BACK TO THE FUTURE:
Australian Suburban Chicken-Keeping as Cultural Pedagogy and Practice Revival

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Abstract

The last ten years have witnessed the resurgence of small-scale domestic chicken-keeping in many cities around the world as part of a broader rise in urban agriculture. This chapter draws on primary research carried out in Sydney in 2015-16 to explore a contemporary "food pedagogy" (Swan and Flowers, 2015)—that of domestic chicken-keeping—asking whether it might signal something more than just "a pervasive nostalgia for earlier modes of living" (Hamilton, 2014: 124). Springboarding off the concept of "practice memory" elaborated by Cecily Maller and Yolande Strengers (2015), it canvasses eight themes arising from the interviews, exploring the learning, sharing and values cultivation involved in this revived practice as a form of cultural pedagogy.

Keywords

chicken-keeping; cultural pedagogy; practice revivals; sustainability; food cultures; urban agriculture

Introduction: Chicken-keeping, Cultural Pedagogy and Practice Revivals

The last ten years have witnessed the resurgence of small-scale domestic chicken keeping in many cities around the world as part of a broader rise in urban agriculture (Price, 2007;

D'Mello, 2016). In Australia, both the climate (mild winters) and the dominant urban housing form (free-standing house with garden) make chicken-keeping in the suburbs, even the inner-city suburbs, quite viable. The boom has been accompanied by media interest: domestic chicken-keeping now appears in local newspapers, lifestyle media and websites. There are chicken and permaculture Facebook groups, where enthusiasm runs high, and YouTube videos on aspects of chicken husbandry. Local councils run introductory chicken-keeping workshops and small businesses sell chickens, coops and assorted chicken paraphernalia, some promising a risk-free trial by allowing you to rent first, buy later. Some preschools and schools have chicken coops or rent fertilised eggs and heat lamps in order to allow young children to watch chickens hatch.

The experiences, learning, sharing and values cultivation involved in this animated activity can usefully be understood via the lens of cultural pedagogy. This framework understands pedagogy outside and beyond formal teaching and learning situations, seeing learning as something that occurs "across a variety of institutions, media, social relationships, pastimes, bodily activities and psychic involvements", many of which involve non-human as well as human actors (Morris, 2015: xv). This analytical interest in the full variety of institutions and relationships is shared by the various overlapping scholarly paradigms going by names such as public, critical, civic and popular pedagogies, all of which rely on a "capacious" (Swan and Flowers, 2015: 147) conception of pedagogy—a "pedagogy writ large", as Savage and Hickey-Moody (2010) put it. As in the "archetypical" (Savage and Hickey-Moody, 2010: 227) work of Henry Giroux, these paradigms characteristically view the pedagogical processes of institutions like the popular media and schools as vehicles for ideology and the "transmission of norms" (Savage and Hickey-Moody, 2010: 229).

Cultural pedagogy does not represent a clear-cut scholarly or disciplinary demarcation from these bodies of work, but rather an opportunity to "refram[e]" them (Watkins et al., 2015: 13), offering a rich perspective in at least three ways: in its insistence on the necessity of attending to contexts, embodiment and materiality; its focus on the technical and processual dimensions of pedagogy (*how* teaching and learning occur); and a resultant focus on temporality, e.g. in the form of duration, frequency, repetition and so on (Watkins et al., 2015). For Megan Watkins, Greg Noble and Catherine Driscoll, the cultural pedagogy

framework requires both empirical and theoretical work (2015: 11), including "the harder work of the analysis of pedagogic processes" (Noble, 2015: 33).

This chapter draws on primary research carried out in Sydney in 2015-16 to explore a contemporary "food pedagogy" (Flowers and Swan, 2015)—that of domestic chicken-keeping—asking whether it might signal something more than just "a pervasive nostalgia for earlier modes of living" (Hamilton, 2014: 124). Rejecting the popular dismissal of contemporary urban chicken-keeping as mere nostalgia or hipster-driven faddism,[1] but also refusing to see it as simply a "green" practice, it considers instead its potential as a vehicle or expression of anti-consumerist and/or pro-environmentalist sentiment, or a conduit to them. In particular, it asks questions about whether this revival is of any serious consequence and potentially durable.

The emphasis on context and process required by a cultural pedagogy approach makes ethnography one of its most suitable methods (Watkins et al., 2015: 7). This chapter uses a sensory ethnographic (Pink, 2009) approach to examine the chicken-keeping revival as a contemporary cultural pedagogy, exploring not only the skills and knowledge that are being learnt, revived and shared, but also the networks, values, pleasures and sensory experiences that enable and actually *constitute* learning in this context. The analysis is attentive to the temporalities of chicken-keeping—both the cultivation of everyday temporal rhythms it requires and the longer-term temporalities implicit in chicken-keeping's status as a revived social practice and a space for imagining new urban futures.

These fantasy spaces and times are an important component of the collective effort to re-imagine urban life in the light of environmental urgencies. As Elaine Swan and Rick Flowers note, "How we eat, and what we eat, are at the centre of what we want to be and how we will want the world to be" (2015: 147). The environmental crisis, including a growing lay awareness of the issues of food safety, quality and security, appears to be catalysing a renegotiation of the contemporary idea and experience of the suburban home as a centre of consumption (Davison, 2011: 42). This represents a revival of sorts, since before 1950, the Australian suburban home was often a site of partial resource autonomy (ibid: 41) in the form of water collection, waste disposal and food production. This makes the home an obvious place to seek out practices of revival, reinvention and explicit or implicit resistance

to dominant late-modern modes of organising production, consumption and labour. For while it is true that Australia has a history of "domestic introversion" (ibid: 46), especially in times of crisis, households are nonetheless "contained and networked at the same time" (Hawkins, 2011: 70) and can thus be "crucial sites for experimentation with what kind of 'common world' we wish to create and inhabit" (ibid: 72). Indeed, Gay Hawkins argues that "managing th[e] forcefield of internal and external relations" of which households are a centre is crucial to sustainability (ibid: 70). Backyard gardens in particular are "places where key environmental engagements occur" for most Australians (Head et al., 2004: 327), and a likely location for the revival and transformation of the skills, habits and routines embodied in older, less resource-intensive practices, which may have lain "dormant" (Shove et al., 2012: 31-32) but might still be able to "tak[e] on a new lease of life (ibid: 32).

A second conceptual springboard for this chapter is the concept of "practice memory" elaborated by Cecily Maller and Yolande Strengers, who use this term to conceptualise the way "more efficient or sustainable past practices could be brought back from a dormant state to be performed anew and recirculated" (2015: 148). Through this concept they emphasise the bodily and temporal dimensions of social practice. The embodied dimensions they derive from the idea of muscle memory—that is, how repeated bodily movements leave traces in the muscle fibres (ibid: 148, 151). To understand the temporal dimensions, they draw on Elizabeth Shove et al.'s (2012: 15-16) distinction between practice entities (relatively stable configurations of practice), practice elements (the competencies, meanings and materials that make up a practice), and practice performances (particular instantiations of a practice). While I am cautious about the structuralism of the entity/element distinction (which echoes a Saussurian langue/parole opposition that I would not subscribe to), I have nonetheless found Maller and Strengers' concept of practice memory useful for stimulating enquiry into the potential *revivability* and *durability* of practice, into "the various states of practice existence" (alive, dying, dormant etc [Maller and Strengers, 2015: 148]) and in particular pointing to the embodied dimensions of practice. Thus while I am not invoking the full conceptual weight of either Shove et al.'s distinction between elements, entities and performances or Maller and Strengers' conception of practice memory, I have found these concepts useful as prompts that have allowed me to distinguish and highlight the following aspects of practices: that they are embodied, unfolding in time and within particular temporal and spatial parameters, simultaneously reflective and generative of social

relationships and communities, and shaped by a range of social contexts. In general, I am highly sympathetic to Shove's (2010) critiques of attitudes-centred accounts of behaviour and change, neatly summarised as "the idea that new social arrangements result from an accumulation of millions of individual decisions about how best to act" (Shove et al., 2012: 11). Despite this, in the case of the chicken-keeping revival, I have been struck by the centrality of values, attitudes and emotions not only as practice elements but specifically as *motivators* of practice. Thus, I include the potential of practices to be expressive of values in my list of core components of chicken-keeping.

The remainder of this paper sketches out a preliminary picture of potentially durable practice that emerged from the data. I suggest eight features of chicken-keeping practices that might assist its durability and its potential to articulate to anti-consumerist or pro-environmentalist thought and practice. Though I treat these themes here under separate headings for the purpose of analysis, obviously in real life, experiences of pleasure, emotion, embodiment, creativity, satisfaction and meaning are deeply intertwined.

Put together, the eight elements analysed here demonstrate three of the elements Watkins et al. deem central to cultural pedagogy: capacitation, habituation and embodiment (Swan and Flowers, 2015: 153, summarising Watkins et al., 2015). Foregrounding them responds to calls within the public and cultural pedagogy scholarship to attend to the material and embodied dimensions of learning, and illuminates "how people learning about food goes beyond cognitive, information transfer or ideological influence" (Flowers and Swan, 2015: 5). Moreover, the focus on temporality tallies with Meaghan Morris' observation that if we are serious about understanding pedagogy as an exercise in learning, then we need to take seriously "the complex temporality of real transformation" (2015: xvii).

Background to the Study

Local (municipal) councils are an important interface between the ostensibly private space of the home and the larger sphere of government. My small-scale study focused on one local council area—Hornsby Shire Council, an expanse of 510 square kilometres[2] in the northern area of Sydney, Australia. It is interesting for its diverse landscapes, ranging from water-access only settlements along the Hawkesbury River in the north, to substantial tracts of

native bushland, urban centres, suburban expanses and a peri-urban fringe threatened somewhat by suburban encroachment. It has a correspondingly diverse population that is unevenly geographically distributed—some suburban areas remain predominantly white, while the urban centres have large Chinese and Korean populations.

The study comprised twenty hour-long interviews, sixteen of which were conducted in the participants' homes and involved a coop/garden visit. Most of these interviews/visits were located within the designated study area, but the snowballing and social media recruitment pathways inevitably generated enthusiastic interest from participants in other regions of Sydney and beyond. It was determined that these would allow for comparison and contrast; as a result, five of the interviews were conducted in other areas of Sydney and four by telephone with interstate participants. The social media recruitment pathway also tapped into online networks of chicken enthusiasts and permaculturists, who made up a small, but distinct and passionate, subgroup of interviewees. Most of the interviewees were women,[3] a fact that points not only to the traditional feminisation of chickens and chicken-keeping (Hovorka, 2012; Squier, 2011) but also to the social dynamics of an all-female research team, the greater availability of women during daylight hours when coop visits could occur and, no doubt, to the perennial willingness of women to 'help out' (McRobbie, 1982: 56-57). My efforts to reflect the Shire's ethnic diversity in my sample were successful more by as result of the 'natural' multiculturalism of Sydney than as a result of my targeted efforts to recruit participants from non-English speaking backgrounds.[4] Part of these measures included attending three *Introduction to Chicken-Keeping* workshops—two run by Hornsby Shire Council and one by a neighbouring council (Ku-ring-gai Council)—as a means of eliciting a broader range of participants than might arise through snowballing. I attended two as a participant observer and the third as a researcher with explicit permission to recruit.[5] These workshops were attended by people of all ages and from a striking range of ethnic backgrounds, but my recruitment attempts resulted mostly in English speakers. Despite this, households and heritages in Australia are rarely singular, so the project was still able to canvass perspectives from people from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

The Importance of Affect, Fantasy and Pleasure to the Revivability and Durability of Practices

In a *New York Times* article, writer and apartment dweller Novella Carpenter, the owner of twenty chickens, fourteen rabbits, four turkeys, a duck and two pigs, describes chickens as "the gateway animal for urban farming" (Price, 2007). This phrase not only deftly captures the addictive quality of chicken-keeping testified to by many chicken enthusiasts, it also offers a metaphor—at once spatial and temporal—for the idea that urban agriculture might be more than nostalgic or faddish but imaginable as a pathway to a future that is neither a simple revival nor wholly new. The chicken-keeping revival refashions older practices in new contexts, facilitated in this by the historical recentness of the expulsion of chickens from the suburbs (Gaynor, 2007), which makes chicken-keeping within single generational reach.

For some interviewees, chicken-keeping was in fact a revival of their own childhood practice, whether in Australia or overseas. For some this was a dim memory, but for others it was very resonant. Gizella, for example, grew up on a farm in England, and had had chickens as pets. Her childhood relation with them had been so intimate and potent (twelve young chicks used to sleep on her pillow) that it had had a lasting effect; she now keeps and breeds chickens on a small-acre property on the peri-urban fringe of Sydney. Others, like Charlie, did not know chicken-keeping from direct experience but still viewed it as a kind of family heritage: "I didn't have chickens growing up, but my grandmother and my great-grandmother did and my brother who lives in France now has chickens". Others have "married into" a heritage. Callie, for example, doesn't have a family history of vegetable growing or chicken-keeping but her Italian husband does. But for others, chicken-keeping was completely new, and often strongly desired; several respondents said they had "always" wanted chickens and one even said that she must have kept chickens "in another world". These accounts point to the possibility for nostalgia not only for lost practices but also for imagined or desired ones. In other words, one can long "for times and places that one has never experienced" (Holtzman, 2006: 367).[6]

To note this is not to demean these feelings, but on the contrary to better understand both the affective dimensions of cultural pedagogies associated with home-making and belonging (Noble, 2015) and some of the drivers of practice and change in the contemporary moment.

It tallies with the shifts in "oppositional politics" observed by Kim Humphery, who argues for the centrality of "the experiential" in contemporary Western anti-consumerism (2010: 54). He claims that "the new politics of consumption" is dominated by "a dual—and politically productive—focus on *ethics* and *life*" (original emphasis):

> *… a politics of change in the West is now deeply enveloped with individual experience, with the micropolitics of everyday life in which questions of personal conduct—but more especially of emotion, feeling, embodiment and selfhood—are central*. (ibid: 54)

The current chicken-keeping revival is fuelled, according to participants like Frankie, by something quite fundamental: "I think people are trying to get back to basics". But practice revivals are always provisional; Maller and Strengers (2015: 153) note the phenomenon of "bounce back", by which practices can easily revert to contemporary, more resource-intense, norms after a moment of perceived or real crisis. So, if it is to be anything other than faddish, a revived practice has to have qualities that might help it endure; and to be anything other than purely nostalgic, it needs to articulate to values, beliefs and practices with some potential to challenge or rework dominant ideologies and the bigger categories of time, space, exchange and social organisation in which they are embedded.

The Cultural Pedagogies of Suburban Chicken-keeping: Eight Themes

1. Values palatability

A first important aspect of a revivable practice is that it needs to be connected or connectable to a value cluster that is palatable (or potentially palatable) in the contemporary context. For chicken-keepers, animal welfare figured as the second most prominent reason for taking up chicken keeping (after the desire for fresh eggs). Some understood animal welfare as a personal ethic; others had a more political/systemic way of saying more or less the same thing: that chicken-keeping was part of a purposeful, if partial, rejection of industrial food production.

The importance of ethico-political values was indicated by the fact that a small but significant number of the chicken-keepers do not actually eat eggs but wanted to play some role in countering industrial chicken-keeping. As Jessee, a loving owner of one store-bought

chicken and four "ex-batts",[7] put it: "We can't make a world of difference for them all but we can make a world of difference for five". Even among those interviewees who ate eggs, quite a number had chosen rescue chickens, despite realising that they might be less prolific layers than purpose-bred hens. Even if it wasn't necessarily a motivator for everyone, animal welfare was definitely a major post facto consideration; everyone actively considered the chicken's welfare and "happiness" as part of their structural arrangements and daily dealings with their chickens.

Given this emphasis on animal welfare, it is unlikely that killing chickens for meat will prove revivable on a large scale domestically, despite the fact that it formed part of the childhood memories and practice repertoire of quite a number of participants. Even among those potentially willing, there are legal impediments—by-laws prohibiting slaughter—and economic disincentives (the widespread prohibition on roosters in the suburbs makes rearing chickens for meat economically unviable). But the more fundamental reason is a change in visceral relations between humans and animals over the last few decades. A number of interviewees recalled having slaughtered chickens as a child, or having watched their parents or grandparents do it. Some felt that they could possibly do this again (or could ask their husbands to do it!) Callie plans on harnessing this intergenerational difference by asking her Italian mother-in-law, who lives next door, to kill their three ducks for meat for her. But most felt it was out of the realm of viable practice for them now—not necessarily for ethical reasons, since most were meat-eaters, but more for visceral ones. At one of the Council workshops, attended by a very ethnically diverse group of people, there was some discussion about who had killed and eaten chickens as a child; one or two participants said that they still did this, some involving their children or grandchildren in the process. The presenter mentioned the term "happy meat" to describe well-cared for animals killed at home, which he saw as an ethical but probably not revivable practice: "If you think it through, it makes sense. But doing it is another thing", he said.

2. Pleasurable emotions

Discomfort with close-up animal death points to the centrality of pleasurable emotions to contemporary Australian domestic chicken-keeping. As noted, all the interviewees cared about their chickens' wellbeing. They spoke with evident satisfaction and pleasure not only of their chicken's physical wellbeing but also of their "happiness" and sometimes their

"emotions". All enjoyed knowing that they were treating their birds better than commercial egg producers or in some cases then their chicken-keeping parents or grandparents had done.

I was surprised by the strength of feeling displayed by many (though not all) participants towards their chickens. Everyone—without exception—found them funny and loved to watch them; "they're hilarious!" was a typical response. Most interviewees considered them to be pets. Jessee, for example, was annoyed that her chickens were subject to stringent council rules while the neighbours' cats were not. Pet status didn't exclude chickens from a functional role; one interviewee described chickens as "pets that give something back" or "low maintenance pets". Almost all had given them names. Charlie described the difference in her attitude from when she had first kept chickens, ten years previously:

> *When I originally had chooks I had a large number and they were just the birds for giving me eggs. But in the last six years they've become 'the girls'.*

Some participants clearly loved their chickens and saw them as family members (Fig. 1). A workshop presenter described, with obvious sorrow, how distraught she had been when taking an ailing chicken to the vet to be euthanised. Frankie, when asked whether she considered them to be pets, replied, "Shall I tell you what I say every night? I lock them in and say, 'Good night. I love you'". When asked if she loved them in the same way she loved her dogs, she said, "I do, actually".

Fig. 1 Close-up chicken-human interactions.

New to this research, I was inclined to suspect that this "loving" of productive animals is a modern thing—a symptom of contemporary day-to-day disengagement from the natural world and maybe of the recent foregrounding in egg marketing of chickens' emotional life (Miele, 2011). But environmental historian Andrea Gaynor (2007) argues that loving your chickens isn't necessarily a new thing. She notes that though it is hard to capture in the historical evidence, there are indications that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century urban keepers of domestic animals sometimes had emotional and pleasurable relations with their animals, citing a personal communication from someone who recalls her mother going down to the chook yard and taking great joy from cackling with the hens (39). Gaynor claims that there is no reason to believe that people in the past always had purely functional ties with productive animals, nor that financial utility precludes emotional bonds (ibid: 39-40).

The same is true today, even among two serious permaculture practitioners, whose attitudes were the least romanticised among the interviewees. Despite using the rather clinical poultry breeders' term "utility bird" to describe egg-laying hens, and even though they would not have described themselves as "loving" their chickens, they nonetheless valued them as a living presence in the garden. One commented on the felt quality of their absence when they were temporarily re-housed:

> *It brought it home to me that it might not even be a conscious level, it might be subliminally, but you know that there are other living things around. When they were gone that [feeling] wasn't there, and I missed that it wasn't there.*

3. Bodily pleasures: Chickens and the senses

For most participants, the love of chickens had strong sensory dimensions; their feelings of love, joy and satisfaction were entangled with the embodied pleasures associated with chicken-keeping. Aesthetic and sensory considerations were evident even at the point of selecting which chickens to purchase. Many interviewees chose the breeds and individuals for reasons of colour and patterning—even in one case for the colour of the eggs they would produce. One workshop speaker liked a particular breed because their eggshells were blue; another had wanted a "rainbow basket" of eggs; another knew someone who bought only black and white chickens. Silkies were often chosen for tactile reasons—because they would be soft and cuddly, especially for children. (See Fig. 2) These sensory considerations were sometimes more important than questions of egg productivity. Jessee doesn't eat eggs, but described in detail her household's daily "chicken cuddles". Egg-eaters recognised and valued the look and the taste of fresh eggs over store-bought ones (see Fig. 3). Everyone—universally—loved the sound of their chickens, finding the "brk brk brk" calming and the cackling amusing, and were often attuned to the meaning of the different calls. Gabby and Julian described the therapeutic effect of simply sitting in their garden with a coffee or a wine, watching the chickens move about.

Fig. 2 The tactile pleasures of chicken-keeping.

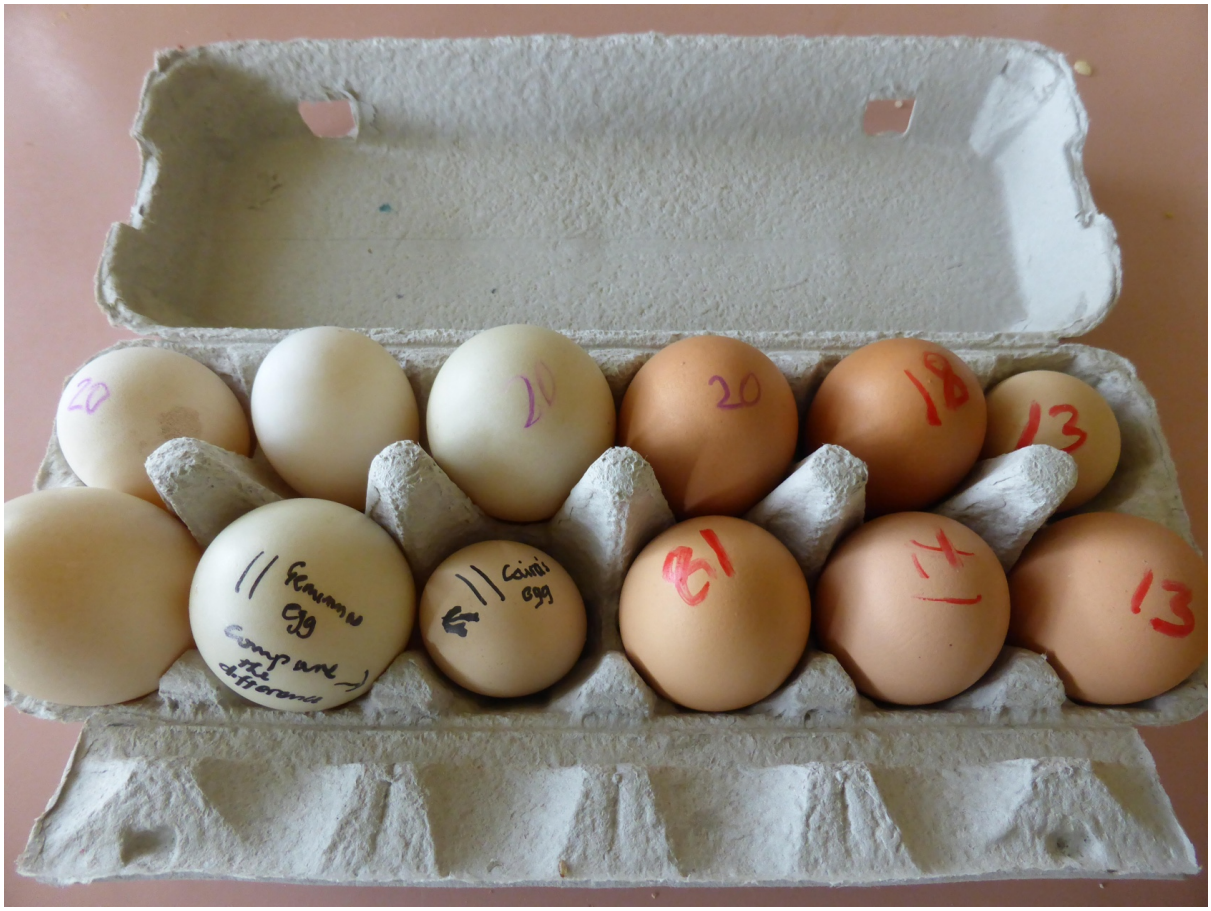

Fig. 3 Chicken-keepers' close connection to the eggs.

These pleasures are examples of what Constance Classen calls an "aesthetic of sustainability" (2009/10: 73). For Classen, this is an embodied and ethical aesthetics, one that might often sound nostalgic, but need not be:

> *The aesthetic of sustainability is not about recovering preindustrial ways of life or making cities into green machines for living. Rather, such an aesthetic calls for new ways of perceiving and interacting with Earth and its inhabitants based on justice, compassion, and cooperation – the* sharing *of pleasure.* (ibid: 73, original emphasis)

But this aesthetic can be deeply environmental only if it is not romanticised or sanitised. For Annie, an academic with an explicit environmental politics, engagement with dirt, mud, mess, compost and so on was very much part of the embodied relations to the natural world that she valued and was trying to inculcate in her children:

> *Don't waste things; that's part of the chicken thing for me—don't waste things, but also don't be afraid of getting wet or getting muddy or getting a tick. Who cares? We get ticks all the time.*

This is an example of Classen's bigger hope that green pleasures should be more deeply embodied and more deeply ecological than the more superficial aesthetic pleasures promoted by green consumerism:

> *It would help if we thought of green pleasures not just as green insofar as they promote sustainable practices, but also insofar as they cultivate a more ecological way of relating to the world with both our minds and our bodies.* (2009/10: 73)

This attunement of bodies to new senses and sensations is an embodied "capacitation" that cultural pedagogy recognises as one of the many forms of learning.

4. Habits and skills

Another source of pride and pleasure, and an obvious form of learning, was the acquisition and practice of knowledge and skills. All interviewees were proud of their (often new) knowledge, many quite actively wanting to show it off. Children were particularly keen to demonstrate their knowledge of chicken breeds, diseases and feeding regimes. Most people had done significant research for up to six months before getting chickens, and the research continued as the need arose (e.g. when chickens got sick). Knowledge and skills are shared between chicken owners locally and via the internet.

These skills were not just abstract and were often very tactile. One owner described how relieved and proud she was after managing to help an egg-bound chicken to release the egg and return to health, a process that involved close and caring touch, including giving the chicken gentle salt baths.

This more-than-technical knowledge includes not only the embodied habits and skills associated with handling chickens but also new habits concerning food. Food scraps were no longer thrown in the bin but were sorted for their edibility (since some fresh foods, like white potatoes, avocadoes and rhubarb leaves, are potentially toxic for chickens) and then

chopped up into small pieces before being given to the chickens. Food preparation for the human family also involved re-orienting everyday practices to centre them on egg availability. Sponge cakes, quiches and lemon curd were making a comeback and freezers were put to good use.

This is part of a broader trend in which some 'old' knowledge has become newly invigorated. Danuta, for example, runs workshops for local councils on what she calls "the old sustainability schemes": pickling and preserving, medicinal use of herbs, and making home-made soaps and cosmetics. She draws on skills, values and knowledge from her background as a child growing up on a farm in Poland, as well as on her university training in biology. 'Old-world' knowledges are springing back to life in new contexts.

5. Routinisation: Synchronising chicken time and human time

For skills to become habits—more than just technical knowledge—they need to be routinised "through repeated performance and doing" (Maller and Strengers, 2015: 152). This "habituation" dimension of embodied learning implicates time at the micro level of repetition and duration. It also involves some tweaking or re-ordering of the "temporal architecture[s]" (Sharma, 2014: 56) that subtend, sustain or enable routines.

For the study participants, human and chicken routines were co-created in a negotiation between the chicken's biological rhythms (particularly sunrise and sunset) and the human patterns of working, resting and commuting. These rhythms were also spatially ordered in relation to the constraints of suburban proximity: neighbours were not to be disturbed by early morning clucking. Everyone who had free-ranging chickens talked about letting the chickens out of the coop as soon as possible so that their morning calls would not annoy the neighbours. Surprisingly, they did not mind this. Jessee was "hyper-aware" of the potential for neighbours to be disturbed, and she and her husband happily share the "early shift", rising at dawn (or "dawnish") to let the chooks out. One respondent even said she was "very sad" that her daily routine had changed since she had made an automatic feed dispenser; she missed rising at dawn to let the chickens out. For workers, the early start was often a minimal imposition since it corresponded with the morning rise. Chickens do not

have weekends, but that did not seem to bother Christina, despite the fact that she has a busy working week and doesn't even eat eggs:

> *When the sun goes down then I'll go and close them up and then that's it for a week day. Then, on the weekend, I still set my alarm, get them up at five, open it up. I'll pop back into bed. Then I can hear them laying or clucking away, and I'll go and check them.*

When asked whether the weekend early rise annoyed her, she replied: "That's all right. I just go back to bed. It's alarm set, out and back in. That's okay".

Christina organises the coop cleaning around her weekly work rhythm. She cleans it on weekends, but does not consider the labour burdensome. When asked about the time it took, she replied:

> *I do it a bit slowly. I'm like, 'Oh, I'll let that dry because then the chooks can just have a bit more [time out of the coop]'. Sometimes when I'm done I'll just watch them for a bit, until I get bitten by the mossies [mosquitoes]. Then I'm like, 'Okay guys, time to get in, time to go'.*

One of the workshop presenters talked about chickens' time clock and said that its best human match was with children's "school cycle". When the kids get up, let the chooks out; when the kids come home, let them take care of them; and lock the chooks back up when the kids come inside. Kid time and chicken time go together, he claimed. In practice, this equation wasn't always that simple and the new forms of pleasure associated with chicken-keeping were intertwined with additional sources of guilt, responsibility and maternal labour:

> *Interviewer: How do they fit in? Are you aware of them temporally? Are they part of the rhythms or the routines of the day?*
> *Annie: Oh totally, totally.*
> *Interviewer: How do they fit in in that temporal way?*
> *Annie: Just like another bloody thing to do in the morning [laughs], as you can imagine! 'Oh shit, gotta feed the chickens'. I'm trying to get my daughter Claudia to go down there and do them sometimes.*

People worked it out. Even a self-confessed non-gardener like Christina had worked out routines that assembled objects, practices and routines in ways that met both her own demanding schedule and the care needs of the birds. Eventually, new knowledge and skills and the temporal rhythms in which they are bound become so normalised that they need not especially register consciously. For Frankie, practices like using grey water on the garden, recycling, re-using junk or avoiding packaging are "Just routine. I guess I've just done it for years and years". In the cultural pedagogy lens, this represents learning so successful that it is an embodied habit.

6. Larger temporal ordering

Against the popular claim that contemporary suburban chicken-keeping is past-centred (nostalgic) or a thing of the fleeting present (a novelty/fad that will soon pass [see Boesveld, 2013; Joseph, 2013: 77]), I want to pose the question of chicken-keeping's relation to the larger temporalities of past, present and future. For in order for practices to be part of a true project of social change, they need to be collective and future-directed and, at least in the advocacy stages, conscious. Thus, changes in daily or weekly rhythm have to be part of bigger temporal rearrangements. As Morris notes, thinking of pedagogy as a cultural phenomenon implies a "shift in emphasis to a longer term perspective" (2015: xvii).

The connections between memory, anticipation, fantasy and the *consumption* of food are well documented, with food being recognised as "a particularly intense and compelling medium for memory" (Holtzman, 2006: 365). But this study uncovered similar dynamics with food *production*. As a social practice being revived in the interests of better (more sustainable, healthier, tastier) futures, chicken-keeping points backwards to real and imagined pasts and forwards to hoped-for futures. One of the ways it does this is via the senses. The sound of chickens clucking could take people back in time or transport them to imagined spaces or times. Anita, for example, had one neighbour who had grown up in Thailand, who would say "Oh, it's like I'm back in the village", and another who would say "It's like I'm in the country".

Do such memory and fantasy elements disqualify chicken-keeping from being seriously future-directed and deeply ecological? Certainly, the interviewees didn't see their practice as nostalgic. Zora, whose migrant parents had been farmers in Croatia, said:

> *Zora: It's not like I went to Croatia for 35 times. It's not like it brings a happy memory to me, having the chickens. It's none of that. It's more about the creating [of] memories maybe with me.*
> *Interviewer: Right, so you want to do a whole new cultural practice of having the chickens with your children growing up?*
> *Zora: Yeah.*

For Zora, then, chicken-keeping is a here-and-now practice with anticipatory dimensions, one of whose benefits is creating potential future memories for her children.

In fact, all participants, regardless of their family connection or otherwise with farming or animal rearing, connected their current chicken-keeping to the future in some way. For most, it was neither regression nor revolution but a small quiet evolution—simply a logical next step after having vegetable gardens, fruit trees and worm farms. For the politically minded, it was the most viable suburban response to the ethical problems of industrial food production. For those with children, it was a way of educating them about the origin of foods and the importance of healthy food. It was as much about a rendering visible of food production as it was an attempt to recapture a lost past. In this way, chicken-keepers act as teachers of others simply through being and doing.

The permaculturists understood chicken-keeping as one component of an actively chosen, scientifically informed, rational and political pathway to a future that hopes to stave off the nutritional disaster of low-nutrient foods, the environmental disaster of degraded and polluted farmlands, and the political disaster of a potential future in which Australia might become a net importer of low-quality food from overseas rather than a producer of high-quality food. To be truly and deeply future-directed, this permaculture project has to shun fantasy futures (or use them strategically) and involve a serious restructuring of the dominant categories and experiences of lived of time associated with late capitalism. I asked Danuta, an avid permaculturist, how the chickens fitted in to some of the classic

temporal/labour divisions of late modernity: work, leisure, hobbies, relaxation and so on. For her, such divisions of time and their implied relations to bodily activity and to pleasure make no sense. Her passion for the garden began when she worked in a corporate job. She would come home and walk into the back garden, still dressed in her skirt and high heels, to pick one or two things. An hour or two later, she would still be there. After a retrenchment, her life has been centred on the garden and its daily, seasonal and yearly rhythms, into which discrete categories of work and leisure can disappear:

> *For me, life is really about nature and living things. I'm not into sport. I don't really watch much TV … For me, this is life. I don't say it's work. I don't say it's leisure. It just* is. *Because I decided to have chickens, then it's part of my daily routine to feed them, to check on them, pick the eggs, make sure that they've got clean water. It's just part of my life. I don't treat it as work. I don't treat it as relaxing time … It's a little bit like village mentality. You wake up in the morning. You go around, check on your animals, feed them. You do some gardening. You work at home. It's just life. You bake your bread, you pick your fruit.*

Declan, another permaculturist, also chose a life that does not fit with the temporal norms of modern Australian society and the identity labels with which they are interwoven:

> *I'm currently not working—whether that's retired, semi-retired, unemployed, pick a number—but we don't have scads of cash to throw around, but what we do have is enough cash to keep us going.*

There was, it seems, no simple label to describe Declan's relation to time, production and consumption. He knows about the types of village life Danuta describes and which the expansion of commodity markets has eroded (Hochschild, 2012), and has actively chosen it over a life where time spent in paid work is traded off against the consumption of commodities:

> *Many, many years ago [self-provisioning] was sort of the done thing. We [i.e. society] got away from that. Certainly, if you watch a lot of TV the whole emphasis of the advertising is 'Don't do that. Go out and do a lot of work and then give us your money and we'll sort it out for you'. That is incredibly disempowering, whereas producing your*

> *own stuff is very empowering. It also means that occasionally if things hit the fan and supplies are down or whatever that it's less of an issue for you.*

Declan and his wife have been living that way for over thirty years, so for him, it is not so much a question of revival as a choice made and stuck by. But what about for "ordinary" people living in the suburbs? Is a garden-centred life imaginable as a viable future or is it a fantasy? Christina's discussion of her routine makes clear that bucolic fantasies have little place in the cheerfully accepted pragmatic business of day-to-day life:

> *Christina: [I go] and say hello and go and have a look at them to double check the water and the feed. Then look at the poo situation. If there's any obvious poo I just get rid of it then because the compost is right next to it. So it goes straight into the compost with the hay.*
> *Interviewer: Do you use the chicken poop for anything?*
> *Christina: Well, it's still – there's nothing — the compost is looking very — just not very compost, looking very much like poo and hay. So, hopefully, that will become something for the garden.*
> *Interviewer: You'll use it yourself for the garden?*
> *Christina: Yeah, or give it to mum and dad, because I'm not much of a gardener. I hate it. I'm not – I don't like the garden. In an ideal world, yes, it would go into the garden, but I don't think I'm going to do it.*

Annie, an academic who also writes a chicken and garden blog, loves the permaculture ideal, and is more deeply enmeshed in its philosophies and practices than Christina, but nonetheless also takes evident pleasure in rejecting it as a fantasy space, describing with gusto how she both uses and subverts it:

> *I think permaculture is a little bit of cult. That's partly why I do my blog because [gardening's] always a fuck-up. You try and do things and they just don't work a lot of the time. I know it's partly because I'm bad at it. It's [also] partly because there's this fantasy way of selling that style of gardening where everything works in harmony. No, actually, if you have your chickens in your vegetable garden they will destroy it. So that sort of hippy dippy thing – 'nature grows the seeds', that sort of thing – it's popular here but my blogs — I always try and be funny because to me that's what's interesting. It's really fucking annoying when someone says 'My garden is beautiful and dolphins…' I*

don't want to really hear that. Like, it's quite helpful to have a few tips but I like to hear, 'Oh God, you know I tried to grow potatoes last year and this [failure] is my potato'.

7. Enriched social networks

The cultural pedagogy of chicken-keeping is a networked phenomenon. Blogs, websites, and the sharing of tips point to the centrality of online and offline social networks to the chicken-keeping revival in ways that parallel the rise of DIY and craft sites in the current "maker cultures" revival (Luckman, 2015). Expertise, advice and enthusiasm are shared among strangers via YouTube videos or informational websites, but also in forms of interaction that are much more obviously communal, such as interactive websites and permaculture, poultry and gardening social media groups. Some of this activity extends to offline contexts as well.

Chicken-keeping is also playing a role in enriching local neighbourhoods, with chickens facilitating cross-cultural and cross-generational interactions. As Anita says: "Sometimes the neighbour's little kids, they come over to see the chooks and to pat them and to get an egg—so it's good in that way". Invited guests, especially those with children, also tend to gravitate towards the chook pen, with the chickens often serving as social ice-breakers. While all respondents were aware of potential problems with rats, noise and smell, only one person reported having had problems with neighbours. Mostly, neighbours loved receiving fresh eggs and hearing the sound of chickens.

Gifting, and other elements of alternative market and non-market transactions (Gibson-Graham, 2008), are an important component of the practice. Eggs are regularly given to neighbours, family and workmates, sometimes in exchange for chicken-feeding while owners are away. Chickens themselves were often acquired as gifts in the first place, often by husbands for their wives.

In these little ways, chickens allow suburbanites to take pleasure in pushing back against the diminution of non-market-based modes of social organisation and the retreat of the "realms of community, commons, and government" that has characterised the growth of market economies (Hochschild, 2012: 9). For most, this was not a systematic attempt to reject market economies, but rather a chance to be a little bit self-sufficient and to enjoy an enriched sense of neighbourhood.

8. Creativity

Chicken-keeping also provided an avenue for experiences of creative making of the type that, while they have no doubt always been part of suburbia, are enjoying a period of resurgence and public visibility via the blossoming of DIY and maker cultures (Luckman, 2015). Elements of fantasy, humour and play were often brought to the construction of coops. One participant, an artist, had created a playful environment by the use of ornaments and signage (Figs. 4 & 5). Another had a husband who was a computer programmer, and so took particular pleasure in repurposing computer monitors as nest boxes (Fig. 6), lamenting as an aside the arrival of flat-screen monitors! Another had a shared family joke: getting "the girls" back into the coop they would shout "Get thee to a Nunnery!" (Fig. 7)

Fig. 4 Creative coop design.

Fig. 5 Creative coop design.

Fig. 6 Computer nest box.

Fig. 7 "Nunnery" coop.

Quite a number of chicken-keeping households, especially those with children, had chicken-themed artworks proudly on display (Fig. 8). Chickens starred in family portraits, Christmas cards and blog pages, even playing a cameo role in one young couple's wedding invitations and decorations, alongside the couple's puppy.

Fig. 8 Chicken artworks.

For some, chickens were just one aspect of a broader attempt to live differently within suburbia. Julian and Gabby, for example, had a very vibrant sense of themselves as creators of an alternative space. They saw their house as a refuge, a creative space, somewhere where their kids and friends can think outside the square: "It's a bit of a magic world".

But one person's creativity is another person's oddness, and a few of the chicken keepers believed they were seen by their neighbours as "weird".[8] Julian and Gabby, while relishing their own vision of creative suburban life, nonetheless realised that it could put them at odds with others: "That's how we feel sometimes. We're the aliens". The permaculturists we spoke to accepted this judgment as an inevitable part of the social project of creating new shared futures. Others were more inclined to delight in it as part of an individual identity as someone not overly constricted by the norms of suburbanism. Callie, for example, delights in her persona as keeper of many different kinds of animals:

> *Callie: I am the mad chicken lady, yes. … [Laughs] Yeah, this place is known as the [petting] zoo. You walk in there and there's these little fluffy things at your front door; people just go berserk. It's really funny.*
> *Interviewer: Great. How does it make you feel? Are you quite proud of that?*
> *Callie: Yep. We're a weird family. We all have very overt weirdnesses and we're quite proud of our weirdnesses.*

Conclusion: Satisfaction and Meaning

This paper has emphasised the centrality of pleasure to the chicken-keeping revival. These pleasures do not appear to be superficial; they connect to deeper questions of satisfaction and meaning. People took pride in waste reduction; in growing something of their own; in managing an ecosystem; in giving a happy life to a small group of chickens; in learning and applying new skills; in having set something up themselves and managing it successfully. They found satisfaction and meaning in connecting more with neighbours and family; sharing a space with living beings; and in creating a home space that allowed them to "move in a different direction to the rest of the herd", as Julian and Gabby put it.

In exploring chicken-keeping as a food pedagogy being revived in the context of the crises of late capitalism, this chapter has not attempted to prove that it is a green practice, but has instead explored how, for the study participants, chicken-keeping articulated to critiques, both implicit and explicit, of commodity capitalism in its era of crisis and the extent to which, and the ways in which, it was one way of negotiating little pockets of life that stand not so much outside of, but rather to one side of, the dominant system of marketised consumption. It suggests the importance of non-human nature in these small projects of de-alienation, since all participants, regardless of the extent of their politicisation, expressed happiness in sharing a space with living beings, whether or not one conceives of them as "pets". As Annie puts it, simply and passionately: "They're beings that share our lives. Not having them would be horrible. I would hate not to have them".

In line with cultural pedagogy's emphasis on capacitation, habitation and embodiment, this study has emphasised the role of spaces, materials, the body, sensory experiences and emotions in the chicken-keeping revival, arguing that it is these corporeal and material elements that might help this revived practice to have some measure of durability.

It is also clear that cultural pedagogy allows us to think more expansively about who or what a teacher might be. In the case of chicken-keeping, it encourages us to focus on "the non-human and human actors involved in feeding us and teaching us" (Swan and Flowers, 2015: 147). This is in contrast to critical pedagogy's insistence on ideology, which, despite its obvious political strengths, might encourage us to focus on human actors. In the critical pedagogy of Henry Giroux, for example, media and consumer culture are doing the teaching, and the job of the critical pedagogue is to teach students to see through this pedagogy and to develop effective "counternarratives" (Giroux et al., 1996). But in the broader framing of cultural pedagogy, teaching and learning is a more dispersed set of processes. Thinking of chicken-keeping as a cultural pedagogy prompts us to observe how older generations are teaching younger ones (through the revival of practice) and peers are teaching each other (through the sharing of expertise, including by explicit instruction at workshops and in books and websites. And of course, the chickens themselves, by falling ill, provoking laughter, refusing to lay, being eaten by foxes, producing eggs, or cackling at 5am, are teaching and training willing human suburbanites to learn new skills, feel new

emotions, confront dilemmas, ask questions, and learn new habits of working, baking, sharing and making.

Endnotes

[1] This was the accusation in a Canadian newspaper story titled 'Hipster farmers abandoning urban chickens because they're too much work', in which animal rights activists were described as preparing for a predicted onslaught of abandoned chickens once hipsters realised that chickens don't lay forever. "It's the stupid foodies. We're just sick to death of it", said the owner of a chicken shelter (Boesveld, 2013).

[2] This figure refers to the interview date. Council boundaries are currently being contested.

[3] Thirteen of the twenty interviews were conducted with women on their own; four with men alone; and three with family groups or heterosexual couples. In several of the female-only interviews, male partners came in and out and occasionally made comments.

[4] One of the research assistants for this project speaks Mandarin. She put up recruitment posters in Mandarin in locations with a large Chinese-speaking population, also targeting particular social clubs, churches etc with phone calls and visits. These produced some interest but no follow-through. Sincere thanks to Christen Cornell for undertaking this work.

[5] This project was approved by the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee. My deep thanks to the stellar research and administrative assistants: Christen Cornell, Kerryn Drysdale, Karma Eddison-Cogan and Karen-Anne Wong.

[6] Susan Stewart took this claim to its logical limit. In *On Longing*, she interestingly, but too absolutely, claimed that the nostalgic "is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself" (1984: 145).

[7] This phrase, meaning "ex-battery chickens", is a play on the colloquialism "ex-pats" (expatriates).

[8] This was more frequently reported with interviewees who lived outside the dominant study area. One interviewee who lived in what is condescendingly called 'McMansion land' in the western suburbs of Sydney said she didn't know anyone else in the area who kept chickens.

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