

Gry Skrædderdal Jakobsen 2006

"From Earth to table and back. On American Homesteaders' efforts to become one with Nature"(In Danish: "Fra jord til bord og tilbage. Om amerikanske homesteaderes bestræbelser på at blive ét med naturen").

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English abstract

Based on a four month fieldwork among homesteaders in the US Pacific Northwest, this thesis explores how ideals of becoming one with nature are practiced in everyday life.

As part of the back-to-the-land movement, the older generation of homesteaders grew up in suburbia but made a life changing move to a rural environment. They are mainly inspired by the hippie movement in the Sixties and Seventies while the younger generation is primarily inspired by anarchist and punk ideology. Like the older generation, they are critical of mainstream American consumerism and are aspiring to live off the land in harmony with nature, thus setting a positive example for others to follow. The young homesteaders travel around visiting and doing apprenticeships on established homesteads to acquire homesteading skills. Basic homesteading skills include growing your own food, building your own home using building materials such as clay, straw, sand and salvaged wood, and doing ecoforestry.

Drawing both on analytical perspectives from structuralism and practice theory and applying classical anthropological studies (Mauss 2000, Hubert and Mauss 1981, Frazer 1963), this thesis points to the complexity of realizing such ideals of living in harmony with nature. Examining the homesteaders' food and eating practices, I argue that the homesteaders are striving to become one with nature. I also argue that in doing so they are paradoxically reproducing the discrimination between nature and culture that they wish to dissolve. In a case study on the homesteaders' relations to animals, I show how such dualists as well as different anti-dualist perspectives intertwine with the ideals in the negotiation of practical solutions to real life situations, e.g. how to remove rats from the kitchen without acting disrespectfully to nature. My argument is that together with ideals each such imaginary create opportunities for action, thus shaping a 'repertoire' for agency. In an analysis of the homesteaders' ways of connecting to nature via sacrifice and composting practices, I further explore the two different anti-dualist perspectives which I have identified: The animist perspective and the ecosystem perspective.

Drawing on Hubert and Mauss (1981), Frazer (1963) and Taussig (1993), I show

how the homesteaders create “connection” to nature via sacrificial exchange and mimesis. I also argue that these practices presuppose a dualist perspective that sees sacred and profane and nature and culture as separate spheres. Finally, I argue that these practices which the homesteaders consider to be “unlearning” of mainstream ways of life can just as well be seen as expressions of ‘reskilling’ which, according to Giddens (1992), is characteristic of modernity. Drawing on a broad ‘repertoire’ of ideals, norms and imaginaries, the homesteaders skillfully make their own patchwork constituting the realization of what they consider to be the good life. This leads to my conclusion that the relation between ideal and realization should be considered processual and therefore as a ‘momentary crystallization’ (Bloch 1989) rather than a quantifiable goal.