



City of sanctuary: Exploring multispecies democracy in a post-growth food future

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Abstract

This article grapples with two pressing problems endemic to capitalist agriculture: the exploitation of nonhuman animals and the enclosure of the agricultural commons. How might a post-growth food transition support animal liberation and restore access to the means of food production? Care farming, an international paradigm integrating agriculture and healthcare through the therapeutic use of farming, may offer a path forward. Employing speculative ethnography, the article explores an expanded and more inclusive political ecology of care farming. It argues, through three fictional vignettes, that care farming and animal rights can resolve practical challenges for one another. The cultural and legal recognition of domesticated animals as members of society is a means for mitigating anthropocentric practices in care farming. Scaling up care farming, in turn, is a way of welcoming domesticated animal citizens into public space and community life. Attending more to social and spatial configurations than technologies, the vignettes hold high- and low-tech approaches to agriculture, interspecies communication, and democratic deliberation in tension. The article concludes by reflecting on questions for further consideration.

Keywords

animal rights, care farming, care ethics, multispecies democracy, post-growth

1. Introduction

The modern-day capitalist food system is marked by labor exploitation, pollution, biodiversity loss, animal cruelty, and the erosion and exhaustion of soils (Gonzalez, 2011; Horrigan *et al.*, 2002; Mitchell, 2011). On the consumption side, it generates uneven geographies of food waste and food deserts (Beaulac *et al.*, 2009; Schanes *et al.*, 2018). As the purveyor of the Western diet, it drives the ongoing pandemic of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes (Carrera-Bastos *et al.*, 2011). These outcomes are not failures of the food system, but rather collateral damage as it succeeds in achieving its goal of maximizing profits for agribusiness investors. But what if multispecies wellbeing were the first and only priority? What might a post-growth food system be like?

Bruce Braun (2015) suggested that, as the Anthropocene takes shape, more attention to alternative futures is needed. "Although a robust critical literature has done much to help us understand how we have arrived at this juncture and has highlighted the deeply uneven geographies of socioecological change, it has been far less successful at imagining and engendering just and sustainable alternatives to existing political, economic, and ecological practices" (p. 239). In response to this imbalance, this article brings care farming and animal rights together in a speculative multispecies democratic society. Care farming (also called social farming) is an evidence-based therapeutic paradigm in which people with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities are provided opportunities to work on farms. Participants gain skills, spend time in green spaces, engage in physical activity, contribute to the community, and cultivate relationships with human and other-than-human beings. Care farming encompasses multiple activities and benefits diverse populations across the lifespan. Research suggests it may be helpful for people with anxiety, depression, dementia, developmental disabilities,

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learning disabilities, multiple sclerosis, substance abuse disorders, traumatic grief, prior justice system involvement, or a lack of employment opportunities (Artz & Davis, 2017; Cacciatore *et al.*, 2020; De Bruin *et al.*, 2020; Gorman, 2017; 2019; Gorman & Cacciatore, 2017; Kwame Ameade, 2021; Murray *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b). Many varieties of care farming can be found throughout the world, with known projects in Africa, Asia, Central and North America, the Caribbean, Europe, South America, and the South Pacific (Petrics, 2014).

Care farming, like other institutions facilitating human-animal interactions, is susceptible to anthropocentric practices. In the United Kingdom, for example, Richard Gorman (2019) found that nonhuman animals are often used for therapeutic purposes in ways which are not mutually beneficial or symbiotic. Indeed, these interactions can be unpleasant and even harmful to animals. Such relations reflect the speciesism embedded in Western law and culture, where animals are property and means to human ends, not rights-bearing subjects of their own lives (Deckha, 2020). The systematic subordination of animals rests on ableist premises: bodily differences are mobilized to construct animality as a condition of lacking certain mental and physical qualities required for full moral consideration and political inclusion (Arathoon, 2022; Jenkins *et al.*, 2020; Taylor, 2014; 2017). Speciesism intersects with and reinforces other modes of oppression as well, including cis-heteropatriarchy, racism, capitalism, and colonialism (Adams & Gruen, 2021; Ko, 2019; Maurizi, 2021; Montford & Taylor, 2020).

Every year, an estimated 80 billion farmed land animals are killed around the world. Roughly 70% of them are raised in Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (Mills & Driscoll, 2022) where they have "no access to outside air, no dirt, no sunlight, and no capacity for natural movement or activities such as grooming, play, exercise, unaided reproduction, or the like" (DeMello, 2021, p. 133). Such conditions lead to widespread illness, injury, and disability among farmed animals (Taylor, 2017). Given the scale and depth of brutality against animals in capitalist agriculture, reimagining their role in a post-growth future is a central task.

Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011) argue that different kinds of nonhuman animals are entitled to different kinds of rights. Domesticated animals have been bred, for the most part, to be both dependent on human care and capable of socialization into human communities. This combination makes them suited for rights of citizenship with full legal and political representation. As will be explored in the following sections, the inclusion of domesticated animals as members of society can be accomplished through practices of "interdependent agency" (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2014, p. 32). This model pushes against abolitionist approaches to multispecies justice, which hold that, as dependent products of unjust systems, domesticated animals ought to be phased out entirely (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011, pp. 77-82). While I will not delve deeper into this debate, suffice it to say that if domesticated animals are liberated within a citizenship model, society will need to reimagine the built and legal environment to uphold their rights. Questions of urban design and accessibility, political representation, and economic integration come to the fore. This article explores how domesticated animal citizenship might respond to the problem of speciesism in care farming, and how care farming, in turn, might respond to the problem of repositioning domesticated animal citizens in society.

2. Theoretical frameworks

Alternative models of food production feature prominently in post-growth imaginaries. However, they tend to take the form of grassroots projects such as urban gardens, regenerative farms, agricultural co-ops, and systems of community-supported agriculture (D'Alisa *et al.*, 2014; Demaria *et al.*, 2019; Nelson & Edwards, 2020). It seems that possibilities for larger-scale, state-supported, democratic socialist food systems are underrepresented. While democratic socialism takes many forms, most combine state-run institutions with participatory organizations that empower workers. These include Universal Basic Services (e.g., public housing, healthcare, education, transportation, food, and utilities), job guarantees, participatory budgeting and planning, strong unions, extensive commons, and worker- or community-owned cooperatives. Mundane as democratic socialist futures may be, they come with at least one advantage: because they are furnished with familiar concepts and institutions, it is easier (relative to large-scale stateless societies, for example) to envision a path from here to there. This emphasis on the pragmatic purchase of medium-term horizons is inspired by the work of Vivek Chibber (2017; 2022). Chibber (2017, no pagination) argues that socialists should focus on reinvigorating traditional institutions of class struggle (e.g. political parties, labor unions, tenant unions, etc.) to

proceed "down the road of social democracy and then to democratic socialism." Furthermore, as society forges the capacity to uphold liberal rights, working-class organizations should expand on and strengthen rights-based frameworks. The last section argued for including animal rights in this project. This section argues for the right to access the means of food production.

The efficacy of care farming as a therapeutic intervention can be explained, in part, by evolutionary mismatch theory: the hypothesis that organisms are vulnerable to adverse health outcomes when there is a mismatch between their bodies and the environment. A fish out of water is an extreme example. A more complex example, which is relevant to the following discussion, is that of animals in zoos. To prevent mental and physical illness due to evolutionary mismatch, the Nutrition Advisory Group to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (2002, no pagination) advises that the diets of animals in captivity "should, whenever reasonably possible, encourage methods of consumption similar to methods in the wild (e.g., chimpanzees work for food in termite mounds), should be of a form as close to natural as possible (e.g., forage for ruminants, whole food/roughage for carnivores), and should allow a similar amount of time spent on feeding (e.g., giant pandas spend most of their day eating; lions spend a relatively short time)." Like animals in zoos, humans in their built environments are subject to mismatch diseases. "In just a few generations, industrialization has transformed human diets, physical activity patterns, and toxin exposure landscapes, and these changes presumably contribute to the long list of NCDs that used to be rare or nonexistent" (Lea *et al.*, 2023, p. 3). Industrialization has not transformed diets, activity patterns, and toxicity risks randomly or uniformly, however. Mismatch diseases are unevenly distributed according to colonial and capitalist logics: geographies of affluence, underdevelopment, and "organized abandonment" (Gilmore, 2022, p. 174) are generated at multiple scales, from neighborhoods to nations and beyond (Brown & Taylor, 2018; Harvey, 2005; Marya & Patel, 2021; Rodney, 2018).

While it is a mistake to assume that humans have a natural way of producing food, the assumption that our bodies are uniquely exempt from mismatch diseases associated with food production is likewise mistaken. In addition to the care farming literature discussed above, research is mounting within the fields of ecopsychology, horticultural therapy, animal-assisted therapy, public health, and urban ecology, showing that caring relationships with human and other-than-human beings are associated with positive health outcomes (Barragan-Jason *et al.*, 2023; Barton & Pretty, 2010; Charry-Sánchez *et al.*, 2018; Shanahan *et al.*, 2015; Tu, 2022). Food production is a primary avenue by which such relations are cultivated. In optimizing agriculture for capital accumulation, the agricultural-industrial complex has foreclosed this avenue for the vast majority of individuals and communities (Shiva, 2011).

As a set of evidence-based approaches, practices and tools designed to include individuals with various backgrounds and abilities in agriculture, care farming is an ideal prefiguration of a job guarantee program. A guaranteed care farming job is one way, among many, to uphold the right to access the means of food production. Even in the absence of such a right, the aforementioned literature suggests that large-scale investments in care farming would promote public health from multiple angles. The idea of participatory agriculture as a post-capitalist community health measure is far from new. To give just one example, anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin (2011) wrote in 1892: "finding in physical exercise, without exhaustion or overwork, the health and strength which so often flags in cities—men, women and children will gladly turn to the labour of the fields, when it is no longer a slavish drudgery, but has become a pleasure, a festival, a renewal of health and joy" (p. 94). If domesticated animals are included in this project, popular care farming could be their pathway into public space and community life. While this article makes these arguments, it does so in a non-linear way, in a manner inspired by science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin's (2019) "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (p. 149). That is, its form and function are less that of an "arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead)," and more that of a "carrier bag/belly/box/house/medicine bundle" in which disparate elements of today's world jostle around and spark new connections, questions, and contradictions (p. 151).

In the following vignettes, the nation-state of England is assumed to exist in the mid-22nd century. This is, admittedly, a reflection of my own limited imagination. Perhaps nation-states, as we know them, will have already disintegrated in the compost heap of history. As the study is bound by time and place, representation is mostly limited to English urban dwellers. England was chosen primarily for having produced, with the rest of the United Kingdom, one of the more popular movements for care farming as a formal institution. Every week,

around 8,750 people are estimated to participate in care farming (Gorman, 2019). The vignettes are informed by my experiences living in England, working as an occupational therapist, gardening, and visiting multiple care farms and animal sanctuaries. While autobiographical factors constrain the scope of the narrative, I acknowledge the importance of including global connections in local analyses (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019) and situate it in a broader context.

3. Methods

This article utilizes speculative ethnography to explore a post-growth food future. According to Michael Oman-Reagan (2018, no pagination), "Speculative ethnography is built from the same stuff as scientific ethnographic work, while also bringing seemingly distant possibilities into the time and space of ongoing history." Speculative fiction authors, for example, use thick description to portray the life-worlds of beings inhabiting imaginary societies. As Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown (2015) argue, visions of a more just and equitable world—whether in print or discussed around the kitchen table—have always accompanied activist movements. Human geographers Chiara Rabbiosi and Alberto Vanolo (2017) note that "fictional vignettes" have been used for several purposes, including to "allow us to explore the universe of possibilities" (p.272). In a review of the geographic literature, Dragos Simandan (2023) likewise argues that "the field has become increasingly aware that in order to effectively fight for a better world, the critique of the capitalist present must be accompanied by sustained efforts to envisage post-capitalist futures" (p. 15).

Critics may argue that speculation and ethnography fall into the category of things which, while good independently, ought not to be mixed. My position, in agreement with Rabbiosi and Vanolo (2017), is that so long as projects at this intersection are carried out transparently, ethically, and without too much gravitas, they offer a useful modality for engaging both intellect and sensory-affective imagination in analyses of alternative futures. Given that "post-growth" already implies a future orientation with the prefix "post," it stands to reason that such methods could be especially valuable in this burgeoning field.

4. Background

In the first half of the 22nd century, democratic socialist movements came to power around the world. Geopolitics underwent a phase transition, shifting from a game of lethal competition to one of care, reconciliation, and repair. Through class and decolonial struggle, global food systems were transformed. Multinational corporations no longer extracted wealth through vast plantations and industrial farms. International food sovereignty organizations such as La Vía Campesina secured significant victories. Local communities reclaimed autonomy over how they produced food, what they produced, and with whom they shared it. As Indigenous jurisdiction was reasserted in formerly colonized territories, many other-than-human beings were legally transformed from property to subjects with inherent dignity (Belcourt, 2015; Deckha, 2020; Montford & Taylor, 2020). Inspired by the socioecological successes of these movements, European nations extended rights to animals, forests, rivers, mountains, burial grounds, and other communities of the living and the dead. These beings and assemblages now have collaborators who help them participate in direct democratic processes, both in-person and online, thereby governing various state and cooperative bodies.

As carceral spaces have been eradicated across species ("Cages of the Ages" exhibits can be found in local museums), rights violations initiate transformative justice processes (Gilmore, 2022; Janak, 2021; Morin, 2016). In England, the National Care Farm (NCF) is sometimes called upon in these. The NCF is a universally accessible job guarantee program that funds and regulates a nationwide union of small to midsize agroecological care farming cooperatives. Just as the right to housing, healthcare, education, and transportation are guaranteed by corresponding governmental agencies, the NCF guarantees the right to access the means of food production: land, water, seeds, tools, time, knowledge, and community.

Between the mid-21st and mid-22nd centuries, in response to cascading climate emergencies, care crises, and collective grief, the care farming movement grew from a niche rehabilitative treatment to a popular ritual of community healing. Furthermore, climate disasters made many regions desperate to increase resilience in food production. Due to its mandate of universal accessibility, the NCF organized farming cooperatives near workers' homes. This led to a multitude of agricultural sites distributed throughout and near residential

neighborhoods. Through cultivating landrace crop varieties and sharing their best seeds, NCF co-ops now add an important layer of redundancy in the food system. In the event of blights, droughts, fires, floods, and supply chain failures, these reservoirs of biodiversity and agricultural know-how offer a safety net.

Each cooperative operates within internationally determined parameters for agroecology. Agroecology is a heterogeneous set of principles and practices which originated with Indigenous peoples around the world. It is adapted to place, attentive to interspecies relationships, and committed to promoting health, biodiversity, and soil fertility (Hernandez, 2022, pp. 107-115; Sands *et al.*, 2023). Agroecological farms are designed to work with—rather than overcome—local topographies, climatic conditions, and biotic communities. Examples of agroecological practices include composting, seed saving, water catchment and storage (e.g., via strategically placed ponds), perennial-based plant selection, companion planting, food forestry (maximizing vertical space by mimicking the multiple layers of the forest's edge), biochar production and use, and habitat construction to attract beneficial insects and wildlife. Because biocultural diversity and accessibility are highly valued in agroecology and care farming, respectively, NCF cooperatives are free to deploy a wide range of techniques and technologies.

What happens to food produced by the co-ops? Workers typically feed themselves, their families and neighbors, then give the rest to public schools, hospitals, and food dispensaries. In the year 2152, this green infrastructure—steadily diffusing free food and care into every neighborhood—is about as ordinary as the public library. That is, through humdrum rituals of taxation, administration, and everyday work on the ground, the NCF supports a high quality of life with unassuming proficiency.

5. Shared spaces

From her perch in the crown of an oak tree at the center of Foxglove Park, a sparrow sees green tentacles unfurling, winding through other parks, plots, university campuses, library lawns and common lands. Among the care farms nestled in these spaces, the one at Foxglove Park is the largest, managed by over 200 workers. The lush, labyrinthine corridors connecting the farms allow humans and other animals to move through the city at their own pace, without encountering loud, fast-moving transit (see Defries *et al.*, 2023, for a discussion of green corridors). As the sparrow takes flight and climbs high into the air, she can see where the green web reaches the countryside. Through these verdant passageways, the liveliness of the hinterlands penetrates and nourishes the urban core.

Lulu, one of the NCF workers with whom I spoke, rides a horse to work. Several years ago, she had a bicycle accident and became paralyzed from the waist down. Serendipitously, a horse named Oja had just completed her socialization as a hippotherapy worker. I walked with her and Oja to the park one morning. Because Rhizopolis is a 15-minute City (Moreno *et al.*, 2021), Lulu is no more than fifteen minutes by electric wheelchair to basic services, including a care farm. Foxglove Park is about as far as it gets, but she enjoys the ride. "It gives my body a chance to connect with Oja's gait—she helps my chronic back pain" (see Kocyigit *et al.*, 2023, for a discussion of hippotherapy). It was early summer when I visited. As we moved through the corridor, we passed through different segments of edible plant guilds: lavender and plum, hazelnut and strawberry, pear and white currant...Every couple of blocks, there were benches where people could rest and snack.

Foxglove Park was accessible to many kinds of beings not only physically, but temporally. Lulu, Oja, and I moved at a comfortable pace throughout our workday. I was reminded of a passage by poet and activist Lateef H. McLeod (2019): "Disability justice states that people, especially those with disabilities, need to live in societies where they have the freedom to pace themselves as their lives are conducted, and not feel pressured to perform at a capitalist level of production" (no pagination). At Foxglove Park, time was structured by the rhythms of the sun, moon, and seasons, not by capital. I sank into my senses: purple and yellow petals, whirring of dragonfly wings, birdsong and the clip-clop of Oja's footsteps, snippets of many languages, laughter, fragrances of magnolia and mulched cedar, and yes, occasional whiffs of manure. As Lulu, Oja, and I meandered the park's paths, we passed by medicinal herb gardens, flower beds, vegetable gardens, mushroom logs, greenhouses, ponds, orchards, chicken coops, beehives, interactive art installations, people playing musical instruments, a giant food forest, a small vineyard, and an old wooden barn.

Domesticated animals are workers at the NCF who contribute in many capacities. In the orchards, for example, pigs circulate through to munch fruit that has fallen and leave rich fertilizer behind (see Hilimire, 2011, for a review of integrated animal-crop agroecological systems). The same pigs are also care workers for park visitors (see Sargsyan & Beebe, 2023, for a narrative review of animal-assisted therapy in care farming). Human NCF workers are encouraged to complete apprenticeships with experienced ecotherapists in order to facilitate mutually beneficial relationships among care farm workers—human and nonhuman—and with members of the public. "Our neighbors know the care farm is a place they can go when they're feeling lonely, down, or anxious," said Lulu. "We just hang out with them sometimes. That's part of the work."

I noticed many ramps, lifts, raised beds, and adaptive farming equipment throughout the park (see Söderback *et al.*, 2004, for a discussion of horticultural therapy and adaptive tools). Lulu showed me how she transfers from Oja to her four-wheeler to feed and water the animals and mend fencing. "During my first few weeks, an NCF occupational therapist went around with me and made sure I could do everything I needed to." When I asked Lulu what accessibility meant to her, she paused for a long time before responding:

Just the fact that we all make this place together. Winged people, four-legged people, people with all kinds of histories and abilities ... I've read about your time, when people were kept in cages outside the city. Some were incarcerated or institutionalized, others were farmed. But now, we share the same space. That's what accessibility means to me.

Scholars of our time have mapped the spatial injustices Lulu described. Karen M. Morin (2016), for example, illuminates the links between human and nonhuman animal oppressions along what she calls the "trans-species carceral continuum" (p. 1333). Likewise, Bill McClanahan and Travis Linneman (2018) argue that Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations and prisons exemplify "dark geographies of rurality": spaces of extreme violence made invisible by capital and the state (p. 519). Lastly, Jamie Arathoon (2022) argues that ableism and speciesism are ideologically entangled and spatially co-produced through practices of exclusion: "Historically, disabled people have been treated as different from their able-bodied counterparts, excluded and marginalized from public spaces, and in the process sometimes 'animalized', treated as inferior or less-than-human due to their physical and cognitive differences" (p. 201).

6. Symbiotic politics

Frankie became involved with the NCF several years ago as part of a transformative justice process (see Janak, 2021, for a speculative vision of transformative justice post-prison abolition). One of their victims believed the experience would help them heal and cultivate compassion. "He was right," said Frankie. "I didn't want to do it at the time, but now I can't imagine doing anything else." Their main role is caring for the chickens: feeding, watering, taking attendance each day, maintaining the coops, and calling the veterinarian as needed. Frankie is also the designated collaborator for the flock:

When I joined, I became friends with their previous collaborator who's now retired. She asked me to take over for her. I did the apprenticeship, passed the classes, and now I know these chickens better than anyone. Their vote is delegated to me. I help them participate in political life.

Liquid democracy, advanced by many Pirate Parties around the world since the early 2000s (Blum & Zuber, 2016), is a hybrid direct-representative governance system. Frankie explains:

In our liquid democracy, we all have a vote—whether online or in-person—in all decisions affecting us. This goes for our workplaces and all scales of government. But since not all of us want to be voting all the time—and we aren't informed enough to vote wisely on many issues anyway—we can delegate votes to proxies in various domains. This can be anyone from our best friend to an expert we've never met. We can retract or re-allocate those votes at any time. As the

flock's collaborator, I'm in charge of delegating all its votes. Personally, I believe each chicken should have their own vote. They're individuals, after all. But then the bee people get all up in a swarm and, you know—it's complicated.

As Frankie suggests toward the end of this statement, the terms of political participation are in a state of perpetual negotiation. The collaborator relationship, which opens the door to multispecies democracy, hinges on the concept of interdependent agency (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011, 2014; Francis & Silvers, 2007; Taylor, 2014). Sunaura Taylor (2014) explains interdependence in this context:

A disability studies perspective of interdependence is about recognizing that we are all vulnerable beings, who during our lives go in and out of dependency, who will be giving and receiving care (and more often than not, doing both), and that contribution cannot be understood as a simple calculation of mutual advantage. When we view animals through this lens, we see that they contribute in countless calculable and incalculable ways, from fertilizing the soil to offering care and friendship (p. 152).

As agency refers to the development and exercise of the capacity to act or choose, interdependent agency is the recognition that this is always already a collective and multispecies endeavor. Indeed, the primordial act of eating other lifeforms sustains the body, the very foundation of agency. Furthermore, it is only through innumerable encounters with human and nonhuman others that agents develop and change over time. The collaborator relationship exemplified by Frankie and the flock is a formalization of interdependent agency in the political sphere. Frankie said more about how it works on the ground:

These chickens have a politics among themselves, a politics with me, and a politics through me with larger institutions. After working with them for so long, I can understand what they're asking of me and vice versa. We're able to help each other through life. It's not perfect, but it works. They've helped me grow a lot as a person and I've done my best to do right by them.

Frankie went on to express disapproval of other care farms' use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the collaborator relationship. In their view, systems that employ computer vision, digital bioacoustics, and machine learning to translate animal behavior into human language (Bakker, 2022) risk undermining direct connection. "If you had a collaborator," Frankie asked, "would you want them to know you personally, or rely on AI to decode your speech and body language?" When I suggested AI could be used to cross-check interspecies communication, they replied that other collaborators would be better sources of insight. "The temptation to rely on machine intelligence is too great," they said. "Before we know it, our innate capacities for communication will have atrophied."

7. Caring relations

Khalil was an herbalist and mushroom farmer at the care farm. He loved learning and had studied mycology, medicine, and philosophy for 45 years. In conversation, Khalil casually wove metaphors of interdependent agency, acutely aware of how his relationships sustained, changed, and empowered him. He explained to me what he viewed as the main difference between Western human-animal relations in our time and his:

Your connection with the more-than-human world was abstract. Ours is embodied. You found yourself related only through "last common ancestor"—an idea, a concept—whereas we find ourselves related through touch, sight, sound, smell, and trust.

Khalil gave me a sensory tour of the farm. "Our fingertips have the highest concentration of nerve endings in our body," he said. As we stopped at various places, he would direct me to "feel the smoothness of this seed," and "feel the coolness of that soil." With our hands in the damp, spongy soil, he said something as if in prayer: "Everything you touch, you change. Everything you change, changes you." I later learned this was a quote from Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (2000, p. 3). When an older cow named Bonolo approached us, Khalil moved out of the way and gestured for me to extend my hand. I did, and Bonolo leaned in to meet it. Khalil could often not hide the pity he felt for Western culture in our time. The way he saw it, because we lacked mutualistic relationships with many kinds of beings, they could not teach us how to live ethically with and among them.

From Khalil's perspective, ethical multispecies relationality—and by extension multispecies democracy—is anchored in care ethics. Building on a feminist ethic of care, Victoria Lawson (2007) describes care ethics as beginning "with a social ontology of connection: foregrounding social relationships of mutuality and trust (rather than dependence)" (p. 3). Khalil sometimes spoke about care as a social—even spiritual—substance that cultures need for longevity. "Every symbiotic relationship is a gate through which care perfuses into the body politic," he said. He was skeptical that decisions regarding interventions into more-than-human communities (e.g., mining, agriculture, logging, construction) could be ethically informed if guided solely by abstract principles and data. "You lose the heart of the matter," he said. "Care is cultivated, not calculated."

Khalil's multispecies care ethic resonates with key philosophies from the Global South that have inspired post-growth movements in the North (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019). The philosophy of *Ubuntu*, for example, which finds diverse expressions in communities across western, central, and southern Africa (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020), "is anchored on the ethical principle of promoting life through mutual caring and sharing between and among humans and nonhumans" (Mabele *et al.*, 2022, p. 92). Interdependence is a central concept, as Gessler Muxe Nkondo (2007) writes: "persons realise themselves in the process of acting with others, in social practice" (p. 96). Another example is found in South America, particularly in Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador. *Buen Vivir*, the precursors of which originated with Indigenous Andean communities, translates to "living well" (Gudynas, 2014, p. 201). While the meanings and practices associated with *Buen Vivir* vary by geography, they share an ecological and care-centric ethos. Eduardo Gudynas (2014) notes that the strands of Western thought most resonant with *Buen Vivir* are "environmentalism, which proposes the rights of Nature, and new feminism, which questions patriarchal centralities and claims an ethic of care" (p. 203).

Katarina Pettersson and Malin Tillmar (2022) draw on feminist geographic scholarship to argue that "care farmers cultivate feminist care ethics as an ontology of connections, by working from the heart" (p. 1446, emphasis in the original). Care farming facilitates what they call "people-place" and "people-people" connections (p. 1461). People-place connections are between care farming participants and farmers, on the one hand, and farmlands, nature, and animals on the other. People-people connections are among participants, farmers, and society. By the mid-22nd century, however, the distinction between people-place and people-people connections is largely dissolved, with humans, animals, and many places sharing the same ethical and ontological status.

Khalil believed that the NCF, as a large-scale public investment in democratically organized care, was an inversion of patriarchal capitalist care, which centers individual responsibility, the privatization of care work, and care provision along gendered lines (Lawson, 2007). "Care work is fairly distributed and publicly valued," he said. "The people of this city are never far from a reminder that care work is, without a doubt, the beating heart of society: the precondition of life's opportunities."

8. Conclusion

This article has argued, through three fictional vignettes, that expanding care farming and animal rights in tandem can potentially resolve challenges for both. The cultural and legal recognition of domesticated animals as members of society is a means for mitigating anthropocentric practices in care farming, while scaling up care farming is a way of including domesticated animal citizens in social and political life. Each vignette gestures at open questions, political knots, and adjacent possibilities for further discussion. The theme of Lulu and Oja's vignette is shared spaces. It explores how turning the dials on the food system's accessibility and

popular participation could alter relational and temporal textures of everyday life. It posits alternative social and spatial configurations that promote, rather than hinder, animal mobilities. That is, because urban and regional planning are governed by a multispecies citizenry, the ways human and nonhuman animals move or remain still in space—and the first-person experiences of such movement and stillness—inform spatial production (Hodgetts & Lorimer, 2020). Lastly, this vignette extends an invitation to imagine realms of conviviality beyond modern-day geographies of exclusion, control and confinement across species.

Frankie and the flock's vignette is a window into symbiotic politics. It offers a glimpse into how concepts like interdependent agency might be operationalized through democratic technologies to form expansive and engaged publics. While capital precludes participatory governance, post-growth societies proactively cultivate a plurality of political agencies. Multispecies liquid democracy is one possible instantiation of what Karen Bakker (2024) calls a "Parliament of Earthlings," a governance model made increasingly feasible by AI-mediated interspecies communication (p. 133). Lastly, their vignette points to how a care-centered food system supports a post-carceral society by providing therapeutic services from which people can benefit in transformative justice processes (caution on this theme noted: see Montford's (2020) analysis of penal agribusiness justified by rehabilitation rhetoric).

Khalil and Bonolo's vignette foregrounds caring relations as a substrate of post-growth food systems. Khalil argues that ethical governance at multiple scales is rooted in tangible, symbiotic relationships among embodied beings. He makes the case that greater care farming accessibility indicates and contributes to a growing feminist ethic of care in society. In a climate-changed world marked by uncertainty and upheaval, care work is urgently needed—not only for children and the elderly, for the displaced, traumatized, ill and injured, but for everyone. The living Earth needs care. The public infrastructure portrayed here (the NCF) is unimportant relative to its function: enlivening ecosystems and providing access to food production, green space, a democratic workplace, and community care. In the same vein, animal rights, the rights of nature, and rights-based frameworks in general represent only one path among many to multispecies justice and democracy. These ends, whatever the means to achieve them, are well within reach. If they seem unrealistic, it is only because capital has set the terms of the real (Fisher, 2022). The capitalist paradigm of plantations and patented genes, factory farms and ultra-processed food is dystopian as it is surreal. By continuing to imagine—and insist upon—healthy and humane food futures, post-growth activists, thinkers, and farmers can reclaim the real and sow the seeds of a caring world.

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