

VALUES, IDEOLOGIES, AND THE EMERGENT TRADITION OF URBAN  
CHICKEN-KEEPING IN EUGENE, OREGON

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Values, Ideologies, and the Emergent Tradition of Urban Chicken-Keeping in Eugene, Oregon

This thesis examines the expressive culture of urban chicken-keepers in Eugene, Oregon in an attempt to explain why this practice has become so popular in recent years as well as to understand what role it plays in their lives. Data for this project were gathered using ethnographic fieldwork methods such as participant observation in “real life” and in social media outlets, semi-structured interviews with participants encountered at The Eugene Backyard Farmer, and a 54-question anonymous online survey of people who frequented the shop’s social media outlets. Based on an analysis of those data, this thesis contends that this group of people is using urban chicken-keeping as a way to intentionally reframe the future in a more positive light and that this can be seen in the articulation of their values and ideologies and through the way that they are traditionalizing urban chicken-keeping.

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This thesis is dedicated to Bill Bezuk, The Eugene Backyard Farmer, and the entire  
Chicken-Keeping Community in Eugene, Oregon.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The smells of warm straw, dust, and hot asphalt fill my nostrils as I stand in the carport-turned-straw-loft of The Eugene Backyard Farmer (EBYF), a small, locally-owned urban farming supply business in Eugene, Oregon. Behind me and scattered throughout the rest of the carport and out under the large tent we rented for this event stand groups of people ranging from pairs to trios to entire families all talking quietly together. Barely-suppressed excitement is audible in their voices. One member of each group is wearing a costume of some sort, be it a cowgirl outfit on an 8-year-old, a wizard cape and hat on a teenager, or a fabric apron featuring big, red hens on a black background worn by an adult. Each group also has some sort of container or box with them that they are constantly checking and adjusting. I get a glimpse of a tiny cowboy hat being lowered into one of the boxes as I turn back toward the stage where a local fiddle band is playing a high-energy tune to the delight of the audience sitting in front of them on rows of straw bales. There are probably 75 to 100 people out there, not including the folks behind me, which is more than I had thought would come to this event. Checking my phone, I realize that it is ten minutes until show time and catch my mother's eye. She is the official chicken fashion show coordinator and has been lining people up in numerical order according to the tags we gave the participants as they arrived. Behind the band and off to the side of the stage, my father, dressed in his white performing shirt, red paisley vest and beribboned, black top hat, sits in a chair reading through the note cards I had given him fifteen minutes ago. I can see his lips moving as he rehearses the names and short descriptions that go along with each entry into the fashion show. As the MC, it

is his job to do the announcing and he works hard to get everything correct. I catch his attention with a wave of my hand and I show him my hands with five fingers extended on one and two on the other: seven minutes to go. He nods, gives me a wide, eye-sparkling smile and returns to his cards. From my post behind and to the left of the stage, I can see Bill Bezuk, the owner of The EBYF and my boss, standing at his “Name That Egg” stand and listening to a group of kids earnestly discussing the origins of the cracked eggs in the dishes on the table in front of them. The point of the exercise is to correctly identify which egg came from the grocery store, which egg is organic, and which egg comes from a backyard hen just by looking at them. People are drifting closer to the straw bales now and all of the judges are sitting at their table underneath a small tent. The mayor of Eugene agreed to be one of the judges for the fashion show along with a local author and a famous local hair artiste. The band finishes its song on a triumphant note and everyone (including myself) applauds. It was a good song. My father gets up, microphone in hand, and thanks the band, asking everyone for “another round of applause.” My mother is herding all of the contestants into a line as finishing touches are being put onto the costumes, faces and hairstyles. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” my father’s voice booms out over the cheerful hubbub, “The Fashion Show will be starting in three minutes, so make your way over to the stage! There are still a few places left on the straw bales; if you’re lucky someone will let you hang a cheek on one!” I roll my eyes at the mental image his words created and return my attention to making sure that everyone in the line has everything they need. I can hear the excitement growing in the crowd in front of the stage as more and more people join the throng.

At last, my mother gives me the thumbs up, which I, in turn give to my Dad. With a nod, he steps to center stage and once again projects his booming voice to every corner of the property (and probably across the street, too): “Ladies and Gentlemen! I would like to welcome you to the first annual Chicken Fashion Show! There are five categories in which the contestants will compete this afternoon and they are...” I turn my attention to the 8-year-old cowgirl I noticed earlier. I bring her to the step at the back of the stage and kneel down so I can look her in the eyes. She looks nervous, but excited and cradles her russet-colored chicken carefully, but tightly, under her arm. The chicken has a pink kerchief tied around its neck, and the tiny cowboy I had observed earlier is perched (with the help of strategic elastic) on top of its feathered head. “It’s super easy,” I tell her making eye contact with her mother as well, “Just walk straight down the middle of the stage to the end. Pause and pose several times; make sure that everyone gets to see you and your chicken, so pose on all three sides of the stage. Keep posing until you hear Mark finish your description and then head right back here. Make sense?” She and her mother nod emphatically and I thank her. I hear my father say “First up today we have...” and I usher the little girl onto the stage and tell her to go as he reads off the rest of her information. She walks straight down the stage as instructed, nervousness quickening her steps. The crowd goes wild, clapping and cheering and making sounds of appreciation. Cameras flash everywhere, and everyone is smiling and laughing. At that point I remember being hit with a sense of un-reality. Who would have guessed that 150 people would have shown up on a hot day in late June of 2012 to the first ever Eugene BAWK Celebration, a mini-festival created to celebrate urban chickens and their keepers? That

was the moment when I realized that urban chicken-keeping was quickly becoming more than just a passing fad.

To briefly situate myself in this context, I am a 29 year old, upper-middle class, white, college-educated female graduate student at The University of Oregon. When I was hired to work at the EBYF in spring of 2011, I had already fallen in love with chickens despite having kept them for only a year or so. Working at the shop deepened my attachment to these livestock birds and showed me that I was not alone in my experiences. I have kept chickens continuously since then and currently have six hens scratching around in my backyard. Though I am no longer working at the EBYF, I buy my chicken feed there and have regular contact with the community through visits to the shop and social media. My family background is solidly middle or working class with Pennsylvania-Dutch business people on one side of my family and Texas-Oklahoma workers and soldiers on the other. It has been at least two generations since anyone in my family has farmed at all, so I do not have a direct connection to the land. I have, however, always felt a strong desire to work with or be close to the land and have gravitated to stories and images of farmland, animals, and gardens. Needless to say, working at The EBYF was a dream-come-true for me.

One day in September of 2013, as an employee of The EBYF, a local urban farming supply store, I experienced a similar realization when I sold a bag of locally milled chicken food to a tall, clean-cut man dressed in a very nice, dark suit who, as I saw from the nametag still attached to his suit-jacket, worked at an insurance agency in town. To my surprise, he declined my offer to carry the bag for him and instead hefted the dusty, 50 lb bag onto his shoulders and left the shop. Through the window, I saw him

walk out to the parking lot and plop it, with a puff of dust, into the immaculately clean (as far as I could see) trunk of his equally nice, equally dark car, which he subsequently drove off. All I could think about at the time was that he now had dust all over his suit and the trunk of his car. This incident crystalized my interest in this group of people. I wanted to know what it was about chicken-keeping that would make it attractive to a suit-wearing man in the insurance industry as well as to the soccer moms, suspender-clad hipsters, stereotypical hippie-types, students, the doctors, the nurses, the teachers, and retirees with whom I also interacted in the shop. I wanted to know what made this practice so popular and what it meant to its practitioners. I wanted to know what drove them to participate in chicken-themed events like the annual self-guided coop tour and BAWK Celebration. I wanted to understand what inspired them to push for a change in the urban livestock zoning laws to allow more chickens within the city limits. In short, I was interested in the way that chicken-keeping seemed to unite these people and had become a locus of culture and a focus of part of their identities.

My own personal experience with urban chicken-keeping and my day-job at The EBYF led me to this area of inquiry, especially since I noticed that the shop functioned as a community hub for this group of people. It specializes in supplying chickens, ducks, and bees, as well as all of their accoutrements, and research materials to people in Eugene and nearby areas who want to get into urban farming. Before working there, I had thought that my love and attachment to chickens (which I had been keeping in the city) was an isolated event, but I soon learned otherwise. As I helped to educate and provide the shop's customers with chickens I realized that this was far more than just a fad, it was a genuine, bona fide movement. I talked to a variety of different customers from soccer

moms, to hippies, to hipsters, to preppers, to lawyers and teachers and they all wanted to or were keeping chickens in their backyards. It struck me as curious that so many different types of people were drawn to the same activity and, moreover that they all seemed to be expressing the same set of feelings and responses to it. Through conversations had in the shop and observations while I was working, I learned that as many people were choosing to keep chickens in an effort to avoid supporting industrial agriculture or to provide a healthy alternative to supermarket food as were “doing it for fun.” Therefore, the overarching question of “How are the values of urban chicken-keepers expressed in the emergent tradition of urban chicken-keeping in Eugene?” became the focus of my research. This question divided itself into three lines of inquiry: “What values are expressed by urban chicken-keepers?”, “How is urban chicken-keeping an emergent tradition?”, and “How are the values of urban chicken-keepers expressed in the material culture of urban chicken-keepers?”

Following these lines of inquiry, this thesis examines the expressive culture of urban chicken-keepers in Eugene, Oregon in an attempt to explain why this practice has become so popular in recent years as well as to understand what role it plays in their lives. I contend that this group of people is using urban chicken-keeping as a way to intentionally reframe the future in a more positive light and that this can be seen in the articulation of their values and ideologies and through the way that they are traditionalizing urban chicken-keeping. Three main values expressed by this group of people emerged from the research and fieldwork: self-sufficiency, optimism, and connection. These three concepts recurred frequently in interviews, interactions in the shop, on The EBYF’s Facebook page, and in the responses to the online survey I

conducted. They are also all a part of the same impulse to make the best of an uncertain situation and create more certainty in the future.

The method through which urban chicken-keepers are working to create this future is the process of traditionalization articulated by Dell Hymes and elaborated by Lisa Gilman and other scholars. If, as Glassie states, “tradition is the creation of the future out of the past,” (1995: 395), then by taking steps to make something traditional a group of people is effectively making an effort to intentionally shape and create their futures to suit their needs. Therefore, by seeking to traditionalize urban chicken-keeping they are also trying to ensure the future existence of the positive and empowering effects it generates. By making urban chicken-keeping traditional, they are trying to create a future that also contains those same positive and empowering effects. This thesis argues that the expressive culture of urban chicken-keepers is important to study because it shows how chicken-keepers are traditionalizing the emergent practice of urban chicken-keeping in an effort to actively construct a better and happier future.

To put urban chicken-keeping in a national context, urban chickens are being kept all across the country from rooftops in New York City, abandoned lots in Detroit, and in backyards everywhere. In their article on “new chicken-keepers in US cities”, Jennifer Blecha and Helga Leitner trace the “upsurge in backyard chicken-keeping” to “the early 2000s” (2013: 89). According to their research, the first website specifically for urban chicken-keepers was started in 1999, the same year that the first coop tour took place in Seattle, WA and was followed by the first chicken-keeping class in 2002 held in the same city by Seattle Tilth. In 2009 *Urban Farm Magazine* published its first issue and in the following year *Chickens Magazine* was published by the same company with a

host of blogs starting around the same time (Blecha and Leitner 2013: 89- 90). This correlates with the start of the recession in 2008 and the dramatic rise of the DIY movement (Matchar 2013: 20) and with Dona Brown’s account of the latest wave of popularity of the back to the land movement in the same year (2011: 16-17). In Oregon, chicken-activists were agitating for changes in city ordinances at around the same time. In 2009 in Salem, OR, members of the “Chickens in the Yard (CITY)” group gathered “500 petition signatures”<sup>1</sup> in the hopes that the city council would change their regulations for urban livestock which they achieved in the following year. Though Eugene’s city ordinance concerning urban livestock was not changed until 2013 (to allow 6 chickens rather than the previous limit of 2), the practice had been growing in popularity and practice since before The EBYF was opened in 2010, placing Eugene’s chicken-mania squarely in the same timeframe as the rest of the country. Within Eugene, urban chicken-keeping is a city-wide practice so there is more than one feed store that caters to this group of people. These shops range in scope and focus from more traditional feed stores to large chain franchises that sell clothing and shoes along with fencing, feed, and medicines, but The EBYF is the only one that caters specifically to the urban farming population. It is doing a lot to promote cultural activity around the practice in an effort to cultivate a loyal customer base as well as to promote the values for which it stands. For this reason, as well as needing to narrow the scope of this project and my own strong ties to this group of people, the research for this thesis focuses on the part of the urban chicken-keeping population that patronizes The EBYF.

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<sup>1</sup> "Backyard Chickens: Good or Bad Idea?" KVAL 13. March 3, 2009. Accessed July 15, 2015. <http://www.kval.com/news/local/40648802.html>.

## *Methodology*

In order to understand the way that the values and ideologies of urban chicken-keepers are expressed in the emergent tradition of urban chicken-keeping in Eugene, the data for was gathered using several ethnographic fieldwork methods. These include: participant observation in “real life” and in social media outlets, semi-structured interviews with participants encountered at The EBYF, and an online survey of people who frequented The EBYF’s social media outlets. The interviews were held at coffee shops around Eugene and involved open-ended questions about my participants’ feelings about chicken-keeping, their routines, their goals, and their triumphs and challenges.

The participant observation took place at the shop during my employment and included informal conversations with customers over the course of normal business interactions. Other participant/event observations focused on EBYF –organized events: The BAWK Celebration (an annual, backyard-chicken-themed mini-festival), Visit CoopTown USA (a self-guided tour of Eugene-area backyard chicken coops and set-ups), and a “Chickens 101” the owner of The EBYF, Bill Bezuk, teaches during the spring and summer. I observed the interactions of chicken-keepers at these events, and supplemented those observations with photographs and conversations with the participants.

The EBYF’s social media sites proved to be a valuable resource for understanding more about the community. From several interviews and many conversations in the shop, it became apparent that some members of the community interact with each other more often on the internet than they do at the shop or elsewhere. Because of this, it made sense to analyze the comments and posts on the shop’s Facebook page as well as the postings on its Twitter and Instagram accounts. Comments associated

with the shop's posts, especially those that involved customers or followers talking directly with each other were especially valuable because they showed more about the values and anxieties of the community.

The last fieldwork method used for this project was an anonymous, 54-question, online survey directed at customers of EBYF and those who participate in its online culture via social media outlets. To keep the research focused, only data from people who live in the Eugene-Springfield area was analyzed to make it more manageable and to make sure that the information matched the customer base of The EBYF. Of the 145 surveys that were started, 86 of them were completed, which creates a 59% response rate<sup>2</sup>. Respondents were 79% female, 20% male, and 1% other, predominately white/Caucasian, and were between the ages of 20 and 70. Both quantitative and qualitative questions were asked about the participants's goals, feelings, experiences, and anxieties about urban chicken-keeping. There were also questions about their occupations, where they purchased their feed and chicks, where they live, what animals (if any) other than chickens do they have in their backyards, what type of feed they prefer, and many others. The questions were a mix of short-answer and multiple choice answers along with opportunities to upload photos of their flock and coop along with an explanation. For the most part, this survey was promoted via the shop's Facebook page, but personal invitations were also sent to the same list of people who had agreed to allow me to contact them over the course of my research.

As an employee of The EBYF I acknowledge that I have a certain amount of perceived authority in the community. I am/was one of the people to whom customers

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<sup>2</sup> "Urban Chicken-Keeping Survey 1." Qualtrics.com. Accessed August 28, 2015.  
[https://oregon.qualtrics.com/ControlPanel/?ClientAction=ChangePage&s=ResultsSection&ss=&sss=.](https://oregon.qualtrics.com/ControlPanel/?ClientAction=ChangePage&s=ResultsSection&ss=&sss=)

would bring questions and from whom they would seek some approval. I often noticed people hedging their words when describing their chicken set-ups and their problems when asking me questions in the shop, the kind of thing one does when one needs help, but one does not want to be negatively judged. I am also aware of the possibility of valorizing this community and its activities, especially since I am a chicken-lover myself. In an effort to address this, I included questions about what respondents did not like about keeping chickens and raising peeps, as well as questions about predator attacks, deaths, and illnesses in their flocks. I also paid attention to what detractors had to say about the practice in the many news stories I read as well as listening carefully to any anti-chicken stories that came my way. In this way I strove to maintain as much of a balanced perspective as possible.

### ***Review of the Literature and Outline***

Chapter II is a descriptive chapter that focuses on urban chicken-keepers in Eugene and provides a theoretical basis for my assertion that they can be understood to be a community. It also describes and explores the values and ideologies expressed by urban chicken-keepers. Along with evidence from fieldwork and the survey, I use articulations of community by Noyes in her essay “Group” from *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture* (2003: 6-40) as well as that in the article “Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory” by McMillan and Chavis (1986) to examine how Eugene’s urban chicken-keeping community is being constituted. Noyes juxtaposes the ideas of network and community to explain her notion of a *group*, which is that “the community exists as the project of a network or of some of its members,” (2003: 33). Noyes’s assertion that community can exist in the social imaginary also comes into play

in the discussion of the constitution of this community because it is still in the process of accreting and so exists mostly in the imaginations of the urban chicken-keepers.

McMillan and Chavis's four elements of community are membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and connection (1986: 4). By looking at community through this lens I will be able to discuss what the people I worked with seem to want out of a community and also what they are willing to put into it. Goals and needs fluctuate constantly with the pattern of each person's life and so any examination of this community would be incomplete without the framework of emergence from Bauman's *Verbal Art as Performance*. He describes emergence, in the context of performance, as residing "in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants, within the context of particular situations," (1975: 14). In other words, the performance changes in response to the specific combination of factors involved in each particular situation and group of people. This includes the performance of identity and of membership of a group, which is the type of performance discussed in this thesis. This concept is especially useful to employ in the context of community and tradition because neither is a static, bounded concept and are constantly changing in response to ever-fluctuating requirements of the present moment. By endeavoring to trace the prevalent needs and interests of this community through an examination of their actions and routines, one can understand the way they constitute their community and understand what they might want in a tradition. Furthermore, the things that people do to keep chickens and the knowledge they have (and are gaining) can be considered as emergent. Chicken-keepers are constantly adjusting their methods to be more efficient and effective with their flock, which also means that they are continuously gaining more

knowledge based on their experiences. This is classic emergence. Putting these theories in conversation with each other as well as with my research will allow me to provide evidence that urban chicken-keepers in Eugene are actively creating their sense of community and can have traditions of their own.

This chapter also explores the way that material culture of urban chicken-keepers is another way of constituting culture within this community. Things like chicken coops, waterers and feeders, nest boxes and decorations that are made in the process of keeping chickens are an important way in which people participate in this community and yield insights into the values and attitudes of the people making or using them. In Glassie's *Material Culture* (1999), he states that objects must be considered as "sets of parts and parts of sets," (1999: 47) and are best understood in three particular contexts: creation, communication, and consumption. The first category, for my project, relates to things that people make and build for themselves: chicken coops, nest boxes, chicken toys, sheds, and garden beds among other things. The second category deals with how objects get to the consumer, is another way this thesis will explore the role of The EBYF in this community. All these things are part of how people decide what to add to their lives. Since The EBYF is a business and a hub for urban chicken-keepers its rhetoric and advertising does much to shape their material culture. As Glassie points out, material culture sets "the mind in the body, the body in the world," (1999: 41) and thus is "the conventional name for the tangible yield of human conduct," (Ibid.). Material culture offers the opportunity to see how urban chicken-keepers assign meaning and values to this practice, which in turn will show its importance in their lives and identities.

Chapter III is more theoretical in nature and argues that contemporary chicken keepers in Eugene are in the process of building and contributing to traditions around urban chicken-keeping and so can be understood within the framework of tradition and traditionalization. “Traditionalization” was first articulated by Dell Hymes as the process through which something becomes traditional. He stated that it “begins in the personal,” and is rooted “social life,” (1975: 353), meaning that traditions emerge out of individual actions and social interactions. Gilman combines Hymes’s theories with those of other folklore scholars (see Williams 1977, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Handler and Linnekin 1984, and Glassie 1995) in her analysis of women’s political dancing in Malawi. In her article, she identifies the three main processes of traditionalization: “drawing from local cultural practice, imbuing it within rhetoric about its traditionality, and ensuring its repetition through time and space,” (2004: 56). She also points out that “in order for people ... to choose to continue (tradition as process) or accept a practice as part of their tradition (something static they feel compelled to continue), it has to play some role in their individual or collective lives, be it in personal, social, economic, or political ways,” (2004: 52-53, 2009). Following her framework, this chapter will trace the ways in which this is happening with urban chicken-keepers in Eugene, highlighting the similarities as well as the differences.

One of the reasons that chicken-keeping is attractive to so many people in Eugene (and in the rest of the country,) is that it is linked in the popular American imagination with an idealized, imaginary golden past that simultaneously evokes the agrarian ideal farmer and the rugged, self-sufficient pioneer that we know from popular culture and history books. These concepts are always, as Noyes points out, “transmissible

and open to recontextualization,” (2003) which means that they can be adapted to suit different situations. Therefore, though “farming” is mainly thought of as a rural activity, it is still possible to recontextualize it within an urban environment and still retain its heavy symbolic value and associations. Because of this link, chicken-keeping is already seen as a traditional activity and consequently already a part of the culture. If we accept Glassie’s contention that tradition “is to be understood as a process of cultural construction,” (1995: 398) and “culture’s dynamic,” (1995: 399), then it makes sense that chicken-keeping is not just one thing that this group has in common, but continuing the practice is also the way that their culture is being constituted. In her analysis, the process of traditionalization moves from the top-down wherein the political elites in Malawi reinforce hegemonic rule and authority through the promotion of women’s political dancing. In my analysis, the direction of movement goes in the opposite direction: from the ground up. This means that it is the chicken-keepers and The EBYF together that are doing the traditionalization rather than a hegemonic authority. Looked at another way, urban chicken-keepers in Eugene come pre-loaded with rhetoric about the practice’s traditionality, which is one of Gilman’s elements. The key here is the high value that urban chicken-keepers place on the practice and the way that it functions as a marker of identity. For them it is a way of feeling environmentally virtuous, a time-honored way to teach their children about respect and nature, a way to show love and care for themselves and their loved ones through providing healthy food, and as a way to connect them to the larger natural cycle. They keep chickens as a way of communicating all of these things to themselves and to other people. These things work in partnership with the way the EBYF

serves as a producer and arbiter of tradition through its role as teacher and authority in this group of people.

Hobsbawm and Ranger's work on invented traditions in their 1983 book, *The Invention of Tradition*, will help to further explain both the impulse and the method of creating the tradition in question. As they state at the beginning of the book, these traditions are "responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition," (1983: 1-2) and are often "essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition," (1983: 4). Chicken-keeping is becoming ever more popular and so by traditionalizing it, people in Eugene are merely formalizing something that already exists. Emily Matchar's 2013 book, *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity*, adds some context to the idea that urban chicken-keeping is a response to a novel situation by describing the origins of the recent DIY/Handmade trend and/or culture. For her, it stems from "a genuine feeling of disgust with the status quo, a sense that the American dream has turned out to be a big, fat, toxin-laden, environment-destroying nightmare," (2013: 11) as well as a deep distrust of the government, corporations, and institutions in general. In other words, the return to activities, technology, and skills of the past like knitting, canning, fermenting, urban farming, and urban chicken-keeping comes from a set of anxieties about the world, the self, and the future. The anxieties are the novel situation and urban chicken-keeping is the response making reference to old situations because people often think of it as something we did in the past.

Chapter IV, the final chapter of my thesis examines what I think urban chicken-keepers are trying to do for themselves through traditionalizing urban chicken-keeping. I argue that chicken-keepers are using the practice to reframe their futures in a more positive light. When taken in conjunction with Hobsbawm and Ranger's ideas on the selectivity and intentionality of invented traditions, it becomes possible to see traditions as something intentionally and selectively created by people for specific reasons, usually because the practice in question is something meaningful to those creating it (Gilman: 2004, 2009). In this context, the meaning attached to urban chicken-keeping is a sense of agency, confidence, and contentment gained through the skill-learning involved in the practice. I argue that this learning and becoming proficient at a new set of skills and the resulting positive feelings leads to seeing the future in a more positive light. In short, by taking up urban chicken-keeping, these people make themselves feel more prepared to deal with whatever the future holds and are thus allaying various anxieties about the future.

## CHAPTER II

### WHO ARE THE URBAN CHICKEN-KEEPERS AND HOW DO THEY ARTICULATE COMMUNITY?

Until recently, it was illegal to have more than two hens within the city limits of Eugene. But after two years of conversation and negotiation between the city council and citizen of Eugene (chicken-keepers and otherwise), the city urban livestock ordinance was changed to include 6 adult hens and six chicks in 2013. The ordinance also made room for other urban livestock, including pigs, goats, rabbits, and bees,<sup>3</sup> as long as only two categories are kept at one time. For instance, one can have chickens and bees, or chickens and pigs, but not chickens, bees, and pigs. That this ordinance was changed as a result of public pressure indicates that these practices have become important to the citizens of Eugene, and it also lays the groundwork for the possibility of an urban chicken-keeping community in Eugene.

The EBYF is the main hub for the group of people in in this thesis and it is the place where chicken-keepers have the most interactions with each other both online and in the physical world. The shop is predicated on the idea of *urban* farming, rather than traditional farming: it focuses on shrinking the scale of most farming practices and skills and even the yields so that they can fit in the average urban or suburban backyard. Though chickens make up the largest part of the shop's inventory and sales, Bill Bezuk, the owner, is dedicated to a very practical and holistic view of farming that includes

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<sup>3</sup> City Council of Eugene, *An Ordinance Concerning Urban Animal Keeping Standards; And Amending Section 9.2010, 9.2682, 9.2740, 9.3115, 9.3210, 9.3310, 9.3810, 9.3910, And 9.5250 of the Eugene Code, 1971, And Section 4.996 of That Code*, Eugene, OR: The City of Eugene, 2013, <http://www.eugene-or.gov/documentcenter/view/10753> (accessed May 22, 2014).

growing food as well as keeping animals. To this end, he has made the shop as much of a one-stop destination as possible. There are several different brands of chicken food as well as options for birds of every age, since babies have different nutritional needs than adults. Grit and calcium, the former for food digestion and the latter for strong egg shells, are provided along with a selection of different kinds of chicken treats called scratch. Medications and vitamin supplements, as well as bedding and anti-predator devices are also on the shelves, along with things like pre-made nest boxes, toys for the chickens, pre-built coops, and a wide selection of resource books. There is even a gift-section that includes tea towels with chickens on them, jewelry, mugs, aprons, tote bags made from feed sacks, and more. Not only does the shop contain everything a chicken-keeper needs to take care of their flock, it also has gifts and decorations that also enable them to publicly identify themselves as members of the community. Furthermore, though chickens and chicken-related items form the bulk of the inventory and sales, the shop also provides gardening materials, bee-keeping materials, and gifts.

The wide selection means that most chicken-keepers do not need to go to more than one shop when they need chicken supplies. The frequency with which they come to the shop varies widely. Some of them come in every week, some every other week, and some as little as once a month if they shop there exclusively. It depends on the size of the flock as well as on which type of food is being used. The EBYF has a bulk food option that allows people with smaller flocks to purchase only what they need instead of buying the large, 50lb sacks. Chickens only eat about a pound of food per week on average (from peep to hen), which makes it possible to calculate out how much one will need. For instance, my flock of five hens eats 5 lbs. of chicken food per week and so, in one month

they will consume 20 lbs. The shop stocks feed sacks that are between 40 and 50lbs, so it makes the most sense for me to buy the bigger one, so that I have food on hand for two months. If I had only three chickens, however, buying the large sack would be uneconomical because by the time I got to the bottom of it (in about 4.5 months) the food would be stale and without nutritional value. Therefore, how often a customer comes in depends greatly on the size of their flock and how they prefer to store their food.

However, some customers come in regularly just to hang out in the shop and visit with the animals. Chick season (late February to mid-September) also sees an increase in the number of people stopping by. The EBYF is also the location and sponsor of a few chicken-themed events where chicken-keepers can interact with each other. The two largest that are discussed in this thesis are The Visit CoopTown USA! Coop Tour and The BAWK Celebration.

The Visit CoopTown USA! Coop Tour is a self-guided tour of Eugene and Springfield chicken coops and allows participants to go into other chicken-keepers' yards and examine first-hand how they have integrated chickens into their lives. All of the details are contained in a booklet that is purchased and serves as the "ticket" to the event. Inside is a map with the various destinations, maps, and descriptions of each stop. Many participants go in groups because of the driving required to reach the more distant coops and because it is fun to go together. The owner of each stop is on hand to greet and chat with visitors and to answer any questions they might have. The event lasts 5 to 6 hours, starting in late morning and finishing up in the late afternoon, giving participants plenty of time to see all of the stops and to connect with as many people as possible. The Coop Tour, more than any other event, is responsible for the transmission of many tips,

tricks, and techniques in Eugene's chicken-keeping world. The other event, the BAWK Celebration, happens in the summer and takes place at The EBYF. Lasting from 2 to 6pm, there is live music by a local band as attendees wander the grounds playing Chicken Bingo by identifying chicken breeds and marking them on pre-made cards or trying to identify a home-raised or factory raised egg based on their cracked appearance. Local food trucks and ice cream trucks provide sustenance for all of the happy activity, especially for those participating in the crowing and chicken poetry contests and those contestants in the Chicken Fashion Show. The latter is judged by three local celebrities and is the main event of the celebration. This event is the one that creates the most sense of "communitas" (Turner 1969, 1978, 1982) among chicken-keepers as well as a great deal of good will, since it is such a fun and happy event.

Another set of loci for interaction is the EBYF's social media outlets like Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter. Since Bezuk has chosen not to pay for advertising, word of mouth and the shop's social media outlets fulfill this function. The Facebook page is where most of the activity takes place. It provides a virtual space where customers can communicate with each other and with the shop as well as well as being the primary location for disseminating news, promotions, information about which chick breeds are in stock, and events. Aside from being a message board, the site also functions as a way for members to the community to stay current on local developments in and around the topic of urban livestock and urban farming through the articles and websites that Bezuk posts. While the Facebook page takes care of the more formal aspects of the business and advertising, the Instagram account provides a more personal perspective on both the business and on what it is like to be an urban farmer in Eugene. The photos

Bezuk uploads to The EBYF's account feature images of his own gardening, cooking, and preserving exploits along with images from the shop and even some urban farming related things discovered on his travels. The realities of urban chicken-keeping are depicted here as well, like the feather-strewn yard that accompanies a molting chicken or the mice that try to live in the straw and eat the chicken feed. In this way, Bezuk presents himself as a living example of what the store is trying to encourage. He also includes himself within the community that his shop is helping to create. It is also another format through which customers and admirers can communicate with Bezuk, since he always responds to any questions asked in the comments on his photos. The Pinterest and Twitter accounts function mostly to funnel activity and attention back to the Facebook page, since that is where most of the direct communication happens. For instance, the twitter account is almost always a link to the Instagram profile or to something on Facebook. Most of the activity on the Facebook page consists of people asking for advice, either publicly on the page itself or via a private message. The rest of the activity is mostly commentary on various posts by Bezuk or others. The cumulative effect of all of these elements of The EBYF and its clientele contribute to community-building.

Dorothy Noyes's statement from her essay on the concept of "Group" that "At bottom, folklorists have been interested in the group as the locus of culture and as the focus of identity," (2003: 10) is the notion at the heart of both Ben Amos's definition of folklore as "artistic communications in small groups," (1972) as well as Alan Dundes contention that the folk is "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor...and have some traditions of their own," (1965). Exploring those concepts is the main concern of this chapter with the goal of understanding how and why

people categorize themselves the way that they do, (or how categories are imposed from outside) as well as how and why they create culture based in and around those categorizations and how these cultural practices contribute to meaning making and social action. From my vantage point as an employee of The EBYF I was able to interact with the different types of people who were all connected by the same practice and I naturally began to wonder what drew them to it and how it affected their identities. Thus, the first question to tackle is who chicken keepers in Eugene are and to find out whether or not they have formed a community.

### ***The Urban Chicken-Keepers***

Though The EBYF opened in 2010, Oregon hatcheries had noticed an increase in interest in urban chickens starting in 2007. According to an April 2010 article in The Register Guard, “the demand for chicks in urban areas has increased as much as 20 percent a year,” since 2007<sup>4</sup>. Urban chicken-keeping in Eugene and across the country has only grown in popularity since then, as the success of The EBYF and the increased presence of the Urban Farming Movement in mass media can attest. In 2009, The New Yorker featured an article titled “The It Bird: The Return of the Back-Yard Chicken<sup>5</sup>,” and the number of books written on the topic began to increase as well. According to Dietz, the author of the Register Guard article “Chicken Revival,” even Martha Stewart got in on the action on her television show with “an entire segment on raising chickens<sup>6</sup>.”

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<sup>4</sup> Dietz, Diane. "The Register-Guard." Chicken Revival. April 18, 2010. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://projects.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/business/24679518-41/chicken-chickens-urban-bezuk-eugene.csp>.

<sup>5</sup> Orleans, Susan. "The It Bird - The New Yorker." The New Yorker. September 28, 2009. Accessed July 20, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/09/28/the-it-bird>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

After I joined The EBYF team in 2011, I witnessed a marked increase in first-time chicken-keepers coming to the shop.

According to my online survey, demographically the urban chicken-keepers who patronize The EBYF are predominately Caucasian and middle-to-upper-middle class people, a conclusion echoed by the findings of a national study conducted in 2014 by researchers at The University of California, Davis and published by the “Poultry Science” journal. That study included urban, suburban, and rural chicken-keepers, found that “91.1% of respondents self-identified as European (Caucasian), followed by “other” (3.6%) and Hispanic/Latino (3.5%),” with “Only 0.7%” identifying themselves as African-American, (Elkhoraihi, Blatchford, Pitesky, and Mench). The study also found that most chicken-keepers were “high earners” who worked “mostly in the professional sector,” (Ibid., 2014: 3) Though I did not collect specific information about average income of my Eugene respondents, the vast majority (63%) of respondents to the online survey spent between \$100 and \$600 on the initial set up for their backyard flocks, which included such things as building the coop, buying equipment like feeders and waterers, necessities like bedding and food, as well as on the chicks themselves. This expenditure seems to indicate that this group generally has a significant amount of disposable income available to them. It also indicates that members of this community (or someone in their household) have the leisure time to devote to raising urban chickens. Most people at or below the poverty level would not have the extra money or the extra time to spend on urban chickens and so it makes sense that the people who can are those who of a higher socioeconomic status.

A key element in the claim about disposable income is that though many people go in to chicken-keeping with the goal of creating a source for healthier and cheaper eggs, they are not necessarily less expensive than those available in grocery stores. This determination depends on whether or not the costs of the initial set up are included in the estimate. In a blog entry on this subject, Bill Bezuk writes that “From July 2012 through June 2[0]13 we collected 119 dozen eggs. The flock at the store varied from six to 11 and during part of that time frame, not all chickens were to laying age. The flock ate \$315 in feed, \$43 in scratch, \$15 in calcium, and used \$24 in bedding. This means that a dozen high quality eggs cost \$3.34.”<sup>7</sup> This is comparable, if not less than, prices found in local grocery stores like Safeway or Walmart for regular, non-organic eggs. According to Bezuk, “it is clear that keeping backyard chickens can be affordable,” but he admits that ““We have not done the math to factor in coop, feeder and start-up costs<sup>8</sup>.” Though there is nothing wrong with these calculations, most of the people I talked with at the shop *do* include those start-up costs, which, as indicated earlier, usually fall between \$100 and \$600. This adds an average of \$350 extra dollars to Bezuk’s calculations, bringing the total to \$747 and the price for 1 dozen eggs to \$6.28, which is roughly the same price of high quality, organic eggs found in high-end grocery stores in Eugene like Market of Choice, Sundance, and Capella’s and even at less high-end ones like Safeway. Of course, this assumes that the chicken-keepers are using the same feed, scratch, calcium, and bedding as Bezuk, which is not necessarily the case. Feed at The EBYF can cost between \$15 and \$40 for a 50lb bag, and though the rest of the elements mentioned in the post do

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<sup>7</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "The Eugene Backyard Farmer." » Blog Archive » The Cost of Backyard Eggs. August 2, 2013. Accessed October 7, 2015. <http://eugenebackyardfarmer.com/the-cost-of-backyard-eggs/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

not have as wide a variation as the feed, it still adds up to an even more expensive dozen eggs. Because of this, most chicken-keepers realize relatively quickly that their eggs do *not* usually pay for themselves right away. Though 7% of survey respondents spent less than \$100 to set up their coops, based on my observations I do not think they were representative of the general population.

To return to the question of socioeconomic class, 50% of respondents reported an occupation that most likely places them as being working class or above like Registered Nurse, Executive Assistant, or Realtor. I have included stay-at-home moms and homemakers in this category because that status usually implies that someone in their household makes enough money to accommodate that life choice. It also has the time necessary for chicken-keeping built into it. This is class characteristic of the current urban farming and DIY movement in general: Emily Matchar writes that these movements are “the re-embrace of house and hearth by those who have the means to reject” modern conveniences and the modern food system, (2013: 12). However, relatively wealthy and privileged people are not the only ones who can and do keep chickens in the city<sup>9</sup>. Chicken-keeping was a common practice of poor immigrants in big cities in the United States since the industrial revolution.<sup>10</sup>

The age range of the urban chicken-keeping community suggested by my research at the EBYF in Eugene spans 5 decades from 21 to 70 years of age, but the bulk of its members are in their 30s and 40s (63% of respondents). This is significant because

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that this discussion of privilege is meant only to accurately illustrate the specific group of people with whom I worked. It is neither my intention nor that of this project to pass judgement or cause any offense.

<sup>10</sup>It was only after WWII in the 1950s that the practice declined in popularity as a result of a cultural emphasis on modernization and supermarkets becoming more commonplace.

it suggests that many of them probably have families and/or children. Though I did not ask any questions about whether or not respondents had children, I did ask how many people were in their household. 46% of them had 3-4 people in their households and 41% reported having 1-2 people. Though these families could be of any composition, from my observations at The EBYF and at events there are about as many families with children as there are without. I have interacted at the store with plenty of single people, couples both young and retired, and many others. According to both the online survey I administered and the statistics from The EBYF's Facebook page, this population is also majority female: 79% and 74% respectively, again mirroring the findings of the national study, in which 70.7% of respondents were female, (2014: 3). Chicken-keeping, like most things associated with urban farming and the DIY culture has been strongly linked in history with women and women's work. In fact, chicken-keeping was so strongly linked to women that "egg money," which originally referred to "extra cash farmwives used to earn selling the leftover products of their henhouses," eventually came to "refer to any money made from the odd bit of domestic entrepreneurship—selling jam, darning uniforms for the local school," (Matchar 2013: 85). Though most of the urban chicken-keepers with whom I worked had no intention of selling their eggs, this shows the close link between the female gender and this particular activity. Interestingly enough, the notion of egg-money is still very much a part of the New Domesticity Matchar describes. This plays out mostly in the context of selling homemade products or crafts at farmers markets and especially on the online handcraft marketplace of Etsy.com which is "overwhelmingly female," with "as many as 97 percent of Etsy sellers" being women, (2013: 73). Some of these women are there to live out the dream of being small-scale

entrepreneurs that the website champions,<sup>11</sup> but many more are there with the goal of supplementing their income (2013: 91). Matchar also points out that traditional gender roles are alive and well in American culture. According to the National Survey of Families and Households “among heterosexual American couples, women do an average of thirty-one hours of housework a week, while men do fourteen,” (2013: 26) and that is looking at the general population, not just those who are interested in urban homesteading or DIY culture. So-called “domestic porn blogs” (3), Etsy sellers (73), and “the unique-to-the-twenty-first-century worlds of artisan food businesses, urban homesteading, food activism, and food blogging,” are all areas in which “women are disproportionately represented,” (98). Though the jury is still out on the long-range effects of this trend, the DIY and homesteading movements do seem to be reifying the traditional gender roles that many people have been regularly challenging in recent years. For some this is an explicit choice, but others have a more subversive goal in mind. “If “housewife” was a dirty word in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, it’s now dirty in the good sense,” (2013: 3) Matchar says. These days women feel “electric with the shivery delight of taboo-breaking,” when they refer to themselves as “homemakers,” “housewives,” and “hipster housewives,” (Ibid.). Though there was nothing in the survey to convey specific information about the abovementioned trends, it is important to note the consistent connection between housework, homesteading, and women.

Furthermore, many chicken-keepers reported that one of their motivations for keeping chickens was specifically to educate their children, making that a significant demographic detail. In spite of these manifold differences, they seemed to communicate

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<sup>11</sup>"About Etsy." Etsy. Accessed November 29, 2015. <https://www.etsy.com/about/?ref=fr>.

with one another in a friendly manner, freely sharing tips, tricks and information. In watching so many different people face the same challenges, overcome the same hurdles, experience the same joys and then nod knowingly as they listened to the stories of other customers I experienced a sense of community both with them and between them. As an urban chicken-keeper myself, I, too, could relate to their stories and empathize with their experiences.

My experience with chicken-keepers in Eugene was vast in number, but not in context because the place where I encountered most of them was at work and not in my daily life. This led me to wonder if the sense of community I felt in the shop extended beyond its parking lot. An analysis of the information I gathered through various folkloristic, ethnographic fieldwork methods led me to conclude that yes, they are a community, but it looks nothing like the city-wide, relatively close-knit community that communicates with each other regularly, shares information and resources, as well as creating and attending chicken-related events I had expected to find. Instead, this is a nascent and decentralized community that is constituted mostly online via The EBYF's Facebook page and at local chicken-themed events, usually (but not always) those organized by The EBYF. In other words, the urban chicken-keeping community of Eugene, Oregon is constituted through the discourse, practice, and social imagination created by the dynamic relationship between the urban chicken-keepers themselves and The EBYF.

### *The Social Imaginary and Ideas of Community*

That same vantage point led me to think that there was a well-defined urban chicken-keeping community in Eugene, but I found out otherwise over the course of my research and fieldwork. Most of the people I interviewed agreed with me that there was a community out there, but none of them felt like they were a part of it. This was reflected in the data from the online survey I conducted as well as through event and participant observation. Urban chicken-keepers, it seemed, were a group of loosely connected (if connected at all) people who all happened to share the same pastime. As I dug deeper, however, I discovered that it was not that a community did not exist at all, but rather that it had not yet come fully into being and was in the process of being constituted. Working from Blecha and Leitner's (2013) application of the imaginary to urban chicken-keepers in Portland, OR and Seattle, WA as well as Charles Taylor's definition of the social imaginary as employed by Dorothy Noyes (2003), I determined that the reason for urban chicken-keepers' assertions that a community did exist, but that few people felt that they were a part of it was that this community exists primarily in their social imaginary. That is to say, urban chicken-keepers in Eugene *want* such a community to exist and think that it *should* exist, so they talk about it as if it does. This means that it does exist, but is nascent and only partially formed. Evidence of the community can be found in the rich online interactions that happen on The EBYF's Facebook page, which is the primary field in which many urban chicken-keepers interact with each other. The high attendance at the two biggest events held by The EBYF is further evidence of community as well as evidence of the fervent desire to get together with other chicken-keepers to celebrate their common pastime and share knowledge and experiences. In the survey, though 46 out of 57 respondents to the question of "How would you describe the chicken-keeping

community in Eugene” had specific and positive things to say about it, only 24 out of 65 people found themselves “talking chicken” often or very often.<sup>12</sup> In other words, though 81% of people believed that such a community exists, most of them were not having chicken-based conversations with other people on a regular basis. This inconsistency is reflected in the interviews that I did with six Eugene chicken-keepers. Every one of them answered “yes,” when asked whether or not they felt that there was a chicken-keeping community in Eugene, but despite this certainty, there was only a vague sense of a city-wide chicken community. One person I interviewed on Feb. 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013 said that she was aware that many people had chickens, but that she was not “hooked-in” to the community. William and Shannon, a married couple I interviewed on Feb. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, often find themselves “talking chicken” at their church meetings and also at The EBYF when they visit, but they did not report any personal experiences with an urban chicken-keeping community. All six of them talked regularly with friends about chickens, but most of these conversations, and consequently their sense of belonging and personal relatedness, took place in an extra-chicken and extra-EBYF context. Nicky, for instance, rarely goes to The EBYF, but knows most of the people who have chickens in her neighborhood and visits and chats with most of the people who have chickens in her neighborhood regularly, (Personal Interview, January 8 2013). My own observations at the shop reinforce this conclusion. Customers did not often show that they knew each other outside of the shop and when I did see recognitions, it seemed that other contexts like school, church and their neighborhood were involved. Their presence at the shop was coincidental rather than being the source of the connection. From my vantage point

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the word “community” was present in the question, but only in three of the answers. Though the concept was front-loaded for the respondents, it still shows their willingness to accept the idea of a chicken-keeping community.

behind the counter, I have heard many exclamations of “Oh, I didn’t know you had chickens!” Though it might seem to be a contradiction in terms, this inconsistency highlights their eagerness and desire for such a community despite the fact that it is so scattered in the material world.

This diffusion can, in part, be explained by the relative youth of the practice’s popularity. Most articles and sources date the most recent upswing in their popularity back to the 2007-2009 recessions, but it goes as far back as 2004 when Madison, WI lifted its poultry ban. Google Trends reports that in February of 2005 there was a sharp increase in the number of searches involving the phrase “backyard chickens” in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Since then, the numbers for this search term have remained between 27 and 100 which shows that this really is a national trend. It also shows that the most recent and intense popularity of this activity is only about a decade old. In Eugene, though, it is even younger. As previously mentioned, local Oregon hatcheries cite 2007 as the year when interest in urban chickens began to increase<sup>14</sup> which means that this practice has only been on the popular radar for 8 years, which is not enough time to create an easily recognizable and definable urban chicken-keeping community. After all, that a large number of people all like to do the same thing does not necessarily mean that they are, de facto, a community.

Charles Taylor describes the social imaginary as something that incorporates “a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other, the kind of common understanding which makes us able to carry out the collective practices that make up our

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<sup>13</sup> "Google Trends - Web Search Interest - Worldwide, 2004 - Present." Google Trends. Accessed June 21, 2015. <https://www.google.com/trends/explore#cmpt=q&q=Backyard Chickens&geo=US>.

<sup>14</sup> See note 3

social life,” with “some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice.” These “expectations” are our assumptions about how the world works. Though these assumptions are often informed by past experience, they also usually include projections about how things “should be.” Taylor says that “This understanding is both factual and “normative”; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they should go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice,” (2004: 106). So, the social imaginary of urban chicken-keepers contains ideas about how it usually works on a practical level, along with judgements about what does and does not count as urban chicken-keeping, what kinds of people keep chickens, what methods are best, and what sorts of characteristics are antithetical to urban chicken-keeping, among many others. Noyes also situates community in the social imaginary, but offers a slightly different perspective. For her, communities become realities as they build up over time around ideas embedded in the social memory the way that pearls form around irritants within oysters, (2003: 26). This is, she points out, how social constructs like this become “ever larger, ever more real, until at last it is as big, as dense, as difficult to deconstruct as “race” or “Germany,” (2003: 26-27). In other words, communities are the result of many people ascribing many similar expectations and attributes to a particular concept and then enacting those things in the world. Over time, all of these things accrete to form a fully-fledged community. Following the metaphor of the pearl, the idea of an urban chicken-keeping community has been gathering “nacreous layers” (26) for too short a time to have manifested fully in the world. It is out of this context that I claim that the urban chicken-keeping community exists mainly within the social

imaginary of urban chicken-keepers in Eugene and can only really be seen in the adjectives ascribed to it and in the fervent emotions behind those adjectives.

Because the concept of community is so complex and constantly shifting, it was difficult to come up with questions in both the interviews and the online survey that would indirectly generate the information needed. Furthermore, by the time that I sat down to create the survey, I realized that I had already been regularly using “community” in conversations with customers at The EBYF as a way to explain my research and had essentially front-loaded the concept into the minds of my respondents. Therefore, the interview and survey questions both used the word explicitly rather than trying to come at it obliquely. It made more sense to remain consistent and ask the question directly as: “How would you describe the urban chicken-keeping community in Eugene?” In retrospect it might have been interesting to see if the concept of an urban chicken-keeping community could come up organically in conversation. However, it is uncertain whether or not the discrepancy between the assumption that a community exists and the way that most people felt like they were not involved in it would have emerged had the concept not been front-loaded. Other questions asked respondents to describe what sorts of people, in their opinions, kept chickens. This question, when compared with the more direct characterizations of the urban chicken-community showed not only how urban chicken-keepers viewed others, but also how they viewed themselves, since the question included them as part of the group. Other questions that shed light on community were those on where respondents shopped for supplies or purchased chickens, what resources they used to learn about the process, and how often they found themselves “talking chicken” with others. The intention was to learn more about the networks that urban

chicken-keepers were involved in and to see what their shopping habits had to do with their views on community. These questions were contextualized with the quantitative, demographic-oriented questions on things like age, cultural identification, and gender from the beginning of the survey.

Because the urban chicken-keeping community exists mostly within the social imaginary, the dissonance between the perception of the community's existence and the lived experience of urban chicken-keepers shows that this community is in the process of becoming more material. Following Taylor's sketch of the social imaginary, urban chicken-keepers are certain that a community exists because it does so in their minds. It must exist because they feel that it *should*. By using specific adjectives and phrases to describe the urban chicken-keeping community that they think already exists, they are, in reality, describing the community that they *want*. Of course, as Taylor points out, these adjective have a basis in lived experience, but that the positive adjectives far outweigh the negative ones in numbers means that on the community they want is still being idealized. In response to the question "How would you describe the chicken-keeping community in Eugene," over half (37 of 57) of the respondents to my survey provided positive descriptors like "friendly," "supportive," "active," "fun," "helpful," "plentiful," and "growing." The overwhelmingly positive image created by these responses shows an enthusiasm for the idea as well as reflecting the kind of chicken-keeping community in which they want to participate. It also implies a lack of frequent contact with other chicken-keepers, since that would probably result in a more mixed description. 6 of the respondents provided just such mixed descriptions. For instance, one person described the community as "Low key and In your face at times," and "Mostly friendly." It is not

much of a stretch to say that human beings often idealize that which they have not experienced, and so descriptions with negative elements would not be present if respondents had not had some negative experiences with other chicken-keepers. Other mixed responses support this notion, such as “Fun, but it annoys me that many people let their non-laying chickens just roam around. It gives responsible chicken owners a bad name,” and “A lot of people like to do it, and more power to them, as long as they are not loud and do not disturb other people.” Both quotes cite very specific circumstances and behavior, which point to personal experience with those same things. The 5 responses that did not carry an automatic value judgement also point to more experience with other chicken-keepers. These responses characterize them as “diverse,” “eccentric,” “interesting,” “weird,” and “varied.” They also show that the respondents in question have interacted with a wider group of people who keep chickens. Why would one describe a group as “varied” if there was not some sort of experience to back it up? These descriptions could also have more to do with the respondent’s opinion of themselves than with other chicken-keepers, but even if they do, it is still part of the way they see the community. By choosing to describe the community at all, they are implying that there is one and, one assumes, they would not be taking a survey for urban chicken-keepers if they did not consider themselves to be part of that group. Therefore, despite the varying levels of implied experience with other chicken-keepers, the list of characteristics given by respondents keeps adding more layers to the pearl of the urban chicken-keeping community within the social imaginary, thus making it more and more material and complex as time goes on. Just because the urban chicken-keeping community exists

primarily in the social imaginary, however, does not mean that it does not find expression in the world.

### ***Role of Social Media in the Urban Chicken-Keeping Community***

One of the ways that the concept of the urban chicken-keeping community is bridging the gap between the social imaginary and lived experience is through social media. Other than neighborhood interactions and chance meetings at The EBYF, many Eugene-area chicken-keepers most often interact with people through online formats like message-boards, twitter, Instagram and Facebook. This mediation does not preclude the formation of community however, and as will be shown in the following paragraphs, online interaction satisfies the four elements of community created by McMillan and Chavis in their article, “Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory.” Their definition of community is as follows:

The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members’ needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is shared emotional connection, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences.

(Original emphasis, 1986: 4)

Though their article deals with a more immediate, face-to-face type of interaction, it can just as easily be applied to other forms as well. As Ulf Hannerz points out, “we need not think of all ties as face-to-face, for some are made through the mass media, and many more are made through...interpersonal media like the telephone, the Internet, and the old-fashioned letter,” (Hannerz, 1992). In other words, just because a group of people does not communicate face-to-face with one another does not preclude the formation of a community amongst them. That much of the community is constituted via social media networks shows that it is more of a social network than a “village community,” where “group is territory and performance, social ideal and lived reality,” (2003: 34). Instead, there is a “structure of linked individuals,” whose “structural and interactional characteristics...affect each other,” (2003: 16). Noyes agrees with Hannerz’s contention that “the network metaphor” is “the most suitable way of understanding...a world interconnected by migrations, marketplaces, and media, (2003: 17-18). The latter is particularly significant for urban chicken-keepers in Eugene because much of their community is constituted on The EBYF’s Facebook page.

Facebook allows people from all over the world to communicate with each other and The EBYF’s page does indeed have followers from many different countries as well as different states in the US, however 1,926 of the people who “like” the page are located in Eugene, Oregon, which turns out to be about 53% of the total number of people following the page. The 3670 “likes,” gathered by The EBYF on Facebook<sup>15</sup> over the last four years shows that it is quite popular for a small business as well as the importance of the shop itself to the community to which it caters. When someone “likes” a page

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<sup>15</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "Eugene Backyard Farmer." Facebook. February 25, 2010. Accessed June 24, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/EugeneBackyardFarmer?fref=ts>.

(usually that of a business, club, group, or other type of organization) they are choosing to “follow” that group and see its posts on their own personal Facebook feed. They can then keep up with the group and any events, changes, or announcements they might make and even comment on them. This is a form of participation in the urban chicken-keeping community because the people who “like” the page are intentionally choosing to stay in contact and even in conversation with The EBYF. As Noyes states “identification with a community is effected in performance,” (2003: 27). By “liking” the Facebook page and participating in conversations thereon, people are performing their identity as an urban chicken-keeper. There is also an implicit sense of membership when one “likes” a page because you are kept in the loop with the developments involving that particular page, business, or group. This reflects the sense of membership, or “the feeling of belonging or sharing a sense of personal relatedness,” described by McMillan and Chavis (1986: 4). Furthermore, all of these people are privy to the same information, which in turn leads not only to having knowledge in common, but also to an increased possibility of communication with each other. It is also worth noting that Bill Bezuk, the owner of The EBYF does not generally pay for advertising; as he told me shortly after I was hired, he prefers to rely on social media and word of mouth, which confirms the earlier point that many of the extra-EBYF chicken-related interactions happen casually between neighbors and acquaintances rather than in large communities.

These conversations can and often do result in a sort of personal relatedness, even if they do not know each other “in real life.” For instance, the comments on an April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013 post about the arrival of meat birds and ducklings at the store feature two exchanges wherein a question is answered or advice is offered by another chicken-keeper

as well as The EBYF. The following answer was given by a chicken-keeper in response to someone asking on The EBYF's Facebook page whether chickens and ducks can live together:

It depends on the breed.. a large male duck housed with a small silkie - the male ducks try to mate with anything and everything. From the harassment alone, they can and do easily kill a chicken (not intentionally). Keep them in the same size range or keep the drakes separate. Unfortunately so many sellers won't sex the ducklings.<sup>16</sup>

Not only is this a long, detailed answer, it also sounds like it comes from personal experience. By asking for and offering advice, these two people are enacting membership of the chicken-keeping community. In the same comment-thread, another chicken-keeper posted a link in response to a question about a bird with scissor-beak<sup>17</sup>, further underscoring the way that this mediated form of communication still facilitates connections between people. By providing the link, that person is providing an opportunity for education and making sure that nothing gets garbled in the process. This is not only helpful, but also kind. This interaction also includes another of McMillan's and Chavis's elements: influence, or "a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of a group mattering to its members," (1986: 4). The giving and receiving of advice, which happens in comment threads all over The EBYF's Facebook page, is a way of "making a difference," to someone else. It results in feelings of satisfaction for both people involved, which brings the third element of integration and fulfilment of needs

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> A scissor beak chicken suffers from a malformation of the beak that causes the top and bottom portions to curve and grow in different directions, making it look like a pair of scissor blades. This malformation, though not fatal in and of itself, can make it difficult for the chicken to pick up food, water, or even defend itself. It can be mitigated by trimming the beak so that the crossing is less severe.

into play. Urban chicken-keepers (both current and prospective) know that if they have questions, they can get answers or suggestions for where to get more information there and are able to give such advice as well. This is in part because that is the way that Bezuk frames his Facebook page. Indeed, all of his employees are told to recommend the page as a place to ask and answer questions. The social media site is meeting people's needs for information. That these answers come from other chicken-keepers as well as the "authority" of The EBYF is one way that these two groups are working together to constitute the urban chicken-keeping community.

McMillan's and Chavis's elements of community are also reflected in Facebook posts concerning the 2013 amendment to the urban livestock zoning ordinance that raised the number of chickens allowed within city limits from two hens to six<sup>18</sup>. The EBYF once again played the role of facilitator, since Bezuk made a concerted effort to keep people up to date on developments as well as urging them to write letters and make calls in support of urban chicken-keeping. Though I remember some of this happening in the shop, the most efficient place to reach the maximum numbers of chicken-keepers was via the Facebook page. That the ordinance was changed at all shows that chicken-keepers can have influence in their community (and outside of it, since the ordinance could affect non-chicken-keepers as well) and that they can get what they need out of it, especially after the passage of the amendment. By coming together for this cause, the element of shared emotional experience is illuminated, since the people who went through the

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<sup>18</sup> City Council of Eugene, *An Ordinance Concerning Urban Animal Keeping Standards; And Amending Section 9.2010, 9.2682, 9.2740, 9.3115, 9.3210, 9.3310, 9.3810, 9.3910, And 9.5250 of the Eugene Code, 1971, And Section 4.996 of That Code*, Eugene, OR: The City of Eugene, 2013, <http://www.eugene-or.gov/documentcenter/view/10753> (accessed May 22, 2014).

meetings together will have an emotional context in common, which is known to build ties of community and friendship.

One such post on February 12, 2013 provided customers with the text of a draft of the proposed amendment that required each animal, including chickens, to be banded and licensed for a fee. Almost all of the comments express surprise and disapproval of the licensing issue in one way or another, and many of them build off of each other in making fun of it. These derisive comments range from “silly,” to questions like “Are we going to have to license our tomato plants next?” and even the facetious “Each bee must be tagged.”<sup>19</sup> The communal scoffing at this absurd requirement created a small incidence of shared emotional connection between these people as well as an increased sense of membership. Not only were they comrades in being against the licensing idea, but they were also connected by having the same humorous reacting to it. After the tomato licensing comment, people continued to add their own funny thoughts, such as “My chickens don’t have wallets, where would they keep a license?” and “The city just called me and told me I had to license and band my licenses AND my bands.....jerks,”<sup>20</sup> (original emphasis). They were participating in the community in this way, showing others that they were not alone as well as creating that feeling for themselves. Through participating in these conversations on The EBYF’s Facebook page urban chicken-keepers are demonstrating the presence of all four of McMillan’s and Chavis’s elements of community. None of that would be happening without the facilitation of The EBYF’s Facebook page, however, which highlights the way that urban

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<sup>19</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "Eugene Backyard Farmer." Facebook. February 12, 2013. Accessed June 24, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/EugeneBackyardFarmer?fref=ts>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

chicken-keepers actively constitute their community through the facilitation of The EBYF. Another, more obvious way is through the events hosted by the shop.

### ***The Role of EBYF Events in the Urban Chicken-Keeping Community***

To return to Dundes's definition of a folk group from the beginning of this chapter, he stated that the group in question also needed to have "some traditions of its own," (1965) along with having at least one thing in common. For the urban chicken-keeping community, the traditions that bind them together as a community and establish them as a folk group are the events put on by The EBYF. There are many other chicken-focused events that happen in and around Eugene<sup>21</sup>, but none of them are quite as festive and communal as The BAWK Celebration and the 'Visit CoopTown USA' self-guided coop tour. These are annual or semi-annual events that focus on celebrating the urban chicken as well as providing opportunities for urban chicken-keepers to gather together, share their knowledge with each other, and to perform their chicken-keeping identities. It is these events more than any others that solidify the existence of an urban chicken-keeping community in the material world. They also fulfil all four elements in McMillan's and Chavis's definition of community as well as being the showplace for much of this community's expressive culture.

The description of the 'Visit Coop Town USA' event on The EBYF's blog states that "This self guided tour is a great chance for aspiring urban farmers to see what it takes to raise chickens in the back yard. It is also a great opportunity to get ideas on how to

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<sup>21</sup> An April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010 Register Guard article references "'Backyard Barnyard' chicken-raising seminar," and there are regular "DIY Poultry Processing," workshops at Berggren Demonstration Farm (berggren-farm.org) as well as many others.

improve your own coop.”<sup>22</sup>In short, this is an elaborate showcase and networking event. When the EBYF first hosted this event in 2011, it was named “The Tour de Coop,” but the name was changed in 2013 to make it more exciting and to ground it firmly in local culture. The playful name is a reference to one of Eugene’s monikers, “Tracktown USA” (because of the city’s many running trails and long history with the sport) which establishes this coop tour as a firmly Eugene event. It also draws a boundary around this particular group of urban chicken-keepers, thereby differentiating between people who are a part of the group and those who are not. This rhetorical move brings the urban chicken-keeping community a little bit closer to being a full-blown reality.

Another step in this direction is that all of McMillan’s and Chavis’s elements of a sense of community can be found within this event. In order to participate as a stop on the tour, chicken-keepers have to register with The EBYF so that they can be included in the guide book that serves as both roadmap and ticket to the event. By choosing to sign up, these people are both creating and reflecting a sense of membership in the community. They are intentionally including themselves in a group of people labeled as chicken-keepers and more than that, they are communicating this inclusion by letting the public come into their private space to see their coop and flock. This illustrates the performative aspect of the chicken-keeping identity and of the chicken-keeping community. Dorothy Noyes puts it this way: “If individual acts of identification create the reality of social categories, the reality of a community with which to identify comes from collective acts,” (2003: 28). The collective act involves both sides of the coop tour

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<sup>22</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "» Blog Archive » Visit Coop Town, USA on Saturday, June 27th." The Eugene Backyard Farmer. June 1, 2015. Accessed July 16, 2015. <http://eugenebackyardfarmer.com/visit-coop-town-usa-on-saturday-june-27th/>.

equation. By *choosing* to be a stop on the tour, chicken-keepers are performing their urban chicken-keeper identity. Similarly, by going on the tour, the visitors include themselves in that same community as well as providing an audience before which the hosts can perform that same identity. Furthermore, because this tour is four years old and has had between 12-20 stops in it over that time, the act of choosing to be a stop becomes a communal one. Therefore, the choice to be a stop on the coop tour equates to the creation of the chicken-keeping community in Eugene.

Not all chicken-keepers volunteer, so not only do hosts have membership in the larger community they are also part of a smaller one as well. The inherent power dynamic in the host-visitor relationship created by this event illuminates the element of “influence” defined by McMillan and Chavis as “a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members,” (1986: 4). In the host-visitor power dynamic, it is the host that has the power in this case. Visitors are extra careful not to trample, hurt, or otherwise disarrange things and are very polite both as they arrive and leave. In this way we can see that the hosts have been placed in a position of authority by virtue of showing off their chicken setup, as well as bravery by opening up their yards to criticism and judgement. The event is described as a way for neophyte urban farmer to see how other people are doing it as well as a way for more experienced ones to gather new ideas and insights. In that description, the hosts are placed in a position of having more knowledge than a neophyte and still having something to offer to the more experienced person. Consequently, by visiting the various stops, one gets the feeling of going to see masters at work. In this way, the coop tour hosts both *feel* like they have influence over the community as well as actually *having* that influence.

The third element of integration and fulfilment of needs can be seen through this event in the networking and information-seeking aspects of it. Again going back to the description of the event, the purpose of the tour is to provide examples and share techniques and knowledge, which is a form of fulfilling needs. If a chicken-keeper is looking for inspiration, this is a great place to find it since they have the benefit of seeing many different ways to tackle the same set of problems. This is also the main part of the tour that gets praised on Facebook. As one participant wrote, “We have a new urban chicken network of people, insight on things to add to our own coop!” Another one said that they had “learned much, gained affirmation, and met nice people.”<sup>23</sup> The need for information and guidance is omnipresent in the ever-changing world of urban chicken-keeping and because of the tour the participants are put in contact with an entire network of people that they can contact with their questions. That this event is an annual one also meets this need because participants can always come back next year for fresh inspiration. It also generates McMillan’s and Chavis’s element of “shared emotional connection,” or what folklorists call “communitas,” (Turner 1969, 1978, 1982). This element is defined as “the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences,” (McMillan and Chavis 1986: 4), which means that just by virtue of participating in the event and interacting under those circumstances, these people become connected.. In this way, having viewed the same people, coops, and setups urban chicken-keepers have a shared emotional context and so feel more connected as a community.

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<sup>23</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "Eugene Backyard Farmer." Facebook. May 19, 2013. Accessed July 11, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/EugeneBackyardFarmer>.

The more light-hearted BAWK Celebration is, perhaps, a more powerful way that chicken-keepers constitute the chicken-keeping community. This one-day event is “a festival celebrating our backyard hen’s contribution to urban farming,”<sup>24</sup> and is meant to be a celebration of all aspects of the practice. Bezuk created this event in 2012 with the intention of creating a fun day where chicken-keepers could get together, eat good food, listen to cool music, and express their love for their chickens through creative means. Its name reflects this emphasis on fun because it is a parody of the much more august classical music celebration called The Oregon Bach Festival that takes place in Eugene at around the same time. Unlike the coop tour, all of the events within the BAWK Celebration happen in the same place: The EBYF’s parking lot. These events include a crowing contest (for people, not roosters), a chicken-themed poetry contest, live music, and a chicken fashion show. Smaller events like chicken bingo, egg and spoon races, and the “name that egg” contest also go on throughout the day. Everything is tied together by the lively emceeing by my late father, Mark Lewis, a local actor and performer. This event creates a more tangible sense of community because it involves large numbers of people congregating in one place and experiencing the same events. It was well-received on Facebook receiving comments of “Oh my, this sounds like so much fun!!” “Markin my calender,” and “yessss.”<sup>25</sup> It was also well-received by the community members we asked to participate as judges for the fashion show, which included a local author, the mayor of Eugene, and a well-known local hairstylist and business owner. I remember

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<sup>24</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "The Eugene Backyard Farmer." » Blog Archive » The Eugene Bawk Celebration. June 6, 2012. Accessed June 14, 2015. <http://eugenebackyardfarmer.com/the-eugene-bawk-celebration/>.

<sup>25</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "Eugene Backyard Farmer." Facebook. May 24, 2012. Accessed July 13, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/EugeneBackyardFarmer?fref=ts>.

being surprised by the intensity of the investment in this event, even before it happened the first year. For instance, one woman felt compelled to ask if the crowing competition was for people or for roosters because she did not want to disappoint her 7 year old who had been practicing his technique, and another one who posted “wish I had chickens.”<sup>26</sup> The first year it happened, more than 100 people attended and though I was busy helping set things up and organizing the fashion show, I remember hearing nothing but happy, excited voices laughing and talking together and seeing only smiling faces. Even Bill, who is normally a taciturn fellow, was walking around with the biggest grin on his face that I have ever seen. The emotional response to this event was nothing but positivity, laughter, and celebration, as far as I could see. Furthermore, I was struck with how fervently these chicken-keepers in Eugene wanted some excuse to get together and celebrate their hobby.

The BAWK Celebration contains and showcases all four elements of McMillan’s and Chavis’s definition of community. Membership is shown not only by attendance, but also by participation. By attending and signing up for any of the performance events, members of this group were self-identifying as urban chicken-keepers. Furthermore, nothing says membership quite like a competition. People have to care a great deal about an activity to want to compete in it, even if it is all in good fun. To have chicken-keepers and their chickens strutting their stuff down the runway in the fashion show, writing and performing haikus and odes to their chickens, and crowing for all they are worth shows their dedication to the practice as well as its importance in their lives and identities. The need being integrated and fulfilled in this case is for community interaction and enjoyment. The best part about having a hobby is that it brings enjoyment and fun into

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<sup>26</sup> See Note 21

one's life and the next best thing is to be able to share this enjoyment with other people who participate in the same hobby. It is clear that urban chicken-keepers in Eugene love this practice and want to share it with others. By providing communal interaction, The BAWK Celebration also validates the view of chicken-keeping as a positive thing. In short, this event answers the need for an urban chicken-keeping community. The competitions at the Celebration, along with showing membership, also demonstrate influence. By choosing a pretty chicken and a costume, the contestants in the fashion show are trying to influence the judges and the audience into seeing them as the best one present. Even though a few people win and others lose, there is still the hope that one's influence will win out next year or at the next celebration. Seeing someone's performance, hearing someone's poem and seeing the adorable costume they made for their chicken also involves influence because it will likely inspire other people.

Last, but not least, is the most powerful aspect of the Celebration: the element of shared emotional connection. The entire event is one big shared emotional context and experience. Attendees visit every booth and (usually) attend all of the events and so have a wide range of common experiences. Though the poetry and crowing contest are also attended and supported, the most popular event is the fashion show. Some of the contestants bring just their beautiful chickens to show off, but others choose to dress up in some way, as described in the introduction. In 2012, one contestant sported an apron made out of fabric with life-like chickens scattered over a black background that complemented the big, black and white hen in her arms.<sup>27</sup> A late entry, a middle-aged man in jeans and an orange t-shirt made a quick daisy chain necklace out of tiny daisies

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<sup>27</sup><https://www.facebook.com/EugeneBackyardFarmer/photos/a.10151053818721293.486604.267552731292/10151053852586293/?type=3&theater> (accessed July 15, 2015).

and dandelions that was placed around the neck of a slim, but lustrous red hen.<sup>28</sup> Two little girls of about 5 and 8 years dressed up as cowboys and stole the hearts of the audience and the judges because they dressed their chickens to match. The older girl wore a pink checkered shirt, jeans, cowboy boots, a pink bandana and a pink cowboy hat which perfectly complemented the pink bandanna she had wrapped around the neck of her ameraucana hen<sup>29</sup>. Her little sister followed suit, but by wearing a denim dress with petticoat-like ruffle, cowboy boots, a light brown cowboy hat, and a red bandanna that matched the one on her white ameraucana hen<sup>30</sup>. As each contestant strode up to the front of the stage, paused to pose for the judges and then headed back to the backstage area, the crowd went wild. They clapped, cheered, and otherwise showed their approval and support of those onstage. Sitting together in heartfelt appreciation for a group of people brave enough to appear in front of their peers in a competition creates a loving bond between community members. Watching from backstage, I found myself tearing up because of the honest and earnest participation in such a wonderfully silly community event. Even after the prizes had been given out (gift certificates for The EBYF, special chicken treats, chicken food) the atmosphere was still very warm, with people congratulating the contestants and discussing which one was their favorite with the people around them. In this way the fashion show becomes part of the common history of chicken-keepers in Eugene and becomes a time they know they can spend with their

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<sup>28</sup><https://www.facebook.com/EugeneBackyardFarmer/photos/a.10151053818721293.486604.267552731292/10151053863581293/?type=3&theater> (accessed July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>29</sup><https://www.facebook.com/EugeneBackyardFarmer/photos/a.10151053818721293.486604.267552731292/10151053863571293/?type=3&theater> (accessed July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>30</sup><https://www.facebook.com/EugeneBackyardFarmer/photos/a.10151053818721293.486604.267552731292/10151053858801293/?type=3&theater> (accessed July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

community. Because of this, The BAWK Celebration is a place where the chicken-keeping community can be found in the material world.

### ***Material Culture of Urban Chicken-Keepers***

Another way in which the urban chicken-keeping community is constituted is through its material culture. Glassie states that “material culture is culture made material,” and that its study “uses objects to approach human thought and action,” (1999, 41). Though these statements might seem obvious, they shed light on the power of the things that people create. The first is that objects are as much a part of culture as their less-material counterparts (words, behaviors, ideas and more) are and the second is that they also reveal a great deal about the inner life and perspective(s) of the person or people who make them. The material aspects of chicken-keeping (coops, equipment, signs, decorations, fences, yards, and more) are concrete expressions of the urban chicken-keeper identity. They are badges of membership visible to one and all. Short of carrying a chicken around with you, this is the most obvious way to communicate that urban chicken-keeping is part of the way you identify or define yourself. Consequently, chicken coops become a ‘text’ in which one can ‘read’ about the way in which urban chicken-keepers conceptualize and contextualize urban chicken-keeping in their lives, identities, and points of view. For Glassie, there are three contexts in which to understand these objects: creation, communication, and consumption. The context of creation is relatively straightforward and entails the creator’s intentions, level of skill, and knowledge (Material Culture 1999: 48-54). The context of communication is when “the object goes from its creator to its consumer, “(1999: 57) and where it is “transferred to another who will never understand all of its associations, and who, therefore, must be struck by its

inherent properties,” (1999: 55). The context of communication is where either the creator or the object itself communicates with the consumer. The last, but not by any means the least, context is that of consumption. Here we have arrived in the realm of use, which may or may not be quite different from what the creator had intended (Glassie 1999: 57). This is how a prayer rug is used after it leaves the market place and is perhaps purchased by someone who does not know what its true purpose is (1999: 57) or of a teapot that becomes a decorative ornament rather than being used to brew oolong, as its creator intended it to. The purpose of these three contexts is to allow the analyst to gather more understanding of the object’s movements over the course of its ‘lifetime’ and to contrast and compare what happens in each.

For many of Eugene’s urban chicken-keepers the context of creation and consumption are identical, since 77% of respondents chose to build their own chicken coop. Besides providing the consumer with what they want, from a folkloric perspective, it provides a window into how they contextualize chicken-keeping in their lives. Glassie recommends that the analyst examine the object in question from two perspectives in order to begin to understand its significance: compositional and associational (1999: 60). The compositional perspective is where

the object in question is examined as part of a set of objects which are broken down into parts and then compared with each other to see “what varies among them.” (Glassie 1999: 61)

As shown in figure 1, the basic form of a chicken coop involves four things: a coop, a ramp, a nesting area, and a run. It is from this basic type of structure that chicken-

keepers create their personal variations. Though thirteen people shared photographs of their chicken coops on the online survey, only twelve of them depict actual coops<sup>31</sup>.



**Figure 1: The Basic Chicken Coop**

These twelve, along with my own chicken coop and the three types of coops at The EBYF form the basis of my analysis. It is also important to note that though nests or nesting places are visible in only two of the supplied photos, I am assuming that they are inside of the coops unless otherwise indicated<sup>32</sup>. Of the sixteen coops under examination, fourteen of them contain all of the abovementioned elements: coop, ramp, nests, and a run. Of those fourteen, four of them used the plans for Marie's 5<sup>th</sup> St. Townhouse, the tall, walk-in coop seen at The EBYF, four used an already existing structure, and the rest

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<sup>31</sup> The other photograph shows a flock of chickens in a barnyard, but since there is no easily identifiable coop it has been left out of this analysis.

<sup>32</sup> When a chicken coop is completely enclosed, there is usually a door that opens to allow cleaning and egg collection. This door is visible in some of the photos, and others the design is so similar to my own coop (which was built from the same plans as one at The EBYF) that I know that it must exist. Where the door cannot be seen, there is evidence in the comments on the photos left by respondents that indicate the existence of nests within the coop.

built different kinds of coops. Two out of the sixteen have a much more open-concept design and are missing the run portion of the basic format. This variety speaks to the many ways that urban chicken-keepers in Eugene adapt this structure to suit their environment and personal needs. Chicken coops are an expression of how the urban chicken-keepers see the practice as well as how it is contextualized into their lives based on what they want, what they are capable of making, and the limits of the space available to them. This sort of meaning is embedded into every part of the structure: the materials with which it is made and where they came from, the design of the structure itself, and the decoration and exterior details all reflect the person or people who built it. For instance, one of the chicken coops that does not follow the abovementioned formula is, instead, of a much more relaxed and informal design as in figure 2. The coop itself is open on one side, not entirely enclosed like most of the other examples in this set.



**Figure 2: A Free-Form Chicken Coop**

According to the explanation of this photo, “Not pictured are the two coop hutches” where the chickens sleep at night, which also deviates from the normal format. The ramps, too, show a more relaxed approach because they do not appear to be firmly

attached to the structure. It seems that this chicken-keeper is not as worried about predators as most others are since this structure does not provide much in the way of protection. Their priorities are different. Of course, there are other ways that the flock could be protected. The survey respondent might have a dog, or the coop hatches could be incredibly secure, but since neither is pictured in the photo or mentioned in the comments there is no way to tell. The relaxed design of the coop seems to fit with the value of self-sufficiency because of its “homemade” look, a surmise borne out by the way it is described by its owner/creator as being “Pieced...together from various parts of other coops.” Though nothing is said about where the other coops came from, that pieces of pre-built coops were re-purposed in order to build another one shows that chicken-keeping is not something that this respondent wants or needs to be beautiful or elegant. Rather, the emphasis seems to be on practicality and effectiveness instead. Furthermore, this description evokes Levi-Strauss’s concept of “bricolage” which he defines as being made from fragments and items salvaged from a variety of sources, (1966: 18). Because bricolage is often associated with folk or outsider art, such a technique of creation brings the material culture of urban chicken-keeping into that realm as well, despite (or along with) the notion of practicality.

Other coops are much more traditional in style, like those that follow the plans sold at The EBYF. Because their composition is more or less the same, it makes sense to focus on their external decorations in order to understand how they shed light on a chicken-keeper’s perspective on their chickens. For instance, just by looking at figure 3, one can tell that chicken-keeping is an important and even integral part of this respondent’s life.



**Figure 3: A More Ornate Coop**

The structure itself reinforces this in the way that it has been carefully and beautifully integrated into the yard. Though it is a subtle detail, that the coop has been made to look just like the house behind it is evidence that urban chicken-keeping is thoroughly a part of this chicken-keeper's life. It symbolizes a unity between the two structures and implies that life at home extends even to the chickens. The hand-painted sign and murals on the coop also make this point, since time was spent painting them. So not only does life at home extend out to the chickens, leisure time also extends there as well. The coop also seems to be the focal point of the backyard, since it appears to be the most colorful thing there, though this might be due to the angle of the photo more than anything else. Though there is much about the photo that indicates the importance of the practice, the biggest indication comes from the comment, which reads "This is our coop in the 2015 city chickens and their coops calendar." In other words, this chicken-keeper went out of their way to submit their coop and yard to a publication that would ensure

that it would be seen by many, many people, which indicates that they take a great deal of pride in the structure and in the practice itself. It stands to reason that a person would not go to all of the trouble to make such a beautiful structure and of submitting it to the public eye if it were not a big part of their life. The structure itself reinforces this in the way that it has been carefully and beautifully integrated into the yard. Glassie's method of analysis gets us this far based on the structure alone, but in this case it is confirmed by external evidence in the form of an Instagram account. This chicken-keeper has an Instagram account focused solely on her chicken-keeping adventures, which are described as "Our attempt at urban farming in Oregon. The antics of Erma, Martha, Lola, Dory, Lucy, Ethel, & Agnes. RIP Hazel."<sup>33</sup> This respondent regularly puts her chicken-keeping activities up for public view, which in turn means that they spend time almost every day taking pictures of their flock and yard and uploading them to the website. All of these things together point to a very rich, chicken-centric lifestyle.

Not every chicken coop is as ornate or integrated into the landscape as that one, however. My own coop (figure 4), for instance, though it was made from the same set of plans, looks nothing like the Fuster Cluck Palace.

It, too, communicates the attitude of the builders and owners towards urban chicken-keeping as well as its place in their lives. The coop itself is made of plain, unpainted wood and has very little by way of decoration. If the metal cutout of a rooster, the small birdhouse tacked up next to the door of the run, and the weathervane featuring a cow seems haphazard, it is because they are. They are the result of randomly finding the

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<sup>33</sup> "FusterCluck Farm (@fustercluckfarm) • Instagram Photos and Videos." FusterCluck Farm (@fustercluckfarm) • Instagram Photos and Videos. Accessed July 12, 2015. <https://instagram.com/fustercluckfarm/>.



**Figure 4: A Plain Chicken Coop**

objects and deciding that they might look good up on the coop. Unlike the Fuster Cluck Palace and its cohesive and carefully executed design, my coop shows that chickens are not a central aspect of my family's life. This is not meant to be judgement of either party, but merely an observation about what the material aspects of their chicken-keeping practice say about them.

### ***Conclusion***

Though the urban chicken-keeping community in Eugene is still in the process of fully forming in the world, the power that it has in the collective social imaginary is still powerful. The existence of The EBYF and its events are evidence of this. There was enough desire for a community that when Bezuk stepped in to create The EBYF a hub for interaction, learning, and communication most chicken-keepers jumped at the chance to participate. Furthermore, the material aspects of chicken-keeping shows that chicken coops are a physical manifestation of the chicken-keeper's attitude towards the practice as well as sharing the "inner wit" of the chicken-keeper "at work in the world," (Glassie 1999: 41), making them yet another way that the community is constituted. When the

coops are showcased and shared via the coop tour, this allows chicken-keepers to build off of the ideas of others, creating consistencies within the material folkways of this group of people and sowing the seeds of patterns that could be repeated and altered for years to come. Because of all these things, the community is much closer to becoming a full-blown reality.

### CHAPTER III

#### URBAN CHICKEN-KEEPING AND THE DYNAMIC OF TRADITIONALIZATION

Urban chicken-keeping is labeled as traditional through a complex web of interconnecting symbols and associations linked with the chicken itself. The main figures in this web are the ideal farmer, the ideal farming landscape, and ideal homesteader who ekes a living out of a desolate land. These images and ideas are reinforced through many sources, including popular culture media such as book covers, magazines, TV commercials, films and documentaries, history books and historical photographs, among many others. Encoded within these three figures are a specific set of values and meanings that hook directly into the history as well as its national character of the United States as imagined by the European settler population that colonized the country. These are values like honesty, discipline, perseverance, simplicity, self-sufficiency, thrift, stewardship, and kindness. Instead of having a hegemonic authority continuously labeling a practice as traditional as is done in Gilman's article, the urban chicken-keepers in Eugene have already encoded notions of the traditionality of urban chicken-keeping within them. Therefore the rhetorical association with tradition that Gilman sees as necessary to the process of traditionalization happens in a much more subtle, yet no less powerful way.

Before opening his shop, Mr. Bill Bezuk was a manager at the local Barnes & Noble bookstore and noticed that "more and more people were coming in and asking for books about chickens, urban farming, and organic gardening," (Personal Interview, Feb. 2013), which inspired him to start his urban farming business. Since then, the shop has acquired a large and enthusiastic customer base, one that is in the process of accreting

into a community and turning the practice of urban chicken-keeping into a traditional activity. The process employed by urban chicken-keepers in their effort to make it traditional, is that of traditionalization, a theoretical concept first articulated by Dell Hymes and then advanced and elaborated on by Williams (1977) Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Handler and Linnekin (1984), Glassie (1995), and Gilman (2004). Conforming to the process of traditionalization, urban chicken-keeping in Eugene is contextualized within local cultural practice, thought of as traditional, and through repetition, it becomes a valued part of the lives of urban chicken-keepers as well as an integral part of their identities. The activities being traditionalized can be big, like replacing the tradition of going to Safeway to buy uniform, white eggs in Styrofoam or cardboard cartons from the sterile and brightly lit refrigerator case with the much more tactile experience of collecting some warm, multi-colored, differently-sized eggs from the chicken coop in the backyard. Or maybe you are making dinner while on vacation and you suddenly realize that you have reflexively saved the carrot tops, celery ends, and other scraps with the intention of giving them to the chickens rather than throwing them away. They can also be relatively small, like when a customer visiting the chick room at The EBYF with her child and referred to it as “a special thing we do together,” (Field notes March 2013). Even emotional responses can be traditionalized, like the experience of sitting in one’s backyard at the end of a hard day and feeling all of the tension and worries melt away as you watch your flock of hens scratch around in the light of the sunset. Or watching your child interact with your flock and knowing that they now have more respect for where food comes from and hoping that they will carry that knowledge with them as they grow up. Eugene urban chicken keepers are traditionalizing these parts of their experience and

more in order to shape their present lives, which they hope will continue into their futures. Following this framework and using evidence gathered over the course of my fieldwork, I will provide empirical evidence for how and why urban chicken-keeping is being traditionalized by the people who practice it along with the help of The EBYF.

### ***Traditionalization***

The term “traditionalization,” as was mentioned in the introduction was originally used by Dell Hymes in a 1975 speech to The American Folklore Society and defined it as a continuous process wherein “every person, and group, makes some effort to “traditionalize” aspects of its experience,” (Traditionalization: 353). For him, traditions are the products of social interaction and get renewed and changed with every repetition (Ibid.). Hymes’s emphasis on process means that he saw it as something that *changes*, something that people actively, intentionally, and selectively *create* and *do*. This flies in the face of the way that most people think about tradition, what Handler and Linnekin termed the “commonsense” definitions of tradition (1984: 273). This is the view of tradition as “an inherited body of customs and beliefs,” which “presumes...an unchanging core of ideas and customs is always handed down to us from the past,” (Ibid.). It is easy to see tradition this way, but they do change over time, though those changes are small. This idea is supported by Glassie when he describes tradition as streaming into continuity by “Drifting through endless, numberless changes so subtle as to provide an illusion of stability,” (1995: 405). These changes, as mentioned earlier, usually happen because people attach a sense of value to it (see also Williams 1977: 115, Glassie 1995: 395), not just because it gets repeated often. This is why we have swept floors the same way for centuries without calling it traditional, but if we make the same

chicken dish for Sunday dinner for a few months we call it tradition because it makes us feel good. By contrast, if a person were to sweep their floors in a specific pattern or on a specific day for an extended length of time, it would probably accrete some sort of significance and value and thus become potentially traditional. It would have been, in effect, traditonalized.

Another concept that underpins the process of traditionalization is that traditions are often intentionally and selectively created, or invented, by those involved. In fact, this idea is embedded in the very word itself. By turning it into a verb, Hymes is pointing, not only to its nature as a process (verbs imply movement or action), but also to the fact that the process involves actors of some sort. As Glassie says, “cultures and traditions are created, invented—willfully complied by knowledgeable individuals,” (1995: 398). Hobsbawm and Ranger call these “invented traditions” and define them as “a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past,” (1983: 1). While they write specifically about those traditions that are created with a specific object or goal in mind the concept can still be applied to urban chicken-keeping. Gilman’s 2004 article combines their theories with her own observations in Malawi and posits that traditonalization has three main conditions: the practice in question is usually drawn from local practices already in place so that it retains some degree of familiarity to the people in question, it must be repeated frequently, and it must have some level of importance in both individual and communal life, (2004: 2). Urban chicken-keepers, along with The EBYF, have been going out of their way to make it easier and more common to keep

chickens in the city and therefore have been traditionalizing the practice. This can be most easily seen in how the City Council of Eugene changed the zoning laws to allow for more chickens to be kept per household in response to public pressure and outcry.

*Drawing from Local Cultural Practice*

There are three categories of local cultural practice that facilitate the traditionalization of urban chicken-keeping: Oregon's pioneer and homesteading roots, local farming culture, and local cultural emphasis on environmentalism and counter-cultural activities. Because of its location in the "Wild West" state of Oregon, Eugene has strong ties to the independent, self-sufficient, and rugged European-Americans who undertook the long journey across the Oregon Trail to start new lives on the frontier. Often spurred by economic hardship as a result of several depressions and panics during the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>34</sup>, the movement west was as much about independence and self-sufficiency as it was about conquering and claiming new territory (Stoeltje 1987). Urban chicken-keeping is similarly linked with economic hardship, according to Barbara Palermo who was interviewed for an April 2010 article in *The Register Guard*<sup>35</sup>. She states that "the chicken fervor is driven by economic fears. People are getting laid off, losing houses and losing jobs," she said. "They want to hang on to what they have. A lot of them remember their grandparents telling them, 'It's chickens that saved us during the Depression.' It's much the same situation now."<sup>36</sup> Palermo seems to be evoking the

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<sup>34</sup> See Note 27

<sup>35</sup> One of Eugene, Oregon's local newspapers.

<sup>36</sup> Dietz, Diane. "The Register-Guard." *Chicken Revival*. April 18, 2010. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://projects.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/business/24679518-41/chicken-chickens-urban-bezuk-eugene.csp>.

values of persistence, independence, and self-reliance that figures like John L. O'Sullivan and Frederick Jackson Turner wrapped up with their mythologization of the American Frontier. Her words show that urban chicken-keepers are turning to the practice for reasons similar to those that brought the pioneers out west, which corresponded to the emphasis on self-sufficiency, saving money on eggs, and providing for one's family that I saw in my research. Chickens fit into this part of Eugene's culture because they often represent one step along the journey to the type of self-sufficiency that the pioneers represent.

Along with the history of self-reliance from the original settlers, Eugene's equally long history of agriculture and farming is another local cultural practice that facilitates the traditionalization of urban chicken-keeping. The "free fertile land of the Willamette Valley," is what originally attracted settlers to the location in the first place (Anderson 2014: 44), and even today Eugene is surrounded on all sides by farm and pasture land. People in the Willamette Valley were "farming seriously" (Bettis 1969: 13) almost as soon as the settlers arrived there and though the main crop was wheat, "every farm...had a garden to provide vegetables...and there were generally at least a few chickens on the place, a cow or two; perhaps some swine or sheep," (Bettis 1969: 14). Chickens are almost always to be found in the description of any farm, especially those in the past, which is indicative of its iconic status as a farm animal and as a general symbol for farming itself. As one survey respondent put it, chicken-keeping makes them feel "connected to farming...a little bit." That Eugene hosts the Lane County Fair each year is further evidence that the city has never strayed very far away from its agricultural roots. One of the most popular livestock exhibits at the fair is the poultry exhibit, which

included two buildings-worth of chicken cages last year. By bringing animals associated with rural life into the city, it blurs the boundaries and makes it easier to imagine keeping chickens in the city. That means that there is a decent amount of communication going on between farmers and city-dwellers, which in turn means that farming practices are not all that far away from the circle of knowledge of the folks who live in Eugene. So, because farming activities and animals surround the city as well as appearing regularly within its limits, chicken-keeping does not seem to be all that far away from their reality, nor all that difficult to do. It is essentially already a part of local Eugene culture.

The last local cultural practice that helps to facilitate the contextualization of urban chicken-keeping as traditional is Eugene's reputation for environmentalism and counter-cultural thought. For instance, the "Eugene" page from the [eugencascadescoast.org](http://www.eugencascadescoast.org) website states that the city has "as strong counter-culture heritage stemming from the 1960s,"<sup>37</sup> and that it "has valued green, sustainable living long before the mainstream surge." That this comes from a tourist website indicates the importance of "green sustainable living"<sup>38</sup> to Eugene. Upon clicking the highlighted "sustainable living" phrase, a new page opens up entitled "Green Travel/Ecotourism" further emphasizing the importance of environmentalism to Eugene's image. This image is not without basis, because single-use plastic bags were banned in the city in 2013,<sup>39</sup> neonicotinoid pesticides (the ones known for killing bees) were banned in February

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<sup>37</sup> "Eugene." Oregon Travel Guide. Accessed July 19, 2015. <http://www.eugencascadescoast.org/eugene/>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> City Council of Eugene, *An Ordinance Encouraging The Use of Reusable Bags, Banning Single-Use Plastic Carryout Bags, and Adding Sections 6.850, 6.855, And 6.865 To The Eugene Code, 1971*, Eugene, OR: The City of Eugene, 2012, <http://www.eugene-or.gov/documentcenter/view/9609> (accessed October 12, 2015).

2014,<sup>40</sup> and The City of Eugene’s website features an extensive “Sustainable Eugene”<sup>41</sup> section. Eugene also has a reputation for a less tame brand of environmentalism. It was home to John Zerzan and his *Green Anarchy* magazine, the headquarters for Earth First!, as well as to a violent cell of The Earth Liberation Front whose members had been arrested and indicted for several arsons of government property in the 1980s.<sup>42</sup> That this information comes from Eugene’s Wikipedia page is indicative of its prominent place in the city’s reputation.

Not all of the counter-cultural thought and activity in Eugene is so radical however. The city also has a reputation of embodying the 1960’s peace-and-environment-loving hippie aesthetic and philosophy, a claim borne out by The Oregon Country Fair that takes place nearby, the Saturday Market, and The Eugene Celebration. The environmentalism highlighted in all of these events leans heavily in the homesteading, DIY direction, which often includes chicken-keeping. In fact, The EBYF has had a booth at The Eugene Celebration and the Hundred Hen March has been part of The Eugene Celebration Parade since the shop opened in 2010. Besides being excellent marketing strategies, it shows that urban chicken-keeping fits in well with this event and the way that Mr. Bezuk is inserting it into fixtures of Eugene culture. This local cultural background lays the groundwork for the traditionalization of urban chicken-keeping

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<sup>40</sup> The City Council of Eugene, *A Resolution Endorsing Ongoing Implementation of the City of Eugene Parks and Open Space Division’s Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Policy and Procedures, Endorsing Expansion of the Pesticide Free Parks Program Requiring All City Departments To Adopt an IPM Policy and Procedures, and Banning Use of Neonicotinoids on All City Property*, Eugene, OR: The City of Eugene, 2014, <http://www.eugene-or.gov/archive.aspx?amid=&type=&adid=3016> (accessed May 22, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> "Sustainable Eugene." Eugene, OR Website. Accessed July 20, 2015. <http://www.eugene-or.gov/sustainability>.

<sup>42</sup> "Eugene, Oregon." Wikipedia. Accessed June 12, 2015. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugene,\\_Oregon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugene,_Oregon).

because a large part of its appeal is its anti-hegemonic nature. Keeping rural animals in a city situation is, in many people's minds, a union of opposites and creates a frisson of excitement for those who do it. It feels like they are breaking the rules, even though they are not (at least not anymore). Like many farming practices, urban farming in general is often included in the category of "eco-friendly" practices and thought of (somewhat erroneously) as something "green" to do. When asked how chicken-keeping made them feel, most urban chicken-keepers responded with words and phrases like "much more environmental," "doing something good for the environment" and "sustainable," showing that chicken-keeping is generally seen as a very "eco" thing to do and how it fits in with that part of Eugene's local culture.

#### *Rhetoric of Traditionality*

The second facet of the traditionalization process as outlined by Gilman is the "imbuing" of the practice in question "with rhetoric about its traditionality,"(2004: 56). In other words, the practice being traditionalized has to be frequently named as a traditional practice by someone in order to take hold. One is reminded of the truism that "if you repeat something often enough, it becomes the truth." By calling something traditional for long enough, it becomes traditional in the minds of those who practice it. In the case of urban chicken-keeping in Eugene, the "authority" that is labelling it as a traditional practice is not an elite, political or otherwise, but is instead the urban chicken-keepers themselves who describe the practice as such. One might assume that Bezuk and The EBYF would be the authorities making claims of traditionality, but this is not at all the case. Though he *is* considered an authority in Eugene's urban chicken-keeping world, he very rarely refers to the practice as traditional. Instead this impression can be gathered

through the vintage farmhouse decorations in the shop and his down-home attitude. There are quilts that feature chickens on the walls, old-fashioned chicken figurines on top of the bookshelves, and an old pitchfork hanging on the wall behind the register among many other things. Bill's emphasis on the practical and frugal, as well as his devotion to urban farming, gardening, and using or preserving every bit of the harvest also communicate the idea of the "traditional." Chicken-keepers with more experience tend to offer practical advice and support rather than talk about the practice as traditional, both in online forums and in social interactions. Instead, the rhetorical association of urban chicken-keeping with traditionality relies on a complex web of assumptions held by the people who practice it and made of a set of interconnected concepts and ideas about the way things were in the past. Often vague, these notions come from the way we understand US history, world history, personal associations and history, as well as representations in popular culture. Through this web, urban chicken-keeping is linked in the popular American imagination with an idealized, imaginary golden past that simultaneously evokes the agrarian ideal farmer and farm landscape as well as the ideal rugged, self-sufficient pioneer that we know from popular culture and history books. The word "ideal" is emphasized in this context because these figures do not represent actual, historical figures, but rather an idealized amalgam of characteristics with which they are associated.

Hobsbawm and Ranger say that invented traditions usually involve an "attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past," and that "insofar as there is such a reference to a historic past...the continuity with it is largely factitious," (1983: 1-2). The key word in this quote is "suitable," because sometimes the actual historical past does not support the message or values that the tradition in question seeks to promote. In other

words, invented traditions often have an invented past to go with them, which means that rhetorical associations that implicitly associate a practice with the past through labeling it “traditional” do not necessarily have to be based in absolute fact. This is why I attribute urban chicken-keeping’s aura of traditionality to an imaginary, golden past inhabited by equally imaginary, golden figures. There are enough historical photos, television shows, films, commercials, and books, children’s songs, food packaging (especially egg cartons), grocery store signage, and many other media that feature chickens in both situations that they have become part of what Noël Sturgeon calls “a social unconscious,” that is “designed to reflect and appeal to our common desires, beliefs, and values,” (2009, 27). The point is that chickens are equally at home scratching around in the barnyard of the ideal farming landscape with the ideal American farmer as they are in the hardscrabble yard of the rugged frontier homesteader. Because of this link and the repetition of such images and ideas, chicken-keeping is viewed and talked about as traditional by urban chicken-keepers themselves.

The first set of images that reinforce the idea that urban chicken-keeping is traditional the quintessential American farmer who is so intimately tied in with an American national identity. This is the ideal farmer, an honest, simple, practical, self-sufficient, plain-spoken, moral person (usually a man) who is fiercely, yet lovingly tied to his community and the land he farms. This figure reaches back to the agrarian ideals expressed by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on The State of Virginia*: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if he ever had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue,” (1875). The connection is quite explicit: to work the land is to be a moral person and Jefferson

situates that morality squarely in the American soil. Wendell Berry's work continues in this vein, especially in *The Unsettling of America* and *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food* where he quotes and agrees with Jefferson's contention that "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds," (1977: 143). Like Jefferson, Berry puts and emphasis on husbandry, which he defines as "to use with care, to keep, to save, to make last, to conserve," (2009: 93) and links both with the household and to the land (Ibid.). Implicit in this definition is the idea that farmers are thrifty and clever with conserving resources, including the land. When combined with Jefferson's ideas of what is embedded in American soil, one can see that "husbandry" is also the process of conserving those moral qualities as well as conserving the land itself. The war gardens and victory gardens from both World Wars also reflected these ideas. Governments urged people (mostly women) to conserve their resources and grow food, which effectively turned them into political acts of identity. As Cecilia Gowdy-Wygant says in her book *Cultivating Victory: The Women's Land Army & the Victory Garden Movement*, "no matter what the name of the garden, the action remained the same: cultivation meant asserting the American identity of abundance to a struggling global community," (2013: 172). Once again, "Americanness" is grounded in the soil through the act of cultivation and farming. In short, these virtues are strongly encoded into the word "farmer," making them practically synonymous with each other in the popular American imagination. This moral, thrifty, and practical farmer is reinforced visually in popular culture media and

includes particular visual characteristics that are also embedded in the social unconscious reaching even as far back as childhood.

“Old MacDonald Had a Farm” is one of the most prominent of the farm-themed children’s rhymes and is an excellent example of how deeply embedded ideas of the ideal farmer are. Though the song has little to no visual context in the lyrics, a perusal of popular culture texts shows that Old MacDonald himself is the very type of an ideal farmer. He is usually white,<sup>43</sup> often wears overalls over a long-sleeved, button down shirt, has wears boots of some kind, and has a hat of some kind on his head. Because is the song labels him as old, he often has grey hair and is usually smiling as he performs his various farm-related tasks. Though he smiles and does his tasks with ease, this stock character is always working, which reinforces Jefferson and Berry’s notion of a farmer as hardworking, persistent, and ethical. The implicit message in many of these farm-themed children’s songs is that hard work makes one a good person.

The 2014 RAM Trucks “Farmer” commercial<sup>44</sup> is another example because it features multiple still photos of people who also match the visual shorthand for “farmer” in the American imagination. Because of the title, the audience knows that all of the figures in the video are farmers, which, like the children’s song means that they are primarily white men with lined, weather-beaten faces and serious eyes who wear jeans, a plaid work shirt under a tough work jacket, cowboy or work boots on his feet, a cowboy hat on his head and have some sort of wooden-handled tool in his hand. The commercial

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<sup>43</sup> This is interesting, since it completely elides the role that blacks and latinos have historically played in the agricultural history of the United states.

<sup>44</sup> "Ram Trucks Commercial "Farmer" Long Version." YouTube. January 28, 2014. Accessed June 10, 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7yZdOl\\_e\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7yZdOl_e_c).

explicitly reinforces the values discussed in the previous paragraph through its use of Paul Harvey's 1978 "So God Made a Farmer,"<sup>45</sup> wherein farmers are described as caretakers who are strong, gentle, patient, kind, compassionate, resourceful, and responsible, again evoking the Jeffersonian husbandman.

At The EBYF, the clothes that Mr. Bezuk wears to work make use of this visual shorthand: he is often wearing jeans, work boots, a t-shirt or a plaid work shirt, and he will don a hat as if he is working outside. In a 2010 TV article by local news station KVAL, Mr. Bezuk is wearing exactly that: jeans and a green, flannel, long-sleeved shirt<sup>46</sup>. It makes him look very farmer-like and telegraphs the virtues of being honest, hardworking, and trustworthy. When I was hired, the dress code was explained to me in terms of practicality and the only restriction was that t-shirts with big logos or phrases on them were discouraged. Shortly after I began work, I found myself mimicking Bill and wearing clothing that referenced that of a traditional farmer. The unofficial uniform that I created for myself consisted of a plaid flannel shirt over a tank top or long-sleeved shirt (depending on the season), jeans or shorts, work boots, and I often brought my EBYF ball cap along with me, especially in rainy weather. I remember thinking to myself that in this outfit I looked trustworthy and qualified to talk about urban farming topics. In short, I was communicating to the customers via visual shorthand that I was in possession of good farming values and behaviors. The EBYF itself evokes those same values by including the word "farmer" in its name. The power of the word and the concepts

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<sup>45</sup> Franke-Ruta, Garance. "Paul Harvey's 1978 'So God Made a Farmer' Speech." *The Atlantic*. February 3, 2013. Accessed June 10, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/02/paul-harveys-1978-so-god-made-a-farmer-speech/272816/>.

<sup>46</sup> Adams, Tom. "Chickens in the City." KVAL 13. April 27, 2010. Accessed June 10, 2015. <http://www.kval.com/news/business/92143789.html>.

associated with it is such that it does not matter that both Jefferson and Berry's farmer is located away from the city and out in the country. The simple act of calling someone a farmer (even if, or perhaps especially if it is oneself) is enough to invest them with a set of virtues that reaches all the way back to the founding of this country and beyond, which is a powerful argument for traditionality. Similarly, by seeking to take on the mantle of a farmer, urbanites are also seeking to inculcate the down-home values within themselves.

Along with this idealized farmer comes an idealized landscape: rolling green hills, golden yellow sunlight, red barns with white trim, (ostensibly) full grain silos, haystacks and neatly planted fields, happy horses and cows, and most importantly, fat and happy chickens scratching contentedly somewhere in the scene. This is the visual shorthand for an ideal farm, which is the natural habitat of the ideal farmer. It is the fruit of his labors and the thing he labors to protect and conserve. As the narration from the Ram Trucks commercial states, this is God's "planned paradise,"<sup>47</sup> and the emotional effect reflects the word. It is a place of beauty, ease, happiness, bounty, and contentment where everything is right with the world. It is the dream farm that many of us aspire to. It is a place where we can get away from the pressures and pollution of the city, where we can "live the simple farming life."<sup>48</sup> Though there are many landscapes associated with farming in America, this one is particularly pertinent because there is a large emphasis on organic food and organic farming/gardening methods among the chicken-keeping community in Eugene. It also mirrors Eugene's own landscape in many ways (it is very green here, with rolling hills and large stretches of farmland), subconsciously linking this

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<sup>47</sup> See Note 38

<sup>48</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "The Eugene Backyard Farmer." The Eugene Backyard Farmer. Accessed June 11, 2015. <http://eugenebackyardfarmer.com/>.

imagined paradise with the general environment of the urban chicken-keepers themselves. Instead of retiring to the country, the dream becomes the creation of that same paradise in one's own backyard.

This idealized landscape is based on the Pennsylvania Dutch Countryside which formed the backdrop to the organic farming and food movement created by J. I. Rodale in the 1930s. This iconic landscape is the “agrarian “middle” landscape of southeastern Pennsylvania,” (2014: 74), described by Andrew Case in “Idealizing the Organic Landscape: J. I. Rodale, the Rodale Press, and the Pennsylvania Countryside.” This “rolling, patchworked landscape of farm, field, and forest,” filled with “old stone farmhouses, winding roads, covered bridges, and big barns decorated with hex signs,” (2014: 74) Case argues, was popularized and linked with the organic food and farming movement because Rodale (the father of the organic food and agriculture movement) located his farm and publishing company there. Through his prolific writing and publishing, he helped make ““organic food” and “natural health” household terms in the postwar United States,” (Case 2014: 78). The large, local Mennonite population in that part of the country helped to lend an air of legitimacy and tradition to both the landscape and Rodale's controversial ideas because of their “old fashioned” ways (2014: 82). The photos and descriptions of the countryside from his books are responsible for the way we imagine an organic landscape today.

The same videos and books that show us how the ideal farmer is embedded in the minds of American children also feature Case's “ideal organic landscape” (2014). Almost every YouTube video of “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” I watched is set in a landscape of green fields with sparse trees, a red barn with white trim, a grain silo, blue

sky with a golden sun and few clouds, as well as all of the animals mentioned in the song. There is usually a pond of some sort (for the ducks, of course), a vegetable garden, fences, a farm house, hay in the barn, and sometimes even a rainbow. That this is one of the foundational songs of the American childhood shows how deeply this idealized landscape is embedded in our expectations of a farm. Furthermore, because the sun is always shining, the animals are always happy and productive, and Old MacDonald himself always does his tasks easily and with a smile the basic conception of the farm completely elides over the incredibly hard work and often adverse conditions that are involved in real farming. Given all of these visual cues, it is no wonder that many people link the idea of “the farm” with simplicity, happiness, and comfort. And since the landscape depicted is the very same one described by Case in his article, it makes further sense that those feelings would be associated with it. To this end, companies often use those same images on their food packaging in an effort to link their products with feelings of ease, happiness, health, and purity. If a milk carton has a happy cow standing in front of a red and white barn in a green landscape bathed in golden sunlight, then it must be good. It does not matter if someone lives in the high desert of Eastern Oregon, the dry pastures of Montana, or the lush swamps of Louisiana, green hills, golden sunlight and a red barn with white trim will always conjure up the notion of “farm” in their heads. And there is one animal that is so often associated with both of these ideas that it, too, has become synonymous with the ideal farm and farmer: The chicken.

Just as the ideal farmer is embedded in the minds of Americans from a very early age through children’s songs and rhymes, the chicken is almost always pecking around the farmyard alongside him. Historically, they are almost always included in the lyrics of

“Old MacDonald Had a Farm,” even the very early ones. Because of this, every video and book featuring that same song includes images of chickens and since the farmer is included in every verse, he is also depicted as interacting with or walking among his chickens. Even if the video is more abstract and focuses solely on the animals, the background is almost always that of green fields and glowing sunshine, naturalizing the presence of the animals there. Therefore, the chicken inhabits the ideal farming landscape and is as natural there as the ideal farmer. Chickens are also featured in both the images and the narration of the Ram Trucks “Farmer” commercial. They are referenced as “pink combed pullets,” that a farmer must be gentle enough to “tend” (Ram Trucks, 2014). Though an image of a chicken is not shown to go along with the words, a fluffy yellow peep is shown standing in the big, worn hands of a farmer in the quick montage close to the end of the commercial as Harvey is listing off yet more things that farmers must be able to do. Because this is a truck commercial, the emphasis is on bigger livestock like cows and sheep and on vegetable crops, but I contend that there would be a gaping, chicken-shaped hole in our imaginations if chickens were left out of the enumeration of tasks and animals involved in farming. The photographs of more realistic (though no less idealized) farmers and farm landscapes also serve to ground the ideal farmer and his chickens into ‘real life’ the way that the Youtube videos of *Old MacDonald Had a Farm* grounds them in the popular imagination.

The second “traditional” image associated with chickens and urban farming is that of the rugged, self-sufficient pioneer pulling a living out of an often-hostile environment. Images of the Oregon Trail, the Dust Bowl, and lonely homesteads of every variety come to mind immediately, as does that of chickens scratching around in the

hard-packed dirt yard in front of a log-cabin in the middle of nowhere. Instead of the ideal farmer, this figure is the ideal homesteader with the ideal homestead. The key word here is “self-sufficient” which carries connotations of independence, resourcefulness, and thrift. This is the notion of an American as rugged, practical, and able to survive in even very adverse conditions. Though these values are similar to those encoded in the ideal farmer and ideal farming landscape, the emphasis in this case is more on survival and subsistence in the face of adverse circumstances than on ease and plenty gained through hard work in a fertile landscape. This figure, too, can be traced back to the origins of the United States.

The expansion westward and The Oregon Trail really cemented the homesteader in the American cultural identity through the 1862 Homestead Act of Congress which sought to relieve the pressure of the poor on cities by sending them to settle the rest of the continent. This act “accelerated the settlement of the western territory by granting adult heads of families 160 acres of surveyed public land for a minimal filing fee and 5 years of continuous residence on that land,”<sup>49</sup> so many people journeyed West in an effort to make a better life for themselves and their families by building and maintaining a homestead<sup>50</sup>. These mythic pioneers (mythic because we are dealing with ideals) of the mythic American Frontier (Stoeltje 1987) are deeply embedded in the American identity and imagination, as William Cronon points out in his article “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” Cronon cites Victor Turner as

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<sup>49</sup> "The Homestead Act." Ourdocuments.gov. Accessed June 11, 2015.  
<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=31>.

<sup>50</sup> According to the website, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=31> } (accessed June 11, 2015), this act was “no panacea for poverty” because so few people were actually able to afford to build a farm, let alone acquire the necessary “tools, seed and livestock.”

expressing the most succinct statement of this myth and summarizes how Turner saw this process as allowing the people moving west to re-infuse “themselves with a vigor, with independence, and a creativity that were the source of American democracy and national character,” (1996: 76). Though Turner and Cronon focus more on the individual experience rather than the families that went west to seek their fortunes, it points to the way that Americans have been establishing homesteads as a way to find independence and their “true selves” for a very long time and this dynamic still resonates in similar ways today.

The ideal homesteader is also closely connected with The Back to the Land movement in all of its manifestations over the years. Getting away from the crushing routine of the city and moving out to the country is hardly a new idea. Most people in the United States are familiar with The Back to the Land Movement from its popularity in the 1960’s and 70’s, but it has been losing and regaining popularity since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the industrial revolution (Brown 2011, 3). The cyclical renaissance of this movement has, over the years, almost always been in response to some sort of economic crisis. Dona Brown says that there “was a series of financial crises: a panic in 1893 had brought on a severe depression that lasted years” and “A short period of recovery was interrupted by another panic in 1907,” (2011: 3) that triggered the beginnings of The Back to the Land Movements. Going back to the land became a way for city people to “defend oneself against depressions, panics, joblessness, high prices, and low wages,” (2011: 27). The focus was on “independent subsistence,” and “food self-sufficiency,” (2011: 29) because economic downturns inevitably led to an increase in the prices of food and other necessities of life. Along with farming, chicken-keeping was often promoted

not only as a viable source of protein for the Back to the Land homesteader, but also as a viable source of income because of the relative ease in which one can raise and take care of them. There were even “poultry colonies” set up in California by Charles Weeks, one of the most important authors and figures in history of the Back to the Land Movement<sup>51</sup>. Poultry colonists “worked a one-acre plot and expected to feed themselves from their own gardens and fruit trees,” (2011: 118) and “they had access to a cooperative marketing system” (Ibid.) that they could use to sell their meat birds and eggs. According to Brown, “The dream of self-sufficiency and independent proprietorship was alive and well in these chicken colonies,” (2011: 119). This further demonstrates the strong link between chicken-keeping and the ideal homesteader.

One of the ways in which one can see this link in the urban farming world is through the slew of books with the word “homestead” or “homesteading” in their titles. Amazon.com has 39 pages of books related to the term “urban homesteading,” and that number only grows if the ‘urban’ is removed. Whereas ‘urban farming’ has a heavily idyllic and agrarian set of connotations, ‘urban homesteading’ evokes feelings of hardship, determination, isolation, and an almost apocalyptic need to rely only on oneself. The subtitles of urban homesteading books support this claim. Some are explicit like that of *How to Make Money Homesteading* by Tim Young, whose sub title reads “*Economic Self-Sufficiency for Preppers, Homesteaders and Survivalists: So You Can Enjoy a Secure, Self-Sufficient Life*”. The emphasis of survival and relying on oneself can be easily seen, but lurking behind that and behind all homesteading materials is the idea of not relying on the government or city infrastructure for help or necessities. Other books are

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<sup>51</sup> See pages (118-120) in *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in America* for a description of Weeks’s contributions to The Back to the Land Movement.

more gentle and philosophical about the idea of homesteading, like subtitle to *The Homesteading Handbook* by Abigail Gehring: *A Back to Basics Guide to Growing Your Own Food, Canning, Keeping Chickens, Generating Your Own Energy, Crafting, Herbal Medicines, and More*. The list of skills points to the ability to survive in any type of circumstance, particularly difficult ones. Note that chicken-keeping is one of the skills listed, thereby implying that it is also an essential survival skill. Many of the people with whom I worked have read these same books or books very like them, which indicates that these images and ideas are alive and well in their imaginations. Consequently, the figure of the homesteader in the wilderness occupies a similarly traditional space as does the ideal farmer in the minds of urban chicken-keepers and because chickens are often linked both visually and rhetorically with it, they see urban chicken-keeping as a traditional activity.

#### *Frequent Repetition through Time and Space*

Frequent repetition through time and space is the third mechanism through which a practice is traditionalized. Hobsbawm and Ranger state that “inventing traditions” is often “a matter of formalization and ritualization” of an already extant practice (1983: 4), and as such, the urban chicken-keeping community in Eugene is in the process of establishing chicken-keeping as just such a pre-existing practice. There are ways in which urban chicken-keeping is being repeated over time and space, but because it is a nascent tradition the repetitive elements I identify do not all look like repetition as such. Instead, these elements are paving the way for repetitions in later years that will more firmly cement urban chicken-keeping as a traditional practice in Eugene.

Frequent repetition is built into the daily realities of chicken-keepings itself and the way that the chicken-keeping routine frames the entire day for chicken-keepers is the perfect example of Gilman's point about repetition. My own chicken routine and that of almost all of the respondents to my survey was some variation on the following: get up in the morning, let the chickens out and freshen their feed and water; check on them in the afternoon or evening when you get home; collect eggs; shut them into their coop in the evening; repeat. Chickens are usually up at dawn, so many people have to alter their lives to get up early to "let the girls out," as one survey respondent put it. Because chicken coops are normally located outside and away from the house, chicken-keepers also have to go outside at an early hour, which can be miserable in bad weather. The large number of calls about and requests for automatic coop-door openers that I fielded at The EBYF showed me that while this portion of the routine was unpopular, people were looking for ways to make it easier, which speaks to their dedication to the practice. When each and every day begins and ends by interacting with the chickens, those birds and the practice becomes embedded into the fabric of one's life. This is further magnified if there are children involved, because the practice becomes even more intentional and functions as part of the structure of their lives. It gets embedded into their early consciousness and associated with home and comfort, which might lead to a continuation of chicken-keeping or even its renaissance later in their lives.

The EBYF also ensures that urban chicken-keeping is repeated through time by its very existence and by promoting the practice both in the shop and on its Facebook page. The EBYF has a much more concrete, vested interest in promoting and sustaining the urban chicken-keeping population in Eugene because it depends on these people for

its survival and success. So, Bezuk does everything he can to make urban chicken-keeping as easy and attractive as possible. One of the most effective ways he does this is by using the shop as an extended showroom for the urban farming methods, tools, and techniques that he recommends, which is an integral part of his business philosophy, (personal interview, Feb. 2012). The grounds of “what was once an auto repair garage,”<sup>52</sup> now sports three chicken coops with about five chickens and five turkeys living there, two top-bar beehives, multiple potato towers, and numerous vegetable plots in raised beds surround the main building and its large parking lot. The lush and productive landscaping evokes feelings akin to those conjured up by the ideal farming landscape discussed earlier and encourages the customer to explore the grounds with each visit to find out what has changed and what’s new. By actively demonstrating things like growing potatoes in potato towers, keeping bees in top-bar beehives, and trying out various heritage or new plant varieties Mr. Bezuk is actively bridging the gap between the knowledge gained through reading books and the knowledge gained by experience. He experiments with waterers and various methods of keeping the water fresh, different types of bedding in the coops, predator protection systems and more. In this way he can reliably recommend or dissuade people from one method, tool or other. By doing so, he is, in effect, telling his customers that if he can do it, then they can definitely do it, (personal interview, Feb. 2012). By keeping things visually attractive, he puts customers at ease and evokes the feelings similar to those related to the ideal farmer and the ideal farming landscape as well as making the practice amenable to those who do not classify

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<sup>52</sup> "The Eugene Backyard Farmer." The Eugene Backyard Farmer. Accessed June 11, 2015. <http://eugenebackyardfarmer.com/>.

themselves as a “hippie.” He makes urban chicken-keeping seem more possible for his customers, which leads to more and more of them taking up the practice.

The EBYF also encourages the repetition of chicken-keeping by emphasizing the adaptability of the practice. Though there is a set of basic requirements, skills and tasks associated with urban chicken-keeping (land, space, tools,), Bill and his employees emphasize that customers should feel free to adapt any part of it to suit their own needs and the needs of their particular urban environments. Though they will answer any questions to the best of their ability and will sometimes express personal preference, the emphasis is on the way that there is no one right way of doing things and if you can solve the problem on your own, so much the better. On two occasions I witnessed Bill actively dissuade customers from buying pre-fabricated nest boxes<sup>53</sup> in the shop because he was sure that they could build it at home, putting affordability for the customer ahead of profit for the shop. On another occasion, I overheard a customer talking with Bill about buying an adult-sized waterer for the peeps he was going to buy soon. Because I knew that it is possible for chicks to drown in those, I joined the conversation to question the customer’s choice. Bill informed me that the gentleman in question was planning to place small, clean, and smooth river rocks in the bottom of the waterer to make it shallow enough for peeps. After the customer left, he reinforced with me in conversation that one of the shop’s values was to promote “more than one way of doing things,” and that I should be more open-minded when interacting with the customers. Promoting such a sense of thrift and husbandry, (invoking Jefferson and Berry) empowers the customer and engenders loyalty to the shop. Chicken-keeping becomes that much more doable and attractive,

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<sup>53</sup> A nest box is exactly what it sounds like: a small container of some sort in which chickens lay their eggs. In this case the container in question was a kit with pre-cut plywood sections for a 1x1x1 foot cube, something that can be easily assembled at home with some scrap wood and a screw-gun.

which makes it more likely to be repeated. In this way, The EBYF simultaneously facilitates the repetition of urban chicken-keeping and secures its customer base, demonstrating its role in the dynamic of traditionalization.

Another way that The EBYF is emphasizing the repetition of urban chicken-keeping in Eugene is through the events that it sponsors, participates in, and produces during the year. Aside from regular “Chicken 101” classes, events like the “Visit Cooptown USA” self-guided tour and the annual Eugene BAWK Celebration that were described in chapter II provide opportunities for chicken-keepers to share their enthusiasm, knowledge, and ideas, not to mention providing fun activities and a generally good time. The repetitive nature of these events helps to encourage the repetition of urban chicken-keeping through time and space. That they recur at once gives urban chicken-keepers something to look forward to as well as providing routine evidence that such a community exists. Both events help to make urban chicken-keeping seem more glamorous, interesting, and possible for newcomers and current practitioners, which helps it to spread into more backyards around the city and beyond. These events are also the place where one can most clearly see the dynamo that is the relationship between urban chicken-keepers and The EBYF. Neither event could happen without the participation of both parties. The EBYF provides the structure of the events: organization, space, time, administration, advertising; the customers and chicken-keepers provide the substance: attendees, stops on the coop tour, participation in performance events like the crowing contest, fashion show, and poetry contest. Without The EBYF stoking the fires, there did not seem to be enough momentum on the part of the chicken-keepers themselves to generate the community events they love so much today.

While the EBYF empowers the customer to change their chicken-set up and routine to suit their needs, the coop-tour allows them to share these triumphs with other people, providing another vehicle through which to encourage the repetition of urban chicken-keeping through time and space: validation. Most people are attracted to urban chicken-keeping because it makes them feel good in one way or another on a personal level, but being able to share one's accomplishments and innovations with an appreciative audience adds an extra layer of appeal that is hard to resist. Because of the DIY nature of many chicken-keepers, their chicken set-ups display a great deal of creativity both visually and structurally, which often functions to inspire other chicken-keepers. Much like the effect of seeing the work that Bill does at The EBYF, seeing the projects and innovations of other chicken-keepers on the coop tour makes the practice seem that much more possible and doable. The BAWK Celebration accomplishes something similar, but does it through an emphasis on community and competition rather than on sharing information and knowledge. As with the coop tour, it is such a fun event that people will want to be part of it and it reflects well on Bill and The EBYF that such a vibrant community is willing to come out and celebrate with them. It is an excellent advertisement for the shop as well as a strong lure for the practice of chicken-keeping. Both events are so fun that non-chicken-keepers who attend often become inspired and want to take up the practice and become part of this community. Also, people who already have chickens often want to participate in next year's event and will continue to keep chickens as a result. Therefore, both events present the urban chicken-keeping community as a fun and exciting "club" that is very attractive to outsiders.

The last element that is making room for the future repetition of urban chicken keeping is the amendment to Council Ordinance Number 20507 that passed in February of 2013 by the City Council of Eugene. This amendment allowed more chickens (and other livestock) to be kept within city limits. The limit went from only 2 adult chickens per household to “Up to 6 of any combination of chickens and domestic fowl over six months of age and up to 6 of any combination of chickens and domestic fowl under six months of age,” (City Council Ordinance 2013: 5) on “development sites of less than 20,000 square feet and located in a zone that allows “Urban Animal Keeping,”” (Ibid.). The document allows chickens in practically every residential zone in Eugene without requiring the purchase of a permit. The significance of this amendment is that enough people were invested in the idea of being able to keep chickens in the city that they went to the city council and were able to alter the city’s zoning laws. The movement went from the people (the ground) up to the city council and made the city friendlier to urban farming and the keeping of urban livestock. In short, the community of urban chicken-keepers is intentionally making it easier to keep chickens, which makes it more likely that other people will get involved and perpetuate the practice.

#### *Individual and Communal Significance*

The last, and perhaps most important, element of the traditionalization process is that “it must play some role in their individual or collective lives, be it in personal, social, economic, or political ways,” (Gilman 2004: 52-53). Gilman contends that people will only be able to make a practice traditional if “if they come to have real meanings and functions for the people who practice them,” (2004: 53). The importance and meaning that chicken-keepers find in the practice is located in the values that it expresses. As one

respondent said, urban chicken-keeping makes them feel like they are “really living out” their values. These values illuminate what chicken-keeping means to those who practice it as well as what they want it to mean, both of which indicate its importance in their lives. As a general rule, people do not usually add something into their lives unless it benefits them in some way or has an important meaning to them. Chicken-keeping is just such a practice and often fulfills both of those requirements. Furthermore, these three values appear in almost every aspect of chicken-keeping from their goals going in, to the materials with which they choose to build their coops, to the way chicken-keeping makes them feel. Though chicken-keepers get into the practice for many reasons, I have identified three main types of values associated with chicken-keeping that were expressed by almost the people with whom I worked over the course of my research: Self-sufficiency, optimism, and connection.

The first of the values expressed by urban chicken-keepers is self-sufficiency. Besides occurring in survey answers and interviews in exactly that form, this value crops up whenever someone expresses the desire to stay away from store-bought commodities, any worries about the quality and sourcing of food, or wanting to be independent from city infrastructure or institutions. Phrases from my survey question asking about their goals in keeping-chickens, like providing “my household with food,” wanting a “protein source not dependent on the grocery store,” and “they [chickens] teach my son self-reliance,” needing to know where one’s eggs came from, all essentially mean the same thing: a profound distrust of institutions and industries, especially Big Agriculture. Matchar cites this as one of the main motivations behind the rise of what she calls “The New Domesticity”, (2013: 5) which is “a shift away from corporate culture and toward a

more eco-conscious, family-centric, DIY lifestyle,” (2013: 12). Chicken-keepers want to be independent from a food system that they mistrust. Just as self-sufficiency is expressed in the context of goals, it is also expressed as an emotional result of keeping chickens. Survey respondents felt “self-sustained and much more environmental,” as well as that they are “doing something good” for their family “by providing a good food source (in the eggs) that are completely organic and healthy.” Others said that “knowing where our food comes from is important to us,” and still others that it made them feel like they “have a say in how our eggs will be produced.” Words like “self-reliant,” and “sustainable” were also used in similar contexts. For all of these people, having chickens in their backyards answered a need that they all felt to play a more active role in their food system and to do right by their families, which echoes the values symbolized by the ideal homesteader and encoded into Oregon’s pioneer past.

The value of optimism is expressed by chicken-keepers through their repeated assertions in the survey that one of the main reasons for getting chickens is for “fun” or for “entertainment.” 37% of survey respondents (30 out of 82) specifically used those words when describing their goals for chicken-keeping. The emphasis on fun and entertainment implies that they want more entertainment in their lives and also that it is important to them. Chickens are inherently funny creatures. Watching a bunch of fat hens pelting toward me from the other side of their yard, wings flapping madly as if that would make them go faster or watching a group of peeps running around and around their brooder as they case after one of their number that has a treat in its beak is almost guaranteed to bring a smile, if not a laugh to someone watching. By adding laughter and entertainment to one’s life, one is saying that being happy and amused is a thing worth

cultivating, elevating it to the level of a value. As with self-sufficiency, optimism can also be found in how chicken-keeping makes people feel. While the goal is “entertainment,” 48% of respondents (30 out of 62) used words like the joy, happiness, relaxation, laughter and pride to describe their feelings about chicken-keeping. So not only do people intend to get some fun out of owning a flock of chickens, it actually does make them happier.

Another way that optimism is expressed by urban chicken-keepers is through their emphasis on using chicken-keeping to educate their children. This particular goal is a more concrete expression of this value, since it is essentially an act of hope for the future. As the saying goes, our children are our future. By providing “life lessons” and “animal husbandry lessons,” for them as respondents reported, urban chicken-keepers are striving to give their children skills to help them live well in the future. In fact, these chicken-keeping parents are attempting to pass on the values of self-sufficiency and connection to their children, illustrating the interconnectedness of these values. Parents want to equip their children with skills and values that will help them live well throughout their lives and the way they are going out of their ways to include chicken-keeping in that set of skills is evidence that they find some intrinsic value in the practice and they are guarding against the possibility that this skill set might really be needed in the future.

The last category of values is that of connection, the feeling of being “part of something” as one survey respondent articulated it, of being in a relationship with something other than one’s self. Matchar and many other authors would attribute this value to the “feeling of disconnection with our high-tech work lives,” (2013: 100) that is

one of the main motivations for the rise of DIY culture and urban farming in recent years, a standpoint that I have noticed often in my interactions with chicken-keepers in Eugene. It seems that connection is one of the most powerful aspects of urban chicken-keeping precisely because it remedies that particular dissatisfaction. Survey responses support this point. Respondents reported that urban chicken-keeping made them feel like they were “more tied with lands, roots, human experience,” and like they were “getting back to nature,” statements which imply that these things are missing from their general lives. Cronon points out that wild nature, or wilderness, is conceptualized by most people as being the diametric opposite to modern life. This opposition carries a heavy moral connotation with it and places the wilderness in the realm of the sacred and pure while human civilization is characterized as irreparably corrupt and destructive. This same dichotomy is at work in the survey responses mentioned above, though in this case it is the nature found in one’s backyard farm rather than the wilderness that is being contrasted with modern life. Of course, there is a dichotomy inherent in this as well, since the farm is just as human-intensive as is everyday life, but the moral and ethical baggage attached to the idea of the farm functions in the same way. So, for urban chicken-keepers to say that the practice makes them feel more connected to nature, to the land, and to the seasons (Urban Chicken-Keeping Survey, 2014) implies that this is something that they want and that was less present in their lives before they began keeping chickens.

One of the ways in which this connection manifests is through being “in touch with the cycle of the seasons.” As explained earlier, chicken coops are normally located in the backyard, which means that the chicken-keeper must go outside in all seasons and all weathers to care for their flock. Though the time they spend may be short, this daily

dose of nature is enough for them to take notice of whether or not it is sunny or raining or windy. Furthermore, having an animal that lives outside (unlike most dogs and cats) makes most people pay much more attention to the weather so that they can take good care of them. In this way urban chicken-keepers find themselves more connected to nature and the seasons. Another form of connection fostered by urban chicken-keeping is similarly associated with the nature/civilization dichotomy, but takes the form of a distrust of the current US food system. In keeping with the sentiments expressed in my survey around the value of self-sufficiency, urban chicken-keepers feel “connected to our food stream,” and “closer to the food chain,” because they “have a say” in how their eggs are produced and know “whose eggs I’m eating and what they ate and what happened to them that day.” The use of “whose” denotes both the connection to the food, but also the personal connection to the bird itself. The chicken is seen, for all intents and purposes, as a “person,” which also highlights the connection formed with the birds themselves.

The connection between urban chicken-keepers and their birds is most easily seen in the great affection they express towards them and in the way they are often anthropomorphized and seen as part of the family. This connection usually starts right away in the journey of urban chicken-keeping. 88% of respondents reported that they chose to raise their flocks from chicks, which reflects my observations from the shop. Raising and interacting with peeps is one of the biggest draws for urban chicken-keepers. Mostly this is because baby chickens are tiny and adorable, but also because if you get them very young, the chicks are easier to socialize and so will be friendlier and even affectionate toward their keepers. The combination of the decision to take care of the chicks, the ease of socializing them, and their cuteness is a recipe for attachment and

connection. Furthermore, chickens, like most animals, have very distinct personalities and each chicken-keeper gets to know the personalities in his or her flock over the course of their interactions. Though it did not appear often in the survey responses, learning about each chicken's personality was a great source of wonder for many people. That they had personalities at all was often a source of wonder for customers at the shop. That chickens naturally establish a hierarchy, or pecking order, also helps in this regard because there will always be a dominant hen and the one who is at the bottom of said pecking order. This hierarchy makes it much easier for humans to anthropomorphize their charges.

Naming is one of the most prominent ways in which chickens are anthropomorphized, and consequently of forging a connection between them and their keepers. Of the 70 people who offered up their chickens's names and/or breeds in the survey, 71% named their birds, while the remaining 29% did not. Those who did not name their flocks gave reasons ranging from "We have too many to name" to "no names—they are food," which indicates that their connection to their animals is based more in the "food source" aspect rather than to the animal as an individual or that they want to avoid creating a bond with the animals and then feel sorrow when they slaughter them. Giving an animal a human name symbolically endows it with "personhood" and gives them the status of a pet rather than food, even though they do produce food in the form of eggs. For the most part, the names given to chickens do not contain any obvious external significance, though there is often a general old-fashioned feel to them<sup>54</sup>. Other names have more explicit themes, like the respondents who named their flocks after

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<sup>54</sup> Names like Erma, Betty, Lucy, Ethel, and Harriet are the ones that evoke older times.

flowers and characters from the TV show *The Walking Dead* respectively<sup>55</sup>. Theming the names is a way for the chicken-keeper to cement the attachment to the birds as well as being a way for them to imprint their own personalities onto their flock. Even if there is no discernable theme, many chickens keepers chose the names of characters from popular culture, like “Captain Kathryn Janeway” and “The Chicken aka Chicken Who,” though at least one chicken -keeper chose a name that is part of the local Eugene culture and named their chicken “Jeff...named for a guitarist in the local band, The Lowmen.” The breed of that particular chicken is called “Lohman Brown,” which is pronounced exactly like the name of the band. Naming them after favored fictional or real characters is a gesture of affection that immediately fosters a personal connection to the animal. The respondent who named their flock after flowers also reported that they “refer to them as our “bouquet,”” which showcases that attachment. Other flocks have names like “Sparkle Bow,” “Twilight Sparkle,” and “Misthorse” seem like they might have been named by children (though not necessarily). Despite this uncertainty, my observations at The EBYF tell me that a large portion of chicken-keepers have children, and so it is an aspect of the naming process that is worth investigating. Having a child name an animal is a sure-fire way for them to become attached to it, and often results in a sense of ownership, a further layer of attachment, and often the parent becomes all the more attached to the animal after seeing the child’s affection for it. The connection with chickens that results from naming and generally anthropomorphizing them is sought after because it helps to take us out of the stresses of the daily grind and reminds us that there is a bigger context to life.

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<sup>55</sup> Because the question did not ask for explanation or clarification of the significance of the names, I cannot include anything that I do not recognize myself.

As one respondent said, “I love my girls. Keeping them safe and healthy makes me feel like a better human. Taking care of small things is a very soulful and humble endeavor.”

Connection to other people is also associated with urban chicken-keeping. This form of connection is tied to the imaginary golden agrarian past discussed earlier because part of that fantasy world includes closer ties to one’s community. It is the world in which one knows the butcher, the baker, the dairyman, the farmer, and everyone else in their town or community. It is a part of the nostalgia invoked by Michael Pollan, Joel Salatin, Wendell Berry, and many others in their discussions of how disconnected most people have become from the sources of their food and sustenance. This is exactly the kind of “simple life” that Matchar says lies behind the DIY movement and *New Domesticity in General* (Homeward Bound 2013). In the urban chicken-keeping community in Eugene, this desire for connection with others is most often expressed in and around The Visit CoopTown USA Coop Tour and The BAWK Celebration. The easiest place to see this popularity, other than participating, is on the Facebook page. The first year it took place, the announcement for the latter was “liked” by 65 people, commented on by 14 people, but only shared to one other person’s page<sup>56</sup>. This shows that there was a significant amount of interest in the event right off the bat, especially given the enthusiastic comments like “That is really exciting!!,” “Can’t wait!” and “Markin my calender.”<sup>57</sup> Other comments include suggestions to add in activities like “the chicken dance” and to not forget “chicken twister.”<sup>58</sup> The humorous suggestions and

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<sup>56</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "Eugene Backyard Farmer." Facebook. May 24, 2012. Accessed July 10, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/EugeneBackyardFarmer?fref=nf>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

comments show that the community liked the idea of having, as one commenter put it, “an opportunity to celebrate and share our hobby.”<sup>59</sup> After the event, the comments both in the shop and on Facebook were equally laudatory, including phrases like “It was great! You DEFINITELY should do it again,” and “We had a good time! Thanks for the event,”<sup>60</sup> peppering the online platform. One participant even said that “Evan [presumably her son] said yesterday, “I can't wait for next year's Bawk Festival!” The second year that the event took place showed its remarkable success with the announcing post receiving 43 likes, 11 comments, and a whopping 30 shares. That the online community went so far as to share the event with other people speaks to their desire for connection, as well as the way that the numbers went up after the first year. Through the chicken-keeping events put on by The EBYF, it can be seen that urban chicken-keepers desire and value connection with other chicken-keepers just as much as they do a connection with their animals, their food and the land.

The significance of urban chicken-keeping in the lives of those who practice it comes down to an expression of values. As has been shown, the values in this case are self-sufficiency, optimism, and connection. Because urban chicken-keeping is the context in which all three of these values are expressed, it makes sense to see that practice as being the vehicle for those values. In other words, by choosing to keep chickens, urban chicken-keepers are reinforcing, communicating, and demonstrating the importance of these values in their lives. Thus, by seeking to traditionalize this practice, they are also

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "Eugene Backyard Farmer." Facebook. May 24, 2012. Accessed July 10, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/EugeneBackyardFarmer?fref=nf>.

seeking to perpetuate these particular values both in their own lives and in their city and community.

### ***Conclusion***

Though the urban chicken-keeping community is nascent, there are clear signs that this practice is being traditionalized. The motivation is coming from the urban chicken-keepers themselves along with the help of The EBYF. The change in direction of traditionalization means that some of the steps Gilman describes look differently in the case of urban chicken-keeping in Eugene. For example, though it is easy to connect urban chicken-keeping with local cultural practice in Eugene, it is much harder to spot the rhetorical labeling because it is much less explicit than in Gilman's examples. Similarly, because of the nascent nature of this particular tradition, it is not as easy to identify "frequent repetition through time and space," (Gilman 2004: 44) part of the traditionalization process. Rather, what one can see is that urban chicken-keepers and The EBYF are in the process of making it easy to get involved with and continue keeping chickens in the city. The repetitive nature of the chicken-keeping routine itself is a powerful force in perpetuating the practice but changing the livestock zoning ordinance to allow for more animals, participating in annual chicken-keeping events and the business philosophy of The EBYF are smoothing and paving the way for future repetitions and therefore the perpetuation of urban chicken-keeping in Eugene. And yet all of these things will amount to nothing unless the people in question find some sort of personal meaning in the practice being traditionalized or that it play some role their individual or communal lives (2004: 52-53). One of the lines of inquiry used to guide the research for this project was an exploration of what values were expressed by urban

chicken-keepers in Eugene and it is these values that provide the meaning for why urban chicken-keepers are traditionalizing the practice of urban chicken-keeping. The values of self-sufficiency, optimism, and connection are writ large across this community and reveal a group of people experiencing varying levels of anxiety and dissatisfaction with the way their world is working, but who want to find ways to make things better. For them, chicken-keeping is the way to remedy these things.

## CHAPTER IV

### REFRAMING THE FUTURE: WHAT URBAN CHICKEN-KEEPERS IN EUGENE ARE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH THROUGH TRADITIONALIZATION

In the past two chapters I have illustrated and analyzed the urban chicken-keeping in Eugene and the ways in which it is striving to traditionalize the practice, respectively. Though both of these topics provide crucial context to understanding the urban chicken-keeping community in Eugene, the question left unanswered is “why?” The answer lies in a dynamic often called re-skilling by scholars, especially those studying DIY and urban farming movements (Matchar 2013). Urban chicken-keeping as a practice requires the participant to learn a different and often new skill set that includes the care and handling of the birds themselves as well as things like construction and material problem-solving. The re-skilling involved in the practice of urban chicken-keeping is an important way through which urban chicken-keepers can create a better future for themselves and for their loved ones. This dynamic has risen to prominence in response to the anxieties urban chicken-keepers express about the present and especially about the future. These include anxieties about food safety, overdependence on a broken and unhealthy industrial/corporate infrastructure, as well as worries about the environment and disasters brought on by climate change. Of course, those fears might not turn into realities, but the anxiety they produce is still very real. The expression of these values not only points to the anxieties besetting urban chicken-keepers, but they also point to the ways in which this practice is being intentionally used to reframe, and in some cases recreate, the future in a more optimistic light. It might seem absurd, at first glance, to claim that urban chicken-keepers are using urban chicken-keeping as a tool

with which to intentionally construct a new and better future, but a quick summary of the nature of tradition and traditionalization as used in this thesis shows that it is not.

Because traditions are present-time references to a value-encoded past, their continual practice results, theoretically, in the perpetuation of those values (and the identity associated with it) into the future. Adding in the idea of traditionalization as discussed in chapter III means that any effort at traditionalization is also an effort to create or recreate the future. In other words, if traditions are the creation of the future out of the past, it follows that when a group of people traditionalizes something they are trying to create a future that features specific characteristics out of a specific present-day practice associated with a specific past. With this in mind, the traditionalization of urban chicken-keeping in Eugene takes on a whole new cast. By making the practice traditional and encouraging its practice in the present urban chicken-keepers are trying to ensure a future that includes chicken-keeping and the values and identity they have encoded within it. In other words, urban chicken-keeping is being traditionalized because the people who practice it want to continue feeling good about their lives in the present and to know that such satisfaction awaits them in the future as well. Therefore, urban chicken-keepers are traditionalizing urban chicken-keeping in an effort to assuage their anxieties and actively construct a better, happier future. It follows then, that urban chicken-keeping must have had a profound effect on them to cause them to intentionally create a future that includes the practice. Therefore, the question becomes ‘what does chicken-keeping mean to those who practice it?’

### *Anxieties of Urban Chicken-Keepers*

Survey responses indicate that for many people in Eugene, the choice to start raising chickens in one's urban backyard is grounded in some sort of anxiety about the state of the world. Fears about natural and man-made disasters, impending environmental shortages, food system contamination and inhumane practices, governmental collapse and dysfunction, economic collapse, war, rising violent crime rates, animal extinctions, climate change, and other topics are reflected in the news media, online, in films and on television with disturbing frequency and so have become a pervasive, low-level sense of insecurity and anxiety. This "culture of anxiety," (2013: 12) as Matchar put it, is fueled by popular culture and mass media and includes news stories, scientific reports, Hollywood disaster films, and articles shared on Facebook by particularly "conscious" friends. When combined with the 2007-2009 recession and its consequences, it is no wonder that many people are turning back to what they think of as the skills and values of their forefathers in an effort to find their sea-legs in such a turbulent ocean of frightening prospects.

In order to gain insight on this topic, one of the questions I included in my online survey was: "Please describe how chicken-keeping makes you feel." The responses ranged from heartfelt, multi-sentence descriptions of their experiences to single words which contained a set of four recurring themes: Happiness and entertainment, accomplishment and pride, a sense of connection and stewardship, and self-reliance. One respondent expressed it best when they called urban chicken-keeping "One of the most satisfying things I have ever done. I feel like I am really living. I feel like I am taking responsibility for feeding myself, and providing for myself, and really living out my

values.” This deep and multi-faceted sense of satisfaction is the perfect antidote to the manifold anxieties that stem from a world where “the economy has been in the toilet for several years now, with little sign of rebound. Our neighbors are laid off, our friends have lost their health insurance...The environment’s a mess—greenhouse gas emissions are spiraling upward and upward, temperatures are spiking, drought billows across the country, politicians do not seem to care [and] the food system no longer seems safe,” (Matchar 2013: 11). The anxieties of urban chicken-keepers fall into three main categories: anxiety about the current US food system and food security, anxieties about over-dependence on the industrial complex, and anxiety about the environmental consequences of everyday living. Though these anxieties are rarely explicitly stated, they can be found encoded into the way the respondents to my survey describe both urban chicken-keeping and urban farming. Understanding these anxieties is an essential part of understanding why people find re-skilling involved in urban chicken-keeping so powerfully attractive.

Anxieties about food security and concern about the industrial agriculture complex are a consistent theme in the way that urban chicken-keepers in Eugene talk about their backyard flocks. Though the term “food security”<sup>61</sup> is usually used in terms of food deserts and the actual access to food for people around the poverty line, but in the context of urban chicken-keepers, the focus is on “safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.”<sup>62</sup> Because of this context, in questions about urban farming and

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<sup>61</sup> Food security was defined in 1996 by the WHO as “existing when “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.” This definition also includes “both physical and economic access to food that meets people's dietary needs as well as their food preferences.”

<sup>62</sup> “Food Security.” WHO. Accessed July 13, 2015. <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/cn/>.

their goals for chicken-keeping, responses focus on the quality of food available at grocery stores, reflecting the aforementioned “growing distrust of the industrial food system,” (Matchar 2013: 16). The eggs featured in every single articulation of chicken-keeping goals from the online survey are often accompanied by adjectives like “fresh,” “healthy,” “organic,” and even “free range.” These are all words associated with quality, further implying that the supply of eggs readily available to this group of people through regular channels (i.e. grocery stores) is not meeting their standards. Of course, for the most part, eggs from backyard chickens supplement eggs bought at the store, so it is not a do or die situation. However, the implications behind those words are still there; they do not trust industrially farmed eggs and so they set out to produce their own. They want to “know where they came from, what the chickens ate, etc....”<sup>63</sup> It is worth noting, at this point that the people with whom I worked are a privileged group on many levels. They almost all identify as white, they have leisure time, and they almost all have disposable income. This means that though they already have access (by virtue of their socio-economic bracket) to a great deal of nutritious food, they have the time, money, and energy to actively worry about its quality and to reject it in favor of homegrown or organic options. This point of view and course of action is not any less valid than another one, but it is important to properly contextualize the motivations of this group in order to understand what is going on and whose practices are being traditionalized.

Anxieties about food quality are also built right into the way that urban chicken-keepers in Eugene think about urban farming in general. When asked to define urban farming in their own terms, respondents provided answers that included “safe food” and an emphasis on helping “your family eat better,” immediately highlighting worries about

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

the quality and safety of the food they find at the grocery stores. Other respondents were more explicit about this distrust, citing “a lack of dependence on large chain markets and mass produced foods” and having “a local sustainable provision of food for family,” as their definitions. Documentaries like *Food Inc.* and *Supersize Me* along with the work of Michael Pollan and Joel Salatin among many others form the foundation of this distrust, but the many large-scale food recalls that have taken place over the last ten years have really driven the point home. This very real anxiety is leading people to “only trust our own food or our local organic farms,” (Urban Chicken-Keeping Survey, 2014). In this context, raising chickens becomes more attractive as a way to protect oneself from these recalls. But even backyard chickens can carry salmonella. According to the Backyard Poultry page of the Center for Disease Control’s website, “Live poultry may have *Salmonella* germs in their droppings and on their bodies (feathers, feet, and beaks) even when they appear healthy and clean,” as well as being found on anything that the birds use, live, or interact with, so they recommend washing one’s hands “so you don’t get sick.”<sup>64</sup> Despite this danger, chicken-keeping remains popular and is still perceived as safer than buying industrially produced eggs and poultry<sup>65</sup>.

Overdependence on technology and modern infrastructure is another powerful anxiety expressed by chicken-keepers. In general, this group of people is uncomfortable with modern society’s high level of dependence on modern technology, oil, and industrialized food system. The focus here is on the question of what would happen if

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<sup>64</sup> "Keeping Backyard Poultry." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. August 5, 2015. Accessed August 6, 2015. <http://www.cdc.gov/features/salmonellapoultry/>.

<sup>65</sup> In the brooder room at The EBYF, there are bottles of Purell hand sanitizer within easy reach of every bin of chicks to protect the customers. The shop always advises people that it is best not kiss the peeps, which surprisingly enough, is the first impulse of many children and adults) and to wash their hands after handling anything related to the chickens, including the eggs.

disaster struck and these highly automated, technology-based systems were to shut down. Many people are worried that grocery stores would run out of food too quickly in an emergency situation or that the disaster would be so intense that help would not arrive for many days, or even at all. For instance, one survey respondent described urban farming as “a way to practice resilience. I have a source of food no matter what happens to disrupt the regular food supply.” The amount of anxiety in this response is breathtaking. This person is not only thinking about the possibility of major disruption of the food supply; they are talking about it in almost certain terms. It sounds like they expect it to happen. The notion of practicing resilience also reflects this anxiety. Disaster is built into the meaning of the word itself in its modern definition: “The quality or fact of being able to recover quickly or easily from, or resist being affected by, a misfortune, shock, illness, etc.”<sup>66</sup> So, by practicing resilience, this respondent is in effect training for the time when he or she will need to be able to respond to and recover quickly from difficult circumstances. Most of the other expressions of this anxiety in my survey are not nearly as intense and focus on mitigating or doing away with dependence “on the government and grocery stores,” or on having “a local sustainable provision of food for the family.” One of the ironies of this outlook is that urban chicken-keeping would be equally affected by such an interruption of supply lines since urban chicken-keepers usually rely on the availability of store-bought chicken feed for their flocks. The very thing they are employing as a way to avoid technological overdependence is intimately tied to that same technology. This is not meant as a criticism or a value judgment, but is an important part of the puzzle of the values associated with urban chicken-keeping. As many resources on

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<sup>66</sup> “Resilience.” Oxford English Dictionary. Accessed July 7, 2015.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/163619?redirectedFrom=resilience#eid>.

chicken-keeping point out, it is possible to make one's own feed and to give them most of their nutrients with table scraps and space for free-ranging.

Anxieties about dependence are also often transferred to the chicken-keepers's children. Though the usual pet-based skills of animal care and responsibility are expressed by the parents and educators in my survey, some of them want to specifically educate their children "on urban farming practices" and to "teach children about raising livestock," and "self-reliance." That these skill sets are part of Eugene parents's goals for their children shows that they consider them to be both valuable and might be useful in the future. These parents are imagining a future in which knowing how to keep chickens in the city would benefit their children, implying anxiety about being dependent on the grocery store. Some families purchased chickens with the intention to eat them, which furnished yet another possible set of life-lessons for children. These life lessons are also behind the contention that "kids can learn where their food comes from first hand," by having chickens in the backyard. From these survey responses, it becomes clear that chickens provide a set of lessons and experiences that cannot be found with conventional pets and that they provide something important and useful for their children.

The third anxiety that motivates chicken-keepers is a concern for the environmental consequences of everyday living. Words like "sustainability" and "environmental" in the survey signal the presence of this worry. Again, this is intimately tied in with anxieties about the food system and overdependence on it. By keeping chickens, they hope to have "sustainable food production," in their backyards so that they do not have to contribute to the environmental degradation perpetrated by industrial CAFOs (Confined Animal Feeding Operation) and the long distances food often has to

travel before reaching grocery stores. Definitions of urban farming from the survey reveal this anxiety because they involve “living lightly and environmentally responsibly” and “being a responsibly consumer.” Though these sentiments are phrased using positive language they show that chicken-keepers are worried about living harshly, consuming too much, and environmental irresponsibility. Following this logic, urban farming, and so urban chicken-keeping, is held up as an antidote, making respondents feel “sustainable,” “much more environmental,” and “self-sustaining.” The reality of urban chicken-keeping does not always match up with these ideas, however. One can still negatively impact the environment through buying new materials for the chicken-coop, not properly disposing of chicken-waste, throwing away feed sacks instead of re-using them, having lights on in the coop during winter to promote egg laying, and many other ways. As one chicken-keeper put it in the survey, “it’s not special, it’s not cheaper, not more environmentally sensitive than buying eggs at the store, etc.” The important part about this anxiety is that chicken-keepers *feel* like they are doing something good for the environment, they *feel* like chicken-keeping is making them better citizens of planet earth. It is this type of emotional dynamic that lives at the heart of how chicken-keepers are using the practice to make their lives and futures better.

### ***Re-skilling in the Urban Chicken-Keeping Community***

Re-skilling is exactly what it sounds like: the process of learning and gaining a skill. The ‘re-’ is there to denote that the skills in question used to be quite common, but have fallen out of favor, as per Matchar’s definition of “relearning the forgotten self-sufficiency skills of our ancestors,” (2013: 72). She goes on to say that “the re-skilling movement is being embraced for its potential to make homemaking fulfilling,” which is

exactly what is happening for urban chicken-keepers, though in their case it is urban farming rather than homemaking. It all starts with the specific set of skills (often a brand new set) a chicken-keeper must know in order to care for their flock and maximize their productivity. When one learns new skills and practices them enough to become proficient, a sense of accomplishment and well-being is sure to follow. What is more, learning new skills also makes one feel more prepared to deal with the future, even if it is only a little bit.

The re-skilling starts the moment a chicken-keeper comes in to choose their chicks. At the EBYF, the staff can and will tell any customer everything that they need to know to get started with chickens. This explanation takes about 20 minutes to half an hour and is meant to show them just how easy it can be. Usually, the detailed, technical explanation of a particular technique is given first and then followed by a simpler, more colloquial way of achieving the same thing. For instance, teaching them about the temperature at which chicks need to be kept for the six weeks they must live inside follows this pattern. For the first week of their lives, chicks need to be kept at about 90°-95° F and then that goes down by 10° every week after that until they are ready to go outside. At first it sounds complicated and I have observed many looks of concern, customers shifting their weight nervously from foot to foot or rummaging around in purses or pockets to find note paper at this point in the explanation. Luckily, there is a much easier way of figuring out when to adjust the lamp (and consequently the temperature). They can figure this out by reading the behavior of chicks in their brooder and observing where they are positioned and how they are spaced. If the chicks are panting and lined up against the edges of the brooder or are standing anywhere but in the

light of their lamp, then they are too hot and the lamp should be raised. If they are shivering and huddled close together right under the lamp (making a tiny, feathery mosh pit, as I liked to describe it), they are too cold and the lamp needs to be lowered. If they are at optimum temperature, they will be evenly spaced across the brooder and peeping and scratching contentedly away. This is a particularly good example because it involves a low-tech, commonsense-type of observational knowledge: instead of buying a thermometer and monitoring it constantly (though some customers have done just that), all they have to do is glance at their peeps and adjust the lamp accordingly. This sort of hands-on knowledge, though it is given to every single customer interested in buying chicks, functions to help chicken-keepers see that chicken keeping is easy and feel that they know what they are doing. It empowers them to confidently make their own choices where their flock is concerned and like any skill, once learned, it becomes available for a lifetime of use.

Chicken-keepers must also face and learn skills involved in remedying some common but specifically poultry-related issues such as broodiness, molting, or egg-eating. The former is when “a hen’s maternal clock goes off and she sets to hatch eggs.”<sup>67</sup> One day the hen will refuse to get out of one of the nest boxes, will poof up her feathers, and make menacing dinosaur-like screeches if her keeper gets too close to her. The hen is ready to “set” or hatch eggs, even if the eggs are not fertilized and sometimes even if there are no eggs under her at all. A mental switch gets flipped, and the hen will follow her biological programming. This can be problematic for the chicken-keeper because while she is broody, the hen will not lay eggs, and she can possibly hurt herself by not

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<sup>67</sup> Bezuk, Bill. "The Eugene Backyard Farmer." » Blog Archive » Broody Hens. Accessed July 15, 2015. <http://eugenebackyardfarmer.com/broody-hens/>.

drinking or eating enough. While some books say that there is “no cure except to wait,” (Carpenter and Rosenthal 2011: 412) for the 21-day brooding cycle to finish, The EBYF’s website suggests isolating her in a cage with a wire bottom set up off of the ground with food and water, but no nesting material. The air circulating beneath the cage and chicken “will drop her body temperature and she will usually snap out of it in 72 hours,”<sup>68</sup> at which point the hen is returned to the rest of the flock. If she resumes her broodiness, she must be returned to the “broody box” (Field Notes, May 2013) until the spell breaks. The skills involved in this case are those of identification and construction of the broody box, as well as being able to judge whether or not the bird has changed her behavior.

Illnesses and injuries are another part of the chicken-keeping experience and their identification and treatment are a special set of skills that chicken-keepers learn. Respondents reported dealing with things like Sour Crop, worm infestations, lice and mite infestations, foot injuries as well as more serious issues like bumblefoot and egg binding. Most of these things can be treated at home using materials readily available there (apple cider vinegar, hydrogen peroxide, gauze, and bandages) or with products available at the shop like diatomaceous earth, antibiotic ointment, powdered electrolytes, and even antibiotic powders. Sour crop, or impacted crop, for instance can be treated by feeding the chicken extra grit and massaging the crop so that the blockage is removed and can pass through the chicken. Worms, mites, and lice can be dealt with by sprinkling diatomaceous earth on the chickens’s food or directly onto the chickens and their coop. Treating bumble foot and egg binding involve more risk on the part of the chicken-keeper. Bumble foot is a staph infection of the foot that is usually treated with antibiotics,

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

but can require surgery if left unchecked. This surgery is possible to do at home (many chicken-blogs have detailed instructions on how), and chicken-keepers in Eugene have done so according to the survey. This means that they learned how to cut open the foot of their chicken, remove the “core” of the infection, and then sterilize and bandage it all back up again. It is quite the ordeal and a successful ending would definitely leave the chicken-keeper feeling a strong sense of confidence and competence. As with the other skills, once they are learned they can be called on forever after to respond to any problem the chicken-keeper encounters. While The EBYP definitely encourages solving these problems at home, it by no means discourages vet visits. In fact, Bezuk keeps the contact information for the various chicken-friendly vets in town right by the register so they can be provided when needed.

Other very practical skills that one can learn through chicken-keeping are things like composting, chicken food making, carpentry, and even permaculture, depending on how interested the person gets. Carpentry is, perhaps, the most practical of these since it has the widest range of application in the non-chicken-keeping part of people’s lives. In the online survey, 77% of the respondents reported that they chose to build their own chicken coop, showing that this is a skill set that most chicken-keepers in Eugene have access to. As reported in the survey, these building projects range from converting old playhouses and gazebos into coops to building an entirely new structure. For most of the respondents (74%), building their own coop was less expensive than buying an entirely new one and it offered a way to customize the little building to suit their needs. By choosing this option, they are actively adapting this practice to their own specific environment, often with future needs in mind. Furthermore, the emphasis on cost

indicates some financial insecurity because though they want to have chickens in their lives, they do not want to spend much money to set things up. By building a coop instead of buying one, these urban chicken-keepers are trading in this feeling of insecurity for more experience with this particular skill set. Another motivation for building a coop expressed by chicken-keepers in my survey was that it was “part of the chicken raising experience we wanted.” This shows that carpentry and solving the problem of what kind of structure to build is just a part of what it means to keep chickens in the city. That they were intentionally choosing to build one indicates that it is a desirable skill and activity, even if it is not a necessary one. Though many of the respondents already had carpentry/building skills or had a skilled friend or relation do it for them, most of the chicken-keepers built their own coop and so gained or refined their carpentry and engineering skills.

All of these skills and all of that problem solving go into keeping chickens in an urban environment, which means that the average urban chicken-keeper is quite accomplished by the end of their first year. Therefore, it makes sense that being able to do all of these things and being able to reap their rewards would lead to a sense of accomplishment and confidence. Over 30% of respondents used words like that to describe how chicken-keeping made them feel. These people felt “joyful and proud,” as well as “more confident knowing I have eggs in my backyard,” and that it is “one of the most satisfying things I have ever done.” In short, it is precisely because of all of the skills involved in urban chicken-keeping that people feel “just a little bit self-sustained,” and “like a badass.” It is because of those skills that urban chicken-keeping makes people feel good about themselves and their lives. These feelings of confidence and satisfaction

derive from newly acquired skills, and when combined with a reliable method of obtaining those feelings and experiences, results in a powerful and positive view of the future. Furthermore, they provide a large part of the folkways of the community, since everyone has to learn them in some way and often this is as much from fellow members as they are from internet sites and books. It is easy to see that such a large volume of skills would result in a powerful feeling of self-sufficiency and security and of being in control. When someone learns a skill in one area, it makes it much easier to branch out and learn others or to master more difficult skills in that same arena. Chicken-keeping yields dividends of emotional satisfaction and because of the community effort to change the livestock zoning laws in the city, they know that they can continue the practice in the future.

### ***Chicken-Keeping as an Act of Optimism***

Simply stated, chickens make people happy. They bring a certain joy and fun and even peace to the lives of many who choose to have them in their backyards. This is, I think, the most significant emotional effect that chickens have on their owners. They are a joy to watch and interact with at all stages in life: from fluffy peep to gangly adolescent to mature hen there is always something interesting to observe. This happiness and sense of well-being is important because participating in something that brings a person joy will definitely help them to see the future in a brighter light. In other words, chickens bring joy to the present and they also help people feel better about the future. Aside from their natural, awkward hilarity, chickens can also become very attached to their keepers, depending on how much interaction they have had. I have heard stories and seen photos of birds who like to jump on their owner's laps when they sit down and birds who ride

around on their keeper's sneaker. With delights such as these, who would not want to keep getting up in the morning to hang out with their chickens? This sense of satisfaction, when combined with the sense of self-sufficiency that chickens often engender, create a powerful sense of stability, possibility, and control that lend a happier cast to future events. Another way of putting this is that choosing to keep chickens in an urban setting is an act of optimism, of hope for the future; it is a way to reframe an uncertain future in a more positive and hopeful light.

This reframing happens through the emotional effects of chicken-keeping. For instance, chickens function as a stress-reliever for many people. They are “a relaxant from a stressful day,” and make people “smile after a hard day of work,” (Urban Chicken-Keeping Survey, 2014). In an interview, William, who is a veteran of the Vietnam War and a retired EMT, described how he gets “really keyed up” about a lot of things, but that he calms down very quickly if he goes outside into his garden and sits in his black plastic chair and watches the chickens, (Personal Interview, Feb 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013). Because of this his wife, Shannon, calls their chickens “blood pressure medicine,” (Ibid.). I have heard similar stories from customers in the shop and have had that experience myself. Watching a group of hens scratching around is, in my experience, a lot like watching fire: fascinating, calming, and sometimes restorative. One customer at The EBYF repeatedly told me that chickens “are the best therapy I’ve ever had,” and that they could have “saved so much money on therapy bills” if only they had gotten chickens years ago, (Field Notes, January 2013). A survey respondent said that they “would not go back to life without chickens,” and if chicken-keeping can solve so many of these

problems, who would? What is more, one gets the feeling that many chicken-keepers feel that the more chicken-keepers there are the happier the world seems to be.

Optimism is also expressed by urban chicken-keepers through the emphasis on educating children. Chicken-keeping parents in Eugene want to use their flock to show their children where eggs actually come from: not from Styrofoam or cardboard containers in a brightly-lit case at the grocery store, but rather from a chicken that has eaten a lot of feed, bugs, and plants. Educating them on the hows and whys of raising chickens will also, theoretically, help them to be self-sufficient in the face of future crises and difficulties. And it is not just parents that are seeking to educate their children using a flock of chickens. At The EBYF I have had several conversations with elementary school teachers who get some peeps every spring for her class to raise and take care of. The kids get to feed them, water them, watch them learn and grow and then, in at least one case, the adult hens get to live in a coop on the school grounds that the children can visit and take care of. So not only are chickens being incorporated into the education landscape of the home, it is also happening at the level of formal education. Therefore, using chickens as a tool for education is one very strong (and quite literal) way that they are using this practice to create a better and happier future.

It is because urban chicken-keeping is a way out of potential difficulties and a way into a brighter future that people in Eugene are seeking to traditionalize it. This is the true importance of the practice in their everyday lives (Gilman 2004, 53). By turning this practice into a tradition, urban chicken-keepers are, as Glassie says creating “the future out of the past,” (1975: 395). They are taking urban chicken-keeping (a practice associated with the past) and traditionalizing it to make sure that their futures include all

of the skills, associations, values, and feelings that chicken-keeping engenders in them. They want to create an environment wherein those values and feelings are validated, supported, and widely held. Simply put, chicken-keeping makes people feel better about the world and who would not want to make sure that those things will exist in the future?

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the expressive culture and values of urban chicken-keepers who patronize The EBYF in Eugene, Oregon in an effort to understand why so many people have made the practice a part of their lives and identities and whether or not it has engendered a community. It has argued that this expressive culture shows how they are traditionalizing the emergent practice of urban chicken-keeping in an effort to actively construct a better and happier future. In order for traditionalization to work, there must be some sort of community in which it operates. It is hard to traditionalize something where there is no social cohesion. Through research, fieldwork and analysis, it became apparent that among urban chicken-keepers a sense of community is not fully-fledged and exists primarily in their social imaginary. This does not mean that it does not find expression in the world, however, as the examination of The EBYF's Facebook page, events, and material cultured showed. This community is in the process of forming around the practice of urban chicken-keeping like nacreous layers building up around a grain of sand.

An extension of this process of community constitution is the way that urban chicken-keepers in Eugene are traditionalizing the practice. The three steps of drawing on pre-existing local cultural elements, imbuing it with rhetoric about its traditionality, and ensuring frequent repetition through space and time are represented in the way urban chicken-keeping is talked about and practiced in Eugene. Furthermore, it is clear that urban chicken-keeping does have a special significance and meaning in the lives of those who practice it, which is the last element required for successful traditionalization

according to Gilman (2004). Besides fitting in well with Eugene's agrarian, frontier, and counter-cultural past, chicken-keepers draw on a broad cultural association of chickens and chicken-keeping with the past. As noted by Hobsbawm and Ranger, traditions, especially invented ones, usually make reference to a past of some sort and that past is often fictitious. In the case of urban chicken-keeping, the past being made reference too is an idealized view of an agrarian farming lifestyle and the rugged pioneer scratching a living out of a harsh environment and relying on no one. Repetition through time and space takes the form of making Eugene a more chicken-friendly place by smoothing the way for future chicken-keepers through the amendment to Council Ordinance Number 20507 and through the aforementioned chicken-themed events. The chicken-themed events fulfil this function on a more cultural level by creating spaces for chicken-keepers to express themselves and to socialize with other people interested in the same practices. In this way, Eugene is becoming both a chicken-friendly place in a legal sense as well as in a cultural sense.

Lastly, the individual and communal significance of urban chicken-keeping in the lives of the people who practice it can be divided into three broad categories of values: self-sufficiency, optimism, and connection. Self-sufficiency is held by chicken-keepers across the ideological/political spectrum and speaks to anxieties about the food system, overdependence on technology, and even about governmental or societal collapse. Optimism is expressed by chicken-keepers when they talk about how happy and cheerful having chickens in their backyards has made them. Not only do their silly antics make their keepers laugh, chickens also seem to have the ability to engender calm and contentment in the people who take care of them. In the realm of traditionalization, this

happiness is a powerful motivator for the continuation of the practice of urban chicken-keeping. Connection, the third value expressed by urban chicken-keeping, covers a broad range of subjects like: people, animals, nature, the self, and one's food source. Chicken-keeping provides a bridge over which people from many different backgrounds can connect. This sort of connection is also a part of the ideal agrarian lifestyle that we associate with organic food, farmer's markets, and old-fashioned practices because we imagine a simpler and smaller life where everyone knows everyone and each person is a productive member of the community. It makes chicken-keepers feel good to compare notes and to feel like they are a part of such a community. This is a large part of why chicken-keeping has become so popular. Through the combination and interaction of all of these elements, urban chicken-keepers are making urban chicken-keeping into a common and perhaps even identifying feature of living in Eugene.

But what exactly is this group of people trying to achieve by traditionalizing urban chicken-keeping? The answer, according to this thesis, is that they are using chicken-keeping as an antidote to a variety of anxieties, like worries about food purity, environmental degradation, the tenuousness of our national infrastructure in the face of national disasters, and even governmental collapse. By traditionalizing urban chicken-keeping in Eugene, this group of people is trying to create a better future for themselves and their families. This is being accomplished through the process of reskilling. Though this might seem like a fantastical claim, it is important to remember that the dynamic in question operates primarily on an emotional level and is perception-based. That is to say, while the re-skilling brought about by urban chicken-keeping might not make the world a better place, it makes its practitioners *feel* like the world is better because of it. Their

personal experience is (usually) one of joy, contentment, and satisfaction brought on by learning and becoming proficient the skills inherent in the practice of urban chicken-keeping. They feel powerful because they can take care of their flock and provide a source of food over which they have control. This confidence, combined with the laughter and enjoyment that chickens bring to the lives of almost every chicken-keeper, results in a great deal of happiness in the present, which in turn makes the future seem that much more rosy. Urban chicken-keeping, while it does not truly solve any of the anxieties expressed by chicken-keepers, does provide a sense of control and a sense of connection through the reskilling process. In a world full of bleak predictions about the future of the planet, climate, and society, the sense of accomplishment, control, and confidence created by this one small practice helps to explain its popularity as well as what those who practice it are trying to accomplish through its traditionalization.

It is also important to acknowledge that Bezuk's decision to frame his shop and its social media sites as such a hub was not just based on altruistic desires to bring people together. It is also a shrewd business decision and strategy. By encouraging this community to center around the shop, he is also creating a dedicated and emotionally invested customer base that will, if they stay interested and invested in urban farming, bring more customers to the shop and make it profitable for a long time to come. The EBYF is, after all, a business, as Bezuk never hesitates to point out. In a February 2014 interview, I was struck by his formal tone and the complete lack of romanticization as we discussed the history of the shop. He told me starting the shop was "just a very smart business decision," and that he saw an opportunity and took it. The altruistic aspects of encouraging the formation of community and the traditionalization of these practices are,

in some ways, a happy side-effect of a solid business strategy. This does not mean that it is all cold calculation on his part. On the contrary, in the same interview Bezuk explained that he does think that our society needs to put more energy into the ethic and practice of sustainability rather than excessive consumption (Personal Interview February 2014) and tries to live accordingly. So he does practice what the shop preaches: he has a large garden in his home's backyard as well as caring for a mixed flock of chickens and ducks on top of his responsibilities at The EBYF. These observations are meant as an acknowledgement of the presence of this influence and to situate the EBYF's role and motivation in the urban chicken-keeping community in its business context. But just because business strategies are in play does not in any way discredit or invalidate it. It simply adds a little bit more complexity. In fact, it shows the way that capitalism can work with and through traditions to perpetuate itself, while simultaneously helping to perpetuate these traditions in a world so dependent on capitalism and consumerism. Perhaps this is the foundation for a more ethical capitalism that works with sustainable and environmental ideologies to redress the imbalances in our society and to promote a more equitable, just, and positive economic framework.

### ***Going Forward***

Though this thesis strove to come to grips with an already elusive and complicated subject, there are many more opportunities for research in the realm of urban farming and similar movements both in the US and abroad. Interest in these topics has been growing steadily over the last 10-15 years and at the moment it shows no sign of slowing down, which indicates that these practices and ideas still hold a great deal of meaning to a great deal of people, making them eminently worthy of scholarly attention.

Besides folklorists (who specialize in studying the things that people do when they get together in small groups), geographers, historians, environmental studies scholars, psychologists, and even business scholars are only a few of the disciplines that could benefit from an investigation of these types of topics.

Even in the narrow field of urban chicken-keeping practices in Eugene, Oregon I came across many intriguing topics that could not be included in this thesis. One of these was the way that urban chicken-keeping, and urban farming in general, created a common context in which people of vastly (even radically) different political/ideological positions could communicate civilly and even enthusiastically with each other. According to Matchar, “the interest in reclaiming old-fashioned domestic work crosses all kinds of political, religious, and economic divides,” (2013: 213), a phenomenon which I encountered in my research. Take for instance, the airport experience of Rita, a university professor and self-proclaimed liberal with whom I talked. She told me a story about how she was able to have a sustained, civil, and interesting conversation with a soberly dressed woman “wearing a prominent religious symbol” (Personal Interview, February 2013) because they both had flocks of chickens in their backyards. They were sitting next to each other in an airport during a layover, and though Rita explained to me that she normally has trouble finding non-inflammatory things to talk about with people she perceives to be very right wing, the two of them were able to talk about breeds, eggs, and behaviors as well as to commiserate about the common chicken-based experiences that they both had gone through. It created common ground for both parties and subverted, for that moment, the judgements that often come with those political standpoints. Though I did not collect information about political affiliation in the online survey, a close reading

of car bumper stickers (gathered while loading feed into trunks) along with snatches of overheard conversation and subtle clues during customer interactions showed me that people from all over the political continuum were customers there. This means that The EBYF and its events is a regular locus for the kind of civility and communication that political activists can only dream of. Matchar sums it up nicely when she says that if you “replace NRA bumper stickers with “Know Your Farmer” ones...preppers become fairly indistinguishable from crunchy urban homesteaders,” (2013: 225).

Another fruitful avenue of study I noticed, but could not explore more, was the amount of meaning associated with and wrapped around the chicken. For most of the people I talked with, chickens were a very positive thing that evoked an agrarian golden past or a rugged frontiersman attitude, but for some people they were dirty, loud, smelly things that brought up memories of when they saw their grandmother kill a rooster by whipping it around her head in quick, brutal circles. There have, of course, been several books already written on the history of the chicken and its cultural roles during various periods,<sup>69</sup> but an in-depth examination of the meanings that are being attached to it now and roles it plays in present-day society, as a result of the urban farming and DIY movements, would yield a powerful and interesting new perspective. Especially when contrasted with historical precedents. One need not stop with chickens, either. Ducks and bees have been rising in popularity as well, and, at least in Eugene, it is likely that miniature pigs and goats will be joining them in the future. All of these creatures have symbolic meanings associated with them that are still relevant today but are being adapted to suit modern outlooks and folkways, so it would be beneficial to understand how they fit into today’s world and what their significance is. Humans bring animals into

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<sup>69</sup> See Smith and Daniels 2000, Dohner 2001, and Lembke 2012.

their lives for any number of reasons, and it is always worthwhile to figure out why and what it means.

### *Final Thoughts*

Anytime large groups of people across social, political, economic, and cultural (though that last category did not feature much in my research) boundaries flock to the same practice or sets of ideologies it is a clear indication that something important is going on. Urban Farming and the DIY movement are just such phenomena, making them rich areas for study for folklorists and other scholars. This thesis strove to explore a tiny corner of this world in its effort to understand the popularity of urban chicken-keeping in Eugene. While chicken-keeping in particular may not stay as popular for very long (though I have head opinions on both sides), it is unlikely that these movements will decline in popularity anytime soon, and it will be useful to see which animals (or plants) rise to prominence and why. As for the nascent, urban chicken-keeping community in Eugene, it will be interesting to see how it evolves and expresses itself going forward. One wonders if the idea of a chicken-keeping community will ever accrete enough associations for it to emerge fully from the social imaginary into material world or if urban chicken-keeping will be seen as a traditional Eugene activity at some point in the future. Regardless of future possibilities, this thesis made an effort to shed light on the way that an exploration of one seemingly innocuous and faddish activity can open the door to the complex realm of cultural associations, personal hopes and fears, and the values that people wish to reproduce in their lives.

These thoughts were echoing in my head as my mother and I lined up along the fence outside of The EBYF, hot coffee in hand, at 9am on a cold Saturday in early

October with approximately 25 other people. We were all there to participate in the shop's "Annual Pullet Sale," an opportunity for chicken-keepers to purchase 3-month-old chickens to add to their flock.<sup>70</sup> Though it has been happening for over four years, this was the first time I was participating. My mother and I were there to replace a hen that had died of old age the month before. It was cold in the shade on this side of the fence so everyone held their coffees close to their bodies, shifted their positions to stay warm, and chatted amiably with each other. Five people or so ahead of me a family of five (mom, dad, son, and two daughters) stood together, busily chatting about similar things, but with an emphasis (driven by the youngest daughter) on what they would name the chickens. It was heart-warming to see such enthusiasm and animated discussion. In the bright morning sunlight inside the fence, the two young women who own and operate Rainy Day Poultry were setting up shop inside the back of The EBYF's big box truck. As I was considering (not for the first time) how nice it would be to stand in the sunlight, Bill emerged from the gate and handed each group in line a ticket with a number on it. The numbers on the tickets, he explained, was the order in which we could approach the truck and ask for our birds. "Remember," he reminded us, "this is a first-come-first-served type of thing, so please be understanding and patient if supplies run out." The whole line buzzed with renewed anticipation and I remember hoping fervently that there would still be pullets available by the time our number was called. A few minutes later Bill opened the front gate and we all streamed toward the sun-bathed truck. Gathering with everyone else in front of the truck, I saw that there were three large dog-crates with 20 or more nervous-looking chickens of varying breeds in them. One of the owners of Rainy Day

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<sup>70</sup> At this age they are old enough to live outside, but are not yet laying eggs. This makes them ideal to get in the fall when most chickens slow down or stop laying all together. That way the new girls are ready to start laying in the spring along with the rest of the flock.

Poultry stood inside the truck and was responsible for grabbing chickens out of the crates, while the other young woman was in charge of selecting a box from the large pile sitting next to the truck. Despite their best efforts there were a few near-escapes as pullets were placed into their boxes for transport. Taped half-way up the side of one side of the truck were two cardboard signs with neat letters saying “Roosters Available: Make an Offer” and “\$20 each: Cash or check, please!” As specified, as each number was called out, the corresponding group went up to the truck and requested the number and breeds of birds they wanted.

Standing in the middle of the small crowd and looking around, I saw that my survey results were reflected in the people around me: most of them were between 20 and 50 years of age, most were female, and many of them appeared to have children. The thing that struck me most, however, was how happy everyone seemed to be despite the relatively early hour, chilly temperature, and gentle overtone of competition. Just like at the BAWK Celebration, they were all excited to be participating in this event and seemed to be supportive of each other. I heard several people swapping techniques for introducing new chickens in to a pre-existing flock and others were commiserating about losses to predators and diseases. The family of five I had noticed earlier was standing by the right hand side of the truck, all three of the kids eagerly observing each chicken that was caught, boxed, and taken to their new home. The older daughter (who seemed to be around 9 or 10) was doing excited echappé ballet jumps while her older brother suggested ideas for theming the names for the new chickens around cake (i.e. sprinkles, frosting, cake, etc) with their parents. Other people were still in the process of weighing and balancing the various breeds and soliciting suggestions from the people around them or

explaining their own preferences. There was nothing competitive or holier-than-thou about any of the conversations and all of the advice was freely offered and accepted. All of the interactions I witnessed (aside from one toddler meltdown) were characterized by smiles, encouragement, and laughter. My mother and I ended up picking out a speckled Sussex, a lovely breed with black and white speckles distributed unevenly over a russet-brown background when our number was called. Our new flock-member<sup>71</sup> was pulled out of the frenzy of birds in the crate closest to us, placed into a box, paid for, and handed to us in short order.

On the way out of the parking lot, I turned around and gazed back at the Pullet Sale. Despite the fact that 15 groups (including mine) had been served, there were still 15-20 more people standing in the sunshine by the truck, talking with each other and waiting their turn to pick out chickens. Bill walked among them answering questions and explaining the rules to new arrivals. Participants congratulated each other on their new chickens and commented on how “beautiful” or “cute” they were. And all of this was happening before 11am. Against the lush, green background of the vegetables and fruits the raised beds surrounding the parking lot, the crowd by the truck made a colorful, appealing and idyllic scene of community participation. *This*, I thought to myself, *this is why I chose this area of study. They all care about each other in this moment. There really is something special, positive, and connective going on here.* The warm feelings generated by my experiences lasted throughout the day and continue to bolster my conviction that these things are worthy of study. There is always meaning behind the things that people do and in order to become better citizens of the world, it is incumbent

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<sup>71</sup> We named her “Stardust” in honor of her speckled feathers and because my Mother, my Sister, and I are all fans of Neil Gaiman’s book of the same name. She is currently holding her own with the older hens and growing up nicely. We look forward to when she starts laying in the spring.

upon us as scholars and as individuals to make an effort to understand the people around us. Therefore, an examination of urban chicken-keeping in Eugene is not just an exercise in academic research and writing. It is also an attempt to see the world through someone else's eyes and to foster greater understanding, compassion, and even kindness. This is the quest of the folklorist.

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