**Chapter 5**

**Savouring the Free Lunch: Edible Activism and the Joy of Foraging**

David Chang and Heesoon Bai

**Oysters on the beach**

On a mild afternoon in April, the sky pale with strokes of stratus clouds, we descend a steep embankment and alight on glistening sands along the alcove. At low tide, the waters loom far on the sightline, and the beach runs wide and clean, mirror pools flush green with kelp. Following Cindy, my host at the organic farm, I dredge through thick sand, labouring half a mile toward the water’s edge, coming upon a rocky archipelago, surrounded by a sleet of shells on the sandy bed. Three of Cindy’s friends have already arrived, leisurely digging clam, chuckling in each other’s jovial company. “The oysters don’t look great.” One of the women says with concern. “I guess there hasn’t been much to feed on,” Cindy replies.

Despite the apparent diminishment in the quality of the yield, the beach looks bewilderingly abundant. Oysters strewn broadside along the inter-tidal zone – hardly a space to place my feet without crunching a shell. Cindy pulls out two mason jars from her satchel and fills them half full with seawater. She shows me how to choose the best oysters – the ones that display a purple, frilled edge along the valves are ones undergoing rapid growth, and more likely to taste plump and juicy. After learning the markers, I set about foraging for the prime specimens. I fastidiously sift through the hundreds of oysters in my vicinity, but only a dozen or so are big enough for the dinner table; fewer still exhibit the frilly shell that Cindy prizes.

After gathering a few good oysters, Cindy demonstrates the art of oyster shucking. She identifies the upper and the bottom valves, jabs her knife into the side opening, shimmies the blade before prying the shell open in one deft motion. I try my hand with the next oyster. The jagged, awkward shell resists my grip and I struggle to hold the oyster against the force of my knife. I manage to penetrate the seam, but the blade is lodged tight and would not move. I steady the shell between my knees and feel the sharp, calcified crust digging into my knee. I lean into the knife in a mad push, bending, wrangling and grunting with the oyster in hand. Finally, a snap! The shell cracks open and I see my oyster, spitting sand and water, drenched in a murky fluid of gray and white. “Looks like a good one.” Cindy says, scraping the oyster from the shell and depositing it into her jar. “Would you eat that raw?” She asks. I scrunch my nose at the alien creature in the jar, bathed in slime and turbid water. The oysters I’ve ordered in restaurants, served on a bed of salt, arranged in a ring around the edge of the plate, adorned by lemon slices, parsley and thyme seem an entirely different delicacy. How sanitized a display compared to these uncanny creatures on the beach, unwieldy to touch, redolent of fish and sea, unyielding as a piece of volcanic rock. Pressed against the glassy jar, their smoky, corpulent flesh is the furthest remove from the longings of taste and appetite.

We fill two jars full of oysters and three bags of clam before returning to land. The tide rising again, we pick up our pace as water rounds rock and boulder. “I’ll fry these with some butter and garlic – they’ll be very tasty,” Cindy says. Fried oysters sound delicious indeed. We return with an impressive harvest for forty-five minutes of work. I scan the surroundings again in admiration of the exquisite landscape; the dark pines on the bank, the distant waters, the outline of island slates, the assertive boulders, tumbling burl of rock that carves the alcove. Such breathtaking beauty and resplendent abundance! Cindy and her husband, Mike, have shucked oysters for the better part of thirty years. They follow the tide table, which sometimes brings them to the beach at ungodly hours, three in the morning, under the pale rays of a luminous moon, the entire landscape alight in a fantastical dream of blue and silver, the cosmos wrapped in deep, enduring silence. Nestled deep in this dark and shimmering universe, they roamed the sands and plucked nature’s pearls.

But isn’t this a deal too sweet? Mustn’t there be someone looming ashore, scale in hand, awaiting payment for these prized delicacies? Perhaps we should at least *tell* someone that we’ve collected our dinner on the beach, lest we be accused of thievery? Yet, without fanfare, we load the harvest into Cindy’s truck, hug our friends, and returned home with the days’ bounty.

**Eating in the age of commodity**

Since my (David Chang) oyster shucking experience on Lasqueti, a remote island off the coast of British Columbia, I continue to ruminate on the significance of this foraging eventin relation to my sedentary, urban life. I live amidst slabs of concrete and towers of glass, where plastered walls and glossy planes rise from steel and asphalt. My foraging places are supermarkets, where the “produce” are arranged in lines, stacked in strict symmetry. My breakfast comes in a cardboard box – if I make enough space in my pantry, I can fit the cereal, the pancake mix, corn starch, sugar and the powdered protein mix on one shelf – a variable collection of edibles. I survey the pantry as I would a shelf of books, fingers tracing spine. Each food item can sit on that shelf for the better part of three years without spoilage. All this plentitude is stored without the slightest odor that might incur on my living space, the slightest demand on my attention and care. When did food become so staid, entirely devoid of imaginative possibility, completely empty of meaning and excitement?

Immersed in the pervasive abundance of edibles produced by the commercial economy, we have traded communion for convenience, mutuality for materiality. Whereas my foraging episode on the beaches of Lasqueti encompassed a suite of contacts registering on the somatic, emotional, psychic, temporal, aesthetic and gastronomical dimensions of experience, the purchase of groceries in the city is an entirely different affair, one ruled by strict utility and transactional efficiency. Grocery shopping is often a chore, rarely a sublime experience. This stark contrast raises questions about the most basic of human acts: *How do we procure our food and how do these procedures shape us in turn?* For most of us raised in cities subsidized by an agricultural complex, the procurement of food is merely another monetary exchange; the ecological webs that undergird this interchange of are easily obscured by economic transaction. The departure is far enough that we see *shopping for groceries* and *foraging for food* as two disparate orders, each belonging to distinct epochs in evolutionary history. Foraging is relegated to a bygone era – if not shrouded in quaint nostalgia, then scorned for its unabashed primitivism. Reliance on the products of the capitalist-industrial food complex remains the default mode of consumption; anything other is perceived as retrograde to the inevitable march of progress.

On the other hand, the image of the forager in the collective imagination may signal a perennial longing for ecological connection. The earth’s primordial abundance and fecundity reveal themselves in the bounty of the forest. Consider the childhood fantasy scene of the wondrous candy-land, where rivers flow with scrumptious chocolate milk, where lollipops bloom like flowers on rolling hills, under clouds of cotton candy. This vision of a paradise for the palate manifests a nascent fascination with abundance and an intuitive grasp of an edible world where sustenance always lies within arm’s reach. In reference to the fecundity of the earth, John Milton wrote of Adam walking “Into the blissful field, through Groves of Myrrh/And flow’ring Odours, Cassia, Nard, and Balm;/A Wilderness of sweets. . . “ (Milton, 2012, p. 2031). This dream of eating the world is not a display of childish whim, less an atavistic regression to primitive fantasy, but rather a manifestation of our affinity to land and its splendid bounty. Like the candy-land fantasy, human ancestors who foraged for food experienced their sustenance as gifts freely bestowed, and by extension, knew their lives to be dependent on the larger matrix of life.

At the same time, we should not indulge a sanguine notion of foraging as a placid idyll from an innocent past. Foragers, from the smallest rodents to prodigious herds of buffalo, are vulnerable to predation when they scour the landscape. Foragers must negotiate several dilemmas – the energy they secure through expedition must at least equal or exceed the energy they expend in foraging, or they will have sqaundered both time and strength. They must guard against predators ⎯ vigilance and fleet-footedness both exact a cost to energy reserves and constrain their ability to glean sustenance from the landscape (Stephens, Brown, & Ydenberg, 2008). In response to the risks associated with foraging, animals have evolved many strategies – some forage in herds, thus distribute the task of vigilance amongst a larger number of peers (Stephens et al., 2008). Others undergo a physiological transformation such as camouflage (for example, the spotted flounder) and quills (North American porcupine) to evade and repel predators. These wide-ranging adaptions instantiate the grave threats posed by foraging and the need for a repertoire of strategies for avoiding peril. Further, dependence on the biome means vulnerability during times of scarcity; foragers are also buffeted by inclement weather and unpredictable terrain. Such is the nature of subsistence within a dynamic biosphere; gratuitous abundance is never far from peril, and life skates close to the clutches of death.

Although the foraging tradition still thrives in many indigenous communities, agriculture remains the dominant source of food for most of the world’s population. We cannot all return to foraging as the primary means of securing sustenance ⎯ Cultural knowledge of edible flora has declined, bands of wild spaces diminished. If foraging offers no realistic solution to the current demand for food, of what relevance might it pose to an increasingly urban populace acculturated to mass industrial agriculture and the economy of monetary exchange? What educational and cultural value might we glean from the practice of foraging, and how might it transform sensibilities and initiate participation in knowledge traditions conducive to a comprehensive ecological ethic?

In response to these questions, we present a conversation between the authors of this chapter, two city dwellers better apt to navigate the polished isles of the nearest Whole Foods than the tortuous trails of a boreal forest. We reflect on our foraging experiences and explore its significance to our urban lives. Having been born in Asia (David in Taiwan and Heesoon in Korea), we bring our views on food, which we inherited from our past, to our hybridized cultural present in a modern, western society (Canada). We shall explore the educative potential of foraging practices, with attention to the sensual component of deep engagement with wilderness, the experience of which returns our somatic, mental and spiritual connection with a numinous earth. We highlight the cultural and relational knowledge traditions that are indispensable to foraging practices, and the vital role of reliable guides who initiate us into an edible world. At this intersection between ecological connection and cultural knowledge, we forward some reflections on how foraging practices might constitute forms of activism within the capitalist-industrial food complex, a contrapuntal narrative to consumer culture, and constitute a form of edible activism. We consider how foraging may facilitate an ecological consciousness via practices that imply participation in a *sacred economy*, where gratitude and delight accompany the cycles of life.

**Sensuality and somatic attunement**

David Chang (DC): Heesoon, we both live in the city, both in apartment buildings. We are in the bowels of a human-made world, so foraging seems like an entirely alien concept. So I wonder about your experiences with this seemingly strange and foreign activity. What experiences have you had with foraging?

Heesoon Bai (HB): I grew up in Seoul, the biggest city of Korea, in the 50’s and 60’s. In those days, we didn’t have supermarkets. Not even “groceries,” as we know them today. We had sprawling open markets that stretched many blocks in which vendors laid out, mostly on the ground, their items to sell: live chickens in cages, pans and barrels of all manners of seafood, farm-grown vegetables, and foraged mountain vegetables that were in season. As a child, sometimes I would accompany my mother on her daily trips to these markets (we had no refrigerators those days), keeping myself closely attached to my mother, for a sense of safety and protection. I found the sight, sound, and smell of the market often overwhelming, and certain parts, especially places where land and sea animals, dead or alive, were displayed and sold, somewhat frightening. My mother was very confident and skilled when it came to handling merchants: in the main, these folks were not the politest lot. Some of them were deceptive, but my mother knew how not to fall for their guile. And she was fearless and confident--to my young eyes, terribly brave--when it came to handling edible items, both vegetative and animal. Vegetables were soil-covered, and dead animals looked pretty frightening to me. There were all sorts of strong and sometimes strange smells. And my greatest admiration went to my mother’s skill at turning these wild-looking materials into delectable dishes. Preparations involved a lot of physical exertion outside the kitchen, in the courtyard at the water pump. Removal of soil from vegetables, especially mountain vegetables, was a routine step. As I grew older, I tried to help out with these preparations, including a major winter fish freeze-drying activity that involved gutting hundreds of Pollock in icy water and hanging them on a line for some weeks.

With this childhood background, and having arrived in Canada in 1972 when I was 18, I found the experience of shopping in a supermarket a most bewildering and disembodying experience. No dirt, no smell, no sound (I don’t think they even had muzak playing in the store those days), and just about everything was neatly cut-up and shrink wrapped. And no vendors to talk to and haggle with over the price or quality of goods. I can only say that it was a surreal experience.

Now, what is intriguing to note is that I started foraging after I came to Canada, not while I was growing up in Korea. Coming from a crowded urban jungle (even though I lived close to the mountains on the outskirts of Seoul), what I noticed in my new homeland, Canada, was the abundance of green space: lots of land all around such as large backyards, back lanes, empty lots, parks, woodlands, and so on, that were all showing the vigor of a Green Kingdom. All manners of plants, shrubs, and trees proliferated everywhere. I began to forage once my mother immigrated to Canada (during my twenties) and started to spend many months of the year with me. She started to show me the wild edible plants she could identify from her childhood memory. She grew up in rural southern part of Korea foraging wild mountain vegetables and catching fish! Not a usual activity for a Korean girl in her time, but thanks to her father, she did everything to her heart’s content what boys would do. Most common weeds (for us they were “mountain” or “wild” vegetables) my mom and I harvested in Canada were “pigweeds,” “shepherd purse,” “bracken,” “dandelions,” and “broadleaf plantain.” I learned to prepare them the way my mother did, blanched and seasoned with crushed sesame seeds, sesame oil, soy sauce, finely chopped green onion, finely minced garlic, and hot pepper flakes. At some point, I read up on these wild edibles and found out that their vitamin and mineral contents were substantially higher than cultivated vegetables with a similar taste. I didn’t have much money those days (living below the official poverty level), and so I felt very smart about my frequent foraging practice. More importantly, however, I really appreciated the bonding experience I was having with my mom. We were both too busy to spend time together while we were living in Korea: she with struggles to take care of our large, complex, and challenging family, and I with my own survival struggle of doing well in school, which culminated in surmounting the final hurdle— the University Entrance Exam. It was a pleasure indeed to leisurely roam the neighbourhood with my mom, gathering wild vegetables. It was also very meaningful to me that I was connecting to my mother’s roots: to her rural and wilderness-rich childhood and to the forgotten and rejected “pre-modern” ways of life that were closer to soil and all that was wild and natural. Foraging was second nature to my mother.

DC: Thanks for sharing. That’s a precious educational experience you’ve had through your mother. I can gather that you are much more knowledgeable a forager than I am. I am surprised that your mother’s knowledge of edible flora applied to the west coast of Canada, a different bioregion. Do Canada and Korea share some of the same wild edible plants?

HB: I haven’t done research to see how on earth these two regions share many such “weeds,” but they do. My guess is that the same “wild vegetables” (so called ”weeds”) my mom identified in Canada belong to the same genus but different species. This is the case with, for example, trees. We have pines in Korea and pines in Canada: they may belong to the same general type, genus, but to different species.

DC: I see. Your story reminds me of my own childhood experience. As a kid in Taiwan, I hadn’t had much exposure to green, wild spaces. I remember my parents taking me for a long drive to the countryside on a Sunday afternoon. We came to a large stream where a group of family friends had gathered. My brother and I were given dip nets and told to wade into the water to catch fresh water smelt. I was astonished to see schools of fish moving from one pool to another in that coursing stream. Pants rolled above our knees, we chased the fish and laughed in exhilaration. My brother and I developed strategies for netting the fish – I would herd a school into a shallow pool while my brother waited on the other end where panicked fish would exit. I dug my net deep in the water and drove the dashing streaks of green and silver toward my brother’s steady guard. But the fish were quick and the nets heavy and awkward in water. Our strategy only caught us a few small fish, but we were entirely undaunted. The sheer joy of the task was enough. Combined with the efforts of others, we managed to catch enough fish for a feast. My parents called me in for dinner, but I lingered in the stream, fully immersed in the game. Dinner was scrumptious – fried smelt dressed with cilantro and chopped onions. I had worked up an appetite after an afternoon in the water. Prior to that experience, I’d never understood playing and eating as the same activity. In that afternoon of catching smelt, I relished the stream, and the delectable taste of the fish in one indelible experience. I didn’t know it was possible to have this much fun catching my own food. It was an entirely delightful discovery.

HB: Exactly! That was my experience of foraging, too: pleasure all around. The most prominent foraging practice that my daughters and I cultivated was picking berries. My younger one was an older toddler and my older one was seven or eight, and we would be picking wild black berries (and other berries like salmon berries) all throughout summer. We would do this every summer, and we usually ended up with around over 20 kilograms of sweetest and juiciest blackberries frozen in our freezer for winter. My seven-year old was incredibly focused and good at picking big and sweet black berries without getting hurt by the thorns. She would fill bucket after bucket. My toddler was on the ground, continuously sampling picked berries, grinning wide with red-purple stained mouth, and proudly displaying her two hands, each fingertip sporting a berry cap.

DC: I see a wonderful tableau in my mind’s eye just listening to your story. What a delightful picture! Now, what significance, educational and otherwise, do you find in those memories of picking berries with your daughters?

HB: *Biophilia--*love of Nature, comes to my mind right away (Bai, Elza, Kovacs & Romanycia, 2010). Foraging trips took us outdoor a lot, which grew my children’s love of forests and all places green and wild. While they are urban dwellers like my self, their love of and respect for Nature is very strong and prominent. While they don’t formally work as environmentalists, they have the environmentalist consciousness. On a more practical note, having learned to forage, they have, I would say, a different sense of relationship with food and sensibility around what they eat and how they prepare food. They are in their early thirties and late twenties, and over the years, I have noticed that they eschew processed food and choose edibles that come in as wholesome a state as possible. And another thing I noticed is just how much familiarity and ‘handiness’ they show with respect to food and how they prepare them for eating, which is like me. I am never at a loss when it comes to getting hold of edible materials, whatever these may be, and prepare them for eating. I have the confidence that, should I have to survive on foraging, I could do so. Of course, it would be very helpful to have more hands-on lessons, as my mother shown me, with more varieties of wild vegetables. It gives me a sense of survival security that we don’t have to solely depend on what supermarkets and grocers bring to us for survival. The further removed we are from the source of our sustenance, the more vaguely insecure we would feel. At bottom, it’s helplessness that triggers survival fear. That one can put one’s senses and limbs to work to find and prepare food is empowering and promotes a sense of security.

DC: I share your view and sensibility around food security. There is also the sensuous dimension to foraging that is part of biophilia (Wilson, 1986). Thinking again of my time catching smelt, wading through the cool water, leaning against rocks, feeling the pebbles under one’s feet, discerning texture and scent – this was an immersion in a world rich with sensation. The involvement of the body, lunging into a world of movement, nuance, and colour, was an enthralling adventure for a boy who had spent most of his time in classrooms. It was a feast of the senses before I even tasted the first morsel of fish. One is gratified in many ways – we don’t know the hunger of the senses until we stumble upon a sumptuous boon that awakens our bodily longing.

HB: Ah, yes, bodily longing! I know a few people around me who avowedly (and maybe proudly) say that they only eat to live. I have joked that I probably could put pieces of cardboard in front them, and they would eat, as long as I drench them with enough spicy sauces. My joke aside, this lack of ‘intimacy’ concerns me in that, to me, it’s intimate knowledge that brings about relationship of love and respect. The interaction we have with food is an intimate, and possibly sacred, act. Indeed, what can be more intimate than putting parts of the world right inside you? The ingested food then goes through a long process of being intimately handled, which in its process nourishes you. When I contemplate on this process of interaction—why not call it edible love-making?-- with the plant and the animal kingdom, I am overcome by a deep sense of awe, wonder, love, and gratitude. I love these lines from Dogen Zenji (1200 – 1253), the founder of Soto Zen in Japan:

Handle even a single leaf of a green in such a way that it manifests the body of the Buddha. This in turn allows the Buddha to manifest through the leaf. This is a power that you cannot grasp with your rational mind. It operates freely, according to the situation, in a most natural way. At the same time, this power functions in our lives to clarify and settle activities and is beneficial to all living things. (Dogen & Uchiyama, 1983, pp. 7-8)

My practice of foraging and eating is an encounter in sacred love.

DC: Your idea of *edible love-making* speaks to a kind of intercourse – the passing of life substance from one body to another, a sacred exchange, like you mentioned. I like Gary Snyder’s poem “Song of the Taste,” which illustrates the confluence of sex and eating as parts of the same life-affirming act:

Eating the living germs of grasses

Eating the ova of large birds

the fleshy sweetness packed around

the sperm of swaying trees

The muscles of the flanks and thighs of

soft-voiced cows

the bounce in the lamb’s leap

the swish in the ox’s tail

Eating roots grown swoll

inside the soil

Drawing on life of living

clustered points of light spun

out of space

hidden in the grape.

Eating each other’s seed

eating

ah, each other.

Kissing the lover in the mouth of bread:

lip to lip.

(Snyder, 2007)

I read in Snyder’s poem, the union of *consumption* and *consummation,* eating and sex as a co-extensive act. In *Practice of the Wild,* Snyder writes: “To acknowledge that each of us at the table will eventually be part of the meal is not just being ‘realistic.’ It is allowing the sacred to enter and accepting the sacramental aspect of our shaky temporary personal being” (Snyder, 2010, p. 19). This exchange of bodies through the act of eating is a fundamental form of mutuality and reciprocity that furnishes the basis of ecology. Thus, “*kissing the lover in the mouth of bread”* reinterprets Dogen’s instructions on handling the leaf of green as the body of the Buddha. There is something imminently numinous and tender about this consummation: we don’t just ingest a meal, we assimilate the universe with each morsel, and we in turn season ourselves as nourishment for others.

HB: So sublime and yet so humble!

**Culture and Relationship**

DC: Now I’d like us to discuss the cultural and relational dimensions of foraging. It seems that few people become successful foragers entirely on their own. There’s a vast body of knowledge that one must tap into before one goes out to gather food; usually there’s an experienced expert who imparts knowledge of edible flora to a novice forager. You had your mother who imparted her knowledge of edible plants. I wonder if many people have access to this traditional expertise, and I worry about the impoverishment of our collective knowledge when this affinity with the foodscape falls into further decline.

HB: I share your worry. In fact, regrettable to say, I am a product of that impoverishment of collective and, I would add, indigenous, knowledge you speak of. What I learned from my mother is only the tip of iceberg in her vast embodied knowledge bank. I have the deepest regrets that I didn’t manage to do more exploration with and learning from her. Basically what took place in my family, and in my Korean culture at large, is modernization, which is synonymous with westernization, devaluation and marginalization of indigenous embodied knowledge, such as my mother had. She too didn’t know, in any full and explicit measure, its irreplaceable value, as she aspired to have her children join the wave of modernization. She succeeded supremely in her effort in that all her children ended up in North America, earning doctorates and becoming professors, surgeon, engineer, etc. Today, we in Canada, as elsewhere, are aware of what took place under colonization and the spread of modern western epistemology, with consequent delegitimation of indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, and how this has impacted negatively on both the social and the biotic spheres of wellbeing.

It is not just with my mother that I lost the opportunity in finding a guide to a body of knowledge that’s alternative to the modern western. My father was an accomplished Traditional Oriental Medicine (what we call these days, Traditional Chinese Medicine) doctor, but he didn’t have chance to transmit his knowledge and skill to his children. Encouraged and motivated by my parents, my siblings and I all left Korea as young people in pursuit of “better,” that is, more “successful,” knowledge systems and life opportunities. I am now in a position to think about all this in terms of my relationship with my two daughters. At least I managed to show my daughters to identify pigweeds (Amaranthus retroflexus) and prepare them for a delicious dish, but I need to do much more! Not only in the field of foraging but also in other fields of embodied knowledge transmission.

DC: It’s astonishing to see what dramatic cultural changes can occur within two generations – the accumulated knowledge of many centuries, indeed millenniums, can be eradicated within a few decades. We need people through whom we can access traditional knowledge. I consider myself a child of the modern industrial era, with no strong attachment to local, place-based traditions. Up to a few years ago, I didn’t have anyone in my social circle who I count as a naturalist. However, I was very interested in becoming a naturalist and was captivated by the idea of being able to identify nourishing foods that grow in the wild. I obtained a copy of National Geographic’s field guide to North American shrubs. I took the book with me on walks through local nature reserves and tried to identify the berries along the trail. Having come upon a purple berry, I leafed through my field guide and found a close match – I believed I was looking at an elderberry, but the illustrations on the field guide for the pokeberry seemed awfully similar. I couldn’t be sure, since the plant seemed to be young and did not have the full branch structure that was illustrated in my field guide. Having read *Into the Wild*, the cautionary tale of Christopher McCandless, who died in the Alaskan wilderness from eating a toxic plant that he misidentified (Krakauer, 1997), I shuttered at the thought of making a fatal mistake in consuming a poisonous berry. Without the help of an experienced forager, I could not be certain of the plant. Books do not respond to questions; they only repeat the same information in every circumstance. Thus, I was left to struggle in ambiguity. Erring on the side of caution, I left the shrub trailside and relinquished my autodidactic naturalist education. When my own health was on the line, I could not place complete trust in book knowledge.

Michael Polan writes of a similar conundrum in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, when he comes upon a pod of fungi that he identifies as chanterelle mushrooms. However, without verification from a learned forager, he could not be sure. His guidebook did not instill absolute confidence, so he threw out the mushrooms. It was only later, with the help of a mycophile, that Polan was able to confirm his find – they were indeed chanterelle mushrooms. The apprehension that accompanies a harvest of mushrooms unfurls from the ominivore’s dilemma: Although humans are able to eat a wide variety of plants and animals, not all plants and animals are safe to eat, nor are they all ethically unproblematic (Pollan, 2006).

The role of an experienced guide, therefore, seems vital to a forager’s education. We need the discerning eyes of an expert to root our knowledge of local flora. Printed words on a page do not suffice. We need to check our perception with the expert’s trained eye, the assurance of watching the expert chew on a leaf or fruit in order to confirm the veracity of our newly acquired knowledge. The forager’s education is thus inextricably relational.

HB: Yes, that’s right! “Printed words on a page do not suffice.” Abstract knowledge, devoid of human breaths and flesh, can’t guide practice in any substantial way. I think this discussion on foraging has a far-reaching educational significance beyond foraging for actual pigweeds, mushrooms, or oysters. They are concrete instances of--I would not hesitate to say--indigenizing curriculum and pedagogy (Manulani, 2008).

DC: I appreciate your use of the word “practice.” Indeed, foraging is a practice, and should not be reduced to a knowledge domain. I also wonder if you can elaborate on what you mean by “indigenizing curriculum”?

HB: The essence of it is that learning should be rooted in the particular and concrete relational matrix of teachers and students who are interested and concerned with local phenomena, issues, problems, and matters of significance and meaning (Greenwood, 2013). “Local” here does not mean that it is separate from and untouched by “global.” Rather, teaching and learning should insist on working with the concrete particulars of people and place, their real joys and pains, passions and concerns, in the living matrix of their relationships (Gruenewald, 2003).

DC: What you say makes total sense in light of our respective experience of learning to forage. Going further, given that you learned to forage from your mother, and then proceeded to pass that knowledge to your daughters, and I learned to shuck oysters from Cindy, my host on Lasqueti Island, what we are saying here reminds me of feminist epistemology in which the abstract is aligned with the masculine, and the concrete particular, with the feminine. It seems to me, then, perhaps the very act of learning foraging, with the relational bonds that it foments, is an entry to feminine epistemology and ontology (Whitbeck, 1984), something that I think the world really needs.

HB: Oh, I love where you are going with it! But let us be clear that the feminine and the masculine here are not to be identified with sex and gender but modality or archetype, like the Chinese concepts of *yin* and *yang*. I do stand by the understanding that the world suffers from yin-yang imbalance, dangerously skewing towards *yang* (Thompson, 1996), and hence that foraging as a feminist epistemic practice would be an important healing practice for our imbalanced world.

**Education and Edible Activism**

DC: I’d like to complete our conversation with some considerations about how foraging might relate to a discussion of ecological ethics, especially if we recognize that current state of industrial agriculture, and the mass-production of food-like products by multinational corporations. Food has been overtaken by capitalism, and it doesn’t seem realistic within the present milieu to assume that we are all going to become foragers. If that’s the case, then what role foraging might play, even if a limited one, within a broader project of environmental education? You’ve already mentioned already that foraging is a return to an indigenous knowledge. Your experience with foraging in the middle of a Canadian city also shows that we don’t need to travel far into remote wilderness to harvest the bounty of the land. So how might this kind of education counter the egregious effects of a capitalistic food culture?

HB: Wonderful question, David! Thank you. I love to muse that everything we do has both literal and symbolic significance and implication. So, I think, foraging has a deeply symbolic significance (besides the literal significance of, for example, foraging oysters and feasting on them) in that it shifts our consciousness when we engage in this activity. This shift may occur along the line of feminist, indigenous, ecological (and so on) epistemology and ontology. That’s huge! It will, if pursued with passion and devotion, and *en mass*, create a tectonic shift in the matrix of the current civilization. What do you think?

DC: I’m with you in your envisioning. A marvelous vision, indeed! Now, to pursue this shift in the concrete particular example of food production and consumption, I think the industrial food system obscures the ecological context of our food and insinuates a pervasive habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) in which the physical and somatic dimensions of food preparation is rendered irrelevant to eating – we bypass the labour, the immersion in dirt and grime, and the elaborate ritual of gathering and preparation a meal. When food is easy, we negate the wholeness of the ecological context encompassed by the act of eating. For instance, when I pull a cluster of mushrooms from the trunk of an alder tree, I see the interdependence of the fungi and the sylvan landscape. The oyster shucking experience put me square in the oyster’s habitat, deep in the sand, the rocks, the cold ocean water. All of these experiences circumscribe the contexts from which food springs. The mushroom has its own home – a space of relations with other organisms that support each other’s flourishing, a space in which I am a guest, imploring the gift of sustenance. These ecological spaces demand a quality of awareness and comportment. When foraging in the forest, I prime my senses and sharpen my attention; I soften my body and negotiate the woodland slopes with care. Attention is the price of admission. I must undergo a certain adjustment to my state of being in order to traverse into this ecological space – the land demands a way of being, enlisting me in a specific form of participation. I must submit to the land in exchange for its bounty. Prolonged engagement in this kind of activity sees me becoming a creature of the forest, the ocean, the marshes, wherever the next delicacy awaits.

The supermarket, on the other hand, abrogates this participatory exchange. We walk the aisles and browse the shelves for goods that are always present to our desire and whim. They do not call upon any somatic or mental posture, nor do they obtain any sense of context or relationship with a larger whole. Phenomenologically speaking, the supermarket enacts a peculiar order: goods do not have their own context – they are units that compose an artificial environs in which the human finds her every need and whim gratified without the least demand on her person. The supermarket seems to say that everything serves human convenience, that nourishment and delectations are merely a matter of course. I think this kind of distortion of ecological relationships can be detrimental to our identity as an earthly species; it disposes us to an expectation of ease, makes us adverse to the ecological mutuality that demands an exchange of physical labour for sustenance. To this end, I think foraging experiences can provide an insightful contrast to our engrained habitus, and our acculturation within the artificial purlieus we have constructed, which reinforce the centrality of the human in a more-than-human world.

HB: Well-said! Foraging would be a medicine specific for this ailing civilization that has lost, literally, its senses, and mired itself in thick and deep delusion. Foraging can be seen as eating our way into a revolution. A form of activism, yes? How about “edible activism”?

DC: Sure! However, I’ve always thought of “activism” as a heavy word. Activists are blasted by water cannons, choked by smoke bombs, arrested *en mass*, sometimes assassinated for the challenge they pose to the establishment. However, *edible activism* can be a playful, celebratory way of carving out space for other possible ways of living in the midst of industrial-agricultural domination. Edible activism might not be thought of as an outright challenge to the status quo, a daring defiance of the prevailing food system, as if we are poised to march the streets and brace ourselves against riot police. Instead, it is a wistful, delightful experiment in reacquainting ourselves with the primordial bounty of the earth. We can start by plucking a few sprigs of spruce to make spruce tea, or wading to the island in the middle of shallow lake to taste some blackberries. It’s about becoming acquainted with elders, the keepers of ancient knowledge, spending time under the sky, passing an afternoon in quiet conversation while sampling the delights of the field. In doing this, we learn perhaps for the first time that there is indeed such a thing as a free lunch, that such a meal may be more satisfying.

Foraging, as a form of edible activism, can serve as a contrapuntal narrative to the pervasive habitus formed under the auspices of the industrial agriculture complex. By “contrapuntal,” I mean the counterpoint form of musical composition, where two independent melodies are played simultaneously. The melodic lines may spread apart or interweave, at times generating tension and at others producing harmony. A musical counterpoint is not a direct binary opposition, but another sonic dimension that introduces further emotional and aesthetic texture to a composition. I think of edible activism in the same way – I do not expect foraging at this point in human history to replace mass agriculture; rather, it is a way to tease, stretch and colour our experience of the earth as ecological beings. We are conditioning our views and ingrained habits toward a more expansive participation with the earth’s inherent fecundity.

HB: Yes! “Free” in your “free lunch” has a whole lot of different meaning for me now. ‘Free’ as a verb, meaning ‘liberating.’ Foraging as a liberating pedagogy, freeing our selves from the conditioning of the industrial-consumer capitalism that has enslaved this civilization.

DC: That’s right. Just as I realized that there was no one to pay for the oysters we collected, the experience of liberation from the monetary regime that we live under, even for a brief meal, engenders a fresh perspective on our economic system. A foraging experience is a chance to look at the market from the marsh, and perhaps for an instant see the strange creatures we’ve become. Hopefully in the process, this kind of foraging education might afford glimpse into a mode of consciousness where we “experience [ourselves] as owning nothing, as receiving existence itself and life and consciousness as an unmerited gift from the universe, as having exuberant delight and unending gratitude as [our] first obligation” (Berry, 2006, p. 118).

HB: Our being as an unmerited gift! That’s to go beyond calculative thinking (Heidegger, 1971) and instrumental values (Bai, 2004), in which the current world has drowned. To be able to see our selves as unmerited gifts from the universe is to commune in unconditional love. Father Berry and his colleague Brian Swimme, the evolutionary cosmologist, present a truly breath-taking vision of our universe: that the universe is a “communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects” (Swimme & Berry, 1992, p. 243). You can see how foraging fits into such universe! Foraging is an experience in communion!

DC: Absolutely. *Communion* aptly sums up what we’ve discussed here – the somatic, sacramental, cultural and ecological dimensions of foraging. Thank you for the delightful conversation. Be warned that I will one day invite myself to your dinner table and sample that delicious pigweed and shepherd purse.

HB: I look forward to dining with you, David! First, we will go foraging. I have to show you how to identify pigweed and shepherd purse. Then we will bring them home to prepare them my mother’s way. We will make miso soup with shepherd purse and a garlic and soy sauce seasoned pigweed dish to eat with brown rice. Oh, here I am, salivating already!

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