

**Lots of ways of living with the land:  
Review of *Permaculture magazine's* film series, "Living with the Land"**

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Each year in Spring, our city hosts the California Strawberry Festival, the largest in the United States. The labor-intensive crop is a hallmark of Oxnard, a place whose absence of frost has condemned it to industrial agriculture over the last century. Most inhabitants hail from generations of immigrant fieldworkers who now call the place home. Outsiders, mostly passing through on their way to and from Los Angeles, know it as the part of the drive that exhales the scent of fertilizer.

Its scenery is quite common for drivers on Central California's freeways: identical straight rows sliced into the soil, peppered with hunched over bodies picking at the scarred landscape. A destination place for only a few, for most it is a sight that can elicit an odd mixture of gratitude, guilt, admiration, and pity.

But for those who come to Oxnard with a purpose in Spring, the story of agriculture becomes transformed. Once safely inside the Festival's gates, the fertilizer scent is replaced with one of strawberry funnel cake. The absence of pickers is all but promised by the steep admission fee. And a group of locals protesting the fields' hazardous working conditions remains quarantined outside, guaranteeing that for at least one day in the Spring, few things will disrupt Festival goers' strawberry dreams.

Yet a generalized anxiety around food will persist in inescapable ways, appearing in both local and global debates about health, the environment, the economy, and immigration. The question is currently framed in the United States around the latter, where an increasingly anti-immigrant discourse is often challenged with the question of "who else?" would be willing to pick our food at those wages and in those conditions.

But the way in which food is grown is a readily taken for granted assumption even among the most well-meaning. We have become accustomed to our geometric food landscapes and may even admire a certain beauty about them. By now, we find high maintenance monoculture crops, their fertilizers and pesticide inputs so normal that it has become difficult to imagine a system of food growing that could be otherwise: one that is self-watering, self-fertilizing, requiring very little cultivation, yet still bearing plenty.

The film series "Living with the Land" (2015), might be the intervention we need into our imagination. Available online for free viewing and downloading, the films were produced by Permaculture People for *Permaculture Magazine*, a UK publication. The short films, ranging from about three to seven minutes each, share how various permaculture projects are currently

unfolding across Britain to tackle questions of food and living in ways that follow the permaculture ethics of “Earth Care”, “People Care”, and “Fair Share”.

Permaculture, a term coined in the 1960s and 1970s, was originally a portmanteau of “permanent” and “agriculture,” signaling a focus on sustainable agricultural practices. It is a method of design that follows nature’s lead rather than work against and in spite of it. We get a powerful example of this the series’ first film, “Forest Gardens,” where we learn how trees, shrubs, and perennial plants can be designed to work together in this way to even self-water and self-fertilize. Human involvement still exists, but with a “light touch.” Standing in sharp contrast to the practice of growing a single crop along a multitude of rows, these less invasive practices mean that fossil fuels are minimized, hazardous synthetic inputs become less necessary, and further deterioration of the environment is abated. So rather than taking an isolated view of plants that assumes that they are inherently in conflict and must be controlled and manipulated against nature, the practice takes a systems-view of life with attention to how living organisms cooperate.

The film “Natural Building” shows how permaculture design can be applied beyond agriculture and toward construction projects. It highlights how cement emits significant amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> and suggests alternatives that can be found in already existing natural building materials and technologies. These include cob, adobe, rammed earth (unburnt clay), and straw bale (which boasts an insulation factor rivaling modern synthetics). The film inspires with examples of stunning architectural possibilities. Viewers still skeptical about their strength, function, and durability, are left to sit with the fact that the Great Wall of China was itself constructed of rammed earth.

In “No Dig Gardening,” we learn of the benefits of leaving the ground untilled each planting season. “Farming with Nature” shows how soil can be built through livestock grazing, while “Animal-Free Farming” provides an alternative way of building soil through crop rotation, without the need for manure or animal by-products. And in “Transformation through Learning,” we are invited into a sustainable rural homestead that serves as a demonstration site for permaculture immersion learning.

The film “Urban Permaculture” takes the practice and education away from the country and into the city, which many viewers will find most relevant to their lives. The film centers around the concept of the “Permablitz,” which it describes as a gathering of people in a day to “transform forgotten backyards into edible and vibrant green spaces, as well as to emphasize the importance of human relationships.” The relationship is both collective and reciprocal: once a volunteer has worked to transform a few backyards, that volunteer can ask to have one done at their place. Here, the film series touches on an important example of how permaculture design has applications far beyond agriculture and into larger ideas of how we relate to each other in the web of life. However, the context of the urban is treated only once the series, and in the shortest of the nine films and, related to this, asking critical questions of the broader political contexts

that make permaculture practice possible for some more than for others, was a practice left untreated as a whole.

With the majority of the world's people now emigrating into cities as communal land holdings are increasingly destroyed and equitable access to resources is every day curtailed, the question of urban permaculture practices seems at least equally urgent as those that take place on acres of private land. But like most discussions on permaculture today, "Living with the Land" focuses on permaculture *ethics* without first critically engaging with the *politics* that determine the land access of "Earth Care;" who are considered sufficiently human to count as the people of "People Care;" and who are valued enough to be included in the sharing of "Fair Share."

The absence of a critical view on the structural privilege of land ownership and resource access is perhaps most striking in two films. "Off-Grid Living," follows a woman who describes herself as having had "a very privileged and very average Western life," before deciding to leave it all to live on a five-acre small holding. There, she is able to delink from systemic dependence in significant ways by growing the food that she consumes, running a profitable farm, and having ready access to a clear water springs, ponds, rivers—material conditions strikingly inaccessible to a growing number of people worldwide.

Another film, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Foraging" promotes going on free walks in nature to pick wild food, while emphasizing the importance of knowing what is edible in the wild, and the long process it takes to accumulate these knowledges. While these used to be knowledges traditionally passed down from generation to generation through practice, for many of us, our alienation from nature today has broken this inheritance. The film speaks of "an equality of opportunity to forage" which actually is not available to many. People of color in Western contexts, for example, do not have the privilege to walk about freely and extract from the landscape without risking confrontation with police, security, or vigilante forces. While the film is not wrong when it says that, to forage, "You don't have to have a degree, you don't have to be like an ethnobotanist, you just be fully human," what it misses is that Western, liberal societies, including his own, employs a definition of the Human that excludes many.

With such critiques in mind, however, watching the films in "Living with the Land" from a place like Oxnard can be an experience of critical questioning all around, and can be very helpful those who would like to confront our contradictions between food growing and our relationship to nature and those who help grow our food. The films can also help affirm agricultural practices in a positive light, which is key for engaging dispossessed people of color in a Western context that has raised us to equate agriculture is akin to slavery, or as work that is done by the exploited and pitied. Permaculture, in fact, can spark reassessments of the more sustainable food growing and foraging practices of our grandparents, which we have long been taught to be ashamed of, and "Living with the Land" as a project, can help us take on the question of food as a powerful starting point to question how else we might grow, eat, live, and relate to all life around us.