistemology of agrarian thinking. In Carpenter’s rite of passage to becoming an urban farmer, she first and foremost engages with the everyday practicalities of food production. From selecting suitable varieties for her urban lot (Carpenter 2009, p. 127), to composting (pp. 29–30), weeding (p. 47), harvesting (p. 87), preserving heirloom seeds (p. 82) to rising chickens (p. 13) and breeding rabbits

(p. 122), Carpenter learns about the practices of cultivation and animal raising. She, however, could not fully embrace her identity as “a farmer” (p. 94) until she has felt “close to [her] food” (p. 224) and participated in a “dialogue with [the] life” of her farm animals (p. 184) through, most notably, killing them turning them into “meat” for her dinner table (p. 94). She exclaims,

[b]y the end of the process [of killing, cleaning, and processing Harold-the-turkey for Thanksgiving], *The Encyclopedia of Country Living*'s pages were marked with blood. And brining in the fridge was a heritage-breed turkey that I had raised from a day-old chick. The poultry package—bought with a credit card and priority-overnighted—had turned me into a farmer. (Carpenter 2009, p. 94)

In *Farm City*, the phases of Carpenter's education to becoming an urban farmer is marked by three different farm animals that she has learned to raise: turkey, rabbit, and pig. Each of these farm animals maps an affective and ethical stage of her development towards a “real farmer.” While slaying turkeys and nonhumans animals for food compels her to confront her irresistible human appetite for animal flesh and the American public's inattentiveness to killing animals for meat (Carpenter 2009, pp. 12, 15, 49), slaughtering rabbits brings about the moral challenge of killing “furry mammal[s]” or cute and distant kin of humans for food (Carpenter 2009, pp. 104, 170). Taking the life of a pig, similarly, prompts her to reflect on her moral guilt of killing “an intelligent, possibly adoring creature” (Carpenter 2009, p. 190) that “convey[s] emotion” (Carpenter 2009, p. 193). As Paul B. Thompson observes, “it is the intentional tending of plants and animals throughout their life cycle that most fully captures the sense of material transformation implied by the word ‘production’” (Thompson 1995, p. 47). Blood, as a metonymy for both the physical act of slaughtering and the responsibility for exercising the power to take lives for human nourishment, plays an integral role in Carpenter's progress towards maturity and full formation of her farmer-productionist self.

Without the help of a butcher, she first achieves agrarian self-sufficiency and attain full economic and spiritual independence from the global capitalist economy by raising and killing her own food (Carpenter 2009, p. 121). Interestingly, as she reveals later on, the act of killing also evokes a new understanding of the agrarian principle of interconnectedness—one in which the close tie between farmers and their farm animals is established not only through a stewardship of care and protection but use and human needs and desires. She remarks, “I wanted to be there as a way to close the door on what had turned into a massive task—feeding and caring for the pigs. I had also wanted to make sure they hadn't been scared in their last moments [...] I wanted to watch, to help, to be a part of these pigs' death as fully as I had been involved in their life” (Carpenter 2009, p. 246). While the act of butchering summons Carpenter to reconnect with the life processes of her farm animals and vegetation, it also invites her to confront eye-to-eye the realities and entirety of the material and agronomic processes of food production.

For Carpenter, the fact that lessons on butchering rabbits are missing from the pages of the hippie homesteading Bible, *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, illuminates an

American unconscious fear of death (Carpenter 2009, p. 114). Rather than instigating violence and suffering, killing reinforces a farmer's full engagement in the in the life and death of farm animals and the farmer's tribute to the animals "sacrifice[d]" (Carpenter 2009, p. 249). Although she believes animal liberators are "terrorists" (Carpenter 2009, p. 208) and never seriously consider their accusation of her violation of animals' intrinsic value and rights to healthy living, she insists that killing animals for meat on her own is part of the process of knowing the farm animals personally.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the killing of animals herself is distinguished from factory-farming's cruelty and indifference and evinces a small-family farmer's respect to farm animal. In "meat-eating cities" where dwellers "don't have to kill something to survive" (Carpenter 2009, p. 91), doing their own killing teach them "humility and remind [them] of [their] interdependence with other species" (Carpenter 2009, p. 90). A "real farmer," whether urban or not, is a small family farmer who fulfills a farmer's identity not only as what agrarians have remarked as stewards of land but as someone who cultivates and produces the population's food source.

Farming in the city, Carpenter finds that farmers' role as providers of foods also redefines her relations to the human community to whom her food serves. She maintains, "[w]hen I explained to my sister and mom that I was an urban farmer now, I could see that they had concerns about that self-definition. Because whom was I really feeding?" (Carpenter 2009, p. 118). Like Berry, Carpenter's urban farm upholds a sustainable food network based on local economy and knowledge. Surrounded by crumbling sidewalks and collapsing gates, Carpenter's urban homestead demonstrates a sense of urgency to distinguish their roles as urban farms from Wendell Berry and a lineage of agrarians who condemn cities for the destruction of "rural values" and "sweet-smelling fields" (Carpenter 2009, pp. 60–61). Rather, she envisions herself as a successor to the squatting gardening and foraging food production tradition of the early New England Puritans and Henry David Thoreau, one in which the squat farmer not only takes but leaves something to the vacant urban lot, claiming temporary ownership.

Throughout her journey to becoming an urban farmer, Carpenter constantly ponders a farmer's role as a producer of food in light of land ownership and the ethics of belonging. Calling Thoreau, her "fellow squat farmer" (Carpenter 2009, p. 81), Carpenter claims that the idea of squatting, "of taking possession of something unused and living rent free, had always held a certain appeal for [her]" (Carpenter 2009, p. 20). Like Thoreau, she is first a habitual "trespasser" who forages for wild edibles in common lands and cultivates foods in private properties without paying dues in hope of uncovering the agronomic abundance of some of the most unimagined landscapes (Carpenter 2009, p. 22). Interestingly, she also finds in Bobby a "homeless" person of her neighborhood, an ally in her efforts to be an anarchic free ranger, dumpster diver, and farmer who leads a self-sufficient mode of

---

<sup>4</sup> For further debates on animal rights and the ethics of animal consumption, see, most notably, Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (Spring 1972), pp. 229–243, and John Arthur's "World Hunger and Moral Obligation: The Case Against Singer," in Steven M. Cahn (ed.), *Exploring Ethics: An Introductory Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 240–246.

life outside the current Western economic and political valuation system. She writes, “[b]esides becoming a squatter, Bobby became a farmer, too—only his crops were cans and metal. [...] Anything that once had value (but now was stained and smelled weird) Bobby would take home” (Carpenter 2009, p. 29). Regarding herself a “farmer for hire” (Carpenter 2009, p. 126), she tells the trespassing “carrot-picker” that “my garden’s your garden” (Carpenter 2009, p. 24). Like Bobby, the urban squatter-farmer, Carpenter not only takes from her (biotic) community but finds it imperative to repay her underprivileged neighbors and over-exploited neighborhood lands through sustainable use and the gesture of what she calls “sharing” (Carpenter 2009, pp. 153, 168, 175, 265, 266) or “redistribute[ion]” (2009, p. 265). Sharing the foods that she raised from her squat farm, for her, reinstates her interconnected relations with her human and nonhuman communities. As Darrin Nordahl rightly argues, the notion of public produce “close[s] the food gap between the inner-city poor,” “improve[s] the health of the American population,” “provide[s] a sense of self-sufficiency,” and “recognize[s] the social relationships and prosperous citizenry that could result if city spaces could help provide food for all” (Nordahl 2009, p. 4). Through a self-sufficient squatting mode of subsidy, she is an urban farmer and a steward who, by rejecting any individual’s legal entitlement to land as a property holder, liberates herself and her fellow neighbors from both the global capitalist economy.

In *Farm City*, Carpenter’s environmental stewardship also leads her to question the idea of humans ever exercising ownership over the natural environment. While establishing herself and her influence through cultivating food in the urban ghetto, she notes, “Thoreau [...] eventually ceded his bean field to the woodchucks. I would soon have to cede my garden to an urban farmer’s most dreaded pest, the real estate developer” (Carpenter 2009, p. 81). Although urbanization and gentrification are indeed exertions of human control of the environment, she reasserts her role as a temporary owner of the planet, believing that the traces of her urban farm will eventually yield to agency of the nonhuman entities and materials. Denying the material presence and existence of her farm, however, is neither nihilistic nor anti-human for Carpenter. Rather, it is an ultimate mode of belonging and citizenship:

People will come and go. Animals will be birthed and die. Food and flowers will be plucked from the earth, friendships made. Bullets will be fired. Houses will be boarded up, then sold to be fixed up. [...] Weeds will feed animals that will then feed humans.

[...]

And now I was just one of the many ghosts in GhostTown. I sprang up here only because it was the perfect intersection of time and place, and like a seedling, I took advantage, sucked up the nutrients that I could find, forged relationships with others in order to grow, bathed in the sunlight of the moment. (Carpenter 2009, pp. 266–267)

Farming in the city, she participates in the larger life and death of the human and nonhuman planetary community. Her legacy as an urban farm remains in the “uncommonly abundant” urban soil and the hope that “someday a strange-looking vegetable will sprout here again, when the moment is ripe” (Carpenter 2009,

p. 267). As Carpenter has demonstrated, the right to healthy food and to grow one's own food is a "birthright" (Carpenter 2009, p. 24) that even the most urbanized and ghettoized landscapes could not refute.

In *Food and the City: Urban Agriculture and the New Food Revolution* (2012), Jennifer Cockrall-King asserts that "While we may have broken ties with rural living, we haven't broken our ties with our need to eat" (Cockrall-King 2012, p. 79). Carpenter calls attention to cities' potentiality for social reform through farming and through attending the basic human needs for healthy, nutritional foods. In this sense, she formulates a new agrarianism that cultivates a stewardship through the unbroken interconnected relations between cities and the countryside and human and nonhuman nature.

## References

- Agnew, E. (2004). *Back from the land: How young Americans went to nature in the 1970s, and why they came back*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Brown, D. (2011). *Back to the land: The enduring dream of self-sufficiency in modern America*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Carpenter, N. (2009). *Farm city: The education of an urban farmer*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Cockrall-King, J. (2012). *Food and the city: Urban agriculture and the new food revolution*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Danbom, D. B. (1997). Past visions of American agriculture. In W. Lockeretz (Ed.), *Visions of American agriculture* (pp. 3–16). Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Editorial Review (2009). Review of *Farm city: The education of an urban farmer*, by Novella Carpenter. *Publishers Weekly*, 43.
- Freyfogle, E. T. (2001). Introduction: A durable scale. In E. T. Freyfogle (Ed.), *The new agrarianism: Land, culture, and the community of life* (p. xiii). Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Garner, D. (2009). *Living off the land, surrounded by asphalt* (p. C32). New York: New York Times.
- Gifford, T. (2014). Pastoral, anti-pastoral, and post-pastoral. In L. Westling (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to literature and the environment* (pp. 17–30). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (trans: Hoare, Q., & Smith, G. N.). New York: International Publishers.
- Iovino, S., & Oppermann, S. (2014). Introduction: Stories come to matter. In S. Iovino & S. Oppermann (Eds.), *Material ecocriticism* (pp. 1–17). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Lockeretz, W. (1997). Preface. In W. Lockeretz (Ed.), *Visions of American agriculture* (pp. 2–8). Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Nabhan, G. P. (2016). Agrarian ecology. In J. Adamson, W. A. Gleason, & D. N. Pellow (Eds.), *Keywords for environmental studies* (pp. 7–9). New York: New York University Press.
- Nordahl, D. (2009). *Public produce: The new urban agriculture*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Pollan, M. (2009). *Blurb for Farm city: The education of an urban farmer*, by Novella Carpenter. New York: Penguin Press.
- Smith, P. A. (2009). *Farm city* by Novella Carpenter. *San Francisco Chronicle*. <http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/Farm-City-by-Novella-Carpenter-3295154.php>.
- Thompson, P. B. (1995). *The spirit of the soil: Agriculture and environmental ethics*. London: Routledge.
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2014). *World urbanization prospects: The 2014 revision, highlights*. New York: United Nations.
- Walbert, D. (2002). What's a new agrarian? *The new agrarian*. Retrieved form <http://www.newagrarian.com/whats-a-new-agrarian/>.
- Walbert, D. (2008). The eightfold agrarian way. *The new agrarian*. Retrieved form <http://www.newagrarian.com/2008/05/the-eightfold-agrarian-way/>.