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Urban Farming in the North American Metropolis: Rethinking Work and Distance in Alternative Food Networks

Diana Mincyte and Karin Dobernig

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of manual work in bridging the distance between production and consumption in alternative agro-food economies, particularly in urban farming. Scholars and public commentators often draw on Marxian theories of alienation to suggest that manual work constitutes a key strategy for reconnecting production and consumption, and overcoming the ecological rift between natural processes and modern, agro-industrial production. Focusing on urban farming, this article complicates the picture of unalienated, decommodified labor and points to continuous negotiations between experiences of re-embedding in the community and the environment, and the on-going commodification of the farming experience. We argue that urban farms function as sites of “experiential production” where farm managers stage work experiences for the volunteers and where visitors build new socialities, reconnect to nature, and accrue social and cultural capital in the context of a global economy that offers limited work opportunities for a generation of highly educated college graduates. Relying on ethnographic fieldwork and 40 semi-structured interviews with urban farmers and volunteers in metropolitan areas of the Northeastern United States as well as the examination of online and print materials, our analysis highlights the contradictory ways in which manual work in alternative agro-food networks indeed counters alienation, while also reproducing consumer society institutions and reinforcing the core values defining neoliberalism such as productivity and self-improvement.

A bird’s eye view of Lower Manhattan features two turkey-shaped patches of farmland wedged between Battery Park and the bustling city streets. Occupying an acre of land, these plots are known as Battery Urban Farm, which was founded in 2010 at the request of eight enthusiastic high school students seeking to “get their hands dirty” and learn how to farm. Surrounded by the manicured lawns and marble-lined sidewalks encircling glassy high-rises, the farm brings rugged countryside aesthetics and a productivist ethos to the decisively urban, commerce-dominated space. By collapsing distance between food production and consumption, the work that urban

farmers perform in the southern tip of Manhattan promises to interrupt the logic of consumerism and financialization, which the neighborhood encompassing Wall Street has come to epitomize.

This article investigates the ways in which labor in general and urban farming in particular operate as methods for countering distance in mainstream agro-food systems. Scholars and public commentators have been increasingly concerned with the growing geographical and social gap between consumption and production prevalent in industrial agro-food economies, often captured in the notions of food miles and distancing (Princen, 2002; Wilk, 2008; Clapp, 2015; Friedmann, 1994). Long supply chains have been shown to bear high environmental and health costs stemming from the extensive use of fossil fuels for industrial production, processing, packaging, and transportation (Harrison, 2011; Weis, 2010; Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2008). Still others have commented on the social justice and economic consequences of economies of scale, where large-scale producers and distributors exploit local resources and create conditions for the devaluation of livelihoods and local knowledge, leading to profound experiences of alienation and disconnect (McMichael, 2013; Lyson, 2004; Jaffe and Gertler, 2006).

In response to these concerns, there is a growing interest among food enthusiasts and the broader public in overcoming distance in food systems (cf. Marsden, 2013; Bowen, 2011; Turner, 2011; Sonnino, 2007). Numerous initiatives in alternative food networks¹—including self-provisioning schemes, home food processing and production, and locavore initiatives such

¹ Alternative food networks (AFNs) is a broad term often used in conjunction with other related notions such as alternative agro-food economies/markets/movements/regimes. These initiatives are considered as a direct response to conventional or mainstream industrialized agro-food economies and are defined in terms of small-scale production; local distribution systems also known as short supply chains; ethical concerns with production conditions for humans and non-humans; importance of reskilling consumers and engaging them in production; focus on local environments and community needs; appreciation and emphasis on the quality of food; as well as broader concerns with sustainability (e.g. Marsden, 2013; Friedmann, 1994; Whatmore et al. 2003; Johnston et al., 2011, for useful literature overviews see Tregear, 2011; Maye, 2013). Notable critiques of AFNs include questioning the ways in which social, racial/ethnic, and gender inequalities can be reified in local food economies (e.g. Guthman, 2008; Deutsch, 2011); concerns with the scaling of niche food economies (e.g. Little et al., 2010; Bernstein, 2014); issues with the conventionalization of local/organic production (e.g. Guthman, 2004); dangers of romanticization of artisanship, sometimes veering towards utopianism and culinary luddism (e.g. Laudan, 2001), and sometimes missing self-reflexivity on the part of the participants (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005).

urban farming—made it possible for consumers to take part in farming, promising a re-connection with nature and community (Kurtz, 2001; Teig et al., 2009; Veen, 2015). In most cases, these efforts emphasize transforming a passive shopper into a skilled, knowledgeable co-producer who works to make her own food (cf. Campbell, 2005; Pudup, 2008). Echoing the Marxian proposition that unalienated work constitutes the center of human life and the source of self-respect, value, and meaning, such an approach suggests that the rift between food consumers and agricultural producers—and more broadly, between the country and the city, and nature and industry—can be resolved by qualitatively changing the relations of production and consumption.

Scholarship on alternative food networks has already started to grapple with the issues related to labor, focusing particularly on the invisible work performed by migrant workers in fields and behind kitchen doors in restaurants (Gray, 2013; Jayaraman, 2013); working conditions in fair trade economies (for an overview, see Terstappen et al., 2013); and the gendered dimensions of food preparation and production (Deutsch, 2011; Laudan, 2001; Lyson, 2004; Barndt, 2008).² What has generally been overlooked, however, is the work of community members, volunteers, and enthusiasts who actively seek to unplug from the industrial agro-food sector, even if their work has been central for re-embedding food economies in the community (cf. Allen and Kovach, 2000; Hudson and Hudson, 2003; McClintock, 2010; Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen, 2012). These flexible work arrangements often combine volunteering, paid work, advocacy-oriented activities, and educational projects in complex and at times

² A number of scholars have challenged the use of the term “alternative” in AFNs to argue that its implicit binarism of “alternative” vs. “conventional/mainstream” obscures the variation in the economic, social and political functions of these economies and material practices (Maye et al., 2009; Holloway et al., 2007, for a recent overview see Hill, 2015). Often drawing on the work on Gibson-Graham (2006) and the Community Economies Collective, this scholarship suggests rethinking agro-food systems as a set of economies comprised of diverse networks and driven by significantly different economic logics. While recognizing the limits of the term “alternative,” we consciously use it in this paper because it captures the transformative political agenda implicit in the urban farming movement in ways that the diversity approach does not afford. Moreover, the notion of “alternatives” is also an “emic” concept in the sense that the urban farmers we interviewed used and invoked it frequently.

contradictory ways, making it difficult to disentangle their organizational logic, power relations, and value chains. Without a clearer picture of the social, economic, and material dimensions of this type of work, we cannot fully understand what unalienated labor might look like today, in the context of an economy defined by neoliberal agendas and the post-industrial order, and what it means to participate—and work—in alternative food networks.

This article fills this lacuna by focusing on urban farming as an illustrative case of the efforts to overcome distance and alienation in agro-food economies. Our analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork spanning over ten months on four urban farms in the Northeastern United States which includes participant observation. We also conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with employed urban farmers³ and regular volunteers⁴ from 12 different urban farming organizations and analyzed other related materials, including farm websites, brochures, advertising materials, and news media.⁵ We chose to focus on the largest, most successful urban farms that are particularly attractive to volunteers. In contrast to the smaller community gardens near low-income housing or institutional farms that rarely get the spotlight, these farms have become the poster-children of the urban farming movement and feature centrally in the public debates about the future of alternative food systems.

Although the lack of survey data on urban farmers makes it difficult to draw generalizations, the majority of farmers and volunteers we encountered on the largest and successful farms were predominantly white, female (ranging from 60 to 70 percent on the farms

³ We use the term “urban farmer” to refer to a respondent who is a founder of the farm or either a full-or part-time employee and thus earns an income from his/her involvement in an urban farm.

⁴ Some urban farms use the terms “trainee,” “intern” or “apprentice” instead, especially if they offer a more structured program and expect a specific time commitment from volunteers. In the course of this paper, we employ the term “regular volunteer” to refer to individuals who have committed at least a few months to working on a specific urban farm without remuneration.

⁵ To protect identities of our interlocutors, we will not name the farms or provide easily identifiable information about the interviewees.

we studied), and college-educated Millennials.⁶ Commenting on similar trends in her study of race- and class-based disparities in New York City’s urban agriculture scene, Kristin Reynolds (2015: 248) notes that such a demographic profile of popular urban farms sets them apart from small urban agriculture ventures and earlier generations of urban farming (see also Guthman, 2008).

Throughout our research, we find that this important cohort of urban growers define their work as a deeply meaningful activity that opens ways for a creative and liberating engagement with nature, community, and the self, suggesting that urban farming, indeed, provides grounds for a decommodified experience. At the same time, her/his involvement in popular food movements is also part of a strategy to accumulate social and cultural capital, enabling the generation of highly educated college graduates to find jobs in the context of a global economy that offers limited employment opportunities and reduced safety nets. Such motivations, coupled with an interest in being part of a “hip” scene, point to the importance of the aesthetic experience of manual work that complicates the picture of unalienated labor. To capture these tensions, we argue that urban farms often function as sites of “experiential production” where visitors seek to fulfill their needs for recreation, self-expression, networking or photo ops and where farm managers stage particular work experiences for volunteers. More importantly, our analysis highlights the contradictory ways in which manual work in alternative food networks does counter alienation by enabling new social realities and opening venues for a deeper engagement with local environments, while also reproducing consumer society institutions and reinforcing the

⁶ Our observations about the demographic patterning of the urban farmers from successful farms were corroborated by the staff of the farms we studied, our observations, and scholarship. In the United States, the term “Millennials” is commonly used and refers to a cohort born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s (compare to the generation of Baby Boomers born roughly between the mid 1940s and 1960s).

core values defining neoliberalism, including productivity, self-improvement, and entrepreneurship.

To develop these arguments, the next section delves deeper in the theoretical issues surrounding distancing and labor in agro-food systems. We then provide a brief overview of main definitions related to urban farming and introduce the four farms that we studied. The empirical sections explore the lived experiences of urban farmers to examine how volunteers negotiate their free, decommodified labor with personal life pressures and commercial interests. Throughout these sections, we highlight how urban farming is simultaneously constructed as a meaningful activity and a consumption experience. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of our arguments.

Rethinking Work and Distance in Alternative Food Economies

Brewster Kneen (1993) is often credited with the invention of the notion of “distancing” to conceptualize the distance that food travels to reach consumers as well as the broader divergence between agricultural production and nature. Since the early 1990s, Kneen’s insight has been echoed by numerous scholars who have explored the power effects of distancing (Freidberg, 2011; Pachirat, 2011); the deskilling of consumers and cultural implications of food industrialization (Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2008; Jaffe and Gertler, 2006); the uprooting and exploitation of agricultural workers (Barndt, 2008; Binford, 2009); and the deepening standardization and proliferation of monocultures that make distancing possible (Busch, 2011; for a historical perspective, see Cronon, 1992).

While focusing on today’s agriculture, these arguments are part of the longer intellectual tradition dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that mapped the negative social effects of modernization (e.g. see Émile Durkheim’s theory of *anomie* and Max Weber’s

notion of *disenchantment*). Among the theorists of modern social condition, Karl Marx's theories of estrangement have provided a lasting impact on contemporary social thinkers. Focusing on alienation that workers experienced in Western capitalist societies in the nineteenth century, Marx identifies four forms of such estrangement, including workers' alienation from the fruits of their labor; a separation from labor processes that reduces the worker to an exploited cog in the system of industrial production; the loss of touch with human nature and the commodification of human life (*Gattungswesen*, German for "species being"); and a fundamental isolation from society and fellow workers (Marx, 1964). According to Marx, the antidote of such alienation is the meaningful work that constitutes the source of one's identity and self-realization (see McClintock, 2014). In Colin Campbell's words, Marx's labor theory can be summarized in terms of "a dichotomy that carries with it the implied, if not explicit, contrast between inalienable, humane, authentic and creative work, on the one hand, and purely mechanical, unfulfilling and alienating labour, on the other" (2005: 25).

In the United States, the valorization of manual work is tied to an influential literary tradition associated with prominent authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. Exploring the human relationship to nature and work, these authors redefined hard manual labor as a spiritual endeavor and in some cases, as a form of liberation from the ills of modern life and redemption (Betjemann, 2011; Brown, 1990). Similar ideas spurred an important Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the twentieth century and several waves of back-to-land movements that saw self-reliance, craftsmanship, homesteading, and self-provisioning as ultimate answers to alienation of the work on a factory floor.

While these values continue to shape the popular imagination, there have also been some notable critiques of the narratives celebrating physical labor. In his cultural analysis of the images of rural life in British literature, Raymond Williams (1973) has argued that the romanticization of

the country side for its “virtuous lifestyle” and the denigration of urban living as an alienated experience obscure ongoing conflicts and dispossessions that are inseparable from the realities of agricultural work and rural living. For Williams (1973), pastoral representations of rural life are problematic because they reproduce the current social order and enable exploitation and because they further fetishize agriculture, manual labor, and rural life.

More recent theoretical investigations focusing on work subjectivities have also questioned the possibilities of decommodification of work in late capitalism. Scholars have found that the workplace itself has been transformed from a place of ruthless exploitation in the early decades of industrialization to a site where one is expected to find fulfillment and self-expression in post-industrial societies. Indeed, Luc Boltanski’s and Eve Chiapello’s (2005) analysis of the dynamics of labor politics in France suggests that, unlike in the 1960s when workers placed value on solidarity, today’s employees often embrace the workplace as a site for self-improvement and an expression of “individual autonomy, singularity, and authenticity” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 175-176). Such an emphasis on individualism and artistic reinvention has not only led to the de-mobilization of workers’ movements, but also to reimagining one’s workplace as a source of character, identity-making, and self-worthiness.

At the same time, studies examining volunteering and unpaid work have suggested that even free and creative work in the food sector has become an ambiguous site for adapting to and reinforcing conditions of late capitalism (e.g. Hustinx, 2001; Poppendieck, 1999). Nina Eliasoph’s (2011, 2012) analysis of youth volunteering activities, for example, exposes tensions surrounding efforts to align one’s individual life goals with participation in civic organizations. Similarly, Marit Rosol’s (2012) analysis of urban farming in Berlin finds that it signals the deepening neoliberalization of urban spaces in that traditional functions of the state are replaced with volunteer labor (2012, see also McClintock, 2014; Pudup, 2008; Checker, 2011).

It is by drawing on the above insights that our paper questions whether manual work in alternative food networks can be considered as a reliable medium for collapsing distance between consumption and production and, more broadly, for countering alienation in post-industrial societies. Our contention is that unalienated, uncommodified work never exists in its pure, ideal form, but is best understood as a hybrid process fraught with contradictions and defined by continuous slippages between de-commodification and re-commodification. Through our analysis of urban farming, we find that farming is increasingly experienced as a form of self-reinvention that combines values of community building, environmental sustainability, and political engagement as well as individualized efforts to accrue cultural capital, build professional networks, and participate in a “trendy” subculture. This suggests that, in a similar way as in Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), work in alternative food networks becomes an act of realignment with the logic of late-capitalist economy, while also serving as a source for meaning-making and experiences of fulfillment. It is in the process of such realignment that production becomes imbued with meanings and experiences of consumerism, effectively enhancing the social and conceptual distance in the food economy that alternative food movements—such as urban farming—seek to bridge.

To capture these dynamics, we enlist the notion of “experiential production,” a term that subverts the concept of “experiential consumption,” referring to the efforts of advertisers and marketers to cultivate “fantasies, feelings and fun” (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) generated through acts of consumption. Experiential production in turn combines embodied work activities and productivist values with consumer desires to experience manual work as a way for engaging in a hip subculture and accruing cultural and social capital. It also relates to the efforts of managers to package urban farming as a valuable experience in response to the expectations of the volunteers. Recognizing the underlying importance of such expectations and imaginaries of

what urban farming should look like, we argue that through one's engagement in experiential production, the rift between nature and society is both reduced and reinvented, as manual work itself is aestheticized and commodified.

Farming in the City

The United States has witnessed several waves of interest in urban farming during the last century, peaking in times of economic stress or war (Gans, 1982; Lawson, 2005). The most recent uptick in urban farming emerged during and after the 2007/2008 financial crisis. However, unlike earlier movements that were often motivated by patriotism and led to the transformation of such iconic national spaces as the White House lawn, Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, and the country's oldest public park, Boston Common, into victory gardens, today's urban farmers tend to pursue environmental and social justice agendas, mobilizing around ideas of urban sustainability, ecological resilience, and social entrepreneurship.

Scholars have proposed various classification schemes to cluster urban food growing projects (Ackerman, 2011; McClintock, 2014). Cohen et al. (2012), for example, categorize urban farming initiatives into community gardens that are managed by a group of local community members or volunteers; institutional gardens and farms affiliated with institutions such as schools, prisons, churches and hospitals; community farms that are run by a non-profit organization and tend to emphasize their engagement with the surrounding community; and commercial urban farms. In reality, however, no two urban farms are alike, differing in their organizational structures, ownership models, and mission statements. Indeed, the boundaries defining the above categories are often blurred when commercial farms develop non-profit divisions coordinating youth or refugee programs, or when members of both community farms

and community gardens operate Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes through which they earn income or generate revenue.

The four urban farms that were primary sites of our research represent the kind of institutional and operational complexity that defines today's most successful urban agriculture enterprises. The first farm is a primarily commercial farming operation that also runs an educational non-profit bringing youth groups for educational tours and workshops each year. In addition to selling produce to restaurants, farmers markets, and CSA members, the farm also offers consulting services to its clients and supplements its incomes by hosting educational and cultural events.

In contrast to the commercial interests that define the first farm, the stated mission of the second urban farm is to organize youth and adults to address food justice issues in the community. Located in a relatively poor, ethnically diverse area, it supports a network of local gardeners representing over a dozen community and backyard gardens throughout the neighborhood. The main activities include running a youth internship program, developing community education programs, managing a community-run farmers market, and maintaining a CSA scheme. The composition of the full-time staff makes it possible to support such diverse programming pursued on the farm: it employs a community organizer, a youth program director, a markets and outreach coordinator, an agriculture director, and a project director.

Located in a prestigious neighborhood, the third urban farm is a relatively large educational farm. It provides an outdoor classroom space in a densely populated area and attracts students of different ages as well as teachers, parents, and members of the local community to learn a variety of skills, including composting, seeding, transplanting, weeding and harvesting. Common activities include lessons led by the educators, "enrichment" visits, numerous summer programs, and workshop series. It employs two full-time and two half-time staff members. Due to

its function as an educational farm, it is supported by the city and attracts funding from numerous corporate donors.

The fourth farm is located in a low-income neighborhood that has recently undergone gentrification processes. Established over a decade ago, the farm has built production, composting and education sites where it grows organic produce sold at a farmers' market and through a CSA program. Its mission is to promote social, economic and environmental sustainability in the neighborhood by creating opportunities for youth to develop new skills and expand their knowledge on urban farming and food cultivation more generally. The farm currently employs three staff members.

On all four farms, staff members perform a wide range of tasks, from administering finances and pitching farms to corporate sponsors, to teaching farming techniques, to undertaking the most urgent and often undesirable physical labor. Activities of other workers, on the other hand, depend on their roles as students, visitors, volunteers, apprentices, and farm community members. Students are usually involved in organized activities and follow the pre-set curriculum led by their teachers or staff. Similarly, short-term volunteers often arrive and work on farms in groups supervised by staff members. For regular volunteers, a typical day on the farm includes intense three to five hours of work on individualized tasks that include less direct guidance and supervision from the farm staff. Across all the farms we observed, but especially those that did not include students, farmers were most likely highly educated female Millennials.

Throughout our ethnographic research, we worked side by side with the farmers and regular volunteers, conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observations, and engaged in conversations with staff members, volunteers, community members, and passers by. One of the co-authors conducted intensive fieldwork for ten months, working full-time alongside farmers as a participant observer. The other co-author resides in the region and has been

interviewing farmers and conducting participant observations as part of the larger project that reaches back to 2010 and focuses on alternative food procurement in the northeastern United States.

To recruit the interviewees, we used a classic snowballing sampling method that relied on social networks of research participants from our field sites. During this process, we sought to create as representative a sample as possible based on reports by urban farm staff members, our knowledge of the field, and current literature. Of 40 interviewees representing 12 different urban farming organizations, 24 were women and all but two were Caucasian. Staff members and urban farmers constituted 19 interviewees, and 21 were regular volunteers. While the interviews enabled us to track dominant narratives about the meanings and purposes of urban farming among the farmers, participant observations and longer conversations allowed us to understand the broader context and processes that shape their work subjectivities. It is such a long-term engagement in the field that made it possible for us to carefully consider the more scripted narratives that were offered during the interviews as well as understand the often messy and contradictory daily experiences of work at an urban farm.

In our analysis, we did not judge whether farmers' narratives echoed promotional materials or seemed to be deeply individuated reflections. Rather, following sociologists of emotions who approach all "emotional scripts" as deeply felt experiences that are always constructed through an interplay of individual emotions and collective narratives, we treated these narratives as equally important for our efforts to capture and understand the farmers' work subjectivities.

Our research confirms the findings of earlier scholarship suggesting that the work performed on the farms is defined as a deeply meaningful activity directed at a variety of social,

economic, political and justice goals (Cohen and Reynolds, 2014; Lovell, 2010).⁷ Joining this argument, the next empirical section documents the experiences of growing food in the city and illustrates how urban farmers construct their relationship to nature, work, and community. We note that the tropes of connectivity and embeddedness play an important role in how farmers and volunteers experience agricultural work.

Urban Farms as Spaces for Reconnecting with Nature and Community

Lived experiences of all urban farm workers are dictated by the seasonal and agricultural cycles and include a wide range of activities—from digging and preparing beds to hauling peat, watering, and harvesting in early hours of the day. For employed urban farmers, however, responsibilities also encompass managing the workflow as well as more prosaic office tasks such as keeping financial records, preparing outreach materials, grant writing, or participating in committees.

Despite these differences in the nature of work, there is a general consensus among the practitioners we interviewed that urban farming is a meaningful enterprise enabling the participants to reconnect to the natural environment from which they feel alienated by living in the city. An urban farmer in New York City articulates this experience thusly:

Growing up in the city, I feel like I didn't know I was missing out on certain things until I was able to work on an urban farm and be like, "Wow, that's a nourishing part of me [sic] that has not been nourished in previous parts of my life." [This is] because I had not had much interaction with anything natural. (Urban Farmer, Male, 26)

⁷ In their analysis of the community food sector in the United Kingdom, Roberta Sonnino and Christopher Griggs-Trevarthen (2012), for example, highlight the contribution of urban farming initiatives to the resilience of local communities (cf. Carolan and Hale, 2016). Other studies find that participating in community gardens builds social capital (Teig et al., 2009; Veen, 2015), produces improvements in behavior and interpersonal skills (Allen et al., 2008; Ober Allen 2008), and fosters healthy eating (D'Abundo and Carden, 2008; McCormack et al., 2010). Moreover, community gardens have been shown to provide wage-earning opportunities for youth, especially for those considered at-risk or from low-income families, effectively developing new ways for them to move out of poverty (Ferris et al., 2001; Kaufmann and Bailkey, 2000).

In this quote, agricultural work serves as a conduit through which the farmer enriches the previously neglected part of his identity, making it possible for the farmer to feel more grounded. It also emphasizes the transformative dimension of being in and engaging with nature: farming the land leads to rediscovering a different self.

In the same vein, numerous farmers and farm managers we encountered in our fieldsites spoke about the power of agricultural work to bring them closer to nature and become more attuned to the surrounding environment. A staff member explains that the mission of his farm is to provide space for bringing people closer to nature:

[W]hat we are doing [is giving] people something to do that connects them with the earth, something that helps them look at their lives in an ecological context, when they have been abstracted from that for generations. And I think we are getting to a point where like my generation, our generation, has been abstracted from the land more completely than any generation before us. People want to sink their fingers into the dirt. (Urban Farmer, Male, 29)

Echoing the sentiment of the return to nature, volunteers define physical work as a liberating experience that ties them to nature. They, too, frequently use metaphors of “getting one’s hands dirty” and “sinking one’s fingers into the dirt,” suggesting that agricultural work is understood as a grounding experience (Borgstedt, 2011). Such a framing is significant not only because it emphasizes intimate engagement with the soil, but also because it underscores the centrality of the embodied experience of manual labor as a medium through which one counters “abstraction” and distance.

To further emphasize the values of working with one’s hands, interviewed participants have commonly contrasted urban farming with white-collar occupations. For the young urban farmers, living in the city and being employed in corporate jobs constitute an alienating experience that, as one interviewee states, “kills one’s spirit” (Urban Farmer, Male, 29).

Similarly, in the following quote, a male apprentice from New York City equates office jobs with a soulless, machine-like form of existence:

I was sort of a corporate drone for like 10-plus years in the past and I really wanted to get out there and work with my hands and be up there in nature and actually [engage in] physical activity or physical work. (Regular Volunteer, Male, 34)

Unlike the alienation that one experiences in corporate jobs, which dehumanizes and distances one from others and from nature, the strenuous labor on urban farms is often interpreted as a meditative, even spiritual, undertaking:

When you get up there [on the farm], it's hard work. Definitely hard work. But there're moments, like when we were picking the carrots the other day, it's just, it's very meditative, it's very peaceful, you're going above the city and you don't have to be down, you know, in all the muck and everything like that. (Regular Volunteer, Female, 27)

In this excerpt, the work of picking carrots on the farm becomes an exercise in reflexivity, allowing the volunteer to find peace and time for herself. It reveals a paradox in that urban spaces are seen as dirty and “muck,” while farm work and hard physical labor are cleansing and uplifting (for racial and class implications of these ideas, see Guthman, 2008). As such, the phrase “going above the city” has a *double entendre* in that it refers to working on the rooftop garden, but it also speaks to the effort to elevate oneself from the pressures and complexities of urban life and regain control over the inner worlds (Borgstedt, 2011).

While an emphasis on reconnecting to the authentic self and nature can be interpreted as an atomized, individualizing experience, farmers are quick to point out that urban farming is an innately social and collective practice, requiring one to work side by side with others. Most tasks on the farms involve various levels of cooperation and communication, producing loosely structured yet discernible networks of interdependency. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear urban farmers speak about the social life of farming and the importance of being part of the

“larger community” and “feeling like part of a bigger movement.” Traces of such a strong ethos of collective work are revealed in an interview conducted with a proud co-founder of an urban farm who tells how their farm was established. He particularly appreciates the contribution that the community and volunteers brought to building the farm from the ground up:

We would not have built the farm without volunteers. I mean, super amazing volunteers that we met, like S and E and F. S e-mailed us; E just walked up on the fence one day. [I]magine, there is this vacant lot in your neighborhood, that’s an acre in the city where space is one of the most prized commodities. And it’s been sitting there for a decade, empty. And all of a sudden, there are all these people, digging things out. And there is a frenzy of activity, there’s like bulldozers and tools and cranes and plants starting to show up... And people really responded to it. And we loved that. (Urban Farmer, Male, 29)

By invoking a powerful image of communal experience, this farmer underscores the generative power of collective work that changed an empty lot into a flourishing farm space praised in local media. His story also speaks to the sense of excitement and empowerment of getting the local community involved, particularly in the way that “people really respond” to urban farming initiatives.

Overall, the above example and analysis highlight four key elements in workers’ conceptualizations of urban farming, including a strong emphasis on physical re-engagement with nature; the articulation of farming as a creative and liberating experience that reconnects one with the authentic self; participation in the community; and a valorization of free work that is suggestive of an ongoing decommodification of labor. These themes demonstrate that the farmers find physical work as an important experience linking them to nature, community, and the self. What matters for them most is the process, the experience, and the non-material value of the work on the farms, suggesting that they approach the work an experiential endeavor. But how do these articulations of decommodification and connectivity endure beyond the fleeting moments of reflexivity in the lives of urban farmers?

Volunteering in the Age of Profit-Making

Although urban farmers and regular volunteers approach their work as a meaningful and communal experience, they are also aware of the tensions with regards to monetary remuneration. Indeed, for young urbanites who often struggle to make ends meet in cities with high costs of living, the question of monetary compensation is pressing. Even before they set foot on the farm, the dedicated volunteers seemingly feel the need to articulate and justify—to themselves and others—the reasons why squeezing in additional hours of work in their already busy schedules is worthwhile. A female volunteer, for example, is acutely aware that volunteering is about making choices:

It's weird when you're doing unpaid work. I would wake up in the morning and was like "Do I really wanna be freezing cold on a rooftop for hours and not even get paid for it?" And I was always like "Yeah, like, I am more happy in this work than I would be sitting in front of my computer." (Regular Volunteer, Female, 25)

When prompted to discuss their schedules and sources of income, volunteers often emphasized the importance of “non-material” values in their lives. In one instance, a committed volunteer explains that the work on the farm in and of itself is a rewarding experience and that the food that she grows and receives from the farm—not money—is the best reward for her work:

Getting paid would be nice because a little extra money here and there always helps. But... I don't know... I feel valued. I feel valued. Because the work is so rewarding, to put something in the ground and water it and watch it grow and have it turn into food and then to feed yourself and other people. I am being paid. I get to take bushels of sungolds [tomatoes] home that we don't sell. (Regular Volunteer, Female, 28)

In this quotation as in other interviews, the experience of watching the plants grow and bringing bushels of produce back home substitutes and even exceeds the monetary value of the work performed on the farm. At the same time, the value of non-commodified work itself is transferred to the worker, making her into a valued person. As described by Barnett et al. (2005) who found

that the particular qualities of objects—such as ethically produced food—become attributed to people, the non-monetized work on urban farm transforms the worker into someone whose work cannot be reduced to a dollar value. Arguably, such an emphasis on non-monetized values and experiences are indicative of unalienated labor and a path towards bridging the distance between food production and consumption. These qualities also resonate with embodied experiences of living closer to nature and healing the rift created by living in the city and an industrialized society (Foster et al., 2011; McClintock, 2010).

Despite the univocal emphasis on non-material values, volunteering on urban farms cannot be regarded only as an idealistic endeavor. Indeed, almost all farmers we spoke to were focused on building their professional networks, acquiring skills, and exploring future work options, at the same time as they emphasized non-material values. For many, urban farming offered an opportunity to build careers in a competitive economy defined by high levels of unemployment and fraying social and financial safety nets.

Even though unemployment rates for college graduates in their twenties and early thirties—the current generation of the urban farming community in the United States—have significantly improved since the Great Recession, they are nevertheless facing considerably tougher job markets and fewer opportunities to find stable, full-time jobs with benefits than their predecessors. Numerous studies of household expenditures also suggest that the Millennials are saddled with disproportionately large college loans as they bear the brunt of increased college tuition costs. One regular volunteer articulates the concerns with the recent shifts in the economy in the following way:

I am not from the generation of the economy crash—those are the mid-30-year-olds... They all lost a lot of jobs and I think my generation still kind of worries about that happening since we were so close to it. So, I shy away from the writing position of 9-to-5 in front of a computer in an office, writing about whatever, with the worry of getting laid off and all that. (Regular Volunteer, Female, 24)

Considering prevalent anxieties, it is not surprising that recent college graduates are looking for work opportunities in green industry, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and various philanthropic initiatives that open opportunities for creating their own work and that resonate with their social and environmental values (see Schor, 2010). In this context, urban farming constitutes a strategy to build reputation among networks of activists, social connectors, and entrepreneurs in the Northeastern United States and beyond.

When on farms, such long-term economic and networking interests are enmeshed with the idealistic efforts to take food production back into one's hands and help others understand "where their food comes from." As a result, the urban farming experience is as much about pursuing non-material goals as it is about working in competitive environments and seeking new opportunities for career advancement, a far cry from the popular imaginaries of tranquility and pastoral life of urban farming that are commonly reproduced in the media.

In the following excerpt, one urban farmer tells of the importance of networking and career building for her involvement in the movement. Having benefitted from the network she developed working on an urban farm, she now supports her peers:

I am getting there [in terms of building connections with other people]. I mean, I volunteered with somebody at GrowNYC who gave my resume to Urban Farm X. And they told me, like since I have been working there, that bumped me to basically the top of the list. So I was one of three because this person recommended me in their world, you know. And so, it's helped me a lot. So, there is the guy that came to the farm today that's interested in networking. He is not even really sure what he is trying to do yet. But he wants to be a part, you know. And so I am happy to support him as he moves forward. And I think that's sort of how it works. (Urban Farmer, Female, 27)

A reference to "their world" in this quote is suggestive of the tightly knit urban farming community where the major players are socially and personally connected. This also indicates that there is a high degree of mobility among the participants in these alternative food networks,

facilitating them to become and remain competitive in the larger realm of the green economy and social entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, while working on the farm may involve one or two summers, there are numerous regular volunteers for whom their engagement in urban farming is a long-term endeavor that opens up opportunities for building life-long careers in (urban) agriculture or other forms of food production and processing. With the steadily increasing demand for local food and a growing market share of artisanal products, small-scale agriculture is beginning to emerge as a viable career choice, driven by comprehensive know-how and entrepreneurial interests. Below, a regular volunteer tells about her educational goals that she is seeking to attain by working on the farm:

[Urban farming is] helping me to develop skills that I might want to use for my career in the future. [I]f I am gonna ever be successful or convincing in urban farming for development, then I need to know how to farm. I need to know logistically how to do it, how do you grow the food, what does it entail. (Regular Volunteer, Female, 26)

For this volunteer, working on the farm is not only a learning experience, but also a form of occupational training in the course of which she hopes to accrue skills and become a professional. As several interviews suggest, the time spent on the farm is considered as an investment in a future career.

However, apprentices and trainees invest not only in acquiring agricultural skills and understanding farm management intricacies, but also explore opportunities to participate in a popular subculture. Indeed, being an urban farmer in the North American metropolis in the mid-2010s is a trendy activity and has a certain cachet upon which some are able to capitalize. This means that in addition to prospects of reconnecting to nature, gaining valuable access to professional networks, and building professional skills, urban farming also taps into the cultural

hierarchies where certain practices and experiences are seen as particularly valuable and desirable.

In the scholarship on social status, such trendsetting cultural practices have been defined as cultural capital or a non-monetary capital that enables one's social mobility. Pierre Bourdieu's voluminous writings on cultural capital (1986) define it in terms of education and other cultural competencies such as a sense of fashion or style of speech that enable the accumulation of power and status. The revalorization of manual work that we observed on urban farms suggests that Bourdieu's theories of consumption could be extended to consider work and production as potential sites for generating cultural capital. Indeed, Paxson (2013) makes this point powerfully in her analysis of artisanal cheese making in the United States. Examining how artisans follow their hearts and choose personal sacrifice and hard physical labor, Paxson shows that the cheese makers gain cultural as well as symbolic capital (defined as prestige or respect) in the process, even if their financial situation might have not been improved. Such a finding subverts the distinction between consumption and production, revealing that work becomes the channel for accruing cultural capital and fame, and the source for identity-making.

Urban farming fits these trends well. Growing numbers of farms and volunteers who devote long hours to working in the rain or scorching heat are suggestive of a changing cultural landscape in which manual work is regarded as a source of personal enrichment and cultural significance. From the volunteers' perspective, participation in urban farming is worthwhile—even as an unpaid, time-intensive, and physically demanding activity—because it opens up opportunities for building professional networks and joining a popular subculture of “the young, the hip, and the urban,” generating new forms of cultural capital.

In summary, as urban farms increasingly seek to build economically viable enterprises and farmers incorporate networking and career-related concerns into their volunteering agendas,

unalienated labor becomes more closely linked with the realities of economic survival, the efforts to accrue cultural and symbolic capital, and a valorization of entrepreneurship, productivity, and self-improvement, suggesting that efforts to reduce distance between consumption and production through urban farming cannot be understood in isolation from the broader economic context of late capitalism in which it is situated. This in turn reveals that the experience of working on the farm itself becomes commodified and turned into an opportunity for accumulating non-financial capital.

Urban Farming as Experiential Production

While the primary goals of urban farms revolve around agriculture and bringing food production back into the city, daily life on urban farms—particularly on commercial urban farms—is defined by a diversity of activities that cater to the urban marketplace and the tastes and lifestyles of its consumers. For example, the website of the world’s largest rooftop urban farm, the Brooklyn Grange, boasts of being a multi-functional enterprise that offers ecological services and commercial innovations. Not only does the farm sell its produce to fourteen restaurants, five retailers, and two caterers in New York City, it also organizes and hosts special dinner events, cooking demonstrations by celebrity chefs, and art exhibitions.⁸

In addition to these activities, the Grange operates a rich education program aimed at the swelling numbers of urban farmers in the city and beyond. To do so, they offer carefully designed programs ranging from hands-on farmer training and youth education to special curricula on how to design and build green roofs, sub-irrigated planters, and even chicken coops and beehives. For those who are too busy to build their own roof top farm, the Grange has convened a special project team that “can help you build your very own urban farm, green roof, or planted balcony”

⁸ See www.brooklyngrange.com, accessed in October, 2014.

as well as maintain it. Past customers of such services include restaurants, private citizens, and companies such as Louis Vuitton and the Durst Organization (see Brooklyn Grange website, 2014).

For the Grange and other farms that seek to be financially viable enterprises, diversification of activities constitutes one of the most important sources for profits. A closer look at the staff structure and labor expenses in recently established commercial urban farms confirms the significance of such added-value offerings, in that a large portion of the total farm business expenses goes to support the staff working toward enhancing additional profit streams, such as event management, marketing, public relations, sales, and outreach.

At the same time that commercial urban farms promise financial gains for their investors, numerous scholars have critiqued the focus on added-value activities because they emerge as a gateway to the commercialization and gentrification of urban spaces and communities. In her recent comparative analysis of developments in New York and Berlin, Doreen Jakob (2012) introduces the term of “eventification” to denote the staging dimension of various urban development initiatives and the subsequent commodification and gentrification of the neighborhoods where they are held. Similarly, Ryan Centner (2008) argues that the beneficiaries of the spatial capital generated through development and other forms of investments into urban spaces may not be the members of local communities, but urban elites, real estate developers, and commercial enterprises that exploit resources, while pricing out the residents of these areas. These insights suggest that the eventification of urban farming runs the risk of engendering commercialization of neighborhoods and creating the conditions for gentrification.

Moreover, while food production is a central mission of urban farms, there seems to be a slippage from the production-centered economy that focuses on growing food to the service-oriented economy in which consumers are invited to partake. In this respect, urban farms become

valued not only as food production sites, but also as a stage offering a “rural” and “natural” experience for urbanites. This move is particularly obvious in marketing brochures and farm websites that invite consumers to experience lantern-lit dinners, enroll in yoga and Pilates sessions enhanced with herb-scented breezes emanating from the beds, and indulge in tasting events with dramatic views of the city skyline. Images portraying these activities have been circulating in the blogosphere and are often shared on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In this way, the farms themselves become aestheticized as places for experiencing particular kinds of nature and agriculture in the post-industrial city.

Even though commercial urban farms are a minority in the urban farming movement, the slippage between a production-oriented ethos and consumerist logic can also be observed on non-profit farms. This is particularly visible in managing work tasks that depend on the season and volunteer expectations. For example, while the months of March and early April require long hours of hard work to clear the farm and prepare the beds, volunteers often prefer to schedule their visits later in the season. This may be because they are not aware of the high labor demand on the farm in early spring, or because weather conditions are generally better for working outside during early summer months. In a similar manner, farms sometimes struggle to keep volunteers over the late summer months (when there is high demand for help during harvest) as people go on vacation.

Such a mismatch between the seasonal and volunteering cycles creates the paradoxical situation where new work assignments sometimes have to be “created” and desirable tasks that are considered particularly enriching have to be rationed in order to match the expectations of the “urban farming experience.” This includes saving, managing and curating tasks such as planting and harvesting (as opposed to cleaning tool sheds or clearing and loading vehicles with produce to be delivered to farmers markets) for schoolchildren or special groups of visitors.

In addition, farm managers face pressure when coordinating and allocating tasks to different types of workers, including corporate sponsors and volunteers, regular trainees, visiting students, and individual helpers, who differ with regards to their expectations and ideas about urban farming. In this sense, during specific times of the year, work itself might become a scarce commodity to be consumed in the order of priorities for particular groups of volunteers. From the perspective of staff, therefore, running an urban farm entails managing expectations and catering to the needs and imaginaries of paying customers and investors, dedicated volunteers, the social media, and the general public.

In short, as examples discussed in this section suggest, urban farming emerges a form of experiential production that is manifested in the efforts of farm managers to stage urban farming as a particular experience as well as in the subjectivities of the volunteers who bring their own expectations about what constitutes farming. More broadly, considering the importance of curation of the urban farming experience, laboring on urban farms is defined in terms of dynamic tensions between the experiences of non-monetized labor on the one hand, and a commodification of the urban farming experience, on the other. By bringing together contradictory goals and interests, urban farming can be best understood as a continuously shifting experience combining valorization of physical labor, reflexivity, and indulgence in the aesthetics of the farming experience.

Concluding Reflections

In this paper we examined work subjectivities of urban farmers and regular volunteers to explore how reinvigorated values of manual work related to alienation and distancing in alternative food economies. Focusing on some of the most successful urban farms in the Northeastern United States, we found that both employed farmers and regular volunteers

experienced their work as a deeply meaningful activity connecting them to their authentic inner-self, their community, the city, and nature. In that urban farming makes it possible for the practitioners to feel connected and fulfilled, it can be interpreted as a distance-reducing practice, effectively overcoming alienation in the sense of Marxian theories of estrangement. However, while promising to anchor cities and urbanites in their local landscapes, urban farming also relies on the cultural, social—and economic—capital generated in the process, effectively complicating the prospects of achieving fully decommodified labor.

In efforts to capture these contradictory processes, we have used the notion of experiential production to conceptualize the slippages that occur on urban farms, turning them into sites for both making and unmaking of distance between production and consumption. By emphasizing the experiential dimension of farming, our notion points to the aesthetization of manual work that transforms farming into a consumerist experience, locating it within the capitalist economy.

In developing these arguments, our contribution to the debates about the future of alternative food networks is twofold. First, our analysis suggests that the often celebrated forms of labor that emphasize affect and care for the environment and community are not immune to the on-going commodification. Indeed, as DiNovelli-Lang and Hébert (2015) in their analysis of natural habitat restoration projects in Alaska suggest, the acts of care for nature often obscure the processes through which environmental “stewardship becomes another means for securing possession” (2015: 4). While such labor requires a re-imagining the meanings of work and a re-education of those involved in the new economies to care for nature, the city, and community, it nevertheless reproduces the older industrial order with its particular configuration of wealth and power. A closer look at urban farming, too, reveals that the efforts of urban farmers and regular volunteers to exercise their care for nature and community translate into an influx of white and more privileged groups into poorer communities and formerly industrial sites, creating conditions

for gentrification and further commodification of these urban spaces. This means that in order to understand the transformative potential of alternative food networks, we need to have a deeper understanding not only of the prevalent practices, values, and relations, but also what kinds of subjects and property relations are produced in the process.

Second, our analysis suggests that it matters profoundly who performs the work in alternative food economies, and under what conditions.⁹ The fact that the Millennials—especially young women—are looking for alternative ways to generate cultural, social and symbolic capital suggests that they may be particularly vulnerable to the changes in the political economy that has shed stable jobs providing financial capital. As their wealthier counterparts and male peers might be aspiring and working towards traditional career paths, they find that alternative job options might be more within their reach.

More broadly, this is suggestive of the emergence of the ways in which lifestyle politics opens new arenas for exploitation, as young participants in alternative food networks turn to unpaid work that requires care, time, and dedication. Even if they justify their work in terms of spirituality and liberation, it is clear that they often stretch the limits of their schedules to squeeze in activities that benefit not only the wider community, but also developers, municipalities, and owners of commercial enterprises (such as commercial farms). Similar to the formation of the post-industrial workplace politics as described by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), free and creative labor in alternative economies presents itself as a site both for self-reinvention as well as self-exploitation. From this perspective, the success of the alternative food movement will at least

⁹ While our analysis focuses narrowly on AFNs, it is important to note that for numerous poorly paid migrant workers who constitute the vast majority of the agricultural labor force in the United States, manual work is an embodiment of the alienation, exploitation and devaluation of labor at its worst. It is only the participants in the more privileged activities such as urban farming for whom manual labor can become the source of meaning, self-improvement and a viable career path.

in part depend on the ability to recognize and re-value its relationship to both exploitation and self-exploitation and its neoliberal underpinnings.

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